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# I

ERNST HONIGMANN

## Shakespeare's life

SEVEN years after Shakespeare's death his former 'fellows' or colleagues published the first collected edition of his plays, the great Folio of 1623, 'only to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive as was our Shakespeare'. *Our Shakespeare!* The phrase, which has re-echoed down the centuries, was probably in use before his death in 1616. In Spain, a contemporary recorded, Lope de Vega 'is accounted of . . . as in England we should of our Will Shakespeare'. This was how one referred to a classic ('our Virgil', 'our Spenser'), more commonly after his death, and Shakespeare was seen as a classic in his lifetime. The anonymous writer of a preface to *Troilus and Cressida* (1609) said so quite explicitly: the play deserves a commentary 'as well as the best comedy in Terence or Plautus'.

The friends who published the Folio loved and admired the man as well as his works. Ben Jonson contributed a poem 'to the memory of my beloved, the author, Mr. William Shakespeare', and later wrote, 'I loved the man and do honour his memory, on this side idolatry, as much as any.' He was gentle Shakespeare, sweet Shakespeare, good Will, friendly Shakespeare – that, at least, seems to have been the majority verdict. A minority saw him in a less agreeable light.

Born in 1564 in provincial Stratford-upon-Avon, he was the eldest surviving child of John and Mary Shakespeare. John is thought to have been the son of Richard, a husbandman in Snitterfield (four miles from Stratford) who held lands as a tenant of Robert Arden, gentleman. Arden's daughter, Mary, inherited fifty acres when her father died in 1556, and not long after married John Shakespeare. John and Mary therefore belonged to different social levels; John, like his son William, proved to be 'upwardly mobile'.

John Shakespeare is first heard of in Stratford in 1552, when he was fined one shilling for building an unauthorized dunghill or muck-heap in Henley Street. (In Stratford, as in London, excrement and other refuse must have been a familiar sight in public streets.) We assume that John already lived in this street, in the house now known as his son's birthplace. He worked as a glover and whit-tawer (a curer and whitener of skins), but he also became 'a considerable dealer in wool' (Nicholas Rowe, in his *Life of Shakespeare*, 1709, confirmed by recently discovered records), he sold barley and timber, and he bought houses, including the one adjoining his house in Henley Street. In addition to his probably complex

business dealings he participated in civic affairs and rose from minor duties to hold office as chamberlain, member of the town council, alderman, and, in 1568, high bailiff (we would say ‘mayor’). He signed official documents with his mark, which may mean that he could not write, though this does not necessarily follow. Whether or not he was illiterate he must have had a good head for business since he was asked to take charge of civic accounts. Is it not likely, though, that Shakespeare’s parents were both remarkable people?

Having prospered for some twenty years, John ran into difficulties in the late 1570s. He was let off paying his weekly 4d. for poor relief; he failed to attend council meetings, and consequently was deprived of his alderman’s gown (1586); he mortgaged part of his wife’s inheritance. It could be that he only pretended to be poor and withdrew from council business for religious reasons – if, like many others, he became a ‘recusant’ when Queen Elizabeth succeeded Mary in 1558, i.e. he refused to give up the ‘Old Faith’, Roman Catholicism. Recusants were persecuted more vigorously just when John Shakespeare’s difficulties started and were fined for non-attendance at church, and his name appears in a list of non-attenders: apparently he alleged that he stayed away because he feared that he might be arrested for debt. Nevertheless he continued to own houses in Stratford; in 1580, summoned to appear in court at Westminster, he was fined £40 (equivalent to a schoolmaster’s salary for two years) for non-appearance. The court, we are told, would not have imposed such a fine if John was believed unable to pay. Did his fortunes really decline, or did he withdraw from the council because, as a recusant, he did not wish to take part in punishing other Catholics? The evidence is not clear.

