

1 *What Manner of Man Was He?*



IN this book I want to think about four specific aspects of Shakespeare's life and work. In this first chapter I shall discuss the general problem of discerning the personality of a writer who spent a lifetime of creative activity in depicting people other than himself. In the second chapter I shall address the question of how Shakespeare set about the task of writing a play. Thirdly, I shall ask what we can deduce about his personality from the body of work in which he seems to write most directly about himself, his sonnets. And finally I shall ask what made him laugh.

First, how can we hope to know what he was like? It's a question that characters in his plays ask about other characters. When a nobleman intrudes upon the revels in the Boar's Head Tavern (*1 Henry IV*, 2. 5.295), Sir John Falstaff asks 'What manner of man is he?' In the same scene (lines 422–423) Prince Hal asks Falstaff, who is standing in for King Henry, 'What manner of man, an it like your majesty?' In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia, referring to the disguised Viola, asks Malvolio first 'What kind o' man is he?' then 'What manner of man?' (1.5.145, 147); in *As You Like It* Rosalind asks 'what manner of man' is Orlando (3.2.201). And in *The Winter's*

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Tale the Clown asks Autolycus ‘What manner of fellow was he that robbed you?’ (4.4.84).

The question, natural enough at any time and in any place, is especially relevant to a dramatist seeking to depict human beings in real-life situations (rather than, for example, the stylized abstractions of the morality plays). It would have been familiar to Shakespeare’s audiences not least from the words of St Mark about Jesus in the King James Bible, ‘What manner of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?’ (Matthew 8: 27). The clear implication here is that he – Jesus – is some sort of superman. Modern colloquial equivalents relating to ordinary mortals are ‘What makes her tick?’ and ‘What sort of a chap is he?’

The question has provoked a whole school, or technique, of criticism based on the attempt to define and analyze characters within the plays, and to discuss their origins, even to portray the girlhoods of their heroines, on the basis of what they say, and do, and on what is said about them, as if they were real people. The method, often associated especially with the late-Victorian critic A. C. Bradley, has provoked dispute as well as agreement, and was famously mocked by L. C. Knights in his 1933 essay ‘How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?’ Bradley himself has a substantial and deeply thoughtful (if ponderously expressed) essay called ‘Shakespeare the Man’ in his *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, first published in 1909, in which he sounds somewhat defensive about the enterprise: he writes that ‘the natural desire to know whatever can be known of him is not to be repressed merely because there are people so foolish as to be careless about his works and yet curious about his private life’ (p. 243). There is,

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I suspect, a covert reference here to contemporary responses, such as those of Oscar Wilde and Samuel Butler, to homosexual readings of Shakespeare's sonnets. And Bradley confesses that 'though I should care nothing about the man if he had not written the works, yet, since we possess them, I would rather see and hear him for five minutes in his proper person than discover a new one' (p. 243). A rather odd admission: would you swap, say, the lost *Love's Labour's Won*, or even the joint-authored, and also lost, *Cardenio*, for five minutes with Shakespeare, possibly on a bad day?

Bradley continues: 'And though we may be content to die without knowing his income or even the surname of Mr W. H. – to whom the publisher Thomas Thorpe dedicated the 1609 collection of sonnets – 'we cannot so easily resign the wish to find the man in the writings, and to form some idea of the disposition, the likes and dislikes, the character and the attitude towards life, of the human being who seems to us to have understood best our common human natures' (p. 313). The wish expressed here is predictable since Bradley is associated especially with character-based criticism – the attempt to write and to talk about the characters of Shakespeare's plays as if they were real people, and the tendency to value his plays especially for their psychological insights into human character.

It is natural to apply the question What was he really like? not only to characters in Shakespeare's plays but also to the author of the plays in which these characters appear. But it is not easily answered. A narrative account of the bare facts of a person's journey through life, their parentage and education, their career, the 'actions that a man might play' (*Hamlet*,

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1.2.84) do not, as Hamlet knows, pluck out the heart of his mystery. A curriculum vitae or a *Who's Who* entry may supply such an account. What people show to the world around them may reveal little or nothing of their inner being, just as the visible signs of Hamlet's mourning for Claudius are 'but the trappings and the suits of woe' (*Hamlet*, 1.2.86).

