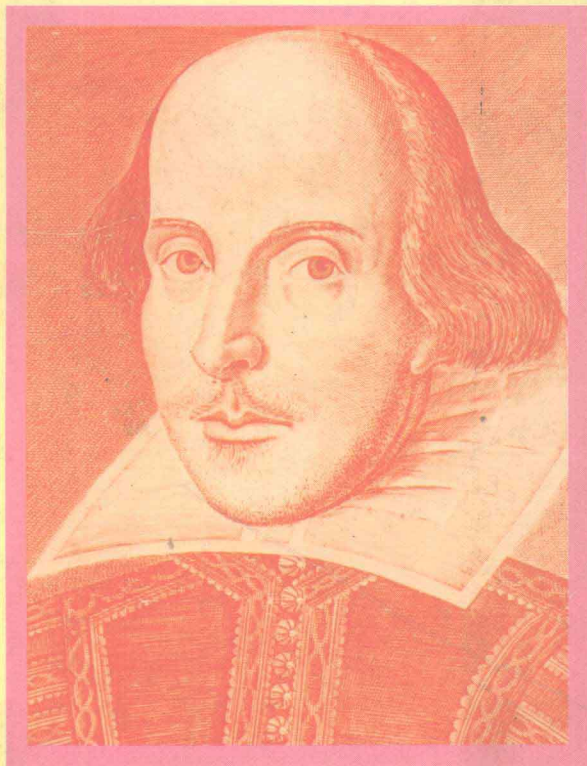


SHAKESPEARE

Germaine Greer



PAST MASTERS

Germaine Greer

Shakespeare

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To Gay Clifford

Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
Making it momentary as a sound,
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
And, ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!',
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.

(*Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1. i. 141-9)

All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the Methuen New Arden edition.

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1 Life

The notices of the life and career of England's greatest poet are not only sparse and brief, but unusually cryptic. If ever their meaning was precisely understood it is so no longer. All attempts to break the unselfconscious code have failed. The name, Shakespeare, in one form or another, was a common one in sixteenth-century Warwickshire. The poet was probably the grandson of Richard Shakespeare, a husbandman of Snitterfield, a hamlet four miles to the north of Stratford. It is assumed that the 'Johannem Shakesper de Snytterfyld . . . agricolam' who was named administrator of his father's estate in 1561 is the same John Shakespeare who already figures in the records as having been fined for keeping a dung-heap in front of his house in Henley Street in 1552 (the house that is still revered as the Birthplace) and who in a suit of 1556 is described as a Glover.

When Richard Arden, Richard Shakespeare's Snitterfield landlord, drew up his will in 1556, his youngest daughter Mary was still single. In 1558, her first child by John Shakespeare was baptized in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford. There her third child was christened, on 26 April 1564, 'Gulielmus filius Johannes Shakespeare'. From that day nothing is heard of him for more than eighteen years.

John Shakespeare prospered. Although illiterate, he was named one of the chief burgesses, then chamberlain, then alderman in 1565, and finally High Bailiff in 1568. We know from allusions in the plays that Shakespeare must have had at least a grammar-school education, and we assume that as the son of an alderman, and therefore entitled to education free of charge, he must have attended the Stratford grammar school, but the school archives for

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the period have not survived. From 1578 onwards, John Shakespeare began to find himself in financial difficulties. In 1586, after ten years of absence from council meetings, his name was finally struck off the list of aldermen.

On 27 November 1582, the clerk noted in the Episcopal Register of the Diocese of Worcester the application for a special marriage licence 'inter Willelmum Shaxpere et Annam Whateley de Temple Grafton'. The bond posted the next day clearly identifies the groom as William Shagspere and the bride as Anne Hathwey of Stratford. Even in so straightforward a business, Shakespeare has left an unusually puzzling trail which would lead some scholars off on a wild goose chase for 'the other woman'; nowadays the discrepancy is usually taken to be merely the result of a scribal error. From the brass marker on Ann Hathaway's grave, which gives her age as sixty-seven when she died in 1623, we know that in 1582 she must have been about twenty-six. The special licence was required for a number of reasons: the groom was a minor, the penitential season of Advent when marriages might not be solemnized was only five days away, Ann's father was dead, and she was pregnant. Of all of these circumstances the most unusual is William's age: he was not yet nineteen.