John Shakespeare died in 1601, and Mary in 1608. We are granted one glimpse of John some fifty years after his death. ‘Sir John Mennis saw once his old father in his shop – a merry-cheeked old man that said “Will was a good honest fellow, but he durst have cracked a jest with him at any time.”’ Who durst – father or son? If the son, this suggests that he sometimes made jests out of season, which is confirmed by other early anecdotes.<sup>1</sup>

John and Mary sent their son to ‘a free school’ (Rowe), probably the King’s New School at Stratford. Here he learned Latin grammar, read Aesop’s *Fables*, then moved on to the usual classics: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (frequently quoted or alluded to in his later writings), Plautus (whose *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo* supplied the plot for *The Comedy of Errors*), Terence, Virgil, Cicero, and no doubt many others. English and modern European literature and history were not taught at this time. The successive masters at his school, Oxford graduates, several of whom were Catholics or had Catholic connections, were paid £20 a year plus housing. Ben Jonson later wrote disparagingly of Shakespeare’s ‘small Latin and less Greek’: by Jonson’s own standards this may have been fair comment, yet Shakespeare probably read Latin as easily as most graduates ‘with Honours in Latin’ today. It was once thought that he was ignorant of Greek



tragedy; not so, it is now said, he knew some Greek tragedies, either in the original or in Seneca's adaptations.

If, as was usual, Shakespeare left school at fifteen or sixteen, what did he do next? According to Rowe, his father 'could give him no better education than his own employment', while a Mr Dowdall (1693) thought that he was 'bound apprentice to a butcher'. John Aubrey heard from the son of one of Shakespeare's colleagues that 'he understood Latin pretty well, for he had been in his younger years a schoolmaster in the country'. Another theory takes us north, to Lancashire, where a wealthy Catholic esquire, Alexander Hoghton, recommended William 'Shakeshafte' to his neighbour, Sir Thomas Hesketh, and at the same time bequeathed him his 'instruments belonging to musics and all manner of play clothes' (August 1581). Was Shakeshafte a player, and could he have been Shakespeare? Could he have worked as an assistant 'schoolmaster in the country' for Hoghton? (The performance of plays by boys was recommended by forward-looking schoolmasters). If so, it would imply that at this date Shakespeare was also a Catholic.

From Hoghton and Hesketh he could have transferred to the service of Lord Strange, a more important Lancashire magnate in whose company, reconstituted as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, we find Shakespeare in 1594. Lord Strange was also suspected of Catholic sympathies.

The curious forms that names could take puzzle us again when, on 27 November 1582, the Bishop of Worcester issued a licence for the marriage of 'Willelmum Shaxpere et Annam Whateley de Temple Grafton'. The next day a bond was signed to protect the bishop, in case the marriage of William 'Shagspere' and Anne 'Hathwey' led to legal proceedings, since William was a minor and Anne was pregnant. Some think that 'Whateley' was a misreading of Hathaway, others that Shakespeare, aged 18, would have preferred not to marry Anne Hathaway, aged 26. It must be added that names – like spelling – could wobble at this time. Shakespeare is 'Shaxberd' in the Revels accounts of 1604–5, Christopher Marlowe also appears as 'Morley' and 'Marlin'.

Anne Hathaway, probably the eldest daughter of Richard Hathaway, a husbandman in Shotton, lost her father in September 1581 and nine months later gave birth to her first child, Susanna (baptized 26 May 1583). On 2 February 1585 the twins Hamnet and Judith were baptized (Hamnet being a variant form of Hamlet); doubtless their godparents were Hamnet and Judith Sadler, family friends.

