

HAVING OUR WILL: IMAGINATION IN RECENT SHAKESPEARE BIOGRAPHIES

LOIS POTTER

‘The biographer begins, of course, with the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, where Mr. Shakspeare was born and died, giving a lengthy, nostalgic description of Stratford in Shakespeare’s time, refulgent with the glow of small-town boyhood.’¹ As Joseph Sobran sarcastically indicates, there is indeed something ‘almost comically formulaic’ about Shakespeare biographies. Of course, this is equally true of other biographies; what the Renaissance would call *copia* is perhaps inevitable in Shakespeare’s case, when there are so many books and so few facts. Since Sobran is an Oxfordian, he naturally makes a distinction between the ‘Shakspeare’ of Stratford and the ‘Shakespeare’ who wrote the plays. He is right about this too: there is a gap between the biographical and the literary figure, though not, I think, because they were two different people. After two decades of writing about Shakespeare’s life, Sir Sidney Lee concluded that ‘The literary history of the world proves the hopelessness of seeking in biographical data, or in the fields of everyday business, the secret springs of poetic inspiration.’² This view, famously insisted on by T. S. Eliot, was once taken for granted in literary criticism. It is now largely superseded, on the one hand, by cultural materialism, which wants to know all it can about those ‘fields of everyday business’, and, on the other, by the postmodern taste for indeterminacy, which has readmitted legendary and anecdotal evidence in order to play with alternative life stories. And so Stephen Greenblatt argues, in his recent contribution to the biographical tradition, ‘to understand how Shakespeare used his imagination to transform

his life into art, it is important to use our own imagination’.³

Certainly, a depiction that appeals to the imagination may well stimulate a new reader of the plays and poems more than any amount of accurate documentation. It is becoming common for writers on Shakespeare to refer at some point to *Shakespeare in Love*, not because they believe its deliberately fantastic version of events but because it is the only one they can expect their readers to know. My own favourites among fictional Shakespeares are the actor briefly sketched in one chapter of John Arden’s *Books of Bale*, the enigmatic figure, possibly a spy, in Peter Whelan’s play *The School of Night*, and the hard-working writer – whose notes for *Twelfth Night* we get to read – in Grace Tiffany’s *My Father had a Daughter*. The question is how much imagination a book can contain and still be taken seriously as a biography. To my mind, Gary O’Connor’s *Shakespeare: A Popular Life* (2000) falls on the wrong side of the borderline. Russell Fraser’s two-volume critical biography (1988 and 1992) allows itself a mixture of fictionalizing, or imagining, alongside detailed factual information and very full, sometimes frankly

¹ Joseph Sobran, *Alias Shakespeare: Solving the Greatest Literary Mystery of all Time* (New York and London, 1997), pp. 57–8.

² *A Life of William Shakespeare* (Oxford, 14th edn, 1931), p. 634. This comment first appears in the 1916 edition; the brief ‘General Estimate’ of the author in the 1898 edition was more vaguely adulatory.

³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (New York and London, 2004), p. 14.

LOIS POTTER

idiosyncratic, critical analyses.⁴ Anthony Holden's *William Shakespeare: His life and work* (1999) is more problematic.⁵ Rather than get bogged down in questions of probability, Holden often simply accepts such traditions as that Shakespeare played Adam in *As You Like It* or that he 'was godfather to one of Ben Jonson's sons' (310). But he can be constructively imaginative too: citing the comparisons Mercutio and Falstaff make to the alderman's thumb-ring, he suggests that John Shakespeare's official ring had made an impression on his son (22). As long as strict accuracy isn't a prime consideration, this book can be recommended, but it suffers from Holden's lack of real inwardness with the literature of the period which sometimes leads him to misunderstand its tone. His own tone sometimes surprises as well. Many have suggested that Shakespeare's mother may have taken the baby William to her family home in Wilmcote while plague infested Stratford in 1564; by referring to her as Mary and to him as 'her first-born son' (20), Holden recreates the Holy Family's flight into Egypt.

