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Edited by Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells

Excerpt

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I

STEPHEN GREENBLATT

The traces of Shakespeare's life

What are the key surviving traces, unadorned by local colour, of Shakespeare's life? The core set of these traces, of course, consists of the printing of his name as the author of his plays and poems. During his lifetime, eighteen of the plays now attributed to Shakespeare were printed in the small-format editions called quartos. Many such editions of plays in this period were issued without the name of the author – there was no equivalent to our copyright system, and publishers were under no legal obligation to specify on their title pages who wrote the texts they printed. (See Chapter 5.) By the second decade of the seventeenth century, it had become more or less routine to include the author's name, but it remains difficult at this distance to gauge the level of contemporary interest in particular playwrights: some contemporaries compiled detailed lists of the names of those they regarded as the pre-eminent playwrights in different genres; many others, to judge from surviving texts, seem to have been no more interested in the authors of plays than audiences today are interested in the authors of television shows. (See Chapter 3.) Only occasionally were there significant exceptions, and then as now for the same principal motive: profit. By 1597 seven of Shakespeare's plays had been printed, their title pages providing details of plot and of performance but not the identity of the author. After 1598 Shakespeare's name, spelled in various ways, began to appear on the title page of quartos, and indeed several plays almost certainly not authored by him were printed with his name. His name – Shakespeare, Shake-speare, Shakspeare, Shaxberd, Shakespere, and the like – had evidently begun to sell plays. During his lifetime more published plays were attributed to Shakespeare than to any other contemporary dramatist.

Similarly, Shakespeare's name figured prominently in the editions, published in his lifetime, of his non-dramatic works: *Venus and Adonis* (1593), *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) and the *Sonnets* (1609). Confirmation of Shakespeare's contemporary reputation as a love poet comes from many early sources, including those students in St John's College, Cambridge, who

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wrote an amateur play in which one of the characters rhapsodizes, 'I'll worship sweet Mr Shakespeare, and to honour him will lay his *Venus and Adonis* under my pillow.' Comparable praise was showered during his lifetime on Shakespeare as a dramatist. Francis Meres, who published a survey of the literary scene in 1598, wrote that 'As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage.' Meres followed with a list of plays – such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* – that seemed to him to prove his point.

But the greatest tribute to Shakespeare's genius – and the single most important trace of Shakespeare's whole life – came seven years after his death, when two of his friends and colleagues, John Heminges and Henry Condell, brought out the collected edition of his plays now known as the First Folio (1623). This edition gave the world the text of eighteen plays – including such masterpieces as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest* – that had not been published before and might well have otherwise disappeared. It included an engraved portrait of Shakespeare that, because the editors knew Shakespeare well, is probably closer to a reasonably accurate image of the author than any other that has been found. And it featured no fewer than four dedicatory poems. The poem by Ben Jonson – celebrating Shakespeare as 'Soul of the Age! / The applause!, delight! The wonder of our Stage!' – is particularly noteworthy since Jonson likens his deceased friend and theatrical rival not only to some of the greatest English writers – Chaucer, Spenser and Marlowe – but also to the greatest playwrights of antiquity – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

This tribute is a biographical fact of great significance: a distinguished poet, playwright and classicist, notoriously competitive, defensive and combative, exalts Shakespeare – safely dead, of course – to the highest rank of literary achievement. Jonson clearly expected not to be ridiculed for the extravagance of his praise; he thought rather that it would bear witness to the justness of his judgement. We learn something important then not only about Jonson's taste but also about the esteem in which a large circle of Shakespeare's contemporaries held him a mere seven years after his death.

But literary reputation, though it was enormously important for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, is generally not regarded by modern readers as the heart of the matter. It seems to us somehow a superficial or external piece of biographical information; what we want is the details of a lived life. And it is both revealing and frustrating that the First Folio, for all the obvious care with which it was edited and presented, gives us almost nothing of what we crave. There is a single detail that Heminges and Condell bother to provide: their great friend's 'mind and hand went together', they

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write; 'And what he thought, he uttered with the easiness, that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers.' If the claim is true, it helps to explain how Shakespeare managed to accomplish so much in a relatively short lifespan. But, as Margreta de Grazia has observed, the same claim was made for other writers in this period and may have had little relation to reality.¹ And indeed recent studies of the various states of Shakespeare's texts suggest that he heavily re-worked at least several of his plays.

