

## SHAKESPEARE THE HISTORIAN

CHRISTY DESMET

Nearly thirty years after the emergence of new historicism and cultural materialism in Shakespeare studies, we have had ample time to make and lose the acquaintance of a figure who quietly underwrote these literary-historical labours: Shakespeare the Historian. In a book of that name published in 1996, Paola Pugliatti imagined a Shakespeare who showed an active interest in not only the past and historical events unfolding around him, but also emerging forms of historiography.<sup>1</sup> But this Shakespeare, a theorist as well as a chronicler of the past, has not found a permanent place in the scholarly, much less the popular, imagination. Certainly, the failure of Shakespeare the Historian to make his mark in literary studies has something to do with new historicist methodology, in which social energies 'circulate' and there can be a 'Textuality of History' without the explicit intervention of a reading-writing subject – that is, an Author.<sup>2</sup> Another factor might be the resurgence, among writers ranging from William Kerrigan to Harold Bloom, of Shakespeare as an avatar for a Romantic or modern sensibility.<sup>3</sup> The rise and fall of Shakespeare the Historian cannot be attributed solely to the vagaries of critical orientation, however. The history of Shakespearian biography has its own story to tell about Shakespeare's interests and intellectual habits. In this essay, I consider how the figure of Shakespeare the Historian gradually takes shape in a dialectic among critical, biographical and editorial discourse, suggesting that the phenomenon offers an evocative case of what Kenneth Burke would call 'impure motives' – a working out of different agendas, not necessarily even fully formed,

that coalesces loosely into a consensus story about Shakespeare as a particular kind of cultural icon. At the same time, the fading of Shakespeare the Historian as an authoritative figure in recent times suggests how entrenched biographical traditions can be. This excursion into meta-biography will, I hope, suggest not only why the concept of Shakespeare as a historian is so difficult to sustain, but also how the figure might be re-imagined for a different Shakespearian historiography.

For better or worse, the most enduring paradigm for Shakespeare as a thinker and writer remains the post-Romantic image of Shakespeare as a literary icon – lunatic, lover, poet, and philosopher – that was firmly in place by the end of the nineteenth century. This is the image that informs Edward Dowden's widely disseminated mini-biography, in which Shakespeare begins in the theatre workshop but, as he matures, turns inward to draw on his own emotional experience, descending into

<sup>1</sup> Paola Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian* (New York, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> The first phrase comes from Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley, 1988); the second comes from Louis A. Montrose, 'Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture', in H. Aram Veeder, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York and London, 1989), pp. 15–36; p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> William Kerrigan, *Hamlet's Perfection* (Baltimore, 1994); Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York, 1997). On Shakespeare and the 'birth' of modernity, see the analysis of Margreta de Grazia, 'Hamlet before Its Time', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 62 (2001), 355–75; and Hugh Grady, ed., *Shakespeare and Modernity: Early Modern to Millennium* (London, 2000).

## CHRISTY DESMET

the emotional 'depths' after the death of his son Hamnet to produce the 'great tragedies' and ascending gradually to the philosophical 'heights' of *The Tempest* after his retirement to Stratford.<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's stint as a writer of history plays, in this narrative, is merely a stage in his steady progress towards heightened intellect and emotion – in short, towards becoming a genius.

While this image of Shakespeare has persisted through popular and school culture and has been rehabilitated by retro-Romantics such as Kerrigan and Bloom in scholarly discussion during the twentieth century, Shakespeare the Man became bifurcated into Shakespeare the Man of the Theatre and Shakespeare the Author, a philosophical split aptly emblemized by those twinned institutions of high culture – the theatre and library – that sustain what Barbara Hodgdon has called the Shakespeare Trade.<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare the Man of the Theatre generally agrees with Sir Philip Sidney about the value of the historian's 'mouse-eaten records'.<sup>6</sup> Irving Ribner's venerable history of *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare*, the ur-text for that large run of books on Shakespeare's histories that were published in the 1970s and 1980s, defines Shakespeare's superiority to other writers of history plays by his ability to shake free from the chronological constraints of chronicle and to avoid the frivolous tales of less pure, romance histories. Shakespeare does history well by resisting the conventions of medieval and early modern historical discourse. Even Phyllis Rackin's judicious account of Shakespeare's history plays valorizes the drama at the expense of its prose sources. Rackin writes that

a major impetus for the Tudor fascination with history was to defend against the forces of modernity, to deny change, and to rationalize a bewildering world in fictions of hereditary privilege. The public commercial theater, by contrast, was a totally new phenomenon, a disreputable place where common players draped in the discarded clothes of aristocrats impersonated their betters for the entertainment (and the pennies) of a disorderly, socially heterogeneous audience.<sup>7</sup>

On this view, historical writing is 'univocal' and conservative, while Shakespeare's theatrical scripts

are 'polyvocal' and subversive. The theatre, as an institution and a site for performative activity, thus has an invigorating effect on history and even acts as a corrective to the 'voice of official history': historiography itself 'is re-presented as a dubious construct, always provisional, subject to erasure and reconstruction, and never adequate to recover the past in full presence'.<sup>8</sup> In this way Shakespeare becomes something of an 'anti-historian'.

