

# Chapman, Our Chapman!

by David P. Gontar (October 2015)

Jonathan Bate is apparently not doing too well these days. Provost at Worcester College, Professor of English Literature at Oxford University, and co-editor with Eric Rasmussen of the RSC edition of *William Shakespeare Complete Works*, Bate seems to be falling victim to an onslaught of authorship bogeymen. Did he not ride out to rout those paper dragons years ago? Will such indecencies ne'er be quelled? Why can't things be the way they were when Ozzie and Harriet reigned over a black and white world, and gawking crowds genuflected before the sacred tchotchke furbishing Anne Hathaway's Cottage and Gardens in quaint Stratford-upon-Avon? Now a tide of unlettered scalawags is driving gallant Professor Bate to the very brink of Hamletesque distraction. Just listen to this plangent lament and be prepared to shed tears of commiseration – or laughter, whichever you prefer.

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I'm being plagued by emails from anti-Stratfordians again. I suppose it's because of all the current talk and writing about Shakespeare @450 years. What really gets me is this: the refusal of anti-Stratfordians even to talk about other dramatists of the time about whom we know far less than we know about Shakespeare and yet whose authorship of the plays attributed to them they never deny. Why do they not argue that Jonson didn't write the plays of Jonson or Chapman those of Chapman?

George Chapman [1559-1634] is an especially interesting case. He was the son of a mere yeoman. He was orphaned. There is no record of his getting any formal education, certainly no Oxford or Cambridge career. But then he turns up in the poetry and theatre world, writing works of formidable learning and obscurity. He even translates Homer. How could Chapman possibly have been Chapman? He must have been an aristocrat in disguise.

Why, or why, [sic] has no one ever seen this?

Although anyone remotely familiar with the authorship issue will recognize that Bate's skimpy analogy – which he finds so deliciously compelling – addresses

only one aspect of the full critique of William of Stratford's authorship claim, let us stoop to pick up his mighty challenge: Couldn't the author of "Shakespeare's" poems and plays have been of low birth and no higher education? Can't genius work unaided miracles? After all, George Chapman, who gave us radiant translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and many original stage plays, was a social nobody who never had the advantage of a college education. His stellar accomplishment obviously shows the dogmatic mindset of those who would *a priori* deny William of Stratford the credit he deserves.

Well, let's take a closer look at Bate's Complaint.

1. According to Bate, Chapman was "the son of a mere yeoman."

But even a glance at the pertinent resources shows otherwise. According to the "George Chapman Biography" online in "History of the World: The Renaissance," Thomas Chapman, George's father, was a local landholder in Hertfordshire where his "well-connected family had lived for decades." His mother Joan was the daughter of George Nodes, a sergeant of the buckhounds to King Henry VIII and later monarchs. On the mother's side Chapman was related to Edward Grimeston, whose family served the English government in France and who wrote *A General Inventory of the History of France* (1607). George Chapman, the second son of the aforesaid Thomas, had financial problems all his life because his elder brother Thomas inherited his father's ample estate under primogeniture, as does Oliver in *As You Like It*.



Possible portrait of Ralph Sadler by Hans Holbein the Younger

Professor Gerald Snare of Tulane University in his biography of Chapman appearing in the *Poetry Foundation* website notes that "from at least 1583 through 1585 [Chapman] was in the household of Sir Ralph Sadler" – the latter having been employed by both Queen Elizabeth and William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Not bad, for the son of a mere yeoman. What was Sadler's training? At the age of seven he had a position in the home of Thomas Cromwell, later Earl of Essex. There he became fluent in French, Latin and Greek, and had legal training as well. Sadler had been Principal Secretary to King Henry VIII circa 1546, and under Queen Elizabeth I was sent to Scotland (1559) to arrange an alliance with the Scottish Protestants. He is remembered as the architect of the Treaty of

Edinburgh. Indeed, some scholars reckon that Chapman's tenure in Sir Ralph Sadler's household commenced as early as 1577, making his social and intellectual sojourn there as long as eight years, from ages 18 to 26. Is it any surprise that young Chapman, having been apprenticed for eight years to a learned diplomat expert in Latin and Greek, should carve out a career in English literature? It goes without saying that the meagre roster of established facts about William of Stratford contains no such developmental experience.