Few biographies of Shakespeare can avoid being critical biographies, since to leave out the works is to make the life meaningless. But there is often not much distinction between a critical biography and a general book on Shakespeare that discusses the works in chronological order. Dennis Kay's very readable critical biography (1991) emphasizes the works more than the life, but brings in other interesting pieces of contextual information – for instance, he found that only one of the twenty-six male babies christened in Stratford in 1564 went on to attend university (a William Smith, who later became a schoolmaster in Essex).⁶ His critical approach is independent: he thinks the epitaph on Elias James, found in the same MS as 'Shall I die?', is a possible Shakespeare composition (327). He and Russell Fraser are the only recent biographers who respond sympathetically to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, probably because they are the only two who know anything about its effect in performance; Kay even argues that it, rather than *The Tempest*, is Shakespeare's farewell to his profession (335).

Apart from the major book-length biographies, a number of more general works have made biographical contributions. After at first ignoring the anti-Stratfordians, some scholars have found it worthwhile to do the kind of contextual work that was needed to put their objections into proportion. Irvin Matus's *Shakespeare, in Fact* (1994) is one of the best of these.⁷ For instance, in answer to the common question of why so little remains in Shakespeare's own handwriting, he points out that even a work recognized at the time as of the utmost importance, the Authorized/King James Bible, left virtually no manuscript evidence behind (50–1). Alan Nelson's careful archival work has resulted in a filling-in of many contextual details, and his biography of the Earl of Oxford, though it carefully avoids mentioning Shakespeare, gives a detailed analysis of this nobleman's written English as well as his financial incompetence. A different kind of context is provided by Stanley Wells's *Shakespeare: for all Time*, which looks like a coffee table book, but is much more.⁸ The main objection to the lavishly illustrated book is that the availability of pictorial material often dictates the emphases of the writing. Here, however, illustrations do an important part of the work of creating the visual background – those evocations of Stratford about which Sobran is so sarcastic, for example. Wells's book is not primarily a biography – about half of it is devoted to the dramatist's afterlife in the theatre and in the fictions of others – but its first section is closer to one than his *Shakespeare: a Life in Drama* (revised as *Shakespeare: The Poet and His Plays*). It contains, almost as asides, some directions in which further research might go: since those who learned Latin in school (like Richard Quiney and Thomas Greene)

⁴ Russell Fraser, *Young Shakespeare* (New York, 1988), and *Shakespeare: The Later Years* (New York, 1992).

⁵ *William Shakespeare: His Life and Work* (London, 1999).

⁶ Dennis Kay, *Shakespeare: His Life, Work and Era* (London, 1992), pp. 30–1. Kay also wrote a shorter, more streamlined biography, *William Shakespeare: His Life and Times*, for the Twayne's English Authors series (New York, 1995).

⁷ Irvin Leigh Matus, *Shakespeare, in Fact* (New York, 1994).

⁸ Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time* (Oxford, 2003).

RECENT SHAKESPEARE BIOGRAPHIES

continued to use it, 'It is quite possible that, if letters written by Shakespeare ever turn up, they will be in Latin' (14). Maybe the 'broad silver and gilt bowl' bequeathed to Judith will turn up some day too although it's hard to see how we would recognize it if it did (43).

Theatre historians have likewise made important contributions to the biography, though Andrew Gurr's most widely accepted suggestion is of a quite different kind: that Sonnet 145, with its apparent pun on 'hate away', is a youthful poem written during the poet's courtship of Anne Hathaway.⁹ Richard Dutton's *Shakespeare: A Literary Life* (1989) does not offer a complete biography, but the author's knowledge of theatre and censorship history makes it valuable.¹⁰ Almost alone among biographers, he takes the sonnets to be primarily literary exercises, playing sophisticated games and perhaps deliberately subverting all sonnet conventions (43). Meredith Skura's study of Shakespeare in terms of the psychology of the actor, though not based on fresh research in theatre history, offers interesting readings of the texts as reflecting such actorly concerns as fear of the hostile audience and the importance of the generous patron.¹¹ Robert Southworth, an actor, deals in *Shakespeare the Player* with the professional career.¹² Some of his suggestions about casting of the plays and doubling charts are interesting, but of course they have no more validity than any other speculations of this type.

