

PART I

Establishing Anne



Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41669-6 — Imagining Shakespeare's Wife
Katherine West Scheil
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

I

ORIGINS

ANNE HATHAWAY COULD SOLVE MANY MYSTERIES ABOUT SHAKESPEARE. She could tell us how he got his start as a playwright, how he negotiated work and family, how he grieved for the death of his only son, how he died, and whether or not he was a closet Catholic. She could reveal where he wrote his plays, if he was a family man dutifully traveling back to Stratford, or if he heartlessly abandoned his wife and children to seek fame and fortune. She could also tell us why her name is on their marriage bond, while the name “Anne Whateley” is on the marriage license. She could divulge what the term “second best bed” in Shakespeare’s will really meant – whether she was devastated to learn that this was her only bequest, as she is in Vern Thiessen’s play *Shakespeare’s Will* (2005), or if it was a term of endearment, a private shared sign of intimacy preserved forever. Likewise, Anne Hathaway could disclose what the woman was like who was married for 34 years to the man who became the world’s most famous poet – was she witty, quiet, affectionate, angry, supportive, vengeful, inspirational, or forgettable?

The questions that remain about Shakespeare’s famous and elusive wife highlight the biographical problems that have accumulated about Shakespeare over the last several centuries. In turn, the answers that biographers, novelists, critics, playwrights, and others have put forward to answer those questions uncover much about the persons involved, and about the “Shakespeare” that they seek to construct through depictions of his wife.

Even though there are hundreds of portrayals of Anne Hathaway, details of her life are fragmentary and elusive. Many are less certain than one might think, and these openings have led to assumptions about Shakespeare’s wife that fit with the desires of readers, audiences, and tourists for particular Shakespeares, but that obscure other equally plausible narratives. Gaps in the historical record have opened up opportunities for imaginative portrayals

and reconstructions of Shakespeare's wife, as readers and audiences have filled in the absences in order to create various Annes that can reflect particular conceptions of Shakespeare – a faithful married man, a libertine, a philanderer who abandoned his wife and children for another life in London, or a sham who exists only as a front for his wife's literary achievements.

This chapter sets out factual evidence about Anne's life, which the remainder of the book explores, to show how these details have been reshaped, reanimated, selectively neglected, and embellished to produce imaginative constructions of her for centuries. The few facts that survive about Anne – her age, family home, bequest in Shakespeare's will, children, etc. – have been manipulated to construct a relationship between Shakespeare and his wife, about which there is otherwise little documentation. Likewise, evidence about Anne has been read back into Shakespeare's literary works to appease the insatiable desire to discover what Shakespeare *really* felt about women, based on the one intimate relationship we *know* he had with a *real* woman: his wife. Through Anne Hathaway, dozens of authors and readers have created an imaginary through-line to the poet's supposed innermost thoughts, desires, habits, and actions, in hopes of unlocking the secrets of his literary achievements. As a result, in the nearly 400 years since her death, Anne Hathaway has enjoyed a vigorous afterlife in the imaginations of authors and readers worldwide.

Family

The information that survives about the Hathaway family is surprisingly extensive. Anne Hathaway came from a family of long-standing residents, both before and after Shakespeare's time, of the village of Shottery just outside Stratford-upon-Avon, and her life was circumscribed by local history and events. Anne Hathaway's Cottage (discussed in Chapter 3), one of the centerpiece Shakespeare Birthplace Trust properties, still exists in much the same manner as it did in her lifetime. It was previously known as Hewlands, the Hathaway family farm dating back to the sixteenth century, estimated at between fifty and ninety acres.¹ Anne's grandfather John Hathaway was a tenant of Hewlands Farm as early as 1543, and held a number of leadership roles in the community.²

While the Hathaway family name is the one that has endured, in numerous historical records it appears as "Hathaway alias Gardner," or even just "Gardner," probably denoting their occupation or profession. Anne's father and several of her siblings were listed as "Hathaway alias

Gardner” in parish records, and it is likely that the family would have been identified as Gardners just as much as Hathaways until the end of the sixteenth century.³