While Shakespeare the Man of the Theatre works with historical materials but remains aloof from their conservative politics and positively resists their plodding narrative method, Shakespeare the Author is by inclination more scholarly. Hodgdon describes the iconic image of the bard at his books that can be found on exhibit at the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon:

A life-size mannequin of Shakespeare sits in a sturdy armchair, eyes cast down to the book he holds in his lap, a pewter tankard beside him on the rush-mat floor covering, a cup and a large leather-bound volume on a nearby joint stool. His desk, tucked into a corner lit by a lattice-paned window and covered with a small turkey carpet or tapestry fragment, holds a writing stand, inkwell, book stand, and vase of flowers; just above it are several shelves stacked with books, a pocket portfolio, and a candlestick. Looking much like an upscale early modern version of today's computer desks, this setting imagines a Shakespeare who is not a theatre man but an author, even an academic.<sup>9</sup>

Shakespeare the Author may have a debatable amount of Latin and Greek, but he has ample means and leisure to delve into his nicely bound

<sup>4</sup> Edward Dowden, *Shakspeare* (London, 1877), pp. 58–60; discussed by Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 357–8.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (Philadelphia, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> *Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Poesy*, ed. by Lewis Soens (Lincoln, 1970), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton, 1957); Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History* (Philadelphia, 1990), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (London and New York, 1997), p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade*, p. 200.

## SHAKESPEARE THE HISTORIAN

Holinshed and Plutarch for dramatic material. A more nuanced image of this same Shakespeare can be found in Stanley Wells's *Shakespeare for All Time*, which describes Shakespeare's Stratford home, New Place, as providing him with 'a comfortable, book-lined study situated in the quietest part of the house to which Shakespeare retreated from London at every possible opportunity, and which members of the household approached at their peril when the master was at work'.<sup>10</sup>

The twentieth-century master narrative of Shakespeare's ideological leanings and intellectual habits, where the theatre is invariably at odds with the study, continues to be reinforced by such popular productions as *Shakespeare in Love*, where, immured in his study, Shakespeare can only write his signature over and over again; he seeks in vain for inspiration until he finds it out-of-doors at the theatre – first in the person of sensuous Rosalind and then in the lovely Viola who, not surprisingly, moonlights as Thomas Kent the actor.<sup>11</sup> The story of Shakespeare the Historian, by contrast, is strongly focused on debating the scholarly credentials of Shakespeare as Author. It is this single focus that has sustained investigations of Shakespeare's historiography well into the twentieth century but that eventually undermines Shakespeare's credibility as a historian when, in a new biographical trend, the Man of Theatre crowds out his scholarly *doppelgänger*. As I will suggest, however, healing imaginatively the rift between stage and study may offer new ways of thinking about Shakespearean history in the making.

## SCHOLARLY SHAKESPEARE

That Shakespeare probably attended the Stratford Free School was first established by Nicholas Rowe,<sup>12</sup> and most recent biographies accept that Shakespeare probably left school at least by the age of fifteen. As Samuel Schoenbaum demonstrates, however, the notion that Shakespeare was a scholar as well as a poet – if not specifically a historian – was part of the popular tradition that fuelled his canonization. According to Schoenbaum, 'In 1877 the master of the free school, like others before

him, proudly displayed Shakespeare's desk to visitors: "William was a studious lad", he pointed out, "& selected that corner of the room so that he might not be disturbed by the other boys".' Phoebe Dighton's *Relics of Shakespeare* (1835) also included a lithograph of Shakespeare's schoolboy desk as one of its sacred icons.<sup>13</sup> The sentimental view of Shakespeare as a good student, however, did not go uncontested in the establishment of Shakespeare's biography.