After 1585 William and Anne produced no more children (unusual in those days: William's parents had eight children over a period of twenty-two years). It may have been shortly thereafter that he left home for a career in the theatre. We first hear of him as an actor and dramatist in 1592, from a rival dramatist who believed that he suffered neglect because of Shakespeare's great popularity. In his *Groat's Worth of Wit* Robert Greene addressed three 'gentlemen, his

quondam acquaintance, that spend their wits in making plays' (Marlowe, Peele, Nashe) and denounced 'an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his "Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide" supposes he is as well able to bombast out [i.e. write] a blank verse as the best of you: and, being an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country'. The pun in Shake-scene and ridicule of a line from 3 *Henry VI* ('O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide') leave us in no doubt as to Greene's target. He sneered at an upstart actor who dared to compete with his betters, gentlemen dramatists who had been to university (Shakespeare had not), one who thought his bombastic blank verse superior to theirs, and who threatened to put them all out of business.

Greene, I think, continued his attack in *Groat's Worth of Wit* with an allusion to the fable of the ant and the grasshopper. The grasshopper enjoyed himself in the summer, the ant toiled to prepare for winter. When winter arrived, the grasshopper 'went for succour to the ant his old acquaintance, to whom he had scarce discovered his estate but the waspish little worm made this reply, "Pack hence," quoth he, "thou idle lazy worm . . ."' The grasshopper died, and, concluded Greene, 'like him, myself: like me, shall all that trust to friends or time's inconstancy'. Can we doubt that the busy ant, pursuing two separate careers as actor and writer, drove himself hard? 'Weary with toil I haste me to my bed' (Sonnet 27).

Greene picked on the line from 3 *Henry VI* to accuse gentle Shakespeare of having a 'tiger's heart', a charge apparently repeated in 'the waspish little worm'. If we accept that Greene had Shake-scene in mind as the relentless ant, the circumstances become clearer, from Greene's point of view. Shakespeare, we may hope, would have told a different tale. Henry Chettle, who had prepared Greene's pamphlet for the press, apologized: various gentlemen vouched for Shakespeare's 'uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious [polished; witty] grace in writing, that approves [confirms] his art'. Greene's public attack must have pained Shakespeare, and it is not impossible that he reflected on it in Sonnet 112:

Your love and pity doth th'impression fill  
Which vulgar scandal stamped upon my brow;  
For what care I who calls me well or ill,  
So you o'ergreen my bad, my good allow? (1-4)

At least one other contemporary, it seems, thought like Greene about Shakespeare. In the anonymous pamphlet *Ratsey's Ghost* (1605) a player is advised to go to London and 'play Hamlet' for a wager. 'There thou shalt learn to be frugal . . . and to feed upon all men, to let none feed upon thee; to make thy hand a stranger to thy pocket . . . and when thou feelest thy purse well lined, buy thee some place or lordship in the country . . .' The player answers that he will do so, 'for I have heard indeed of some that have gone to London very meanly, and

have come in time to be exceeding wealthy'. The allusions (Hamlet, New Place – see p. 6 – and going to London) point to Shakespeare rather than Edward Alleyn, the only other player rich enough to buy a 'place' in the country, for Alleyn was a Londoner born and could not 'go to London' at the start of his career.

Greene's fable may help us with another unsolved problem. When did Shakespeare begin his theatrical career? The grasshopper calls the ant 'old acquaintance', which supports the view that he had been around in the theatrical world for some years, i.e. had made an 'early start' (1586 or 1587), not a 'late start' (1590). The late start is still widely supported, yet there are good reasons for the early start which, if correct, could mean that Marlowe (also born in 1564) was not Shakespeare's predecessor as a playwright, as stated in older textbooks, but his exact contemporary.

We next hear of Shakespeare in 1593 and 1594. He dedicated his *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* to the young Earl of Southampton (born 1572), the 1593 dedication being couched in formal language ('I know not how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolished lines to your lordship . . .'). The later one indicates that Southampton responded positively.

The love I dedicate to your Lordship is without end, whereof this pamphlet without beginning is but a superfluous moiety. The warrant I have of your honourable disposition, not the worth of my untutored lines, makes it assured of acceptance. What I have done is yours, what I have to do is yours being part in all I have, devoted yours.