Six months later the Shakespeares' first child, Susanna, was baptized, on 26 May 1583. On 2 February 1585 her brother and sister, the twins Hamnet and Judith, were baptized. Eleven years later the parish register records the burial of the poet's only son.

The years following the baptism of his children and preceding Shakespeare's emergence as a figure in the theatrical world of London are called the 'lost' years. Theories abound: Shakespeare might have worked as a schoolmaster, have trained for the law, have gone for a soldier, have travelled in Europe in the train of some great man, have been arrested for stealing deer and fled to London. The next clear mention of him is hardly

auspicious. As Robert Greene, decayed scholar-playwright, lay dying of his own excesses, filthy, verminous and destitute, in a borrowed bed, he penned a last pamphlet, *Greenes Groatesworth of Wit bought with a Million of Repentance* (1592). In it he apostrophized his fellow university wits, Marlowe, Nashe, and Peele:

. . . there is an Upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tiger's heart wrapt in a player's hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the rest of you; and being an absolute *Johannes Fac Totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shakescene in a country.

From Greene's twisted version of a line from *Henry VI Part I*, we know not only that the Henry VI plays must have been performed by this time, but also that they must have had a certain success. Shakespeare is clearly the person referred to, but what is not clear is the nature of the offence of which he is being accused. As an actor reciting lines written by the university men, Shakespeare could not have merited such a venomous attack. If Greene is using the image of the crow as Horace does in his third epistle, which Greene and his fellow-graduates must have known well, then he is accusing Shakespeare of passing off the work of others as his own.

Greene died before anyone could find out exactly what he meant. Nashe dissociated himself from such 'a scald, trivial, lying pamphlet'. Shakespeare evidently took the trouble to speak to Henry Chettle, who had prepared the fair copy of Greene's work for the publisher, and Chettle apologized handsomely to him in the preface to his own *Kind-Heart's Dream* published a few months later.

I am as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault, because myself have seen his demeanour no less civil

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than he excellent in the quality he professes. Besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art.

Clearly Chettle had understood the accusation to be one of plagiarism, but as a refutation his words leave something to be desired. We learn that Shakespeare had refined and agreeable manners and upper-class friends who were prepared to take his part, together with a certain literary talent. There is no good reason for supposing sixteenth-century commercial theatre to be any less protean than that of the twentieth century, where plays are not so much written as rewritten in performance. As a successful actor, Shakespeare may well have turned to the university wits for additional material and felt perfectly free to revise what they provided in production. The copying out of plays was a laborious business; usually the actors' parts were written out with their cues, while the stage-manager worked from a 'platt' listing cue lines and exits and entrances. There can seldom have been an entire copy to spare for a publisher, and besides, the players' companies reckoned their play-books among their chief assets. Many plays were never published, and many were published anonymously. Few were ascribed to single authors, unless the authors were particularly well known, in which case their names appeared on plays they had nothing to do with.

Thomas Heywood claimed to have worked on at least two hundred and twenty plays, many of which, he said, 'by shifting and change of the companies have been negligently lost'. Henry Chettle wrote thirteen plays of which one survives, and collaborated on thirty-six others, of which four have survived. If Shakespeare, as is thought, collaborated with Heywood, Dekker, Munday, and Chettle on *The Book of Sir Thomas More* at some time in the 1590s it is not far-fetched to assume that all four, and perhaps