Anne’s father Richard (d. 1581) was a tenant on Hewlands, and the property was not owned by the Hathaways until Anne’s brother Bartholomew purchased it in 1610. It is likely that Anne lived at Hewlands until her marriage to Shakespeare in 1582, but no surviving evidence confirms this. Richard Hathaway was a Shottery yeoman farmer who seemed well-connected in his community, as the relationship between the Hathaways and the neighboring Burman family attests. Burman’s Farm was next to the Hathaway family farm in Shottery and would much later be developed into an auxiliary attraction for visiting tourists in the 1930s.⁴ Stephen Burman was executor of Richard Hathaway’s will (along with Fulk Sandells, whose name appears on Shakespeare’s marriage bond), and Richard Burman served as a witness to the will. An early nineteenth-century account of the inscriptions on the floor of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford lists numerous Hathaways and Burmans in the eighteenth century, buried together in the same section, which may suggest a close, long-term relationship.⁵ Other members of the Burman family had connections with both the Hathaways and the Shakespeares; Stephen Burman was executor to Anne’s brother Bartholomew Hathaway’s will, along with Shakespeare’s son-in-law John Hall. A later Richard Burman owed money to Thomas Nash, the husband of Elizabeth, Shakespeare’s granddaughter. The impressive memorial tablet in Holy Trinity Church attests to the influence that the Burman family had in Stratford and Shottery for over 300 years, and their many links to the Hathaways and to the Shakespeares suggest that all three families were closely knit and were influential in the larger community of Stratford.⁶

The connections between the Hathaways and the Shakespeares both before and after the marriage of their two famous family members underline the fact that the union of Anne and William was a match between two families with long-standing relationships. According to C. J. Sisson, “there is a marked tendency, especially among the more imaginative writers upon Shakespeare’s life, to represent Anne as a yokel daughter of a peasant father, and the marriage as a *mésalliance* for the son of a prominent Stratford burgess,” but Sisson points out that Richard Hathaway’s “influence was potent in local affairs at Shottery” and he was “a man of substance” in the community.⁷ John Shakespeare paid some of Richard Hathaway’s debts as early as 1566, and they likely were close friends; the marriage of Anne and William in 1582 may have even been arranged before Richard Hathaway died the year before.⁸

Anne was one of ten children, born in 1555 or 1556, if the inscription on her grave is correct (it says she died at the age of 67 years in August of 1623). There is some speculation that Richard Hathaway may have married twice, though if so, the name of a first wife does not survive.⁹ His wife Joan, named in his will, outlived him by fifteen years, dying in 1599. No details remain about Joan's relationship with Anne, although it is likely that Anne lived with her at Hewlands until her marriage in 1582.¹⁰ Though no evidence survives about Anne's relationship with her father, (step)mother, or siblings, knowing Anne's family situation at the time she met William Shakespeare might determine whether she was desperate, reluctant, or eager to marry.

Little information survives about most of Anne's siblings, except for her brother Bartholomew, who purchased Hewlands in 1610; Shakespeare's lawyer Francis Collins drew up the deed.¹¹ In Richard Hathaway's will, he instructs his son Bartholomew to "be a guyde to my saide wife in hir husbandrie" and "also a Comforte vnto his Bretherne and Systers to his power."¹² Like his sister Anne, Bartholomew also married in November of 1582, and both marriages had an uncanny similarity in their timing. His wife Isabella Hancocks of Treadington died in 1617, the year after Shakespeare. Bartholomew and Isabella had five children: a daughter (coincidentally?) named Anne in 1584, an unnamed infant who died in 1588, and three sons: Richard (1583–1636), John (born 1586) and Edmund (1590–1648).¹³ Though he farmed for a year or so in nearby Tysoe in the 1580s, Bartholomew later remained active in Stratford civic life (serving as a churchwarden for Holy Trinity Church from 1605–1609, for example), until his death in 1624, a year after his sister.

Bartholomew and Isabella's eldest son Richard was the one most likely to be close to the Shakespeares in Stratford, since he became a baker at the Crown in Bridge Street, just around the corner from William and Anne's final home of New Place, and he held several positions in Stratford civic life.¹⁴ In 1623, he supplied bread for seven communions, including one on 3 August that year, just a few days before his aunt Anne died.¹⁵ Anne's brother William may have had a more complicated relationship with her family. In 1619 he was involved in an anti-Puritan riot over removal of a maypole in Stratford, sanctioned by the new Puritan vicar Thomas Wilson.¹⁶ Though Wilson was not well liked, his "most passionate adherent" was Susanna Shakespeare's husband John Hall, which may have caused conflict with Susanna's uncle William Hathaway, who protested the new vicar's practices.¹⁷

Further links between the Hathaways and the Shakespeares extended well into the eighteenth century. Shakespeare's son-in-law John Hall was the

executor of Shakespeare's will as well as Bartholomew Hathaway's will in 1624.¹⁸ Hall was also a trustee in the marriage settlement of Bartholomew Hathaway's granddaughter Isabel in 1625, daughter of Richard Hathaway of Bridge Street.¹⁹ Richard Hathaway and his cousin Susanna (John Hall's wife) were both born in 1583, so the fact that Susanna's husband had a role in the marriage of Richard's daughter comes as no surprise.