The tradition that Shakespeare was no scholar goes back as far as Nicholas Rowe's biography (1709), where 'learning' means knowledge of the classical poets and is linked to the notion that Shakespeare had only the 'little' Latin that he had acquired at school.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the issue of Shakespeare's learning was deemed irrelevant to his portrayal of English history in his plays. Rowe, who thought the term Histories a misnomer in Shakespeare's case (most of those labelled as histories in the Folio should properly be considered tragedies), also considered that Shakespeare mined such historical texts as Holinshed and Plutarch not for historical fact or even moral lessons, but for characters:

What can be more agreeable to the Idea our Historians give of *Henry the Sixth*, than the Picture *Shakespeare* has drawn of him! His Manners are every where exactly the same with the Story; one finds him describ'd with Simplicity, passive Sincerity, want of Courage, weakness of Mind, and easie Submission to the Governance of

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time* (Basingstoke and Oxford, 2002), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Shakespeare in Love*, written by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, dir. John Madden, perf. Joseph Fiennes, Gwyneth Paltrow, Judi Dench (US, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Rowe, *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespeare* (1709), with an introduction by Samuel Holt Monk, Augustan Reprint Society, 17 (Ann Arbor, 1948), pp. ii–iii; see also Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 47; Phoebe Dighton, *Relics of Shakespeare* (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1835), cited by Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 47. See also Curtis Guild, *Over the Ocean: Or, Sights and Scenes in Foreign Lands* (Boston, 1884), p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> Rowe, *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespeare*, p. ii.

## CHRISTY DESMET

an Imperious Wife, or prevailing Faction: Tho' at the same time the Poet do's Justice to his good Qualities, and moves the Pity of the Audience for him, by showing him Pious, Disinterested, a Contemner of the Things of this World, and wholly resign'd to the severest Dispositions of God's Providence.<sup>15</sup>

The 'Characters' of Cardinal Beaufort's death, Wolsey and Henry VIII, and Coriolanus are also singled out for praise. The shape of Rowe's minicomium to Henry VI reflects the character portraiture prominent in history writing after Clarendon, a form that would also be incorporated into a wider range of commentary on Shakespeare's literary characters and would also be mercilessly satirized in Jane Austen's send-up of such character-driven histories – in her case, Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England* – in *The History of England, from the Reign of Henry the 4th to the Death of Charles the 1st*.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the argument that Shakespeare lacked learning undermines Shakespeare's claim to the status of scholar even as it places him within a certain tradition of history writing.

For Rowe, Shakespeare's lack of learning is evident in both his reliance on vulgate sources and his careful adherence to those source texts for both his English and Roman histories. As Shakespeare criticism developed in the eighteenth century, a lack of facility with foreign languages and literature became the focus of arguments about Shakespeare's learning. Richard Farmer's *An Essay on the Learning of Shakspeare* (2nd edition, 1767) argues that Shakespeare lacks foreign languages, having gathered all his references to classical authors from 'Excerpta, Sententiae, and Flores'.<sup>17</sup> Although, as Schoenbaum points out, Farmer's analysis rests on his own library and prodigious reading in the texts of Shakespeare's day and, although he meant to praise Shakespeare's native wit by dismissing the possibility of classical imitation, Farmer comes across as disdainful of Shakespeare's reliance not merely on Plutarch for his Greek and Roman history, but on North's English translation.<sup>18</sup> What Greek expressions Shakespeare sets down, according to Farmer, were available through sources ranging from John Davies to Samuel Daniel. Holinshed

is mentioned, but only in the context of showing that Shakespeare relied on the *Chronicle* as a derivative source, not directly on Greek sources, as Upton had speculated.<sup>19</sup>

Alone among the early biographers who relied primarily on Rowe but appreciated Shakespeare's learning was Alexander Pope, who not only omitted Rowe's comments about Shakespeare's lack of scholarly acumen in his version of Rowe's *Life*,<sup>20</sup> but also, in his own Preface to the *Works of Shakespeare*, suggested that Shakespeare's familiarity with English historical writings constituted in itself evidence of learning: 'But as to his *Want of Learning*, it may be necessary to say something more: There is certainly a vast difference between *Learning* and *Languages*. How far he was ignorant of the latter, I cannot determine; but 'tis plain he had much Reading at least, if they will not call it Learning.' As Pope continues, however, it becomes clear that the evidence of learning, Shakespeare's observance of ancient 'spirit' and 'manners', is part of the Bard's ability to draw 'whatever object or nature, or branch of Science' he addresses.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Shakespeare's reading serves the instincts of Shakespeare the poet of Nature rather than the scholar who might be interested in history.

<sup>15</sup> Rowe, *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear*, pp. xxviii–xxix.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Austen, *The History of England, from the Reign of Henry the 4th to the Death of Charles the 1st* (Chapel Hill, 1993), p. 2; Oliver Goldsmith, *Abridgement of the History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Death of George the Second*, from the 12th edition, Early American Imprints, second series, No. 15127 (Philadelphia, 1808).

<sup>17</sup> Richard Farmer, *An Essay on the Learning of Shakspeare* (1821; repr., New York, 1966), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 102; Farmer, *An Essay on the Learning of Shakspeare*, pp. 18, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Farmer, *An Essay on the Learning of Shakspeare*, pp. 27–9.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Holt Monk notes that Pope's more orderly rewriting of Rowe's biography (which even Malone accepted as Rowe's own revision) eliminated the references to Shakespeare's lack of learning (Introduction to Rowe, *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear*, p. 10, n. 6).