However, most biographies of the last twenty years have been influenced, to one degree or another, by the work of Ernst Honigmann – who, ironically, has refused to write a book-length biography of Shakespeare on the grounds that there are already too many in existence. In particular, his *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* (1985) is responsible for an increasing emphasis on the possibility that Shakespeare was a Catholic.¹³ The Shakespeare theory, going back as far as E. K. Chambers, takes a servant of that name to be an alias for a teenage Shakespeare, living in Lancashire with Alexander de Hoghton, the head of an aristocratic Catholic family; Robert Bearman's research

has indicated the prevalence of the name Shakespeare in Lancashire,¹⁴ and there has always been good sense in the argument that it would seem odd to choose so transparent an alias. But many of the other connections traced by Honigmann are persuasive – the Stratford schoolmasters with Lancashire and Catholic origins; the satirist John Weever, who knew all the parties involved and wrote several epigrams on Shakespeare; the fact that Shakespeare wrote his only commendatory verse, 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', for a poem by Robert Chester dedicated to Sir John Salusbury, whose wife was an illegitimate daughter to the Earl of Derby, a friend of Hoghton. In fact, so many of the people that he mentions seem to have been related to each other or to other major players in the Shakespeare story that after a while one wants to invoke the Six Degrees of Separation principle. Honigmann connects a good many dots, but he is careful to indicate where the gaps are, and he is open both about his own research practices and about what might be done by others.

Honigmann has made two other contributions to the biographical debate. The first, his argument that Shakespeare's literary career began considerably earlier than the first recorded allusion in the *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592), has won general acceptance in principle. It is hard to see how a writer's talent could lie fallow for so long, especially in the theatre world of the 1580s, with its insatiable demand for new plays. Scholars are less certain what

⁹ Andrew Gurr, 'Shakespeare's First Poem: Sonnet 145', *Essays in Criticism*, 21 (1971), 221–6.

¹⁰ Richard Dutton, *William Shakespeare: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke, 1989).

¹¹ Meredith Skura, *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing* (Chicago, 1993).

¹² John Southworth, *Shakespeare the Player: A life in the theatre* (Stroud, 2000).

¹³ E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* (Manchester, 1985).

¹⁴ See Robert Bearman, "'Was William Shakespeare William Shakespeare" Revisited', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51 (2002), 83–94. For Honigmann's reply, 'The Shakespeare/ Shakespeare Question, Continued', see *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54 (2003), 83–86.

LOIS POTTER

to do with the idea in practice, though some have taken it as a reason to treat, e.g., *King Lear* and *The Taming of A Shrew* as early works by Shakespeare, later revised by him. Going further, Eric Sams has identified many anonymous works of the 1580s, such as *Edmond Ironside*, *Fair Em*, *Lochrine*, and *The Troublesome Reign of King John* as apprentice work by Shakespeare, arguing vehemently against once received views that explained Quarto versions of Folio plays as the result of memorial reconstruction and textual corruption.¹⁵ Honigmann's other contention – that Shakespeare, as exemplified particularly in the legal documents he left behind, really did have a tiger's heart inside his 'gentle' manner – is developed both in *Shakespeare's Impact on His Contemporaries* and in the essay, 'Shakespeare's Will and Testamentary Traditions'.¹⁶ It seems somewhat inconsistent with the Shakeshafte argument, which assumes that the seventeen-year old Shakespeare was charming and impressive enough to get a special bequest from a nobleman in whose service he had been for only a few months, but perhaps such a person could deceive his master about his true nature; in any case, people often become less nice as they get older. Understandably, the negative view of Shakespeare's character has had less general appeal than Honigmann's other arguments, with one exception that I'll discuss later. Eric Sams accepts the arguments for Shakespeare's Catholicism and the 'early start' but his Shakespeare is a sympathetic figure, largely self-educated, poor, and persecuted by snobbish university men. Honigmann's work on wills, incidentally, enables him to say with authority that Shakespeare's failure to mention books in his will does not mean he didn't have any: other wills with the same failure include those of such unlikely people as the schoolmaster John Cottom and the writer John Weever.¹⁷

Among recent biographers, Kay stands out for his relative lack of interest in the Catholicism theory, not so much because he finds the Lancastrian argument implausible as because it seems inconsistent with the traditions surrounding Shakespeare in the first hundred years after his death. These, Kay notes, seem patriotic in inspiration, designed to make the dramatist, by contrast with