We assume that Shakespeare wrote these poems because plague caused the closing of London's theatres, from the summer of 1592 to the spring of 1594, and he was cut off from his normal income. He and his colleagues, now the Lord Chamberlain's Men, resumed acting in 1594, and performed twice at court in the Christmas season. Three of their leaders signed a receipt for £20 – Richard Burbage, William Kempe, and Shakespeare. Burbage was a gifted tragic actor, Kempe an outstanding clown, and Shakespeare – ? The receipt proves that by 1594 he had won a prominent place in his company. Indeed, Greene – identifying no other actor – implied that Shakespeare helped to lead his fellows as early as 1592, perhaps as their business manager.

Shakespeare's business acumen must have been quite exceptional. In the course of time, as he prospered, he took on new responsibilities, with four distinct roles in his company: (1) 'sharer', one of ten or so owners of the company's assets (play-books, play clothes, properties); (2) 'house-holder', one of the owners or lease-holders of the Globe and Blackfriars theatres; (3) dramatist; (4) actor. Other dramatists were paid from £6 to £12 per play, prices that were clearly negotiable. Shakespeare must have known that his plays were his company's most precious asset, and might have demanded much more than others. He seems to have written, on average, two plays a year until 1602 or so, and thereafter one a year, and this could have been his major contribution.

Dramatists rehearsed their plays with the actors; we hear that Shakespeare ‘instructed’ them, and Jonson may have glanced at this practice in his memorial poem:

Shine forth, thou star of poets, and with rage  
Or influence chide or cheer the drooping stage. (77–8)

Hamlet cheers the players when they arrive in Elsinore (2.2.405 ff.) and later warns them against overacting (3.2.1 ff.). The voice of Shakespeare himself?

He ‘did act exceedingly well’, according to Aubrey. James Wright (1699) heard otherwise – he was ‘a much better poet than player’. ‘The top of his performance’, said Rowe, ‘was the ghost in his own *Hamlet*.’ He is also believed to have played Adam in *As You Like It*. It seems likely that he took supporting roles; after 1603 he dropped out of his company’s actor-lists, and perhaps felt that he could use his time more profitably in other ways. I imagine that by 1603 he was in a position to do more or less as he wished in his company. He remained with the Chamberlain’s Men (known as the King’s Men from 1603) for the rest of his working life, writing all told more than three dozen plays.

The order in which he wrote the plays is now pretty well agreed. Yet ‘internal’ or stylistic evidence and ‘external’ evidence (references to plays in dateable documents, or references in plays to historical events) give us very few firm dates for individual plays. For example, the allusion to the War of the Theatres in *Hamlet* (2.2.326 ff.) could have been a later insertion in the Folio text or a cut in the second quarto; if *The Troublesome Reign of King John* was a derivative play based on *King John* and not the source of Shakespeare’s play, the dates of most of the early plays would have to be changed. Fortunately Francis Meres published, in 1598, a list of twelve of Shakespeare’s plays (including one called *Love’s Labour’s Won*), an important event for two reasons. He supplied the date by which these plays must have been written, and he named their author. Only some of the twelve had been published before 1598, and they had been issued anonymously.

Until at least 1603 Shakespeare devoted most of his time to the theatre. Nevertheless he had begun to invest heavily in property in Stratford. In 1597 he bought a three-storey house called New Place, the second largest in the town; in 1602 he added 107 acres (43 ha) of arable land and 20 acres (8 ha) of pasture in Old Stratford, paying £320 in cash, an even bigger purchase, and, later in the same year, he bought the copyhold title to a cottage and garden facing the garden of New Place; in 1605 he paid £440 for a lease of tithes in neighbouring villages (this alone yielded an income of £60 p.a.). And he had other business interests: in 1597 he was possessed of 80 bushels of corn and malt (as a speculation?); some years later he sued Philip Rogers for a debt of 20 bushels of malt; in 1608 he sued John Addenbrooke, gent., for a debt of £6. In 1598 a Stratford man, Richard Quiney, wrote to Shakespeare to ask for a loan of £30. The tone of the letter and its financial implications are interesting.

