

Richard Dutton

*William
Shakespeare*

A Literary Life



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For My Father
and to
the Memory of My Mother

Preface, with Suggestions for Further Reading

Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale,
Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man.
(*King John*, III.iv.108-9)

This is an account of Shakespeare's career as a dramatist and poet. Although it follows the contours of his life, it does not aim to be a biography in the conventional sense. There is nothing here about Shakespeare's antecedents and very little about his immediate family; nor do I have much to say, for instance, about his education, his property transactions and other legal dealings, or his relations with the Mountjoy family, with whom we know he lodged in Cripplegate in 1604. Anyone looking for a life of Shakespeare which incorporates such issues should go to S. Schoenbaum's masterly *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (Oxford, 1975) or the abridged version, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (Oxford, 1977, revised 1987). This must be regarded as our standard life of Shakespeare, though the popular biographies by J. Q. Adams (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1923) and A. L. Rowse (London, 1963) are also worth consulting. Professor Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford, 1970) is a fascinating (and, to any biographer, daunting) account of the transmission of myths and facts about Shakespeare through the ages. Indispensable for scholars is Sir E. K. Chambers' two-volume *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (Oxford, 1930), a synthesis of all the materials relating to Shakespeare's life and career. Also useful is G. E. Bentley's *Shakespeare: A Biographical Handbook* (New Haven, 1961). Among more specialised studies are Mark Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1961) and E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* (Manchester, 1985). The latter questions the orthodox view, represented by Chambers and Schoenbaum, of when and how Shakespeare's career began.

Sir E. K. Chambers' four-volume *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1923) is the starting-point for all modern study of Elizabethan (and early Jacobean) theatres and theatrical practices. Andrew Gurr's

The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642 (Cambridge, 1970; revised 1980) is a readable summation of Chambers' material and of scholarship relating to later Jacobean and Caroline theatre. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert edited *Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge, 1961), the most informative documents about the Elizabethan commercial theatre to have survived. J. L. Barroll, A. Leggatt, R. Hosley and A. Kernan, *The Revels History of Drama in English, III: 1576–1613* (London, 1975) is an authoritatively informed introduction to the theatrical period, G. E. Bentley's *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time, 1590–1642* (Princeton, 1971) and M. C. Bradbrook's *The Rise of the Common Player* (London, 1962) examine two major facets of the Elizabethan theatrical profession. John Orrell's *The Quest for Shakespeare's Globe* (Cambridge, 1983) is the most authoritative study of the theatre with which Shakespeare was most associated. Three volumes in Routledge and Kegan Paul's Theatre Production Studies series are illuminating about the staging of Shakespeare's plays at different phases in his career: Michael Hattaway's *Elizabethan Popular Theatre* (London, 1982); Peter Thomson's *Shakespeare's Theatre* (London, 1983) and Keith Sturges's *Jacobean Private Theatre* (London, 1987).

Accounts of Shakespeare's life-in-his-time include E. I. Fripp's *Shakespeare: Man and Artist*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1938, 1964), which is particularly strong on local Stratford detail; M. M. Reese, *Shakespeare: His World and His Work* (London, 1953; revised 1980); and M. C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare: the Poet in His World* (London, 1978). T. W. Baldwin exhaustively described the education he is likely to have received in *William Shakespeare's 'Small Latine & Lesse Greeke'*, 2 vols (Urbana, Illinois, 1944). The sources and analogues of Shakespeare's works have been collected in Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols (London, 1957–75), and further analysed in Kenneth Muir's *Shakespeare's Sources* (revised, London, 1977).

Many other works relating to Shakespeare's life and times are cited in my text and in the notes at the end of this book, but it is impossible to do justice to the sheer volume of material. Anyone wanting to pursue a particular topic relating to Shakespeare might usefully start with Stanley Wells (ed.) *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographical Guides* (Oxford, 1973, currently being revised), coming up to date with the annual bibliographies included in *Shakespeare Survey* (Cambridge) and *Shakespeare Quarterly* (Washington, DC). Other helpful starting-points would be Stanley Wells

(ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies* (Cambridge, 1986) or John F. Andrews (ed.) *William Shakespeare: His World, His Work, His Influence*, 3 vols (New York, 1985), both of which contain up-to-date bibliographical details on a topical basis.