the refined French writers to whom he was so often compared, a hearty, typically English man's man (38). Of course, this may be the point. A Shakespeare riddled with doubts and neuroses is more to our taste than the lighthearted lecher and poacher of the early anecdotes, the happy and successful man chronicled in Rowe's 1709 biography, the respectable one of Malone,¹⁸ or the selfish and perhaps embittered one that Honigmann seems to envisage. Thus, many biographers have been willing to believe that the apparent lack of excitement in Shakespeare's life is the result of deliberate concealment – that he was, in the title of Richard Wilson's book, *Secret Shakespeare*.¹⁹ The Catholicism theory has obvious attractions, since it can explain the plays' inconsistent treatment of religious issues, as well as the dramatist's low profile (by comparison with Jonson), and even the lack of personal documents concerning him. Though Honigmann doesn't note this, another of its attractions is that it helps to justify some of the less pleasant traits that he identifies in Shakespeare: a deep sense of insecurity might well lie behind an obsession with saving money and buying property, perhaps even behind his apparent determination not to leave his wife a rich, and therefore remarriageable, widow. On the other hand, Ben Jonson does not seem to have felt that his conversion to Catholicism required him to lie low, and a comparative study of other playwrights reveals that many of them, for instance John Fletcher, left even fewer handwritten documents than Shakespeare.²⁰

¹⁵ Eric Sams, *The Real Shakespeare: Retrieving the Early Years, 1564–1594* (New Haven, 1995).

¹⁶ E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare's Impact on his Contemporaries* (London, 1982) and 'Shakespeare's Will and Testamentary Traditions' in Tetsuo Kishi, Roger Pringle and Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare and Cultural Traditions* (Newark and London, 1994), pp. 127–37.

¹⁷ Honigmann, *The Lost Years*, p. 131.

¹⁸ For an analysis of Malone's account, see Margreta de Grazia's *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford, 1991), esp. pp. 134–41.

¹⁹ Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion, and Resistance* (Manchester, 2004). This book appeared too late for review.

²⁰ See Matus, *Shakespeare, in Fact*, p. 265.

RECENT SHAKESPEARE BIOGRAPHIES

Though Honigmann assumes that Shakespeare was converted to Protestantism in the early 1580s, a view which makes sense of his writing *King John* as well as the apparent lapses into the older beliefs in some parts of *Hamlet*, Wilson, Wood and Greenblatt (in descending order of certainty) base their accounts of Shakespeare on the likelihood that he was the product of a Catholic upbringing, with a background of secrecy and persecution.

Park Honan's biography is a thoroughly professional piece of work, for which one's respect only increases with use.²¹ This is a writer who scrupulously attempts to trace the numerous received opinions about his author back to their ultimate source and who, committed as he is to a full biography, is obliged to work in all the facts, not just those that he finds interesting or that happen to fit his argument. Honan has taken the trouble to chase up the kinds of legal and financial records that most of us find boring, and manages to integrate all the details into his story, documenting them properly, and quoting the appropriate sources, without losing momentum. For instance, he examines a record of a sale of land to which Mary Arden set her mark in 1579 and finds evidence of her ability to use a pen (14); he takes Judith Shakespeare's witnessing a deed of sale for one of the Quiney family in 1611 as evidence of a close relationship with them well before her marriage with Thomas Quiney in 1616 (391). Honan's Shakespeare is a genial, comfortable conformist, who enjoyed his education while making jokes about it, and whose behaviour as a writer was characterized above all by professionalism. He is quick to discount a picturesque but impossible story, though willing to give it in the first place, and he draws on a sort of common sense psychology where it seems appropriate. For instance, with reference to the plague of 1564, he thinks that John Shakespeare, as a town official, could not have left town or have allowed his wife to leave. Further, he suggests that Mary's care for her son must have been particularly intense in that troubled period and that perhaps the sense of being loved in his first year gave Shakespeare the confidence that kept him from the need to show off that afflicted some of his contemporaries (18). Though

he takes the Catholic argument seriously, he does not unreservedly accept it but offers (in a surprising, almost postmodern moment) a 'method of alternative narrative' to explain what Shakeshafte's life would have been in Lancashire, whether or not he was Shakespeare. Though understandably dismissive of so-called biographies that are really extended critical surveys of an author's work, interspersed with snippets of second-hand biography and history, Honan makes literary judgements on all the works and even on those tentatively ascribed to Shakespeare (he has been proved right in the case of *The Funeral Elegy*). These are conscientious surveys of current critical views, sometimes with comments on the plays in performance, but are likely to date sooner than anything else in the book. Useful appendices give family trees and 'A Note on the Shakespeare Biographical Tradition and Sources for his Life' (415–24), which will be a starting point for many other biographers. Despite the vast amount of material he covers, Honan is concise because he does not pad out his facts with more speculation than they can bear. Moreover, he can be called the cause that conciseness is in others. His immediate successors have been able, after acknowledging the existence of his comprehensive narrative, to move quickly on to more exciting and selective narratives emphasizing sexuality, religious persecution, psychological abnormality and greed.