Apart from the debatable claim that he possessed a startling authorial 'easiness', Heminges and Condell are virtually silent about Shakespeare's life. The Folio editors do not even arrange the plays in the order of their composition, so that readers could follow the evolution of the playwright's skill and vision. A major scholarly effort, over several centuries, has pored over theatrical records, allusions and internal evidence in order to establish a plausible order. Though there are still disputes over the precise years in which certain plays were first written and performed, a rough chronology of the plays is now generally accepted. Some biographers, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attempted to assign this chronology to a presumed psychological evolution that underlay it: from the mingled realism and festive laughter of the histories and comedies, to the despair and bitterness of the tragedies, to the renewed if sober hopefulness of the romances. But quite apart from certain anomalies that disrupt the comfortable flow of the psychological story – *Titus Andronicus*, for example, written uncomfortably close to *The Comedy of Errors*; *Twelfth Night* cheek by jowl with *Hamlet* – the story itself has proved difficult to coordinate coherently with the surviving biographical details of Shakespeare's life.

The Folio editors, in any case, had no interest in providing any assistance to such an attempt. Though they include the author's picture, they do not bother to include his birth and death dates, his marital status, his surviving children, his intellectual and social affiliations, his endearing or annoying quirks of character, let alone anything more psychologically revealing, such as the 'table talk' carefully recorded by followers of Martin Luther. Shakespeare may have been a very private man, but, as he was dead when the edition was produced, it is unlikely to have been his own wishes that dictated the omissions. The editors evidently assumed that the potential buyers of the book – and this was an expensive commercial venture – would not be particularly interested in what we would now regard as essential biographical details.

Such presumed indifference is, in all likelihood, chiefly a reflection of Shakespeare's modest origins. He flew below the radar of ordinary Elizabethan and Jacobean social curiosity. In the wake of the death of the poet Sir Philip Sidney, Fulke Greville wrote a fascinating biography of his

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friend, but Sidney was a dashing aristocrat, linked by birth and marriage to the great families of the realm, and he died tragically of a wound he received on the battlefield. Writers of a less exalted station did not excite the same interest, unless, like Ben Jonson, they were celebrated for their public persona, or, like another of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Christopher Marlowe, they ran afoul of the authorities.² The fact that there are no police reports, privy council orders, indictments or post-mortem inquests about Shakespeare, as there are about Marlowe, tells us something significant about Shakespeare's life – he possessed a gift for staying out of trouble – but it is not the kind of detail on which biographers thrive.

Centuries of archival labour have unearthed at least some of the basic details. William Shakespeare was baptized in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on 26 April 1564. (Since christenings usually took place within five days of a child's birth, his actual date of birth – for which there is no record – is conventionally celebrated on 23 April.) He was the first son of John and Mary Shakespeare; two daughters had already been born to them, but neither had survived infancy. Altogether they would have eight children, four daughters and four sons. William's sister Anne, born when he was 7 years old, died in 1579, just before William's fifteenth birthday. Another sister, Joan, married a hatter and survived both her husband and her celebrated brother; she is mentioned in Shakespeare's will. William and Joan were the only ones of the siblings to marry. One of Shakespeare's younger brothers, Richard, left no trace of his occupation; another, Gilbert, is said to have been a Stratford haberdasher; and the third, Edmund, became a professional actor, though evidently not a notable one. Edmund, who died at 28 in 1607, was given an expensive funeral, presumably paid for by his older brother, whose tremendous success in the theatre had by that time made him a wealthy man.

The place into which William was born was a prosperous, pleasant market town, situated on the River Avon, about 100 miles north-west of London. It was not the fiefdom of a powerful nobleman or of the church; since the mid-sixteenth century it had been an independent township, governed by an elected bailiff and a council of burgesses and aldermen. The town was graced with substantial half-timbered houses lining the three main streets running parallel to the river, a fine church with a noteworthy chapel, a bustling annual fair and – perhaps most important for our purposes – an excellent free grammar school. The origins of William's father, John, were in the countryside; his grandfather, Richard, was a tenant farmer in the nearby village of Snitterfield, where he rented a house and land from Robert Arden, a prosperous, land-owning farmer. In the mid-sixteenth century John Shakespeare moved to Stratford, where he became a glover and dresser of soft leather. He

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must have done reasonably well for himself, for he purchased a house and other property in Stratford and soon after married Mary Arden, the youngest daughter and favourite of his father's landlord. Mary was not one of the wealthy heiresses – Portia, Juliet, Celia, Hero and Olivia – who populate Shakespeare's plays, but, bringing both property of her own and a name of some repute, she was a prize for John Shakespeare. Continuing to prosper – in addition to making fashionable gloves, he seems to have bought and sold real estate, dealt in wool and other agricultural commodities, and lent money at high rates of interest – John steadily rose in the town's administrative hierarchy. He held a series of trusted roles culminating in 1568 – when his son William was 4 years old – in a year's term as bailiff, the equivalent of mayor. A sign of his ascent was the application he initiated for a coat of arms, which would have signalled his attaining the rank of a gentleman, someone in the upper 2 per cent of England's population.

