

## WHAT WAS SHAKESPEARE REALLY LIKE?

Sir Stanley Wells is one of the world's greatest authorities on William Shakespeare. Here he brings a lifetime of learning and reflection to bear on some of the most tantalizing questions about the poet and dramatist that there are. How did he think, feel, and work? What were his relationships like? What did he believe about death? What made him laugh? This freshly thought and immensely engaging study wrestles with fundamental debates concerning Shakespeare's personality and life. The mysteries of how Shakespeare lived, whom and how he loved, how he worked, how he produced some of the greatest and most abidingly popular works in the history of world literature and drama, have fascinated readers for centuries. This concise, crystalline book conjures illuminating insights to reveal Shakespeare as he was. Wells brings the writer and dramatist alive, in all his fascinating humanity, for readers of today.

PROFESSOR SIR STANLEY WELLS, CBE, FRSL, is Honorary President of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. His many books include *Shakespeare: For All Time* (2002), *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* (2004), *Shakespeare & Co.* (2006), *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love* (2010) and *Great Shakespeare Actors* (2015). He edited *Shakespeare Survey* for almost twenty years, and is co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage* (with Sarah Stanton, 2002), *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* (with Margreta de Grazia, 2010), *The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography* (with Paul Edmondson, 2015) and *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare* (with Paul Edmondson, 2020). He is also General Editor of the Oxford and Penguin editions of Shakespeare.

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Stanley Wells , Foreword by Stephen Fry  
Frontmatter  
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## Stanley Wells

*With a foreword by* Stephen Fry

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## FOREWORD

Stephen Fry

The Forest of Arden is as nothing to the impenetrable thickets of Shakespearean scholarship that so often block out the light, choking the paths and entangling generations of schoolchildren who are expected to hack their way through. How often do we hear ‘Shakespeare was ruined for me at school’? For many, his works are for ‘other people’, for – to use the most grievous insult of our age – the cultural elite.

It was never so in Shakespeare’s own time, of course. He was the most popular (and financially successful) dramatist of his day; his histories, tragedies, and comedies delighted contemporary audiences of all sorts and conditions. If one wanted to do so, one could compare him to ... Peter Morgan, say, the creator of the Netflix series *The Crown*, and to ... I don’t know ... Julian Fellowes of *Gosford Park*, or to Ricky Gervais, Steven Spielberg, and the creators of the Marvel Cinematic Universe – but such comparisons are only ways of restating Shakespeare’s *reach*, they say nothing of the particular qualities that have elevated him to the unique status he has attained around the world for the best part of four hundred years. He combined all the excellence of the most popular and skilled creators of dramatic entertainment we can think of, but with a depth, scale, and poetic power and insight that no playwright, novelist, film director, or screenwriter has since come close to.

## FOREWORD

The poet Robert Graves juicily observed that ‘the remarkable thing about Shakespeare is that he is really very good – in spite of all the people who say he is very good’. And how people do beat the drum for his greatness. He and his works are famous for exhausting superlatives, and tiresome declamations of his genius (like mine) are of no help. Such ‘bardolatry’ only makes the frustration (and often anger and contempt) of those who ‘don’t get him’ all the more intense.

The Nobel Prize laureate Richard Feynman, one of the greatest physicists of the twentieth century, was celebrated for the way he could explain the most impenetrable and profound ideas in science to anyone. Rare as the gift of understanding the mathematical and conceptual complexities of physics might be, the gift of being able to *communicate* them is rarer still. And so it is in the field of Shakespeare Studies. Shakespeare may not be as difficult as quantum mechanics, but some seem to go out of their way to make him so.

Forward Professor Sir Stanley Wells, whose knowledge and scholarship are equal to any academic anywhere, but whose ability to talk and write straightforwardly, clearly, and revealingly about all aspects of Shakespeare is absolutely unequalled. Over a long and fruitful life he has, to mangle Cassius, bestridden the field like a colossus. It is, I think, incontestable to claim that no single person in history has done more for the study and appreciation of Shakespeare.