## 2. Jonathan Bate Says Chapman Had No Formal Education

The only objection one can raise against this idea is its utter falsity. For there is a firm consensus that Chapman *did* attend Oxford, a fact one would expect to be known by a Professor of literature there. Indeed, there are some who maintain he studied at both Oxford *and* Cambridge. At least one contemporaneous account reflects his academic prowess in the Latin and Greek tongues. It is true that George Chapman didn't obtain a baccalaureate degree. How could he, without the ability to pay tuition? Chapman's skills in classical languages were sufficient to enable him to work as tutor, which he did, *e.g.*, for his patron Prince Henry. He was able to succeed in this capacity because of his university education and his scholarly association with The Right Honourable Sir Ralph Sadler, whose distinguished portrait by Hans Holbein the Younger appears above.

## 3. Bate Overlooks Chapman's Extensive Literary Correspondence

One of the principal reasons independent scholars reject William of Stratford as the author of the corpus is that he leaves no epistolary paper trail. What kind of professional writer sends no letters? Gets no mail? Such a figure can only be a ghost. George Chapman manifests himself today in a trove of letters in which he dwells on his craft of writing. Take as an example his heart-rending missive to Henry Howard, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Northampton (1540-1614).

Beseeching your Lordship to vouchsafe the reading of the annexed petition, and to take notice of my enforced suite therein contained; the ground thereof being a due debt (the promise of a prince vouched on his death bed) growing from a serious and valuable cause (two years studious writings impos'd by his highness upon a poore man, whose Pen is his Plow and the sole meanes of his maintenance) that your Lordship, being a most competent

Judge of my paines in this kinde; may please out of your noble inclination to learning, to countenance my constrained motion, made for no money, but only for some poor Coppiehold of princes land, of 40 pounds rent, if any such I can find. Nor needs your Lordship doubt giving President to any, no one being able, of this nature, to allege the like service; none but myself having done Homer; which will sufficiently distinguish it from any other: for if what Virgile divinely affirmes be true, that easier it is to gaine the Club from Hercules than a verse from Homer (intending so to gaine and manage it that we make it our owne) I hope few els can plead to the Prince so difficult a service. (Charlotte Spivack, *George Chapman*, Twayne, 1967, p. 20)

Here we have from Chapman what we never get from any of the records pertaining to William of Stratford: personal testimony affirming the art and practice of literature. In and through Chapman's florid prose we find ourselves confronted by that most recognizable of all commodities: a suffering human being. And in that frank and wincing presentation of a flesh and blood individual we find one whose "Pen was his Plough." A more touching and self-ratifying confession could hardly be imagined. The writer George Chapman was not a ghost, but a real guy, who lived in the anguish for which the poetic path is so notorious. This above all is what is missing in the Stratford myths and legends: a man, a man in need.

## Conclusion

The learning displayed in the works of Shakespeare is arguably without parallel in the history of the human race. As Aristotle ("the master of those who know") would observe, the formal cause of knowledge is education. Genius alone, no matter how towering, cannot substitute for life. That is why there are child prodigies in only three fields, music, mathematics and chess. None of these relies on the sort of cultural enrichment one finds in law, history or psychology, for example, where only seasoned veterans excel. The still-pertinent axiom is that the cause must be equal to its effect. Those who actually read the totality of Shakespeare's works must agree that it reflects extraordinary learning.

The reason "anti-Stratfordians" don't advance the same critique of Chapman that they do *In Re: William of Stratford* is that, asseverations of Mr. Bate to the contrary notwithstanding, Chapman plainly possesses in abundance the credentials

necessary to support his authorship. His background is one of superlative learning and substantial court associations. To be sure, if the documentary record revealed a Chapman who was really a callow rogue on a par with, say, Jack Cade in *King Henry VI*, we'd be justified in suspending his literary reputation pending further investigation. That is precisely what we don't find, however. Hence there is a presumption in Chapman's favor. Him in his course untainted we allow. Anyone such as Mr. Bate, proffering a gratuitously less generous account of his preparation, would ironically bear a heavy burden of showing that Chapman was indeed Chapman, a burden hardly discharged by the dyspeptic and mendacious bloggery of 22 April 2014.

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David P. Gontar's latest book is [Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays](#), New English Review Press, 2013.

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