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978-1-107-05432-5 - The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography

Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Excerpt

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General introduction

PAUL EDMONDSON AND STANLEY WELLS



Imagination is needed if we are to bring the information we have about another human being to life. When the subject is Shakespeare, although we may continually lament that the facts we most desire do not exist, we may decide to broaden the scope of how to use what is available the better to imagine what his life was like.

Biographers of Shakespeare normally and understandably drive a direct trajectory from his birth to his death, writing about persons he knew mainly in relation to specific occasions when his life intersected with theirs. Relatives, friends, theatre practitioners, fellow writers, publishers and printers, patrons, business associates – people such as these all played significant roles in the dramatist's life. In this volume we have invited our contributors, instead of taking Shakespeare as the centre, to consider members of his circle – or rather of the intersecting circles of persons he encountered at various periods of his life – in their own right, as well as in relation to the ways in which their lives impinged on his and his on theirs. We hope that these explorations within the Shakespeare circle will both add to our knowledge of the society of his time and, more specifically, will cast reflected light back on Shakespeare himself, enriching our understanding of him by offering a fuller than usual picture of his personal and professional relationships, the people we know he was closest to.

The twin centres of Shakespeare's life are of course Stratford-upon-Avon and London. In his day Stratford, set on the River Avon in Warwickshire, was a thriving market town with around 2,000 inhabitants. It had a fine church and a well-established grammar school with Oxford-educated masters where all the boys of the town could receive a free, classics-based education with no expense to their parents. Many townsmen both spoke and wrote Latin. Girls, however, could be educated only at an elementary level. Daily life in the town is exceptionally well recorded because of the high survival rate of many of the corporation and other records, though some key documents are lost. The school's records, for example, are only

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preserved from the nineteenth century onwards. The town's affairs were regulated by its councillors and aldermen, presided over by the Bailiff, or mayor, an office held in 1568 by Shakespeare's father, John (Chapter 2). They were advised by lawyers such as Thomas Greene (Chapter 11), town clerk, who described himself as Shakespeare's 'cousin' (though they may not have been related by blood). The various trades practised by townspeople were organised into guilds which met in the Guildhall, which survives. It was both the centre of local government and a location that, under the patronage of the Bailiff and the Town Council, could host troupes of travelling players normally based in the metropolis. Officials and a town carrier were among those who travelled regularly between Stratford and London, a distance of just over 80 miles as the crow flies, but considerably more along the highways and byways of Elizabethan England; typically the journey took two or, more comfortably, three days on horseback, with overnight stops in, perhaps, Oxford and Aylesbury or Uxbridge.

London, with more like 200,000 inhabitants, was the centre of government and the Court, home of the monarch, a cosmopolitan city also, like Stratford, based on a river which gave it strong links with Europe and beyond; a centre of trade and commerce, but also a place where culture – music both sacred and secular, literature of many kinds, religion, painting and the other fine arts – thrived. The Inns of Court provided educational opportunities in the law. Crucially for Shakespeare, in the later part of the sixteenth century the city saw a rapid development of professional theatre, with permanent playhouses – the only ones in the country – increasing in number and in sophistication of design.

Many of the persons discussed here belong firmly to either Stratford or London. Most members of Shakespeare's immediate family – his parents Mary and John (Chapters 1 and 2), his surviving brothers Gilbert, Richard and Edmund (Chapter 3), his sister Joan (Chapter 4), his wife Anne and her relatives (Chapter 5), his children Susanna, Hamnet and Judith (Chapters 6, 8 and 9) – have left evidence of little if any direct contact with the capital, though Gilbert, a shadowy figure, may have worked there for a while, and his youngest brother, Edmund, followed in his footsteps in a brief acting career of which only faint traces survive. We can identify clear links between Shakespeare and a number of Stratfordians beyond his immediate family. He encountered the Quineys on both a public level, in

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his business dealings, and privately through the marriage of his daughter Judith to Thomas Quiney. The physician John Hall (Chapter 7), who came to live in Stratford when Shakespeare's London career was in full swing, married his other daughter, Susanna (Chapter 6), and fathered Shakespeare's granddaughter Elizabeth (Chapter 10). The lives of several members of another Warwickshire family, the Combes (Chapter 12), intertwined at various points with Shakespeare's: he had business dealings with some of them, received a legacy from one, and left his sword to another. One Stratford friend, Richard Field (Chapter 13), Shakespeare's schoolfellow, also made his career in London, becoming a distinguished printer and publisher associated with all Shakespeare's poems except the Sonnets.