Loving countryman, I am bold of you as of a friend, craving your help with £30 upon Mr Bushell's and my security or Mr Mitton's with me . . . You shall friend me much in helping me out of all the debts I owe in London, I thank God, and much quiet my mind . . . You shall neither lose credit nor money by me, the Lord willing . . . and if we bargain farther you shall be the paymaster yourself . . . The Lord be with you and with us all, amen. [Addressed] Haste. To my loving good friend and countryman, Mr Wm. 'Shackespere' deliver these.

The tone is civilized and gentlemanly; the financial implications are spelt out in a letter from Abraham Sturley to Quiney, recommending caution. Sturley had heard 'that our countryman, Mr Wm. Shak., would procure us money, which I will like of as I shall hear when and where and how'. He warned that the conditions of the loan would be crucial, implying that 'Mr Wm. Shak.' might drive a hard bargain. Like his father, John, who had lent large sums (£80, £100) at the illegal rate of 20 per cent, William seems to have had a sideline as a money-lender, while at the same time Shylock thrilled audiences in London. (The financial manager of a rival acting company, the Admiral's Men, kept a thriving pawnshop; his accounts have survived.)

How much was Shakespeare helped as a businessman by his parents? It has recently emerged that his father was not only capable of raising very large sums before he experienced those mysterious difficulties in the 1570s and 1580s, he was also accused of illegal wool-dealing (buying 200 tods of wool, or 5,600 pounds, with another purchaser and 100 tods on his own). It is sometimes said that William must have helped to finance his father's application for a coat of arms in 1596 (for which there is no evidence whatsoever. On the contrary: the heralds had noted that John 'hath lands and tenements of good wealth, and substance £500'). Is it perhaps more significant that William began to invest large sums in 1602, eight months after his father died, amounting to something not far removed from £500? I think it quite possible that his parents helped him financially at the start of his career, and even that his mother acted as his business manager in Stratford after 1601, and that her illness and death (in 1608) compelled him to spend more time at home, at least for a while.

Shakespeare's last known investment, the purchase of the Blackfriars Gatehouse in London in 1613 (for £140) has been described as a 'speculation rather than for use as a dwelling. He had by then retired to Stratford' – yet in the same year he helped to write two or three plays (*Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the lost *Cardenio*), so he did not think of himself as retired. The Gatehouse, close to the Blackfriars theatre, would have been a convenient London home; aged 49, he could not know that he had only three more years to live.

He had his will redrafted on 25 March 1616. Word must have reached him that his new son-in-law, Thomas Quiney (he had married Judith in February), was due to confess to 'carnal copulation' in the parish church the next day, 26 March. Shakespeare inserted new clauses to protect his daughter against her feckless

husband. For example, he bequeathed a sum of £150 to Judith, provided that ‘such husband as she shall at the end of . . . three years be married unto . . . do sufficiently assure unto her and the issue of her body lands answerable to [i.e. as valuable as] the portion by this my will given’ – an unlikely eventuality. And if Judith lived for three years, the sum of £150 was to be spent for her benefit by the executors, but ‘not to be paid unto her so long as she shall be married’. Clearly Shakespeare had no confidence in Thomas Quiney. A tiger’s heart wrapped in a father’s hide!