But though a coat of arms was drawn up for him, John Shakespeare did not pursue the costly process that would have led to its actual grant. From the late 1560s onwards the course of his life became distinctly less smooth. There were repeated, unexplained failures to attend meetings; legal complaints, lawsuits and fines; the selling of family property to raise cash. When in 1592 the local authorities, attempting to ferret out Catholic sympathizers, drew up a list of those who had not been coming monthly to the Protestant church services, as the law required, John Shakespeare's name was included. Speculation that Shakespeare's father was secretly a Catholic – at a time of intense fear and persecution of Catholics suspected of conspiring to topple the regime – was furthered by the discovery, in the eighteenth century, of a document that purported to be John Shakespeare's 'spiritual last will and testament'. The original document, conspicuously Catholic in its formulations, has been lost, however, and its authenticity has been challenged. Moreover, in the list of those cited for failing to attend church, John Shakespeare's name was placed in a special category, distinct from religious recusancy: 'It was said that these last nine come not to church for fear of process for debt.' John Shakespeare never returned to public office in Stratford, though he seems to have weathered his financial difficulties and remained, until his death in September 1601, in the substantial double house in Henley Street where his celebrated son was born. Shakespeare's mother outlived her husband by seven years.

Part at least of William Shakespeare's childhood and adolescence may well have been shadowed by these family difficulties – how could it not have been? – but there is no firm evidence to prove it. Indeed, after the initial baptismal entry, there is no firm evidence of anything about his upbringing. He presumably learned his ABCs at what Elizabethans called a petty

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school and then presumably went on to the King's New School, a fine, free grammar school where he would have received a serious education centred on the Latin classics, but the records that might have confirmed his attendance are lost. (See Chapter 2.) There is no record, likewise, of what he did in the years immediately after he left school. His name is not listed in the well-maintained records of those who matriculated at Oxford or Cambridge University, and, if he had somehow attended anyway, we would almost certainly know it from the title pages of his plays whose authors routinely and conspicuously trumpeted such distinctions. But whether he was an apprentice to his father in the glove business or a law clerk or an unlicensed school-teacher or a soldier – all frequently rehearsed speculations – is impossible to determine with any certainty.

The next time that William Shakespeare leaves a documentary trace of himself is in the marriage licence bond recorded on 28 November 1582 to enable him to marry Anne Hathaway of Shottery, a village near Stratford. Shakespeare was 18 years old; Anne was 26, the daughter of a modestly prosperous sheep farmer and husbandman, recently deceased. The bond, required to facilitate unusual haste in conducting the marriage, may have been linked to the fact that the bride was some three months pregnant. In May she gave birth to a daughter, christened Susanna. Before two years had passed, she gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl, whom the parents named Hamnet and Judith, after their long-term Stratford friends Hamnet and Judith Sadler. These three children, all of whom survived infancy, are the only recorded offspring of William Shakespeare. Hamnet died in 1596, at the age of 11; Susanna died in her sixty-seventh year, in 1649; and Judith reached what for the time was the ripe old age of 77, dying in 1662. Her three sons all died before she did, and Shakespeare's only grand-daughter, Elizabeth, died childless in 1670.

What role Shakespeare played in the upbringing of his three children is unknown. After the records of their births in 1583 and 1585 we have no direct evidence of his whereabouts or activities for seven years, a period that has been dubbed by frustrated biographers the 'Lost Years'. Then in 1592 a playwright, pamphleteer and fiction writer notorious for his disorderly life, Robert Greene, published a nasty attack on an 'Upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers'. 'Our feathers': Greene's attack takes the form of a warning to fellow university-educated playwrights who had been writing for the London stage. Lacking their elite educational background, the 'Upstart Crow' started off as a mere actor – one of 'those Puppets', as Greene puts it, 'that spake from our mouths, those Antics garnished in our colours' – but has now set up to be a writer as well. He has the gall to think he is 'as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you'; indeed

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he imagines himself to be 'an absolute *Iohannes fac totum*', a Johnny-do-all. Greene does not exactly name the rival he thus characterizes as ambitious, unscrupulous and opportunistic, but he unmistakably identifies him by alluding to a line from one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, 3 *Henry VI*, and informing us that its author regards himself as 'the onely Shake-scene in a country'.