In 1647, Anne's cousin Thomas Hathaway owned the house at No. 20 Chapel Street, just a few doors away from New Place (No. 23 Chapel Street).²⁰ That same year, members of the Hathaway family appear in a 1647 resettlement, undertaken by Elizabeth Nash and her mother Susanna Hall to prevent Thomas Nash's estate from going to his kinsman Edward. Two cousins of Anne, William Hathaway of Weston-upon-Avon, yeoman, and Thomas Hathaway of Stratford-upon-Avon, joiner, were parties to the resettlement; both signed and sealed the document as well.²¹ In her will, Anne's granddaughter Elizabeth Nash Barnard also mentions the Hathaway family cousins, giving "Judith Hathaway, one of the daughters of my kinsman Thomas Hathaway late of Stratford aforesaid," £5 twice a year, and £50 to Joan Hathaway Kent, wife of Edward Kent, as well as £40 to the three other daughters of Thomas Hathaway (Rose, Elizabeth, and Susanna).²² A later Hathaway cousin, Edmund Hathaway, relied on Shakespeare Hart, a grandson of William Shakespeare's sister Joan, as a trustee for his will in 1729.²³

The long-running associations between the Shakespeares and the Hathaways were further enriched as the tourist trade developed in Stratford. When Samuel Ireland visited Shottery in 1793, he commented that the Hathaway cottage "is still occupied by the descendants of her family, who are poor and numerous." The Harts were apparently in similar dire financial straits in the eighteenth century.²⁴ Ireland was referred to the "humble" cottage by a "Mr. Harte, of Stratford," who suggested that an oak chair and purse in his possession had been "handed down from [Shakespeare] to his grand-daughter Lady Barnard, and from her through the Hathaway family to those of the present day." This would have been Thomas Hart (c. 1729–1794), son of George Hart, a descendant of Shakespeare's sister Joan, who lived in the Birthplace on Henley Street. Even several generations after the death of Anne in 1623, descendants of both families collaborated to take advantage of the tourism income from their famous relatives, as the next chapters will show. Thomas Hart certainly capitalized on the fame of the family; he was "known to have sold numerous chairs" as relics of Shakespeare.²⁵ In sum, the historical Anne Hathaway and her family had a long association with

the Shakespeares, and their marriage was part of the well-established relationship between two families.

One additional surviving document related to Anne, the will of Hathaway family shepherd Thomas Whittington, confirms several facts about her. First, while more than one Hathaway family lived in Shotton around the time of Anne, Whittington makes clear that Anne was descended from the family of Richard Hathaway, since Anne's father Richard mentions Whittington in his will. In turn, Whittington's 1602 will leaves money to the poor, which he entrusted "in the hand of Anne Shaxspere, wyf unto M^r Wyllyam Shaxspere."²⁶ The fact that the Hathaway family shepherd singled out Anne as the recipient of his funds, rather than another family member like her brother Bartholomew, suggests that she was an esteemed and respected member of her family, and one who could be responsible for the financial bequests of others.

Marriage

Although Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway was not only typical for his day, but was also a good match for the poet, the inconsistencies in the historical records have inspired much speculation.²⁷ In November of 1582 the marriage license obtained from the Bishop of Worcester, "inter Willelmum Shaxpere et Annam Whateley de Temple grafon," gave permission for William and Anne to wed with only one asking of the banns instead of the customary three. The marriage bond for £40 from 28 November was backed by family friends Fulk Sandells and John Richardson, for a marriage between "William Shagspere" and "Anne hathwey of Stratford in the Dioces of Worcester maiden." No one knows why two different names appear on these documents (Anna Whateley and Anne Hathaway), or why two different locations are mentioned (Temple Grafton and Stratford). It is possible that Anne was then living at Temple Grafton, though records of that village do not survive. Most likely, as Samuel Schoenbaum puts it, the Worcester clerk was "fairly incompetent – careless at least – for he got a number of names wrong in the Register."²⁸ Both Fulk Sandells and John Richardson were Shotton husbandmen; Sandells was described as a "trustie friend and neighbor" in Richard Hathaway's will, and he also was a supervisor of the will.²⁹ After their marriage, the Shakespeares would likely have lived with William's family in the house on Henley Street, though no evidence confirms this.