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Pope, ed., *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear*, 6 vols. (London, 1723–5; repr., New York, 1969), vol. 1, pp. ix–x.

## SHAKESPEARE THE HISTORIAN

But Pope's was a minority voice, and to a great extent Shakespeare's ostensible lack of learning led critics to see the histories in the context of a broader, and less elevated, concept of literature. Farmer's exegesis of Shakespeare's learning makes little distinction between what we would think of as proto-novels and more 'serious' history and literature, such as Chaucer's *Book of Fame* and the *Mirror for Magistrates*; as sources, all demonstrate equally that Shakespeare was no scholar. Although he gives her only the most cursory of acknowledgements, Farmer's notion of the histories (like Rowe's) is consistent with the way in which Holinshed was packaged by the early collection of source materials, Charlotte Lennox's *Shakespeare Illustrated*. Lennox's redaction of the *Macbeth* portion of Holinshed's *Chronicle*, for instance, prefigures many of the narrative techniques of the Lambs in their proto-novelistic *Tales from Shakespeare*. The opening sets the scene and introduces Macdonwald in a way that is much more regular than either Shakespeare or Holinshed. Within a kind of romance plot, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth take on folkloric characters. Macbeth is a villain waiting for his chance to make mischief, a cousin to the King who is 'of a Disposition as haughty, cruel, and revengeful, as *Duncan's* was mild and peaceable'. Lady Macbeth, 'a proud, ambitious, and cruel Woman, urges on her Husband to the Murder of the King'.<sup>22</sup> In Lennox's narrative summary, it is difficult to separate a historical ethos from the romantic tone of other, more popular 'stories' upon which Shakespeare drew. Her sourcebook retains the very old sense that 'history' and 'story' are etymologically the same thing.

AUTHENTICATING  
 SHAKESPEARIAN HISTORY

As Shakespeare gradually was canonized, the status of his history writing grew proportionately, and Shakespeare became, himself, a 'source' for English readers' knowledge about English history. The kind of edifying history that was written by Goldsmith and satirized by Austen often spawned

pedagogical abridgements, complete with study and essay questions that easily allowed for slippage between history writing proper and Shakespearean drama. This slippage made its way as well into quasi-scholarly discourse about the histories. Bolstered by Coleridge's remark that 'the great Duke of Marlborough acknowledged that his principal acquaintance with English history was derived from the historical plays', for instance, Thomas Peregrine Courtenay, politician and author, begins his two-volume *Commentaries on the Historical Plays of Shakespeare* with the adage that 'the youth of England take their religion from Milton, and their history from Shakspeare'.<sup>23</sup> The question that Courtenay sets himself is: 'what were Shakespeare's authorities for his history, and how far has he departed from them?', combined with a pedagogical concern to know 'whether the plays may be given to our youth, as "properly historical?"'.<sup>24</sup> His answer rests upon a body of historical sources ranging from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. While Courtenay decides that Shakespeare's history is not accurate enough to substitute for other, more authentic historical texts, he too takes up arms in defence of the bard as Author.

The very possibility of Courtenay's amateur project – to assess the 'authenticity' of Shakespeare's history – depends on a complex of factors establishing an 'authentic' Shakespeare. As Margreta de Grazia has shown in her extensive analysis of Edmond Malone's 1790 *Apparatus*, the emergence of 'Shakespeare' as Foucault's sovereign subject rests upon the notion of Shakespeare as an authentic biographical and textual subject.<sup>25</sup> First, there is Malone's establishment of Shakespeare's earliest

<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Lennox, *Shakespeare Illustrated: or the Novels and Histories on which the Plays of Shakespeare are Founded* (London, 1753; repr., New York, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 252, italics in original; 270.

<sup>23</sup> Coleridge, *Literary Remains*, cited by Thomas Peregrine Courtenay, *Commentaries on the Historical Plays of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1840; repr., New York, 1972), vol. 1, p. iv.

<sup>24</sup> Courtenay, *Commentaries*, vol. 1, p. xii, italics in original.

<sup>25</sup> Margreta de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford, 1991), p. 9.

## CHRISTY DESMET

printed texts as primary for the editor. As de Grazia writes, 'The new criterion of authenticity converted the Shakespearian texts into a new kind of object: one lodged in the past rather than integral to current cultural concerns.' Thanks to Malone's 'cooler model of research', which allowed for 'the gradual accumulation of the information he identified with the bygone past',<sup>26</sup> the text of 'Shakespeare' could now be placed next to that of such historical chroniclers as 'Holinshed', in a conceptual form of Hinman collator. (The completion of this textual project would have to wait, however, for the antiquarian revival of Holinshed's 'text' by Sir Henry Ellis – the singular number of 'text' here being this editor's contribution.) Malone's second project, establishing an 'authentic' biography for Shakespeare, in conjunction with Ellis's similar project for Holinshed and other chroniclers, made possible the notion that Shakespeare, Holinshed and such figures as Edward Hall were fellow travellers through the fields of English national history.