The four chapters in this book ask four beguilingly simple questions which result in deeply fascinating and exciting journeys into Shakespeare’s mind and practice. As you read, you are very likely to exclaim, as I did, ‘Why the hell didn’t my English teacher talk like this?’



## FOREWORD

The final Epilogue takes us on a delightful excursion through the eight decades that Sir Stanley has spent helping the world understand Shakespeare better as creator, person, and phenomenon. Actors, directors, producers, lecturers, teachers, students, and all who want to know and understand more will hug this book to them.

We could say of Stanley Wells what Matthew Arnold says of William Shakespeare:

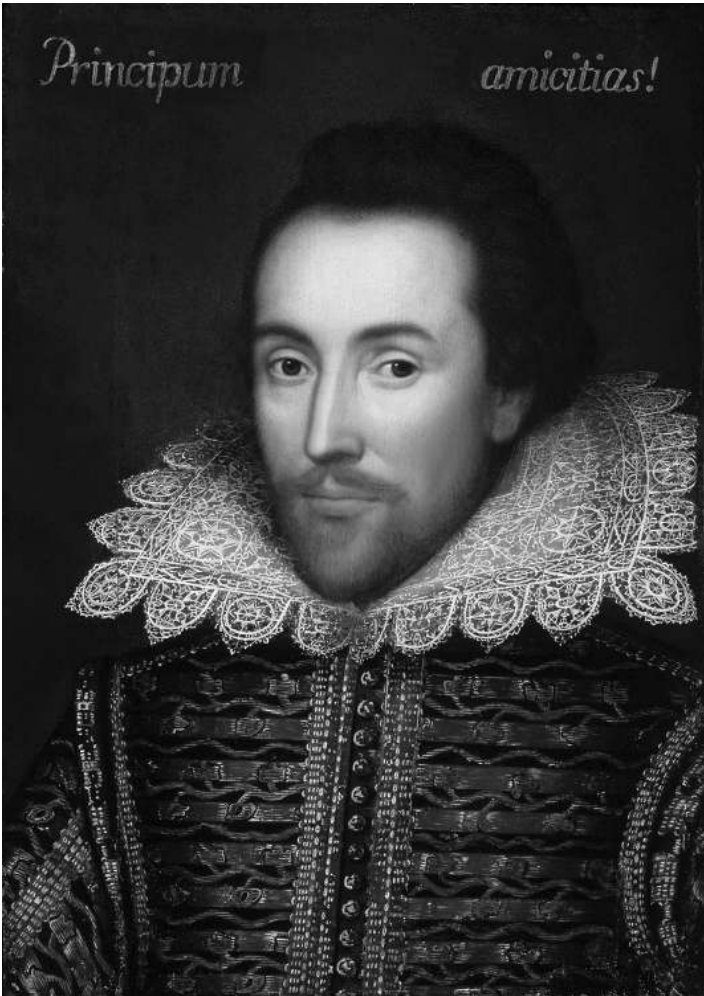
Others abide our question. Thou art free.  
We ask and ask – Thou smilest and art still,  
Out-topping knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (eds).  
Oxford University Press, 1950, p. 2

## PREFACE

This little book contains the lightly revised text of four lectures which I was invited to write for delivery in the Shakespeare Centre, headquarters of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, in April and May 2020 to celebrate my ninetieth birthday, on 21 May of that year. Because of the pandemic, however, they were instead delivered online, at weekly intervals. They were edited and recorded, in somewhat shortened form, in my home with the indispensable editorial and technical help of the Head of Research at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Dr Paul Edmondson, to whom this little book is gratefully dedicated. Each lecture was generously introduced by a friend, Professors Russell Jackson and Michael Dobson, both of whom had studied with me and went on to follow me as director of the Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham; Gregory Doran, artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, of which I am honorary governor emeritus; and Professor Lena Orlin, trustee of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, of which I am honorary president. The lectures were made available through the trust's website, [www.shakespeare.org.uk](http://www.shakespeare.org.uk), with the accidental (but, for me, happy) result that many more people in many different countries heard them than if they had been given in person, as originally intended. For this printed version I have restored passages omitted in the recording and made a few revisions.

PREFACE



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