I wish to record my own debt to all the works I have mentioned, particularly those by Chambers and Schoenbaum. Anyone writing about Shakespeare, of all subjects, has to be intensely aware of standing on so many other people's shoulders, some whose sturdiness it would be churlish not to acknowledge. My own small qualification for adding myself to the human pyramid, not to mention another volume to the immense pile of books, is that of having spent most of my academic career thinking and writing about Ben Jonson, the most challenging of Shakespeare's contemporary rivals but also the one who has suffered most from standing in his shadow. The history of Jonson criticism is littered with complaints (often backed by spurious accusations of envy and ingratitude) to the effect that he neither wrote like Shakespeare nor, which is worse, even tried to; it is still common enough, particularly in the classroom, to have to explain that this was not a crime or self-evidently a disqualification from genius. Nevertheless, this *can* open up fruitful ways of focusing on what is significant in Jonson's own achievement. So in this book I have tried to return the compliment. The silent question to which I keep returning is: why did Shakespeare not write, or try to write, like Jonson? Posed like this, it is a nonsense. Shakespeare led and Jonson followed, with the example of the older man to emulate or react against. But they were both professional dramatists, operating broadly within the same market-place. Why did Shakespeare work in modes and styles so different from those adopted by his younger rival? In asking the question I hope to isolate some of the qualities unique to his achievement and to offer new perspectives on a tale somewhat more than twice-told.

Quotations from Shakespeare's works refer to *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, general editor Alfred Harbage (revised, Baltimore, 1969). As with most editions of Shakespeare, the text has been modernised to meet the needs of students and general readers. I have followed suit with all other quotations, modernising even where my sources (notably Chambers in *The Elizabethan Stage* and *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* – respectively ES and WS in the notes) have preserved the original. So too, I

have given all dates in New Style, treating the year as starting on 1 January, though for the Elizabethans (at least in Court and legal circles) it began on 25 March. We lose the poignancy of Elizabeth dying on New Year's Eve 1602, as they would see it. Quotations from Jonson's poems, his *Conversations with William Drummond* and his common-place book, *Timber, or Discoveries*, all refer to the versions in George Parfitt (ed.) *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1975). To keep the notes within some kind of bounds I have not cited chapter-and-verse on all quotations from Shakespeare's contemporaries. Most of these come from prefaces, epistles and such-like items, brief and easily found in any modern edition, should the reader wish to follow them up.

I wish to thank Julia Steward for her initial enthusiasm in taking the Macmillan Literary Lives series on board, and Frances Arnold for steering the series, and this volume within it, to publication. Parts of what I say about *King Lear* in Chapter 8 appeared, in very different form, in *Literature and History* and I am grateful to the editors for permission to use the material again. Thanks finally to Maura, Katie and Claire, who must often have felt that they had lost me to a word-processor over the last few months.

Richard Dutton
1988

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1

Myths, Legends and Anonymity

We do not know when William Shakespeare was born. We know that he was christened on 26 April 1564, in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire; there is an entry in the parish register to that effect. Given that three days was not an unusual interval, in a time of high infant mortality, between birth and christening; that 23 April 1616 was to be the day on which Shakespeare died; and that 23 April is dedicated to St George, patron saint of England, it has become usual to commemorate Shakespeare's birthday (as the national poet) on that day too. This mixture of fact, guesswork, legend and sentiment is all too typical of our knowledge of Shakespeare's life and career.