References to parishes, streets and other London locations occur from time to time among the essays. Readers seeking precise information about these locales and their scale in relation to each other may find it helpful to consult the on-going Map of Early Modern London project hosted by the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada at <https://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/>. Readers will find there an invaluable resource which allows them to zoom in to particular areas of the famous Agas map of the city from the 1560s. The project provides a searchable placeography, personography, bibliography, glossary and orgography (of organisations), as well as much other information. An overall effect of perusing a map of this kind is to be reminded of how close together the various communities and places were, a valuable insight into the geographical aspects of Shakespeare's London circles.

Shakespeare's closest identifiable personal links in London were with professional associates, fellow actors including Richard Burbage (Chapter 19), Will Kemp and Robert Armin (Chapter 20), John Heminges and Henry Condell (Chapter 25), and fellow dramatists such as Robert Greene, George Peele, Christopher Marlowe (Chapter 18), the deplorable George Wilkins (Chapter 22), Thomas Middleton (Chapter 23), John Fletcher (Chapter 24) and his admiring rival Ben Jonson (Chapter 15). Some of his fellow poets, such as Richard Barnfield, John Weever and William Basse, wrote about him (Chapter 16). We are lucky enough to know quite a lot about the Mountjoy family (Chapter 14), with whom Shakespeare lodged, becoming closely involved in their domestic affairs. Both the literary and the theatrical professions thrived on patronage. The evidence of the dedications to Shakespeare's narrative poems suggests

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that his relationship with the Earl of Southampton (Chapter 21) rapidly developed from formality to a close and loving intimacy.

We have restricted the subjects of this book almost entirely to persons for whose relationship with Shakespeare we have documentary evidence or with whom we can assume he had a close relationship, either personally or professionally. But the Shakespeare circle can always be widened. He knew composers, some of whom worked for his company, such as Thomas Morley, a near neighbour in London, Robert Johnson, who composed music for *The Tempest*, and John Dowland. He surely heard John Donne preach, and attendance at Court would have brought him into contact with a broad spectrum of Londoners from members of the royal family and the aristocracy through court officials such as Edmund Tilney, the Master of the Revels, to musicians, artisans and many other kinds of practitioners. Did he attend Edmund Spenser's funeral or see Essex's troops ride out on their way to the Irish wars (as Simon Forman did)? He certainly would have known other playwrights, poets and writers including Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, John Marston, Thomas Nashe, Edmund Spenser and John Webster. Some of these would no doubt have been among his regular companions and associates. Together they form a litany of names that it becomes all too easy to imagine surrounding him as drinking companions in the Mermaid Tavern.

In the diary of the lawyer, John Manningham, we find the only surviving anecdote about Shakespeare's personal life:

Upon a time when Burbage played Richard the Third there was a citizen grew so far in liking with him, that before she went from the play she appointed him to come that night unto her by the name of Richard the Third. Shakespeare, over-hearing their conclusion, went before, was entertained and at his game ere Burbage came. Then, message being brought that Richard the Third was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third. (Schoenbaum 1975, p. 152)

Manningham's anecdote provides just the kind of insight which Shakespearian biography abundantly lacks: personally inflected and sensational, the account sounds as plausible today as it no doubt did 400 years ago. But Manningham seems to be writing at second-hand; it has a 'once upon a time' feeling to it. His contribution to Shakespearian biography is primarily to illustrate the kind of celebrity reputation Shakespeare had

among trainee lawyers and the Inns of Court. Whilst Manningham's story is important, it does not warrant him a place among Shakespeare's intimates.