SHAKESPEARE AMONG THE  
CHRONICLES

The Keeper of Printed Books in the British Museum, Ellis was an antiquary and a librarian, but not so distinguished as to draw much enthusiasm from his biographer in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. While Ellis's post gave him privileged access to old texts and manuscripts, to a large extent his *Holinshed* manifested on a grand scale the kind of antiquarian interest that fuelled the popular collections of British antiquities, which aristocratic travellers excerpted for their tours through the countryside. (Ellis himself edited and published Brand's *Popular Antiquities* in 1813.)<sup>27</sup> Snippets of *Holinshed* showed up, for instance, in such venues as the periodical *The Antiquarian Repertory* (first volume 1775).<sup>28</sup> *Holinshed* also continued to be disseminated through collections of Shakespeare source materials in the tradition of Lennox; John Payne Collier's six-volume edition of *Shakespeare's Library* included some *Holinshed*, although, when possible, he preferred popular drama – such as *The*

*Famous Victories of Henry V* – and other romances to chronicle sources.<sup>29</sup> Framed by popular literature and romance, *Holinshed* became detached from the tradition of history writing; in Ellis's ponderous edition, by contrast, *Holinshed* conferred on Shakespeare new credentials as a student of history.

Ellis's large Folio of *Holinshed's Chronicle*, published by Richard Lan in 1807–8, was part of a larger project to recover and print 'significant histories and chronicles from the sixteenth century'.<sup>30</sup> Ellis reprints the 1587 edition, but pieces in censored portions that had been kept in circulation in eighteenth-century volumes. (This is Ellis's method as well with his edition of John Hardyng's *Chronicle*, where he combines the version printed by Richard Grafton in 1543 with additions from the Selden and Harley manuscripts available to him.) Thus, although Ellis manages to achieve a certain kind of completeness with his volume, he does so at a price, creating a *Holinshed* that readers of neither the 1577 nor 1587 editions would have read. In de Grazia's lexicon, he suppresses textual *copia* in the service of establishing a stable, unitary textual 'copy'.<sup>31</sup> Ellis, in other words, does to *Holinshed* what Malone did to Shakespeare.

Their texts stabilized, their personae individualized, the newly allied figures of Shakespeare and *Holinshed* stood poised to authenticate the project of Shakespearian historiography, which would achieve its most powerful form in the totalizing mechanics of E. M. W. Tillyard's version of Shakespeare as an apologist for the Tudor Myth. Ellis's foray into editing the chronicles was followed by a spate of single-volume compendia of 'Shakespeare's *Holinshed*' that made *Holinshed* more or

<sup>26</sup> De Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim*, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London and New York, 2004), p. 337.

<sup>28</sup> Sweet, *Antiquaries*, pp. 321–2.

<sup>29</sup> *Shakespeare's Library: A Collection of the Plays, Romances, Novels, Poems, and Histories Employed by Shakespeare in the Composition of his Works*, 2nd edn, 6 vols. (London, 1875).

<sup>30</sup> Alison Tafer, *Holinshed's Chronicle*, Twayne's English Authors Series (New York, 1999), p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> De Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim*, p. 92.

## SHAKESPEARE THE HISTORIAN

less available to teachers and students. Some gathered together excerpts from *Holinshed* under the rubric of individual plays (Boswell-Stone), while others presented the materials relevant to Shakespeare's plays in the order they appear in *Holinshed* (Hosley).<sup>32</sup> From here, snippets of *Holinshed* made their way into editions of Shakespeare ranging from the magisterial Arden series to the inexpensive paperback Signet editions. While the *Holinshed*-for-students industry was to some extent just a by-product of the larger project of establishing Shakespeare as a historian, it provides crucial material for Tillyard's own project, which was itself as much pedagogical as scholarly in its goals.

Terence Hawkes, among others, has shown that Shakespeare was gradually drawn into the long, durable project of establishing English national identity by way of English letters. The idea that Shakespeare spoke for the English nation and its values, although implicit in much nineteenth-century discourse about Shakespeare after Carlyle, took on renewed urgency in the twentieth century, particularly between the World Wars. Figures from Arthur Quiller-Couch to Walter Raleigh are prominent as scholar-ideologues in the creation of a sense of Englishness through the figure of Shakespeare.<sup>33</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, as Graham Holderness and Hugh Grady have both argued, was another important player in the modernist appropriation of Shakespeare as an English Man of Letters and apologist for English nationalism.<sup>34</sup> As part of this national project, Tillyard also completed the apotheosis of Shakespeare the Historian.