The facts are there: quite sufficient to demonstrate that the man lived, married, had children, prospered and, beyond all reasonable doubt, wrote the plays and poems for which he is famous. An industry of scholars has been busy establishing these facts for over two hundred years and sifting their implications with a scrupulosity that was once reserved for Holy Writ. As a result we know far more about Shakespeare than we do about most Elizabethans of his status. But what we know falls a long way short of what we would like to know and, only too often, the facts that have come down to us are not quite the ones we would elect to have if we had any choice in the matter. Time and again, so to speak, we have the date of the christening rather than that of the birth. We look for the story behind Shakespeare's marriage and discover only details of Hathaway family land-holdings; we look for the Dark Lady and the Rival Poet of the sonnets and find only Shakespeare involved in a succession of rather tedious legal disputes.

Some of Shakespeare's literary contemporaries contrived to leave more colourful accounts of themselves. Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and John Donne, for example, all acquired a fame or notoriety in their lifetimes that ensured quite extensive documen-

tation of their activities. One detail of Donne's life ironically underlines how colourless and indirect is so much of what we know about Shakespeare. Donne's daughter married Edward Alleyn, the great tragic actor who had been a leading figure in the Lord Admiral's Men, principal rivals in the 1590s to Shakespeare's own acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Alleyn had previously been married to the step-daughter of Philip Henslowe, the business manager of the Admiral's Men; when he married Constance Donne, in his rich and pious old age, Alleyn had already founded the College of God's Gift at Dulwich, and it was to that college that he bequeathed his papers and those of his first father-in-law. The Henslowe Papers are by far the most informative documents about the Elizabethan theatre to have survived, and much of our understanding of Shakespeare's professional activity is based on them, even though they relate to other companies, dramatists and theatres, never directly to Shakespeare himself.¹ It is typical of our luck in this respect that when Henslowe and Alleyn attempted to emulate the success of Shakespeare's company with the Globe by building a rival, the Fortune, they insisted in the contract (which survives at Dulwich) that it should resemble the Globe in most particulars, and they provided a drawing of it to guide their builders. Frustratingly, the drawing (of incalculable potential value for our understanding of Shakespeare's theatrical practices) has not survived. And the Globe itself burned down in 1613, very possibly destroying at source any equivalent that Shakespeare's company had to Henslowe's papers. At every turn, it is as if we see through a glass, darkly. Feeling the lack of direct access to Shakespeare the man, later ages have filled in the picture with guesswork, legend and sentiment. If we are to write a reasonably detailed narrative of his career, there is no avoiding a considerable amount of guesswork – inferring, for example, what he is likely to have done from what we know that other, better-documented, contemporaries did. We can only aim to make the guesswork as judicious and well-informed as possible. But we must be far more circumspect about the legend and the sentiment.

Most of the sentiment relates to Shakespeare's modern status as the greatest writer in the English language, a status which was only established in the second half of the eighteenth century. Dr Johnson's edition of the *Plays*, first published in 1765, with its inimitable Preface and notes, or David Garrick's shambolic Stratford Jubilee of 1769 (notable for its neglect of Shakespeare's own

writings) may serve as appropriate markers. Since then, Shakespeare has been a national monument and it has become increasingly difficult to assess either the man or his writings with any objectivity; with only minor exceptions, generations of criticism have been dedicated to celebrating a genius which no one seriously questions. And this has rubbed off in assessments of the man and his career, particularly in the Victorian propensity to assume that poetic genius of this order must be matched by a high nobility of character; so popular accounts of such matters as Shakespeare's marriage or relations with Ben Jonson are bedevilled by the need always to show Shakespeare in the best possible light. More recently, as in Anthony Burgess's novel, *Nothing Like the Sun* (London, 1964), and even more so in Edward Bond's play, *Bingo* (London, 1974), it has become fashionable to insist on a Shakespeare as human and fallible as the rest of us. But these are reactions against the stereotype rather than attempts at a true objectivity, which would tell us that we know nothing for certain about any of these matters. We must, therefore, be on our guard against sentiment, particularly when it takes the form of berating Shakespeare's contemporaries for failing to appreciate what they could not know – that they had a national monument in their midst.