others whose names have perished, were at some time called upon to provide material for him. The only serious contender for the title of Shakespeare's collaborator is John Fletcher, whose hand is detected on internal stylistic grounds in *Henry VIII*, who is named as co-author of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* on the title-page of the 1634 quarto, and again as co-author with Shakespeare of a lost play *Cardenio* in the Stationers' Register (1653). The evidence is far from conclusive, but if conclusive proof of collaboration should be found, it would not invalidate Shakespeare's claim to be the greatest playwright in the English language however much consternation it might cause to bardolators who have always sought to elevate him to the lonely eminence of prodigious originality. His strength is very much the strength of his time and his milieu; although he transformed everything he found and the greatness of that transformation cannot be exaggerated, the culture of his contemporaries afforded him some remarkable resources. Centuries of the most diligent sifting have not produced a play or any part of a play in his own hand, unless we count the additions to *The Book of Sir Thomas More*.

An essential aspect of the mind and art of Shakespeare, then, is his lack of self-consciousness. Nothing but a complete lack of interest in self-promotion, from which the careful publication of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* are the only aberrations, can explain Shakespeare's invisibility. The lives of lesser men and women, insignificant members of his own family, the actors he worked with, the politicians and courtiers he knew or might have known, have all been scrutinized minutely, their every action tracked to find the spoor of the Bard, but they have yielded all but that.

The years 1591-4 were marked by outbreaks of plague which gathered to a head in the summer of 1592. 'For the avoiding of concourse of people whereby the infection of

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pestilence might have increased' in London, the Bartholomew Fair which fell on 24 August was cancelled and the theatres closed down. Shakespeare turned his hand to more literary endeavours; in April 1593, *Venus and Adonis* was entered in the Stationers' Register, and in June, Richard Field, a Stratford man, published it. Its dutiful dedication to the young Earl of Southampton was signed with the poet's full name. A year later, *The Rape of Lucrece* appeared, again with a signed dedicatory epistle to Southampton, couched in terms which might be thought to indicate a growing intimacy. 'What I have done is yours, what I have to do is yours, being part in all I have, devoted, yours.'

Both poems enjoyed considerable popularity, if the number of subsequent editions is any guide. *Venus and Adonis* was reprinted eight times during Shakespeare's lifetime, and fourteen times altogether before the Interregnum, that is to say, more often even than the *Arcadia* or Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. *Lucrece* went through eight editions. We may infer from this that Shakespeare was well known as a poet: whether he was equally recognized as a playwright is another question.

We shall never know if Shakespeare was tempted by the prospect of life as Southampton's protégé, or, indeed, if the option was ever open to him. If the sonnets are any guide, he may have been passed over for someone more brilliant and congenial who was not repelled by the seamier side of Southampton's personality. Whatever the case, it seems that there was little or no suspension of his writing for the theatres. Before the Earl of Pembroke's company of players broke up in the summer of 1593, they had been playing plays by Shakespeare. The 1594 quarto of *Titus Andronicus* says that it had been played by Pembroke's Men and by the servants of the Earl of Derby, Lord Strange, also known as the Admiral's Men, whose play-lists show Shakespeare titles playing at the Theatre. The title-page of *Titus*

Andronicus claims that it had been played also by the Earl of Sussex's servants, who had apparently acquired the plays used by Pembroke's Men and staged them from December 1593 to February 1594. There is no mention of Shakespeare's name. Nor did his name appear on the quarto of *Henry VI Part II* when it appeared as *The First part of the Contention betwixt the two famous Houses of York and Lancaster* in 1594, nor on Part III which appeared as *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of York* the following year. Awareness of the authorship of plays was generally low, as might be expected when constant adaptation and collaboration were the rule, but in 1598, when the second quarto of *Richard III* was issued, it bore Shakespeare's name in full on the title-page. A second quarto of *Love's Labour's Lost*, issued to replace a bad quarto now lost, announced that it had been 'newly corrected and augmented by W. Shakespere'. A second quarto of *Richard II* also bore Shakespeare's name in full. We may perhaps infer that by 1598, Shakespeare's name was recognized by publishers as a selling-point. Even so Shakespeare's name did not appear on *Henry IV Part I* until its third publication in 1599. The second quarto of *Romeo and Juliet*, which appeared two years after the first in 1599, did not bear his name. The quartos of *Henry IV Part II*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, all published in 1600, all bore his name, but *Henry V*, published the same year, did not. Such seeming haphazardness is the rule in this period, when the name of the company who staged the play was a better selling-point than the name of the author.