Eustace Mandeville Wetenhall Tillyard was a classicist and a Fellow in English and then Master of Jesus College, Cambridge. Tillyard's influence on the study of Renaissance literature and on Anglo-American literary education generally rests on his pedagogical blockbuster, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, which situated Elizabethan intellectual culture within a medieval tradition that was, at heart, theological and – most importantly – largely stable and uniform. *The Elizabethan World Picture*, wide-ranging in the sources it cites, is simple in its methodology but epic in vision. Shakespeare's most memorable contribution was Ulysses's

speech on degree from *Troilus and Cressida* which, although it is given pride of place near the front of the book, is absorbed into a tapestry of references so that the Elizabethan World Picture does not, ultimately, have a strongly Shakespearian flavour. Rather, the book promotes a view of Renaissance thought whose public face is a Milton who, despite his adherence to no fewer than three heresies, was 'normal' for his age in his belief in a theological world order and who, through the intermediary of Tillyard's criticism, comes to have a normative role in English intellectual history.

According to Tillyard's preface to *The Elizabethan World Picture*, however, that little book was a by-product of a weightier project, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, which takes on more directly the task of describing a Shakespeare who believed in and represented a national politics grounded in cosmic order.<sup>35</sup> Tillyard's familiar account of Shakespeare's two English tetralogies – a dramatic structure largely of his own making – traces the political disorder that follows Henry IV's usurpation of the crown from Richard II through the successive upheavals marking each subsequent reign until the accession of Henry VII, by unifying the warring Houses of Lancaster and York, ushers in and fulfils the Tudor Myth. Tillyard's vision of medieval English politics and of literature's social function, as critics have pointed out repeatedly, are both ideologically conservative; and it was this conservatism that made him a prime target for cultural

<sup>32</sup> See W. G. Boswell-Stone, *Shakespeare's Holinshed: The Chronicle and the Historical Plays Compared* (1896; repr., New York, 1966); Stephen Booth, *The Book Called Holinshed's Chronicles* (San Francisco, 1968); Richard Hosley, *Shakespeare's Holinshed* (New York, 1968).

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Terence Hawkes, 'Entry on Q', in *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London, 1999), pp. 33–46; 'Swisser Swatter: Making a Man of English Letters', in *That Shakespearian Rag: Essays on a Critical Process* (London and New York, 1986), pp. 26–47.

<sup>34</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (New York, 2000); Hugh Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare: Critical Texts in a Material World* (Oxford, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York, 1943), p. vii.

## CHRISTY DESMET

materialist critics in Britain during the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> But, as Hugh Grady has argued, the reception of Tillyard's work in the United States as well as Britain suggests a less uniform ideology at work than the focus on his work's expression of a hegemonic wartime politics might allow.

A strongly pedagogical, more than a political, motive underlies Tillyard's work, according to Grady. Tillyard, he argues, steered an ameliorating path between the nineteenth-century philology of Cambridge's heritage and the 'new professionalism', the concept of education as a preparation for economic life that was being promoted by F. R. Leavis.<sup>37</sup> Tillyard grounded his own educational programme in that most venerable of literary activities, source study. Thus, he parades before readers authorities ranging from Polydore Virgil to William Warner, but organizes them under the banner of the most ideologically consistent of Tudor chroniclers, Edward Hall, who is *fons et origo* of Tillyard's 'Tudor myth'.<sup>38</sup> 'What raised Tillyard's study above the level of ordinary "source hunting"', according to Grady, 'was the attempt to synthesize the sources with a general cultural pattern that appeared, in a phrase Engels once used in a flight of hubristic fantasy, to explain almost everything'.<sup>39</sup> The Tudor Myth, by offering a nostalgically modernist view of English monarchical hegemony as organic medieval culture, thus gains a loose kinship with T. S. Eliot's notion of literary tradition and, methodologically, with the American New Critics. (Parenthetically, Henry Ansgar Kelly has made the complementary argument that Renaissance notions of Providence were less monolithic than Tillyard acknowledges: instead of a uniform concept of divine Providence, we find in the body of chronicles a 'series of simpler providential patterns, mainly short-range ad hoc judgments in favor of each new line of kings and against the immediate predecessor, or vice versa'.)<sup>40</sup>