The Shakespeare legends pose a slightly different problem. Most of them were first recorded in the years between his death and the time he became a national monument; they are thus too late to be really trustworthy, but too early to be dismissed out of hand – they may have some basis in fact, though this is no longer verifiable. Most of them relate to the period of Shakespeare's adolescence and early manhood, and sceptics dismiss virtually all of them as attempts to put flesh on a skeleton that is embarrassingly bare. Between birth and the age of twenty-eight (by which time more than half his life was over) we *know* virtually nothing about Shakespeare beyond the fact that he was christened, was married and had three children who were christened. We assume that, as the son of a prominent citizen, he would have been educated at the Free Grammar School in Stratford. But his early employments, the circumstances of his marriage, the reason and timing of his leaving Stratford, and his first connections with the acting profession are all matters about which we know nothing. And in the absence of facts, legend flourishes.

The circumstances of Shakespeare's marriage are certainly intriguing. We do not know the date of the ceremony itself, but we

do know that a special church licence had to be obtained, late in 1582, to permit the groom to marry – at eighteen he was still a minor; the bride, Anne Hathaway was twenty-six, if the dates on her gravestone are correct. Their first child, Susanna, was certainly christened within six months of the granting of the licence (26 May 1583). Explanations have ranged from a perfectly respectable hand-fast marriage well before the church ceremony, to seduction of the young man by (in Elizabethan terms) the ageing spinster. That Anne Shakespeare never seems to have joined him in London, where he spent most of his working life, and that he notoriously bequeathed her his ‘second-best bed’² has only fuelled the argument. But in reality we know nothing about their domestic arrangements or their compatibility. Less than two years after Susanna, twins, Hamnet and Judith, were also christened (2 February 1585), completing – so far as we know – William Shakespeare’s family. I should add, lest the name Hamnet evokes that of his father’s most famous creation, that the twins were almost certainly named after Stratford neighbours, Hamnet and Judith Sadler. This is not to say that Shakespeare might not have had his son (then four or five years dead) in mind when he created his version of Hamlet the Dane, but it makes it far less likely that he named his son after the legendary character – with the implication that the Prince of Denmark haunted him throughout his life. There are enough myths and legends as it is, without allowing others to germinate for lack of all the evidence.

Two of the most popular legends are among the least trustworthy: that Shakespeare had to leave Stratford after being caught poaching deer (Sir Thomas Lucy of Charlecote, a local magistrate and landowner is usually cast as the villain of the piece) and that his first connection with the London theatre was as someone employed to hold the horses of wealthy playgoers. Sir Thomas Lucy did not have a deer park at the time in question, while the horse-holding is not mentioned by the earliest biographers of Shakespeare, Nicholas Rowe (1709) and Alexander Pope (1725), but is later recounted on their supposed authority. The story of how such suppositions slowly accreted to the popular ‘life’ of Shakespeare is excellently told in S. Schoenbaum’s *Shakespeare’s Lives*. There is no harm in such popular mythology, or in the attempts to ‘confirm’ such information about the man and his personality by reference to his works – such as the attempts to track Sir Thomas Lucy in the word-play on ‘lucis’ and ‘louses’ during the prattle between

Shallow, Slender and Evans at the beginning of 2 *Henry IV* (surely a very belated and obscure in-joke), or to relate *some* of the poet's complex responses to female sexuality (such as the tale of the virginal boy and the rapacious goddess in *Venus and Adonis*)³ to the circumstances of his marriage. It will do no harm if we see evocations of a Warwickshire boyhood, particularly in the comedies, wherever Shakespeare writes about wild flowers and the countryside, or about pedantic schoolmasters, like Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* may notionally be the Ardennes in Belgium/France, not the Warwickshire Arden evoked in Shakespeare's mother's name (Mary Arden), but some of us will doubtless persist in knowing better. It must be stressed, however, that such fancies do less than justice both to Shakespeare's imagination and to his reading (which was prodigious, if not necessarily systematic). There is, moreover, nothing that we know, suspect or have made up about Shakespeare's early years that really helps us to explain the achievement of the plays and the poems. There is no biographical point of entry to his works comparable to that which we have with Marlowe, Jonson or Donne. He remains in this respect anonymous, for all the efforts of the mythographers. Oddly enough, this remains true even if we accept the most persistent piece of speculation about his early years: the possibility that he was brought up a Roman Catholic.⁴