Biographical studies of Shakespeare vary in the degree to which they attempt to dig below the surface to interpret the facts of his life in search of the inner man. Some accounts are pretty well wholly objective. I think for example of E. K. Chambers's *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, published in 1930, and of S. Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1977), and its lesser-known sequel, *Records and Images* (1981), which offer raw materials for the biography that Schoenbaum hoped to write but did not live long enough to accomplish. At the other extreme is Katherine Duncan-Jones's *Shakespeare: An Ungentle Life* (2001; revised 2014). It's a combative title. She is picking up on the fact that several of Shakespeare's contemporaries, including Ben Jonson, referred to him as 'gentle' (which could refer to social status, as in 'gently born', no less than to character. In Shakespeare's time a gentleman was a man entitled to display a coat of arms). In Duncan-Jones's view, the adjective as applied to his character is undeserved. Making interpretative use of absence of evidence, she remarks in the blurb of her book that 'unlike other local worthies, or his actor-contemporary Edward Alleyn', Shakespeare 'shows no inclination to divert any of his wealth towards charitable, neighbourly or altruistic ends'. This is not really fair, since he left £10 – no small sum, amounting to half of the local schoolmaster's

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annual salary – to the poor of Stratford, and there are also bequests to neighbours and to other persons outside the immediate family circle.

There have also been attempts – less fashionable now than previously – to apply the techniques of psychoanalysis to Shakespeare through interpretation of both the life records and the works. An example is the volume entitled *Shakespeare's Personality* (1989), edited by Norman N. Holland and other scholars, which offers a series of essays, many of them based on Freudian psychology, relating Shakespeare's life to his works. Its index includes entries for such subjects as Shakespeare's 'abhorrence of vagina', his 'compliant tendencies', his 'erotic versus aggressive drives', his 'phallic fantasy', his 'sexual fantasies', and his 'vindictive impulses'.

For all its intellectual sophistication, such work has to negotiate two difficult obstacles. One is our imperfect knowledge of the facts of Shakespeare's life. For instance, several of the contributors to Holland's volume make much of what the editor refers to in his introduction as Shakespeare's 'father's loss of patriarchal authority as a result of his financial decline' (p. 7). But that supposed financial decline is imperfectly documented and has indeed been disputed in a study by David Fallow (*The Shakespeare Circle*, pp. 34–36). John Shakespeare was buried in September 1601; William, who already owned New Place, was his eldest son and clearly inherited John's house, now known as the Birthplace, in Henley Street; only nine months later William made the most expensive purchase of his life, paying £320 for a large area of land in Old Stratford and on the Welcombe Hills. I should be surprised if all this money came from his theatrical earnings. If his father's

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supposed financial decline didn't occur, theories of its supposed psychological effect on Shakespeare are invalidated.

A major obstacle to reading Shakespeare's life through his plays is the fact that they are not purely the product of his own imagination but draw heavily both for their plots and their language on historical events and on writings by other people, and so cannot be properly thought of as purely the projections of his subconscious mind or as reflections of his personal experience. To give an example close to home – in more than one sense – there is a speech in *Henry IV, Part Two* written about the time that Shakespeare was buying and, there is reason to believe, renovating New Place in which it is tempting to suppose that he was drawing on recent personal experience:

When we mean to build
 We first survey the plot, then draw the model;
 And when we see the figure of the house,
 Then must we rate the cost of the erection,
 Which if we find outweighs ability,
 What do we then but draw anew the model
 In fewer offices, or, at least, desist
 To build at all? (1.3.41–48)

The temptation to see these lines as autobiographical may dwindle, however, when we find that they paraphrase quite closely the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builder in St Matthew's Gospel, 7: 24–27.