He also left bequests to many others, including his only surviving sibling, his sister Joan. She, married to a hatter, was to retain tenancy of the house in which she lived for the yearly peppercorn rent of 12d., and she was to have £50, which the executors were to pay to her or to her sons (i.e. not to her husband). Shakespeare, evidently a very sick man who could only just sign his name, also deleted a bequest to Richard Tyler, who was still alive, and there are other signs of his displeasure. It is in this context that we have to place the single reference to Anne Hathaway – ‘Item, I give unto my wife my second-best bed with the furniture’ (hangings, coverlets, bed-linen). Had he provided for Anne before he made his will, as some have supposed? Wills of the period often made this explicit. We do not know. There are various signs, however, that he was not a happy husband: the possibility of a shot-gun wedding in 1582; the fact that Anne had no more children after 1585; Aubrey’s report that ‘he was wont to go into Warwickshire once a year’; stories that link Shakespeare with other women, including the dark lady of the Sonnets; the fact that in purchasing the Gatehouse he brought in three trustees, which had the effect of barring his widow from any right to the property; the curt reference to ‘my wife’ in the will (testators generally said ‘my loving wife’), and the fact that she was not asked to be an executor. He named his daughter Susanna and her husband, Dr John Hall, as his executors, and Susanna as his principal heir (his son, Hamnet, had died in 1596).

Greene (1592) and *Ratsey’s Ghost* (1605) reveal Shakespeare as seen by his enemies; his will (1616) confirms that he had a stern, unyielding side. Our only rounded picture of Shakespeare the man is found in his Sonnets – one so extraordinary that many biographers prefer not to take it seriously (see also chapter 5, Shakespeare’s Poems, by John Kerrigan). Here he depicts himself as abnormally vulnerable and emotional, often almost unable to control his emotions, whether high or low, and inclined to withdraw from difficult confrontations. He seems to have written many of the Sonnets to explain feelings that he could not express face to face. He adores a ‘lovely boy’ or young man, probably a nobleman’s son, he dotes on a dark lady, and both betray him. He is too forgiving to the young man and knows it (Sonnets 35, 40–2, 70), and, some will say, spiteful to the dark lady (137). Nevertheless he also addresses sharp words to the young man (‘thou dost common grow’, ‘Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds’, 69, 94), and can write tenderly to the dark lady (128). Being Shakespeare, he sees the ridicu-

lousness of his own position (143). The Sonnets, of course, must not be read as 'straight' autobiography – yet why dismiss them as too extraordinary to be credible? Shakespeare was not an 'ordinary' or 'normal' man.

The publisher dedicated the Sonnets 'To the only begetter [inspirer?] of these ensuing sonnets, Mr W. H.', I assume without Shakespeare's permission. Whether or not the poet's love for the young man was homosexual (this is much debated), it might certainly be thought so, which – in view of the penalties against homosexual acts – would be dangerous. Mentioned by Francis Meres in 1598 as Shakespeare's 'sugared sonnets among his private friends', these superb poems remained unpublished for at least eleven years, with the exception of two that appeared in the pirated *Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), and, just as surprisingly, were not reissued between 1609 and 1640. This suggests, I think, that they were thought to be 'compromising'.

Several identifications of the young man have been proposed, including Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton (W. H. transposed?). Recent biographers have favoured William Herbert, later the Earl of Pembroke and dedicatee of the First Folio, in my view correctly. This W. H., born in 1580, was for many years a generous patron of Ben Jonson, and there are grounds for thinking Jonson the 'rival poet' of the Sonnets, who caused Shakespeare much grief (e.g. Sonnets 78–86). The rival competed for the young man's patronage: he paraded his learning, putting Shakespeare in the shade, he was proud, a polished poet, a flatterer, so overbearing that Shakespeare preferred not to engage with him (and felt that this needed an explanation):

My tongue-tied muse in manners holds her still  
While comments of your praise, richly compiled,  
Reserve thy character with golden quill  
And precious phrase by all the muses filed.  
I think good thoughts whilst other[s] write good words,  
And like unlettered clerk still cry 'Amen'  
To every hymn that able spirit affords  
In polished form of well-refined pen.  
Hearing you praised I say 'Tis so, 'tis true,  
And to the most of praise add something more;  
But that is in my thought . . . (85.1–11)

A 'tongue-tied' Shakespeare? Other sonnets present the same evasive, introverted personality (e.g. 23, 80, 83, 86, 128, 140) and yet early allusions refer to his unabashed quickness in repartee (cf. p. 2). So, too, early allusions depict him as a boon companion, whereas Aubrey recorded that 'he was not a company keeper, lived in Shoreditch, wouldn't be debauched, and if invited to [be debauched?], wrote he was in pain'. Contradictions? Why, though, expect a rigidly consistent Shakespeare? Do we not feel close to him in both Hamlet and Falstaff?