It is reasonably clear then that by 1592 Shakespeare had made his way from Stratford to London, that he had become an actor and that he had established himself sufficiently as a playwright to excite the anger of an envious contemporary. Indeed Greene seems to assume that Shakespeare was well-enough known to be identified merely by a quotation and an allusion. A few months later the printer of Greene's pamphlet, Henry Chettle, published an apology. Once again, no names are directly mentioned, but referring to the person attacked as an upstart crow, Chettle testifies that he personally has 'seen his demeanour no less civil than he excellent in the quality [i.e. the occupation] he professes'. 'Besides,' he adds, 'diverse of worship' – that is, several important people – 'have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious [i.e. witty] grace in writing, which approves his art.'³ By 1592, then, Shakespeare seems to have had important friends and protectors.

The precise route by which Shakespeare entered the professional theatre – the company he may have first joined as an apprentice, the way he initially received the chance to write for the stage, the precise moment he arrived in London – has remained obscure. Theatre scholars have reconstructed with reasonable confidence his trajectory thereafter, a trajectory that led him to be an actor, playwright and shareholder in the company known first as the Lord Chamberlain's Men and then, after Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, as the King's Men. These were the two most successful and celebrated companies of the age, and Shakespeare flourished in both reputation and wealth.

He must have worked extraordinarily hard: for the better part of two decades he wrote approximately two plays a year, plays that suggest restless and substantial background reading as well as intense compositional attention. At the same time he was somehow memorizing parts, rehearsing and performing in plays, his own and those of others. He must, at least on some occasions, have also accompanied his company when they travelled from town to town. And he was helping to manage his company's finances and his own, investing his earnings, for the most part, in country real estate in and around Stratford and perhaps lending money from time to time at a favourable rate of return. He was indeed an 'absolute *Iohannes fac totum*', and he reaped the rewards. In a profession where almost everyone else eked out a marginal existence, Shakespeare amassed a small fortune.

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Combing the archives, scholars have found various documentary traces of Shakespeare's business dealings. He was twice cited for not paying his taxes on his London residence. In his Stratford house he amassed an ample supply of corn and malt, presumably for sale. He sold a load of stone to the Stratford corporation, which used it to repair a bridge. He bought an interest in a lease of 'tithes of corn, grain, blade, and hay'. A letter from one Stratford burgher to another remarks that 'Our countryman Mr. Shakespeare is willing to disburse some money upon some odd yardland or other at Shottery or near about us.'⁴ Another letter, drafted but not sent, asked Shakespeare for a loan of £30; he was evidently understood, then, to dabble in money-lending. At least twice Shakespeare went to court to recover small sums of money that he claimed were owed him. None of these dealings constitutes anything out of the ordinary for a person of means in this period, but, taken together, they represent a lifelong attention to his financial resources.

If we set aside the astonishing genius of what he wrote, this set of activities and accomplishments, though considerable, might not qualify as superhuman, but it would for anyone, however gifted, have required unusual discipline, tenacity and ambition. The seventeenth-century gossip-monger John Aubrey, one of the first writers to interest himself in Shakespeare's life, is not to be trusted. But at least one of the anecdotes he collected and recorded in 1681 rings true: Shakespeare was not, Aubrey was told, 'a company keeper'. He 'wouldn't be debauched', Aubrey's informant reported, and if invited out, he would excuse himself, writing that 'he was in pain'.⁵ Shakespeare must have husbanded his time extremely well: it is noteworthy that his two great narrative poems seem to have been written during a period in which the theatres were all shut down, by government order, in response to an epidemic of plague.

When this torrent of London-based activity was going on, the playwright did not live with his family: he took rented lodgings near the theatres, living at various times in St Helen's parish, Bishopsgate, in the Clink in Southwark, across the river, and on Silver Street, not far from St Paul's. How frequently Shakespeare saw his wife and children is not known; Aubrey was told that he visited them once a year. He had not, in any case, abandoned them: his wife and children remained in Stratford, living with his parents in the family house on Henley Street and then, from 1597 onwards, in New Place, the second-largest house in the town. Shakespeare's purchase of New Place is striking evidence of his prosperity, prosperity signified as well by the successful application in 1596 for a family coat of arms. His father, as we noted above, had initiated that application decades earlier, at the height of his prosperity, and then abandoned it; its renewal was almost certainly the work of his startlingly successful son. Certainly the irate York Herald, Peter Brooke, thought

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so: he complained that his colleague had inappropriately assigned a heraldic device to a number of base persons, including 'Shakespear ye Player'.