William and Anne were the parents of three children, but the nature of their family life remains a mystery. The birth of Susanna Shakespeare in May

of 1583, a mere six months after their marriage and thus conceived beforehand, and the subsequent birth of twins Hamnet and Judith two years later, are the clearest testament to Anne's legacy as a mother, memorialized in the epitaph on her grave (discussed later in this chapter). It is unclear why the Shakespeares did not have additional children after the twins, perhaps due to Anne's physical condition after the birth of twins, or due to the long-distance relationship between the Shakespeares.³⁰ Other women of the Shakespeare family were not especially prolific either; Susanna Shakespeare Hall, who by all accounts lived with her husband in Stratford for all of their married life (as opposed to her mother's situation), only had one daughter, Elizabeth, who even though she was married twice, never had any children. Daughter Judith Shakespeare Quiney had three sons, but none lived to adulthood. According to Jeanne Jones's study of Stratford residents, "the favoured family sizes were three, four or six," making the Shakespeares well within the norm.³¹ As subsequent sections of this book will show (particularly Chapter 5), the fact that daughter Susanna was conceived out of wedlock, sometime in the late summer/early fall of 1582 but well before their November wedding, has incited substantial speculation about the possible circumstances and scenarios.

Home

In 1597, Shakespeare purchased New Place, the second largest house in Stratford, and this would have remained Anne's home until the end of her life in 1623. George Vertue describes New Place in 1737 as "where [Shakespeare] livd and dyed with his wife after him 1623."³² The community at New Place, likely with Anne in a prominent role, may have influenced Shakespeare's works in ways that have yet to be explored. "New Place was his writer's base, as well as his gentleman's family home," write Paul Edmondson, Kevin Colls, and William Mitchell.³³

Exactly who lived at New Place during Anne's life is uncertain, though the size of the house, with ten chimneys and twenty to thirty rooms, suggests a large household. The Shakespeare family home on Henley Street may have been damaged by fire in 1594–1595, and there is evidence that by April of 1602 it had already become a tavern. Robert Bearman attests that Shakespeare's "shrewd and opportunistic" purchase of New Place in 1597, shortly after the fires in Stratford of 1594–1595, may have been "an effort by a man conscious of family obligations to provide a suitable home for his dependents in the wake of misfortune."³⁴ Shakespeare's father John could have lived at New Place from 1597 until his death in 1601; his mother Mary

Arden until her death in 1608; and Shakespeare's brothers Gilbert and Richard until their deaths in 1612 and 1613, respectively.³⁵ Hall's Croft was not built before 1613, so it is likely that Susanna and John Hall lived in New Place from their marriage in 1607, during daughter Elizabeth's birth in 1608, and probably from 1616 onward, after Shakespeare's death. Judith Shakespeare may have lived there until her marriage to Thomas Quiney in 1616. Thus, there could have been a relatively large Shakespeare circle at New Place from the start of Shakespeare's ownership. In addition to the extended Shakespeare family, New Place was also the home for Stratford town clerk Thomas Greene and his wife Lettice, at least in 1609 but probably longer, and possibly as early as 1603.³⁶

The area around New Place included an extensive female community during Anne's lifetime. In addition to several neighbor widows, Shakespeare's sister Joan Hart had also become a widow in 1616, a few weeks before Anne.³⁷ No details survive about their relationship, but Shakespeare makes a point to provide for Joan in his will, which suggests a close connection between the siblings.³⁸ Daughter Susanna Hall may have even taken on a supervisory role there, since she and her husband John Hall were the executors to Shakespeare's will. In 1614, a visiting clergyman was entertained at New Place, and was provided with "one quart of sack and one quart of clarett winne given to a preacher at the Newe Place."³⁹ After the death of John Hall in 1635, Susanna lived in New Place with her daughter Elizabeth and son-in-law Thomas Nash, so there may have been something of a family tradition of mothers and daughters at New Place.⁴⁰

There is no evidence that any members of the extended Hathaway family lived in New Place, though the families must have remained close, since Susanna's husband John Hall was involved with the Hathaways until his death in 1635. As a physician, it is likely that Hall treated members of the Hathaway family, as he often traveled to Shottery, though no references to family members (other than his wife and daughter) survive in his casebook. Hall was known for treating extended family members, particularly women, but he may not have felt that the Hathaway family cases were medically significant enough to document.⁴¹

It is unclear what role Shakespeare himself played in the New Place household and its activities, though Paul Edmondson has argued that "New Place was too fine a house for Shakespeare to have been most of his time away from it."⁴² Archaeological discoveries at New Place corroborate the affluent lifestyle of the occupants during Shakespeare's lifetime: pig bones from animals slaughtered before maturity probably derive from suckling pig prepared for a special feast; and venison was associated with the well-off.