By assimilating Tillyard's project to modernism, however, Grady underemphasizes his affinity with the older historicist tradition that promotes an 'authentic' Shakespeare from whose world the reader is estranged. Grady himself notes that 'his book is so necessary, Tillyard keeps telling us, pre-

cisely because *we* are now so different in our historical suppositions'.<sup>41</sup> As de Grazia also emphasizes, the reproduction of texts, both Shakespearian and historical, makes the alien past accessible, fixable, present and capable of being possessed. Thus Tillyard, like Malone before him, fixes the text by placing it in the distant past. This move, in turn, authenticates both author and work and allows Shakespeare to be seen as a historian.<sup>42</sup> Tillyard also sees Shakespeare as a historiographer or theorist of history. The first chapter to *Shakespeare's History Plays* suggests that 'if Shakespeare went to Holinshed for many of his facts, he had meditated on the political philosophy of Hall and of his own day'.<sup>43</sup> *Henry VIII*, a belated history play, also reaches back to Hall, whose *Chronicle* 'Shakespeare had read and digested in his early years' and from whom he had derived his 'philosophy of history'.<sup>44</sup> By his own account, Tillyard (and Shakespeare) are drawn to Hall not only for the elegant shape of his chronicle – superior, in Tillyard's view, to Holinshed's baggy collections of facts and anecdotes – but also for its philosophical depth. Tillyard thus refashions Shakespeare as an epic dramatist – in effect, another Milton. He concludes: 'I hope this book has served to strengthen the ideas of an educated Shakespeare, and of a poet more rather than less like Dante and Milton in massiveness of intellect

<sup>36</sup> See Holderness, *Shakespeare's History* (New York 1985).

<sup>37</sup> Hugh Grady, 'Instituting Shakespeare: Hegemony and Tillyard's Historical Criticism', *Essays: Critical Approaches to Medieval and Renaissance Texts*, 5 (Pittsburgh, 1989), 37–61; Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare*, p. 169 and *passim*.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Hall, *Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* (London, 1548).

<sup>39</sup> Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare*, p. 171.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Ansgar Kelly, 'Tillyard and History: Comment and Response', *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, 10 (1980), 85–8.

<sup>41</sup> Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare*, p. 174.

<sup>42</sup> De Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (New York, 1944), p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, 'Why Did Shakespeare Write "Henry VIII"', in *Essays: Literary and Educational* (New York, 1962), p. 48.



## SHAKESPEARE THE HISTORIAN

and powers of reflection.<sup>45</sup> Educated Shakespeare, scholarly Shakespeare, a superior mind musing on historical patterns and philosophies: Tillyard's author is another manifestation of Shakespeare the Historian who stands tall in the company of the philosophical Hall and intellectual Milton.

Grady and Holderness both couple Tillyard with Lily Bess Campbell, the American historicist whose work on *A Mirror for Magistrates* likewise produced an influential account of Shakespeare's history plays as 'mirrors' of Elizabethan policy. Tillyard praised Campbell's edition of the *Mirror* as an indispensable aid to teachers and students.<sup>46</sup> But Campbell, unlike Tillyard (whose thematic machine is primarily pedagogical and critical) and unlike Ellis (whose impulse is primarily antiquarian and whose method is homogenizing), was a modern literary editor whose labours in the Huntington Library's pastoral vineyards produced a judiciously edited selection of the *Mirror for Magistrates* (1938), complete with the kind of editorial apparatus that Ellis's *Holinshed* lacked and that Tillyard's totalizing framework rendered unnecessary.<sup>47</sup> From her edition, we can tell what entered the *Mirror* when, and we can imagine, if not experience first-hand, the mutation of this text through successive editions. This editorial drive and experience, I suggest, not only tie Campbell to the long-standing project of validating Shakespeare's historiography, but also point forward to more contemporary developments in the study of English chronicles.

Holderness proposes that any attempt to demonstrate the 'organic unity' of Shakespeare's histories entails its opposite, the idea that Shakespeare's plays were, from the outset, 'discontinuous' and 'fragmentary', 'each individually and independently shaped by contemporary cultural pressures'.<sup>48</sup> With the figure of Shakespeare the Historian finally installed in the library and classroom, we can see the subsequent process of fragmentation in not only the number of critical books on the histories produced between the 1970s and 1990s, but even more specifically in historiographic projects aimed at dismantling the monolithic figure that the success of Tillyard's paradigm had reified. These works range from Henry Ansgar Kelly's careful study of Shake-

spere's multitudinous sources (1970), which incidentally provides scholars with a priceless bibliography, to Annabel Patterson's (1994) liberation of Holinshed from the confining aura of Shakespeare. Each of these writers is at heart something between an editor, a teacher and an antiquarian in the best sense of that word, pointing readers of different moods and capacities to primary texts that will let them play, for however long and intensely they choose, the role of historiographer.<sup>49</sup> But while the textual work begun in the name of Shakespeare the Historian may continue unabated, the figure himself is, sadly and ironically, being written out of the story by the most recent biographies of Shakespeare – in particular, by that paradigmatic champion of textual mutability, Stephen Greenblatt.