Of these, certainly the most stimulating is Katherine Duncan-Jones's *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes From his Life*.²² Its title may derive from Richard Wilson, who, paraphrasing Dylan Thomas, describes the 1616 will as Shakespeare 'going ungently into night'.²³ Though sceptical about all the evidence relating to Shakespeare's possible Catholicism, this book is a far more negative evaluation of his character than Honigmann's. It starts from a contextual approach: 'I don't believe that any Elizabethans, even Shakespeare, were what might now be called 'nice' – liberal, unprejudiced,

²¹ Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford, 1998).

²² Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life* (London, 2001).

²³ Richard Wilson, *Will Power* (London, 1993), p. 185

Cambridge University Press

0521850746 - Shakespeare Survey: Writing about Shakespeare, Volume 58

Edited by Peter Holland

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LOIS POTTER

unselfish'(x). Duncan-Jones compares the Stratford dramatist unfavourably with another Stratfordian who was much more generous than he, the great late fifteenth-century benefactor Sir Hugh Clopton (xi). Shakespeare's bequest of £10 for the poor of Stratford certainly sounds mean, but, as a member of a theatre company he had been making regular contributions for poor relief in the parish throughout his stay in London, and Honigmann, comparing Shakespeare's will with others of the period, calls this provision generous ('Shakespeare's Will', 128). She admits that most people in the period used their wealth for themselves and their families alone and that when Shakespeare was hoarding malt in the bad years of the 1590s he was only doing what the rest of the Stratford maltsters did. The question is where to place the playwright on a rather long continuum of human behaviour. At the opposite end of the scale from Clopton, for example, one might compare Duncan-Jones's account of the appalling Garter King of Arms, Sir William Dethick, whose past included the accusation, by a fellow Herald's wife, that he had kicked her, poured her chamber pot over her head and rubbed hot ashes into her hair (99–100).

What makes *Ungentle Shakespeare* really worth reading is Duncan-Jones's superb knowledge of the literary and courtly context. She can say, for instance, that Sir George Carey and his daughter Bess (for whose wedding she thinks the dramatist wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) took a special interest in dreams, about which the father wrote his daughter in a letter of 1593 (88–9). Whereas most other biographers know only Shakespeare's works, she is able to insert the two narrative poems dedicated to Southampton into a conversation with others similarly dedicated (among other things, she notes the puns on 'Vere' that might refer to Anne Vere, the woman Burghley wanted Southampton to marry). Arguing that Southampton supported the poet's application for a coat of arms, she notes the terse hint in the *Lucrece* dedication, 'Were my worth greater, my duty would show greater', and the presence in the Shakespeare escutcheon of the falcon from the Southampton coat of arms (91–6). She thinks Scoloker's *Diaphantus* not only refers

to *Hamlet* but indicates some of the stage business Burbage might have used in it, such as smoking his pen and drinking from his ink-horn (180). In short, there are enormous numbers of intertextual points, which, in the end, make this book more valuable as literary criticism than as biography. But even in the area of textual evidence, Duncan-Jones raises issues that need further examining: for instance, she is very suspicious about the authenticity of that part of Simon Forman's diary that refers to the plays he saw in 1611 (xii–xiii).

Michael Wood's television series, *In Search of Shakespeare*, made brilliant use of visual material and of performance to do exactly what television can do and a book cannot. His beautifully produced book does what television cannot: that is, develops an argument at some length.²⁴ It is slightly less sensational than the series, though still inclined to create tenuous chains of connections, to make disconcerting leaps from 'perhaps' to 'we know', and to accept what is convenient for the narrative, particularly when it allows for the use of an effective visual record – for example, that the Cambridge portrait is indeed of Marlowe. Still, it must be said that the visual side of the book is wonderful, though it makes less use than the television series of those surprising glimpses of the back streets and cellars of a previously unknown, largely unchanged, ancient London. It would be worth buying just for the detailed maps of the theatre districts and the areas in which Shakespeare lived (Wood seems also to have benefited from Alan Nelson's admirable work on Shakespeare's neighbors). It will be plundered for PowerPoint illustrations. This book offers a major argument for the Catholic reading of Shakespeare's life, less conspiracy-driven than the television series. But it deals also with the other major questions in Shakespeare's biography and is in fact an extremely up-to-date summary of the current state of knowledge.