Attempts like those in the Holland volume to offer an interpretation of the external evidence in the hope of defining what Shakespeare was like must delve beneath the exterior facts in endeavouring to define the essentials of his personality, what makes him different from other men, what characterizes

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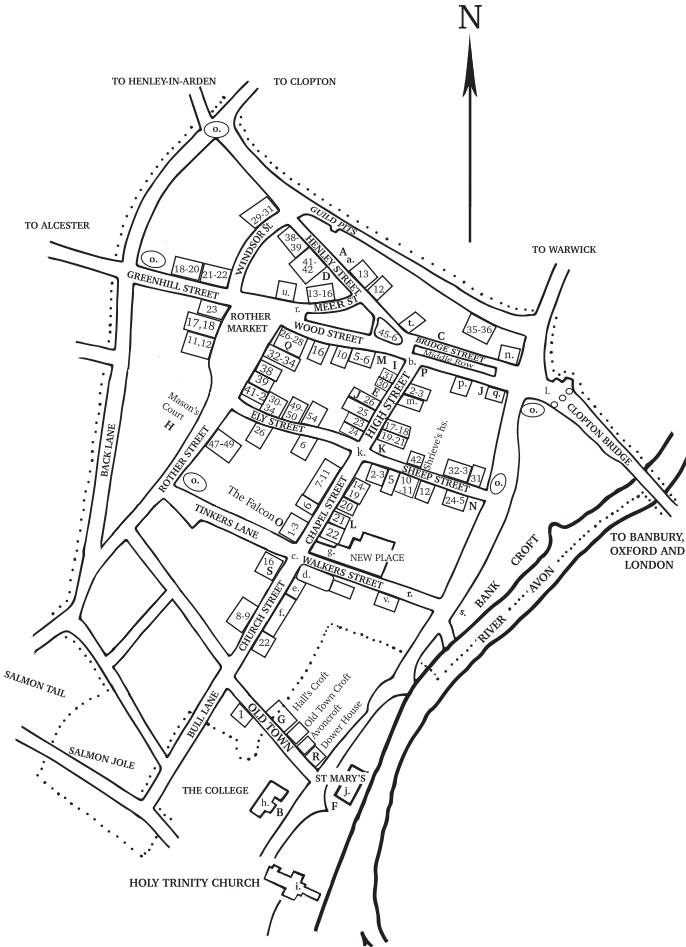
his attitude to his fellow human beings and the way in which he reacts to the situations in which he finds himself, qualities such as his sense of humour, his tenacity, his conscientiousness, his predictability, his temperament, his sensibility, his sexuality, his attitudes to the great questions of life and death, his spirituality, his moral stances, and his imaginative makeup. For the Elizabethans, these qualities were determined by the four bodily humours – black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood – which in turn influenced the four basic temperaments – choleric, phlegmatic, melancholic, and sanguine. Such simplistic, rough and ready categorizations offer mere pigeon-holes into which people can be slotted with little regard for true individuality. Attempts at definition of character demand far more subtlety; they must acknowledge too that personality is not constant, that people change and develop over the years, and that appetites alter – that, as Benedick says in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a man may love ‘the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age’ (2.3.226–227).

Are there, in spite of the many notorious gaps in our knowledge about Shakespeare’s life, the paucity of personal documentation, the absence of self-revelatory letters such as we have for John Keats, of diaries such as those of the Elizabethan astrologer Simon Forman and of Samuel Pepys or, closer to our time, Virginia Woolf, intimate memoirs such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and documentary films such as we have for some more recent writers – are there, in spite of such absences, ways in which we can attempt to plumb Shakespeare’s depths?

To start with, these absences are not total. We have expressions of opinion about him from contemporaries, some

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 Excerpt
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1 Map of Stratford-upon-Avon showing some of the landmarks and buildings present in Shakespeare's time. Stratford had around a thousand elm trees and a population of two thousand people.