Much closer to home are all the other members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (from 1594), later the King's Men (from 1603) who worked and acted alongside Shakespeare, for whom he was writing the parts in his plays, and whose names appear in what has long seemed like a roll call of honour at the front of the First Folio of 1623. Among these were his co-shareholders of these companies, along with the Globe and Blackfriars playhouses, men whom he trusted, respected and with whom he shared a passion for business. They all have ample qualification to be included in the Shakespeare circle but we have had to limit our attention to the major candidates. Augustine Phillips, for instance, was a loyal business colleague and fellow actor who left Shakespeare a legacy of a 30-shilling gold piece. It was Phillips who, in 1601, testified before the Privy Council about the Lord Chamberlain's Men's performance of *Richard II* on the eve of the ill-fated uprising led by the Earl of Essex.

We have been reminded in preparing this volume that biography, in its quest to tell the truth, articulates at the same time its own sense of longing, which makes itself felt, in part, through speculation. We have encouraged that longing to know as much as possible about Shakespeare's life among our contributors. Without wanting this book to be full of expressions such as 'he must have' and 'there can be little doubt that', we have not discouraged our contributors from going beyond narrowly documented evidence, relying on their familiarity with Shakespeare's life and times to exercise their imaginations in the attempt to illuminate obscure areas of his existence and experience. Some of them offer revisionist views. David Fallow, for instance, provides a fresh but reasoned perspective on John Shakespeare's career which has major implications for the sources of William's wealth; and Alan H. Nelson does not shrink from speculation about his sexuality. We have not attempted to impose uniformity on the volume, but present it as a collection of authoritatively engaged voices – some of whom are primarily historians, others literary scholars – who do not always agree, but who have been willing to think afresh about the lives that touched Shakespeare's most closely, as well as the kinds of experience those lives represent within the culture of the period.

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All biographical discourse overlaps to a greater or lesser extent with fiction. Virginia Woolf explores the playfulness as well as the limits of biography in two novels. *Jacob's Room* (1922) is ostensibly about Jacob Flanders except that he never actually appears. Instead, the reader is presented with a series of impressions; the true subject, the heart of the matter, is tantalisingly deferred, refracted. In *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Woolf teases the reader three times with the possible appearance of Shakespeare, whose name can be found in the index. On all three occasions, mention is made of his 'dirty ruff' and in the first two encounters he is described as being 'rather fat' (Woolf 1992, pp. 8 and 47). Here is his first appearance, a poet in the throes of composition, his eyes in what Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* describes as 'a fine frenzy rolling' (5.1.12):

He held a pen in his hand, but he was not writing. He seemed in the act of rolling some thought up and down, to and fro in his mind till it gathered shape or momentum to his liking. His eyes, globed and clouded like some green stone of curious texture, were fixed. He did not see Orlando. For all his hurry, Orlando stopped dead. Was this a poet? Was he writing poetry? 'Tell me', he wanted to say, 'everything in the whole world' – for he had the wildest, most absurd, extravagant ideas about poetry – but how to speak to a man who does not see you? Who sees ogres, satyrs, perhaps the depths of the sea instead? So Orlando stood gazing while the man turned his pen in his fingers, this way and that way, and gazed and mused; and then, very quickly, wrote half-a-dozen lines and looked up. (Woolf 1992, p. 8)

He remains anonymous until the third encounter, a memory, towards the end of the novel:

He sat at Twitchett's table . . . with a dirty ruff on . . . Was it old Mr Baker come to measure the timber? Or was it Sh-p-re? (for when we speak names we deeply reverence to ourselves we never speak them whole). (Woolf 1992, p. 204)

Little wonder that when Woolf visited Stratford-upon-Avon in search of Shakespeare on 9 May 1934 she described her visit to New Place in the following terms:

everything seemed to say, this was Shakespeare's, had [here?] he sat and walked; but you won't find me, not exactly in the flesh. He is serenely absent-present; both at once, radiating round one; yes; in the flowers, in the old hall, in the garden; but never to be pinned down. (Woolf 1978, pp. 264–5)

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This is very much the spirit of the essays we have gathered to help form our sense of the Shakespeare circle. By trying to look their subjects in the eyes, we hope that our contributors have found something of Shakespeare, reflected – or perhaps refracted – back to them. It is our hope that the sum total of these biographical studies will enable you to think about Shakespeare from a range of different perspectives, ‘serenely absent-present’, but a presence which nevertheless haunts and moves across each and every one of these ensuing pages.