## WILL BACK IN THE WORLD

Greenblatt's biography, the most popular and probably the most reviewed of the new spate of books on Shakespeare's life, distances the Bard from the early modern texts that sustained not only Tillyard's 'old historicism', but also Greenblatt's and many others' new historicism. In *Will in the World*, Greenblatt mentions Holinshed only three times and Hall not many more. Holinshed becomes merely the lens through which Shakespeare perceives his new home, London, and thereafter a crib to which he turns for material to trump Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* with an English epic.<sup>50</sup> In the *Henry VI* plays, for instance, Shakespeare takes John Cade from Holinshed and mixes his rebellion with elements of the even more distant 1381 Peasants'

<sup>45</sup> Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 321.

<sup>46</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, "'A Mirror for Magistrates' Revisited", in *Essays: Literary and Educational*, p. 165.

<sup>47</sup> Lily B. Campbell, ed., *Mirror for Magistrates, Edited from Original Texts in the Huntington Library* (Cambridge, 1938).

<sup>48</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (Cambridge, MA, 1970); Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles* (Chicago, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York, 2004), p. 195 and *passim*.

## CHRISTY DESMET

Revolt, but Cade's London is 'really' a portrait of Shakespeare's contemporary London: 'And it is the London crowd – the unprecedented concentration of bodies jostling through the narrow streets, crossing and recrossing the great bridge, pressing into taverns and churches and theaters – that is the key to the whole spectacle.'<sup>51</sup> *Will in the World* reflects back to us Shakespeare as a spectator of the local scene – not interested in the vexed Bermoothes any more than in Jack Cade's family life – a spectator who revels in the 'everyday': 'Throughout his career Shakespeare was fascinated by exotic locations, archaic cultures, and larger-than-life figures, but his imagination was closely bound to the familiar and the intimate. Or rather, he loved to reveal the presence of ordinariness in the midst of the extraordinary.'<sup>52</sup> Greenblatt's Shakespeare is finally less a historian than an ethnographer, enjoying the same intense immersion in his new culture that Greenblatt perceives in the writing of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz.<sup>53</sup> The sense that Shakespeare is completely caught up in the scene at hand becomes clear from the most discussed anecdote in Greenblatt's speculative biography, a hypothetical meeting between Shakespeare and the fugitive priest Thomas Campion:

Let us imagine the two of them sitting together then, the sixteen-year-old fledgling poet and actor and the forty-year-old Jesuit. Shakespeare would have found Campion fascinating – even his mortal enemies conceded that he had charisma – and might even have recognized in him something of a kindred spirit. Not in piety, for though Will (in this version of events) was a staunch enough Catholic at this point in his life to be trusted with dangerous secrets, there is no sign in his voluminous later work of a frustrated religious vocation. But Campion – a quarter century older than Will – was someone who came from a comparably modest family; who attracted attention to himself by his eloquence, intelligence, and quickness; who loved books yet at the same time was drawn to life in the world.<sup>54</sup>

As Greenblatt implicitly acknowledges, Campion is an older mirror image of Shakespeare, the poet of Sonnet 3 who might recognize an heir in Shakespeare as genealogical glass. But while in his anecdote Shakespeare and Campion are attracted to

one another as members of some exotic species that somehow seems familiar, the two finally pass as icons in the night, neither of them aware of their mutual roles in English history. Greenblatt's new-found aesthetics of the 'everyday' in *Will in the World*, which he bestows in turn on Shakespeare, effectively prevents any historical actor from achieving the status of Historian.

Sidney's prejudice against 'mouse-eaten records' and Greenblatt's neo-romanticism aside, we have at this moment a wealth of information that would allow scholars and readers to raise Shakespeare the Historian out of the ashes of post-new historicist apostasy. Patterson's book, which has already encouraged a number of articles on Holinshed's 'others', coupled with the primary texts made available (and, more importantly, readable) by the technology of Early English Books Online, make it possible now to reconsider Shakespeare's engagement with the more remote historical texts that Tillyard wished for and Ellis's and Campbell's editions sought to provide. What is lacking is an alternative view of Shakespeare at work that complements this scholarly recovery of English history as a textual palimpsest constructed by many hands and voices over time. For Greenblatt's influential biography, by putting Will back in the world, has only hardened the distinction between scholarly Shakespeare, immured in his study with his bulky folios, and Shakespeare the theatre professional living London life to its fullest. What we need is a Will not returned to the library but a figure whose sense of texts, history and the situated self can bear up and thrive under multiplicity and indeterminacy and who can move gracefully between the Book and the World. Such a Shakespeare would be a natural collaborator and a product and practitioner of the rhetorical arts.

In his entry for Shakespeare in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Peter Holland writes that

<sup>51</sup> Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, p. 169.

<sup>52</sup> Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, p. 388.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'The Crowd Parts', *Common Knowledge*, 13 (2007), 211–13.

<sup>54</sup> Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, pp. 108–9.