To understand the implications of such a suggestion, it will be necessary to sketch in some background. The English Reformation was barely thirty-five years old when Shakespeare was born, and indeed had been reversed during the five-year reign of Queen Mary. Under Elizabeth, who came to the throne in 1558, England was once more formally a Protestant country;⁵ conformity to the Church of England, of which the Queen was Supreme Governor, was required by law. Religious and political allegiances were generally deemed to be indivisible, and it was a punishable offence to miss church on Sunday without good reason. The strictness of these measures should perhaps be seen as an indication of the insecurity of the regime which, not without cause, felt itself to be threatened both from without and within. A large proportion of the population (some would say a third of them, and more in remote rural areas) remained Roman Catholic at heart even if not in practice, and the authorities in London constantly feared an uprising in favour of one of the Roman Catholic claimants to the

English throne, notably Mary, Queen of Scots (who, from 1568 to 1587, was a prisoner in England and a focus of possible discontent) and Philip II of Spain.⁶ The northern rebellion of 1569 and the Throckmorton Plot of 1583 demonstrated that these fears were not ungrounded, and tension increased after 1570 when a Papal Bull was published, excommunicating Elizabeth and calling upon English Catholics to regard Mary, Queen of Scots as their lawful sovereign. The Spanish Armada of 1588 and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 were the two most traumatic national events of Shakespeare's lifetime and reflected between them (at least in the eyes of the authorities) the Roman Catholic threat from without and within.⁷ With hindsight, we tend to assume that the Spanish threat evaporated after 1588, but that was not how contemporaries saw it. A second Armada almost sailed in 1595; Spanish ships actually put to sea against England in 1597, but were dispersed by the wind. Throughout the 1590s (a background to Shakespeare's English history plays) there was a succession of English expeditions against Spain – notably the Cadiz raid of 1596 and the Islands Voyage of 1597 – and of English interventions on behalf of the Dutch Protestants fighting against their Spanish overlords.

In such a context it was no small thing to be Roman Catholic, however covertly. But it is not inherently improbable that John Shakespeare, though an alderman of Stratford and (in 1568–9) holder of its highest office, that of bailiff, should have had Catholic sympathies: many of his countrymen lived such double lives. He may well even have put his mark (not, apparently, being able to write)⁸ to a Spiritual Testament affirming his Catholic faith.⁹ If so, it means he almost certainly came into contact with one or other of the two Jesuit priests, Robert Persons (or Parsons) and Edmund Campion, who slipped secretly into England in 1580, on a mission to support the faithful – or, as the authorities saw it, to incite rebellion. If John Shakespeare did subscribe to one of the Testaments that they carried to bind their secret flock to the faith, he was taking a considerable risk: Campion was arrested and executed for treason in 1581 and Sir William Catesby, who hid him for a time in his house at Lapworth (only twelve miles from Stratford), was imprisoned in the Fleet. A further piece of evidence which may connect John Shakespeare with Catholicism is that his attendance at church became quite infrequent in the 1580s, as did his attendance at meetings of the town council. But it is just as likely that he stayed at home for fear of being arrested

in connection with the debts we know he had run up by this time.