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PART I



Family

The closest members of the Shakespeare circle are his family. This section covers four generations. Starting with his mother, Mary Arden, the youngest of eight children, we are reminded by Michael Wood of a ‘shift in wealth, education and opportunity which marked the later Tudor age’. It was Shakespeare’s family who first stimulated his imagination and creativity by introducing him to the rhymes and folk tales of oral tradition. Helen Cooper, an authority on the late medieval influence on Shakespeare, has suggested to us that from his early years he knew tales such as those about Robin Hood and King Arthur as well as the romances of Guy of Warwick (all of which were widely disseminated orally and readily available through inexpensive editions). The presence of casual allusions to many of these tales in plays written much later in life – Edgar disguised as Poor Tom in *King Lear*, for example, alludes to the romances of Bevis of Hampton – suggests that they were deeply embedded in his imagination.

The medieval imagination was inextricably linked with the old faith, inevitably represented to Shakespeare by his parents. The Church of England, established during their formative years, was Catholic in the broadest sense of the term. The three Catholic creeds, along with ‘The Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary’ (‘the Magnificat’) and ‘The Song of the Three’ (‘the Benedicite’), were printed in its foundational text, the Book of Common Prayer, first printed in 1549. It was always intended to be a broad church – one which was catholic and reformed and could accommodate a wide-range of spiritual and religious beliefs among those who were happy outwardly to conform. Overall Shakespeare and his family, like most other people of their time, seem to have done just that.

An interpretative clash in this section concerns John Shakespeare. David Fallow’s revisionist view of the later part of his life and career finds a life of impressive prosperity deriving from his involvement with the thriving wool industry, whereas Michael Wood accepts the more traditional view

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that his withdrawal from his civic duties reflects a decline in his economic fortunes. In marrying into the Ardens, John Shakespeare allied himself with a junior branch of a prosperous land-owning family of good pedigree. William was also to marry into a farming family. He married young and in a hurry when he was just eighteen (the average age for men in Stratford-upon-Avon to marry was twenty-six), and his already pregnant bride was eight years his senior. Fallow plausibly suggests that he first went to London to further his father's business interests and only later became involved with the rising theatrical scene. Catherine Richardson points out that Shakespeare seems to have taken an almost paternal interest in his sixteen-year younger brother, Edmund, who followed him to London and became an actor.

Shakespeare's accrual of wealth by 1594 (when he was able to co-found and purchase shares in the Lord Chamberlain's Men) meant that all of his family members could have a roof over their heads. As Tara Hamling points out, there were rooms enough in New Place even for a lodger, Thomas Greene, Shakespeare's putative cousin. Evidence of the closeness of the Shakespeares is provided by the fact that his sister Joan Hart and her family lived in part of their late father's house which Shakespeare inherited in 1601. In writing about his wife, Anne Shakespeare, Katherine Scheil uses evidence from the 2010–13 archaeological investigations at New Place to demonstrate the lifestyle enjoyed in Shakespeare's family home, so substantial and handsome a house that it is reasonable to suppose that Shakespeare would have wished to spend as much time there as his professional commitments would permit.

The inheritor of New Place, Shakespeare's elder daughter Susanna, was brought up there, moved out on her marriage to the physician John Hall, and moved back from 1616 until her death in 1649. Greg Wells mentions what may be John Hall's first encounter with the Shakespeare family. William Covell, who refers to 'sweet Shakespeare' in his 1595 book *Polimanteia, or, the meanes lawfull and unlawful, to judge of the fall of a commonwealth*, was the signatory of Hall's Bachelor of Arts degree. There is a striking contrast between Shakespeare and his two sons-in-law. Thomas Quiney disappointed family hopes with his scandalous behaviour around the time of his marriage to Judith. This is reflected in changes to Shakespeare's will, which survives only in a revised draft. Although little is known about Shakespeare's younger daughter, Germaine