Unfortunately, the collaboration and editing that enabled Wood to incorporate so much recent work also make it impossible to track down some of the

²⁴ Michael Wood, *Shakespeare* (London, 2003).

RECENT SHAKESPEARE BIOGRAPHIES

sources. The publishers assume that readers won't follow up the quotations or want to know their authors, much less their act, scene and line numbers. The practice of giving only general acknowledgements in miniscule type at the back of a book may be allowable when one is drawing largely on secondary sources likely to be familiar to any competent scholar, but this is not that kind of book. It is full of detail, of fascinating illustrations (many of them identified only by the picture library from which they came), and of claims that cry out for more investigation. Wood's statement that 'we now know' that *The Phoenix and the Turtle* was about the martyrdom of a Catholic woman in 1601 is based on an article that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 18 April 2003, only six months before the book's publication (the 'we' of this statement is thus a pretty small group, and the documentation that would clinch the argument has yet to appear as I write).²⁵ His comments on the penmanship of Shakespeare's mother (48) are based on Honan's (see above); his arguments for the Earl of Pembroke as the young man of the sonnets (178–80) are not, of course, new, but their wording sometimes comes close to Katherine Duncan-Jones's in the introduction to her Arden edition of the Sonnets and almost anticipate the further bolstering by Jonathan Gibson in another *TLS* article.²⁶ Occasionally there are signs of careless note-taking: the statement that Shakespeare never blotted a line is attributed to Ben Jonson rather than, as Jonson himself does, to 'the players' (221). Like all too many biographers, Wood makes a practice of stating a fact about, say, the scenery of Stratford, and then quoting a few lines from the poet, as if to suggest that the one led inevitably to the other. Virtually everyone, for instance, after referring to the painted cloths in Mary Arden's childhood home, quotes the lines about painted cloths in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Wood goes even further, using the word 'uncanny' for some of the echoes that he thinks he detects. The phrase about those who have 'defaced the precious image of our dear Redeemer' in *Richard III* (2.1) refers in context to murdering or maiming the image of God as seen in a human being but Wood wants it to be an uncanny reflection of the

adult Shakespeare's unconscious sense of guilt over an event that occurred several months before he was born, his father's supervision of the whitewashing of the religious paintings in the Stratford Guild Chapel (13).

On the other hand, Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* searches for echoes of more than words, especially the words of high culture.²⁷ His first quotation is from a nursery rhyme and his last chapter is called 'The Triumph of the Everyday'. Greenblatt's Shakespeare is never ashamed of his roots and can easily and happily retire to live among ordinary people at the end of his life. But ordinariness is beautiful, by contrast with the tragic world of English Catholicism from which Greenblatt sees the poet as emerging. His first chapter opens 'Let us imagine', and one of his invitations to 'imagine' involves a meeting between the young Shakespeare and Edmund Campion. Campion's works are looked at in some detail, although Greenblatt goes on to admit that the meeting probably never happened, and his reading of the plays suggests that mysticism and martyrdom meant little to the poet outside an erotic context. To explain the apparent contradiction, he, like Wood and Wilson, invokes the traumatic effect of the torturing of members of the persecuted minority to which Shakespeare belonged. Entering London for the first time, the future dramatist could have seen on London Bridge the heads of several Catholics – some from his part of the world, some possibly

²⁵ See John Finnis and Patrick Martin, 'Another turn for the *Turtle*: Shakespeare's Intercession for *Love's Martyr*', *Times Literary Supplement* (18 April 2003), pp. 14–16, and subsequent correspondence. The source, not named in Wood's book, was pointed out by some reviewers and noted by Finnis in a message to the Shaksper Listserv (www.shaksper.net/archives/2003/2125.html).

²⁶ Jonathan Gibson, 'Cherchez la femme: Mary Wroth and Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Times Literary Supplement* (13 August, 2004), pp. 12–13. Gibson suggests, in the light of her affair with Pembroke, her brunette appearance and her participation in *The Masque of Blackness*, that she might have been the Dark Lady.

²⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York and London, 2004).