There is no concrete evidence in William Shakespeare's own lifetime to connect him with Catholicism, though there is the terse and unsubstantiated assertion made late in the seventeenth century by a clergyman, Richard Davies, that 'he died a papist'.¹⁰ There is, moreover, a persistent legend, recently given a new lease of life and more substantiation (if something short of proof) by E. A. J. Honigmann's *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'*: that as a young man he was the 'William Shakeshafte' employed in Lancashire Catholic circles, specifically by Alexander Hoghton of Lea Hall, near Preston, and later by his brother-in-law, Sir Thomas Hesketh, who were both known Catholics.¹¹ The Lancashire associations of John Cottom, the schoolmaster at Stratford from 1579 to 1581/2, help to make plausible the otherwise unlikely translation of the young man from the Midlands to the North. And if he was employed there as a family tutor, this would tie in with another tradition recorded by the seventeenth century antiquary, John Aubrey: 'Though as Ben Jonson says of him, that he had but little Latin and less Greek, he understood Latin pretty well; for he had been in his younger years a schoolmaster in the country'.¹² This is one of the best-founded of such anecdotes, since Aubrey had it from William Beeston, an actor himself and son of Christopher Beeston, who had been a member of Shakespeare's company.¹³ If, moreover, this 'schoolmaster' in the rural obscurity of Lancashire had also been employed in theatricals (it was not unusual for country gentlemen to keep entertainers in their households) then Shakespeare might have made himself known to the local magnate, the Earl of Derby, who was a friend of Sir Thomas Hesketh, or more particularly to his charismatic son, Ferdinando, Lord Strange, who was patron to one of the leading acting companies of the 1580s. This *could* explain how Shakespeare entered the world of professional theatre. On the other hand, it is equally plausible that he contrived to join one of the troupes that visited Stratford around 1586/7, including such notable ones as the Earl of Leicester's and the Queen's Men.¹⁴

Fascinating as such possibilities are, they remain a tottering edifice of speculations. Perhaps Shakespeare *was* born Roman Catholic and perhaps secretly he adhered to the old faith. But if he did, nothing of the struggle it presumably entailed registers in a discernible way in the poems and plays that he wrote – another notable contrast with so many of his literary contemporaries. Ben

Jonson's conversion to Roman Catholicism while in prison and his reconversion to the Anglican communion twelve years later were obviously significant moments in his life and career.¹⁵ John Donne's conversion to the Church of England from a family with deep Roman Catholic roots – his own brother died in prison for the faith – was obviously deeply traumatic and there are echoes of it in much of his writing. As John Carey bluntly puts it: 'The first thing to remember about Donne is that he was a Catholic; the second, that he betrayed his Faith'.¹⁶ Even if we could now establish for certain that Shakespeare was born Roman Catholic and adhered, at heart, to that faith, we could hardly make such a statement about him.

There are obvious contexts among his works in which we might look for the pressure of his personal convictions. *King John*, for example, deals with a dispute between the English king and the Pope over the limits of their respective authorities. Bishop John Bale's much earlier play of *King Johan* and the anonymous *Troublesome Reign of King John*, which Shakespeare knew and drew on, were both virulently nationalistic and anti-Catholic. Shakespeare is more muted in his tone. His treatment of King John, for example, is ambivalent; in the first half of the play, though clearly a usurper, he is strong and purposeful, a man the nation can follow, not least in his defiance of Cardinal Pandulph, the Papal legate; but latterly he becomes weak and vacillating, and nationalistic sympathies are focused on the wit and gallantry of the fictitious Bastard of Faulconbridge rather than the unlovable king; and most of the sentiment of the play is channelled towards the tragic figures of Prince Arthur and his mother, Constance. However, it remains an odd subject for a supposed Catholic to have chosen (Cardinal Pandulph is hardly an endearing or an inspiring apologist for Rome) even if the play eschews the zealous Protestant propaganda that others had made of it.¹⁷ There are similar ambiguities, which we shall examine in due course, about Shakespeare's writing of *Macbeth* in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot.

The religious tensions of his day do sometimes surface openly in his plays, but always parenthetically. It is hardly accident that Hamlet attends Luther's own university at Wittenberg, while Laertes goes to (Catholic) Paris, but it is not a major issue in the play. In *Measure for Measure*, the would-be (Catholic) nun, Isabella, confronts the puritan, Angelo, though – and this is one of the perplexities of that 'problem play' – it would be hard to say which