Shakespeare and Jonson perhaps tipped together in taverns, and had a

relationship of sorts for many years. Jonson repeatedly criticized Shakespeare and his plays, and on at least one occasion gentle Shakespeare may have retaliated. In the third Cambridge Parnassus play (1601?) Will Kempe says ‘O that Ben Jonson is a pestilent fellow, he brought up Horace giving the poets a pill [in *Poetaster*], but our fellow Shakespeare hath given him a purge that made him beray [foul] his credit [i.e. shit himself].’ Jonson was Shakespeare’s only major and persistent critic. He was jealous, and could not bear to praise the ‘sweet swan of Avon’ until after his great rival’s death.

In the present century we have learned much about his friends and associates, less about Shakespeare. An American, C. W. Wallace, discovered law-suits that give us vivid pictures of Richard Burbage and his father and, even more important, the Belott–Mountjoy suit of 1612. Stephen Belott had served as apprentice to Mountjoy, a French Huguenot, and had married his master’s daughter in 1604. Shakespeare, then a lodger in Mountjoy’s house, deposed that he had known the parties for ten years or so, and that he was asked to persuade Belott to marry Mary Mountjoy. He recalled that Mountjoy promised to give a ‘portion’ with Mary, ‘but what certain portion he remembereth not’. A diplomatic loss of memory? He signed his deposition, one of only six surviving signatures. It is sometimes transliterated as ‘Willfm Shakp’ but, as C. J. Sisson pointed out to me almost fifty years ago, it ends with a penman’s flourish and should read ‘Willm Shak.’ Compare ‘Mr Wm. Shak.’ (p. 7 above).

The discoveries of Leslie Hotson, a Canadian, match Wallace’s in importance. After *The Death of Christopher Marlowe* (1925) he published, in *Shakespeare versus Shallow* (1931), documents involving various persons close to the theatrical world. Francis Langley, the owner of the Swan theatre, claimed ‘sureties of the peace’ (i.e. the protection of the law) against William Gardiner, a Southwark JP, and William Wayte; Wayte then claimed ‘sureties’ against William ‘Shaksper’, Langley, Dorothy Soer, and Anne Lee (1596). Hotson argued that Gardiner and Wayte were lampooned as Justice Shallow and Slender in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. His most exciting detective-work followed in *I, William Shakespeare* (1937), an account of Thomas Russell, Esq., a friend named as overseer (assistant to the executors) in Shakespeare’s will. Russell owned an estate at Alderminster, four miles from Stratford, and was the stepfather of Sir Dudley and Leonard Digges. Sir Dudley probably gave Shakespeare access to William Strachey’s unpublished letter to the Council of the Virginia Company, describing a shipwreck in the Bermudas: this suggested details for *The Tempest*. Leonard Digges, born in 1588, young enough to be Shakespeare’s son, contributed verses to the First Folio and a longer memorial poem printed later (1640). He revered Shakespeare the man and the ‘fire and feeling’ of his plays.

Be sure, our Shakespeare, thou canst never die,  
But, crowned with laurel, live eternally.

Again, *our* Shakespeare!



Many stories circulated in Shakespeare's lifetime and after his death from less well-informed sources – the 'Shakespeare myths'. They portrayed him as a poacher, a hard drinker, a lover, and of course a master at repartee. There may well be some truth in some of these anecdotes, or are they too good to be true? John Manningham recorded one in his diary in 1602. When Burbage played Richard III, a woman in the audience made an assignation with him

to come that night unto her by the name of [i.e. using as password] Richard the Third. Shakespeare, overhearing their conclusion [arrangement], went before, was entertained and at his game ere Burbage came. Then message being brought that Richard the Third was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third.