Cambridge University Press

0521850746 - Shakespeare Survey: Writing about Shakespeare, Volume 58

Edited by Peter Holland

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LOIS POTTER

even known to him. This, Greenblatt thinks, would have encouraged him to cover his tracks as much as possible, avoid leaving a paper trail and keep his feelings to himself – revealing them, paradoxically, in those purchases of land, which give us several of his signatures (58). His will, ungracious as it sounds in many respects, can also be seen as a final expression of love for his eldest daughter and her husband (389). Greenblatt offers a clear and beautifully written narrative, interpretation more than biography, though, like Duncan-Jones, he achieves clarity in part by omission (of, e.g., most of the early histories and late romances, the non-narrative poems that aren't in sonnet form and the possibility of collaboration).

E. K. Chambers, in 1930, mentioned the speculations on where Shakespeare got the books that were sources for his plays: 'Did he borrow from the Earl of Southampton, or from Jonson or from Camden, or did he merely turn over their leaves on the stationers' stalls?' These, he declared, were 'foolish questions, to which I propose no answers'.²⁸ Most people now would think that they are very good questions, and the years since Chambers wrote have brought other equally interesting ones. Did Shakespeare visit the printing house of his fellow Stratfordian, Richard Field? Did the theatre company think it worthwhile to invest in copies of Plutarch and Holinshed, given the extensive use made of them by the house dramatist? What these questions don't lead to, or at least have not yet led to, are answers and this is why Chambers thought they were foolish. Modern biographers of

Shakespeare would be lost if they were not allowed to ask unanswerable questions. It is the sheer number of these – or sometimes the tentative answers offered by bolder authors – that swells a chronology into a book.

Should they be asking other questions? At the conference on 'Writing About Shakespeare', on which this *Survey* volume is based, James Shapiro argued for a rethinking of the form of the Shakespeare biography. His own decision – to focus on a single year in the writer's life – produced marvellous results. However, I would guess that most biographies are the product of a publisher's desire for a book that will supersede, rather than complement, all previous ones. This usually means a cradle-to-the-grave structure, critical accounts of the works and as much information about context, afterlife and the current state of criticism as the word limit allows. Of course, the project is both ridiculous and redundant. The one question that all biographers want to answer, and cannot, is the source, not of the plays, but of what Lee called 'the secret springs of poetic inspiration'. Mapping the human genome may seem simple by comparison. Yet, given the complex encoding involved in both, the multiplication of questions, contexts and micro-facts, for all its repetition and wild experimentation, may after all be the right approach to take.

²⁸ E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare, a Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1930), vol. 1, p. 23.

TOWARD A NEW BIOGRAPHY OF SHAKESPEARE

JAMES SHAPIRO

Shakespeare biography hasn't changed much in the past hundred years. With few exceptions, those who write about his life continue to obsess over a handful of issues that have little to do with what or how he wrote – from his sexual inclinations to his pursuit of status to his decision to leave his wife a 'second best' bed. Because most of his biographers accept as a matter of faith the Wordsworthian notion that 'the child is father of the man,' a disproportionate amount of attention has also been devoted to finding in Shakespeare's early and 'lost' years – rather than, say, the first few years of his writing and acting career in London – the key to what made Shakespeare Shakespeare. Over time, the emphasis has changed, though the premise that his early years were crucial has not: Shakespeare the poacher, butcher's apprentice, soldier, lawyer's clerk and schoolteacher have all had their day and are currently supplanted by Shakespeare the crypto-Catholic. Given the absence of hard evidence to support such claims, the biographer's search has usually begun not in the archives but in the plays themselves, which are ransacked for clues that can be read back into anecdotal accounts of his early years (and since the plays contain a vast range of experiences, this is not as hard to do as it may sound). Unless one believes that the plays are two-way mirrors, it is difficult not to conclude that this approach is ultimately circular and arbitrary.

Traditional cradle-to-grave biographies of Shakespeare also share the unspoken assumption that what makes people who they are now also