After the construction of the Globe theatre in 1599 Shakespeare had another source of regular income: he was in the unusual position of being part-owner of the playhouse in which his company (of which he was also part owner, as well as principal playwright) performed. After 1606 his company also took the lease on the Blackfriars theatre and thereby acquired another significant London venue. There are traces of other, more occasional remunerative activities: in 1604, along with other members of his company, Shakespeare received a cash payment and scarlet livery to attend on the visiting Spanish ambassador, and in 1613 he was paid 44 shillings for devising the *impresa*, or insignia, to be inscribed on a nobleman's tournament shield. In addition he was rumoured to have been given very substantial gifts by the fabulously wealthy Earl of Southampton to whom he dedicated *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* and who is often mentioned as one of the prime candidates for the unnamed fair young man of the Sonnets.

The Sonnets seem to promise a huge biographical payoff. They are written in the first person with exceptional intensity and reveal a passionate relationship, mingling adoration, desire and bitter reproach, with both an aristocratic young man and a dark lady. There is pain when a rival poet threatens to displace the speaker in the young man's affections, and still greater pain when the dark lady seduces the young man. In several of the sonnets the poet seems to refer specifically (and with shame) to his profession in the public theatre:

Alas, 'tis true, I have gone here and there
 And made myself a motley to the view,
 Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear.
(110: 1-3)

And in addressing the dark lady the poet repeatedly refers to himself by name:

Make but my name thy love, and love that still,
 And then thou lov'st me for my name is Will.
(136: 13-14)

Apart from these moments of self-identification the Sonnets do not identify the characters – despite a mountain of speculation, the identity of the young man, the dark lady and the rival poet remain in doubt – and readers have long understood that Shakespeare could have invented the whole erotic tangle. Nonetheless, the Sonnets are a distinct provocation, a tantalizing invitation to biographical speculation, even as they withhold the detailed information that would give that speculation some solid ground.

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Many have accepted the invitation and constructed elaborate accounts of Shakespeare's sexual life, as revealed by the Sonnets, but Stephen Booth's wry comment in 1977 sums up some of the frustration that haunts all these accounts: 'William Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter.'⁶

Something of the same frustration attends speculation about Shakespeare's religious beliefs or his sceptical doubts. In the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century Richard Davies, a Gloucestershire curate, jotted down that Shakespeare 'died a papist' – that is, Davies believed that on his deathbed Shakespeare received the Catholic last rites. Some have conjoined this jotting to the hints that Shakespeare's parents may have harboured faith in Roman Catholicism, and scholars, notably Sir Edmund Chambers and Ernst Honigmann, have ferreted out intriguing links between several schoolmasters in Stratford, during the young Shakespeare's years at the King's New School, and both English recusants at home (that is, those who refused to attend the Protestant Church of England religious services) and English Catholic exiles abroad.

Critics have accordingly scrutinized Shakespeare's plays and poems for signs of clandestine Catholic sympathies. The enterprise is hindered both by the complexity and ambiguity of the religious settlement in Tudor and Stuart England and by the complexity and ambiguity of Shakespeare's works. Comparable hindrances have been encountered by critics who have attempted to find in Shakespeare signs of thoroughgoing disbelief. The surviving biographical records indicate that he was baptized in a Protestant church, married in a Protestant ceremony and buried in a Protestant funeral. If he had systematically refused to attend Church of England services, he would almost certainly have been cited and fined – regular church attendance in this period was not voluntary. Since he was not so cited, he presumably met at least the minimal formal requirements for an observing Protestant. What he believed – or did not believe – in his heart remains hidden. Or, rather, here too the works are an invitation to venture forth in a speculative landscape without clear boundary markers or secure destinations.

In 1607–8, having written an astonishing succession of tragic masterpieces, Shakespeare shifted generic ground and collaborated with a freelance playwright, George Wilkins, on an episodic romance, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. On internal evidence it seems that Wilkins wrote most of the first two acts and Shakespeare most of the last three. This is not an obvious recipe for success, and little in Wilkins' life suggests that he was a promising candidate for a happy collaboration. (Repeatedly in trouble with the law, Wilkins was arrested in 1611 for 'kicking a woman on the belly which was then great with child', and in his later years he seems to have run a brothel.) But