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Key to map

Some of the buildings that Shakespeare knew and which still survive today**Chapel Street**

Nos. 1–3 (now The Falcon from around 1661); 6; 7–11; 14–19; 20 and 21; part of the buildings now known as The Shakespeare (hotel); No 22 (now Nash's House)

Church Street

Nos 8–9; 16; No 22 (now The Windmill)

Ely Street

No. 6 (now The Cross Keys); 26; 30–34; 49–50; 54 (now The Queen's Head)

Greenhill Street

Nos.18–20; 21–22; 23 (now The Old Thatch)

Guild Pits (now Guild Street)

Nos 35–36

Henley Street

No.12 (now The Public Library); 13 (now Hornby Cottage); 29–31; 38–39; 41–42

High Street

Nos. 2–3; 17–18; 19–21; 23–24; 25 (now The Garrick); 26 (now Harvard House); 30–31

Meer Street

Nos. 13–14; 15–16

Old Town

No.1; Old Town Croft; The Dower House; Avoncroft; Hall's Croft

Rother Street

Nos.11–12; 17–18; 34; 38–39; 40–41 (now The Lamplighter); 47–49; Mason's Court

Sheep Street

Shrieve's House; Nos. 2–3; 5; 10–12; 24–25; 31–33; 42

Wood Street

Nos. 5–6; 10; 16; 26–28; 45–46

Location of some of Shakespeare's neighbours at different times of his life

- A. George Badger (next door to the Shakespeares)
- B. The Combe family (The College)
- C. Richard Field (28 Bridge Street)
- D. William Greenaway (now 46–49 Henley Street)
- E. William Walker (29 High Street)
- F. Thomas Greene (St Mary's)
- G. John and Susanna Hall (Hall's Croft)
- H. Alderman John Gibbs (Mason's Court)
- I. Adrian Quiney (31 High Street)
- J. Thomas Rogers (26 High Street, Harvard House, and 27–28 High Street)
- K. Hamnet and Judith Sadler (22 High Street)
- L. July Shaw (21 Chapel Street)
- M. Abraham Sturley (5–6 Wood Street)
- N. Richard Tyler (now around 23–26 Sheep Street)
- O. William Walford (now The Falcon)
- P. Thomas and Judith Quiney (1 High Street)
- Q. Alderman William Parsons (26–28 Wood Street)
- R. William Reynolds (The Dower House)
- S. John Sadler (16 Church Street)

Landmarks

- a. The Shakespeares' home on Henley Street
- b. High Cross or Market Cross (and from 1614 a whipping post)
- c. White Cross
- d. Guild Chapel
- e. School and Guild Hall
- f. Almshouses
- g. New Place and grounds
- h. The College
- i. Holy Trinity Church
- j. St Mary's
- k. Corn Market
- l. Toll Gate
- m. The town's first recorded jail (5 High Street)
- n. The Swan Inn
- o. Muck heaps
- p. The Crown Inn
- q. The Bear Inn
- r. Streams
- s. The Walkers' Mill
- t. The Angel Inn
- u. The King House or Hall (now the White Swan)
- v. Rowington Cottage
- ... Borough border

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posthumous, many of which are gathered together in the two-volume *Shakespeare Allusion Book* (badly out of date though that work is – it was published in 1932). These start in 1592, when he was twenty-eight, with the description of him in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* as an 'upstart crow'. This is an obviously malicious and envious gibe, and it was rapidly countered by the prolific but congenitally impecunious writer Henry Chettle in his *Kind Heart's Dream*: 'I am as sorry,' wrote Chettle, 'as if the original fault had been my fault because myself have seen his [i.e. Shakespeare's] demeanour no less civil than he [is] excellent in the quality he professes, besides divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art.' (This is the first time the word 'facetious,' from the Latin meaning 'witty,' appears in English; here the phrase 'facetious grace' seems to mean something like 'amusing skill'.) It would be good to know who the 'divers of worship' were. Might they have included Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare was to dedicate *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* in the two following years? Anyhow this is a powerful character reference; and to the best of my belief, the 'upstart crow' jibe is the only denigratory surviving reference to Shakespeare's character made by any of his contemporaries throughout his career.

People liked and admired him. The minor poet John Weever addressed him as 'Honey-tongued Shakespeare' in a poem published in 1599. And he is mentioned favourably in several commendatory poems and in the three anonymously written *Parnassus* plays performed at St John's College, Cambridge around the turn of the century – 'O sweet Master Shakespeare, I'll have his picture in my study at the court,' says