A story more in character with the ethos of the plays, though not of the Sonnets, we owe to Sir Nicholas L'Estrange (mid-seventeenth century).

Shakespeare was godfather to one of Ben Jonson's children, and after the christening, being in a deep study, Jonson came to cheer him up and asked him why he was so melancholy. 'No, faith, Ben,' says he, 'not I. But I have been considering a great while what should be the fittest gift for me to bestow upon my god-child, and I have resolved at last.' 'I prythee what?' says he. 'T'faith, Ben, I'll e'en give him a dozen good latten spoons, and thou shalt translate them.'

Notice two puns. Translate could mean 'transform'; godfathers usually gave silver spoons, latten being a cheap alloy. Here Shakespeare appears to smile at Jonson's condescending view of his rival's small Latin and less Greek.

Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616, his widow on 6 August 1623. Their daughters outlived them – Susanna till July 1649, Judith till February 1662. Judith's three sons died without issue; Susanna's only child, Elizabeth, was married twice, first to Thomas Nash, and after his death to John (later Sir John) Bernard. Elizabeth died childless: with her death in 1670 the descent from Shakespeare became extinct.

The story of Shakespeare's life includes many unsolved puzzles, explained differently by different biographers. My account will displease traditionalists on many points – John Shakespeare's 'difficulties', William's possible sojourn in Lancashire, his marriage, the relentless ant, his carefulness with money, the 'early start' of his writing career, his will, his relationship with his wife, his personality as revealed in the Sonnets, his possible homosexuality, his religion. I have discussed these matters elsewhere, at greater length.<sup>2</sup> Of course, I agree with traditionalists more often than I disagree.

'He was indeed honest', Jonson summed up after Shakespeare's death, 'and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fancy, brave notions and gentle expressions.' Like so many other allusions, this one needs to be translated into modern English. Jonson probably meant 'He was indeed an honourable man, and of an unreserved and spontaneous nature; had an excelling imagination, fine ideas and admirable ways of expressing himself.'<sup>3</sup>

*Notes*

1. The best example is Shakespeare's alleged extempore epitaph for his Stratford friend, John Combe, 'an old gentleman noted thereabouts for his wealth and usury' (Rowe): 'Ten in the hundred lies here engraved, / 'Tis a hundred to ten, his soul is not saved. / If anyone ask who lies in this tomb / "O ho!" quoth the devil, "'tis my John-a-Combe!'"
2. It should be noted that these puzzles in Shakespeare's life remain unsolved: I mention interesting possibilities, but do not regard them as certainties. And it does not follow that, if Shakespeare was brought up as a Catholic (a possibility), the plays we know were written by a Catholic. Many Catholics became Protestants in his lifetime, including John Donne and Ben Jonson. See my *Shakespeare's Impact on his Contemporaries* (London: Macmillan, 1982) for Greene and Shakespeare, Jonson and Shakespeare, Shakespeare's personality, the 'early start'; *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* (Manchester University Press, 1985, revised edn 1998) for Shakespeare's father, Shakespeare in Lancashire, his religion; *Myriad-minded Shakespeare: Essays on the Tragedies, Problem Comedies and Shakespeare the Man*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1998) for Shakespeare's personality, his will, his marriage. Also my essay 'The First Performances of Shakespeare's Sonnets' in *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R. A. Foakes*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000) for 'Mr W. H.' and the rival poet.
3. All contemporaries of Shakespeare and later commentators cited in this chapter can be identified through the indexes of E. K. Chambers, Park Honan, and Samuel Schoenbaum (see below).

*Reading list*

- Chambers, E. K., *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930).
- Fripp, E. I., *Shakespeare, Man and Artist*, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1938).
- Honan, Park, *Shakespeare A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Schoenbaum, Samuel, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).