made people who they were back then. I'm not so sure. Because almost nobody thought to write a memoir or keep a personal diary in Shakespeare's day – revealing enough facts in themselves – we don't know whether the emotional lives of early modern English men and women were like ours. Their formative years certainly weren't. Childhood was brief, and adolescents, rich and poor, were sent from home to live and serve in other households. Plague, death in childbirth, harvest-failures and high infant-mortality rates may have diminished the intensity of family bonds. And these bonds didn't last as long: people lived, on the average, until their mid-forties (only one of Shakespeare's seven brothers and sisters made it past forty-six). Eldest sons like Shakespeare inherited all, creating friction among siblings. Though life was shorter, most Elizabethans delayed marriage until their mid-twenties (and a surprising proportion, including Shakespeare's three brothers, never married at all). Given the extremely low illegitimacy rates at the time, premarital desire must have either been sublimated or found an outlet in non-procreative sex – perhaps both. Even the meaning of such concepts as individuality was different. Writers, including Shakespeare, were only beginning to speak of 'individual' in the modern sense of 'distinctive' or 'special', the exact opposite of what it had long meant, 'inseparable'. This was also an age of faith, or at the least one in which church attendance was mandatory; religion, too played a greater role in shaping how life, death and the afterlife were

JAMES SHAPIRO

imagined.¹ All this suggests that, as much as we might want Shakespeare to have been like us, he wasn't. We call this period early modern or pre-modern for good reason.

We know all this, yet collectively remain reluctant to ask whether the time has come to abandon the questionable assumptions and stale conventions that govern the writing of Shakespeare's life. It didn't have to turn out this way – and probably wouldn't have if Thomas Heywood's ambitious Jacobean 'Lives of All the Poets Modern and Foreign' had not vanished without a trace² or if seventeenth-century antiquarians like John Ward bothered to speak with Shakespeare's younger daughter, Judith, who was still alive after the Restoration (Ward made a note to contact her in 1662 but she died before he managed to do so and, with her, a direct and intimate sense of the kind of man Shakespeare was and how he spent his time).³ A few more facts – or even anecdotes that weren't so obviously second or third-hand – might have put the lie to current, often wild, speculation about how Shakespeare became Shakespeare.

Unfairly or not, I blame John Heminges and Henry Condell for the ossified state of Shakespeare biography and for the difficulties we now face in accounting for Shakespeare's development as a writer. Having spent most of their adult lives performing in Shakespeare's plays they knew the sequence in which all but the earliest plays had been written. But when they put together the 1623 Folio they abandoned the chronological order of their model, Ben Jonson's 1616 Folio, choosing instead to shoehorn Shakespeare's plays into the categories of Comedies, Histories and Tragedies (which made for a very uncomfortable fit for 'tragedies' like *Cymbeline* and *Troilus and Cressida*). Even within these categories they ignored the order in which the plays were written, so that, for instance, *The Tempest* is the lead comedy in the First Folio. And, unlike Jonson, they made no mention of where and by whom each play had been performed. Heminges and Condell's decision to take Shakespeare out of time and place made it much easier for subsequent critics to conclude,

as Coleridge did, that a transcendent Shakespeare wrote 'exactly as if of another planet'.⁴ Some of the most popular one-volume editions of Shakespeare's works still organize the works by genre, and most of us, in our teaching, are more likely to speak of *Henry V* as part of an historical tetralogy that began four years earlier with *Richard II*, than we are to emphasize its connections to plays like *Julius Caesar* or *As You Like It*, written at much the same time, with which it shares a different set of preoccupations.

Shakespeare himself seems to have taken for granted that 'the purpose of playing' was to show, as Hamlet put it, 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (3.2.20–4). But to see how Shakespeare's plays managed to do so depends upon knowing when each one was written. And with the deaths of Richard Burbage, Thomas Pope, Heminges and Condell, that knowledge too disappeared. Over a century and a half passed before Edmond Malone tried to tackle the question of Shakespeare's development in his 'Attempt to Ascertain the Order in Which the Plays of Shakespeare were Written'. Few were more steeped in Shakespeare scholarship than Malone, and yet the best that he could initially determine was that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in 1596 and *Henry VIII* in 1601, that *The Winter's Tale* (1604) preceded *Lear* (1605), while *Julius Caesar* (1607) followed both *Cymbeline* (1605) and *Macbeth* (1606).

¹ The literature on early modern social history is vast. See, for example, Ralph A. Houllbrooke, *The English Family, 1450–1700* (London, 1984); J. A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550–1760* (1987; 2nd edn, London, 1997); Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987); and David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997).

² See S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, new edn (Oxford, 1991), p. 83. Heywood's book was mentioned in 1614 and again in 1635.

³ See E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1930), vol. 2, pp. 249–50.

⁴ As cited in C. J. Sisson, *The Mythical Sorrow of Shakespeare*. Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy, 1934. From the Proceedings of the British Academy, vol. 20 (London, 1934), p. 6.