Before he had any reputation as a playwright, Shakespeare evidently achieved some eminence as an actor, for we find him named as leader with Richard Burbage of a new company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, in the Declared Accounts of the Royal Chamber for 15 March 1595 when they collected a fee for a Christmas entertainment. In 1596, John Shakespeare was granted a coat of arms,

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presumably at the instance of his successful son. The next year William Shakespeare bought New Place, a fine old house built by Sir Hugh Clopton, the Stratford boy who had become Lord Mayor of London in 1491, and his family settled there. Thereafter, Shakespeare figures frequently in the Stratford records, as a prosperous citizen with valuable stores of scarce commodities and money to invest in land and houses. Not one of the contemporary references to him in the Stratford records makes any mention of his activity as either poet or playwright.

In 1598 we find Shakespeare's name at the head of the cast list for a performance of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* by the Lord Chamberlain's Men at the Curtain. The company was looking for a site to build a new theatre, the Globe, out of the timbers of the Theatre which had been torn down. A piece of land in Bankside was leased to them by the son of Sir Thomas Brend, whose post-mortem accounts name Shakespeare as the principal tenant. According to the lease, dated 21 February 1599, Shakespeare held one fifth of a half, the other half being shared between the Burbage brothers. After Will Kempe left the company to undertake his famous dance to Norwich, Shakespeare's share of the leasehold increased to a seventh. The records show him living in various bachelor lodgings in Bishopsgate, near the Shoreditch playhouses, in 1596, and later that year on the South Bank; in 1599 the tax records show him living in the Liberty of the Clink, near the Globe. Other players had settled their families in London, but Shakespeare preferred to invest in a great house in his home town, taking temporary accommodation close to his work. Rather than indicating a degree of estrangement from Ann Shakespeare, this arrangement implies that the Shakespeares had a mutual interest in running a big country establishment. Apart from the house itself, which needed considerable restoration, and the baking, brewing, distilling, and other manufacturing activities associated

with a large Elizabethan household, there were two barns and two gardens, one at least planted with grape vines. Over the years were added another cottage and garden, and 107 acres of arable land, farmed by tenants. Shakespeare's success in these dealings could not have come about without the intelligent co-operation of his wife.

In 1598 Shakespeare's reputation as poet, player, and playwright reached its zenith. In his *Poems in Divers Humours*, Richard Barnfield praised Shakespeare's 'honey-flowing vein', and in his *Palladis Tamia* of the same year, Francis Meres included 'A Comparative Discourse of our modern poets with the Greek, Latin and Italian Poets' in which he paid Shakespeare the highest compliment of which a university man might be supposed capable:

The sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugared sonnets among his private friends, &c. 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; for comedy witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love Labour's Lost*, his *Love Labour's Won*, his *Midsummer's Night Dream*, and his *Merchant of Venice*; for tragedy, his *Richard the Second*, *Richard the Third*, *Henry the Fourth*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus*, and his *Romeo and Juliet*.

If the compliment seems fulsome, it must be remembered that Meres has higher praise and more of it for Shakespeare's fellow Warwickshireman, Michael Drayton. Meres's comments are particularly valuable because they give us a *terminus ad quem* for twelve plays, one of which cannot now be identified, and for at least some of the sonnets which were circulating in manuscript. In 1599 William Jaggard, hungry to exploit the Shakespeare vogue, put together a collection of poems which he called *The*