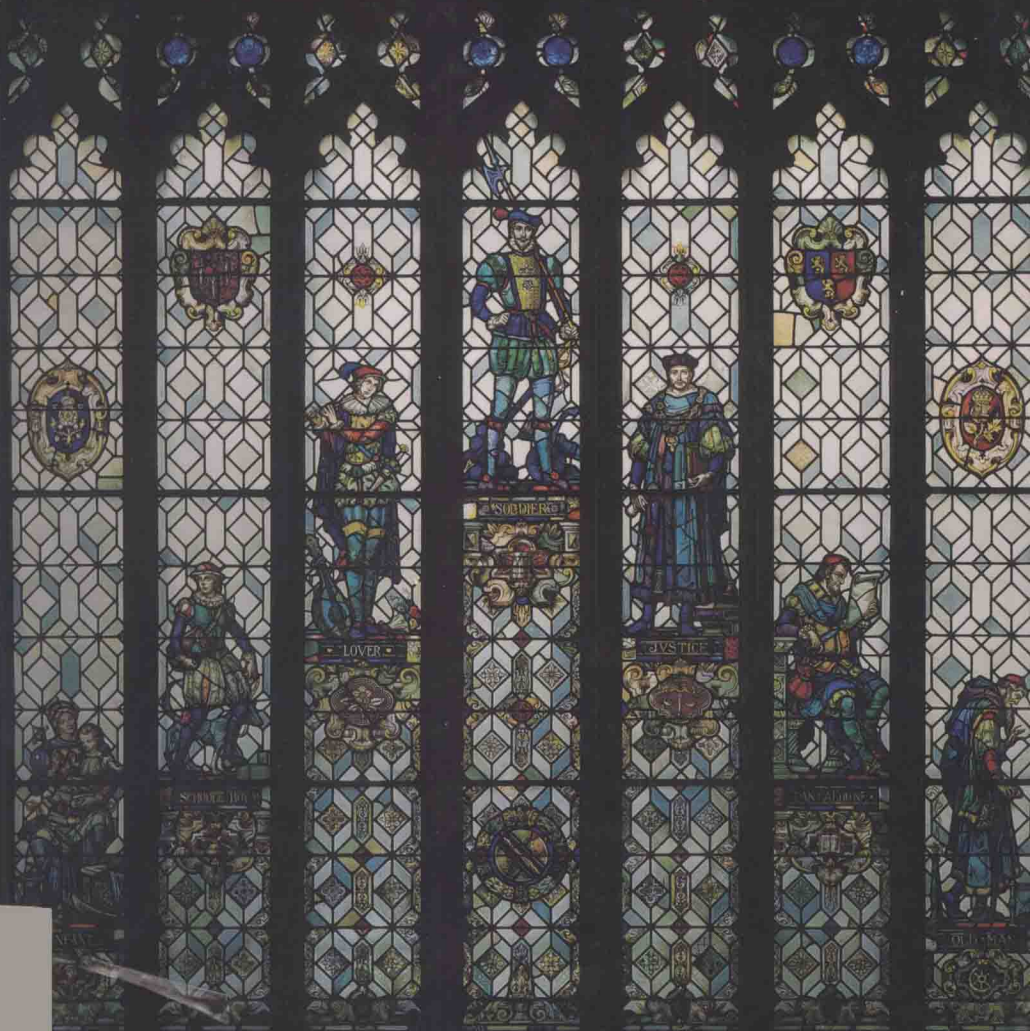


DAVID BEVINGTON

SHAKESPEARE

The Seven Ages of Human Experience

SECOND EDITION



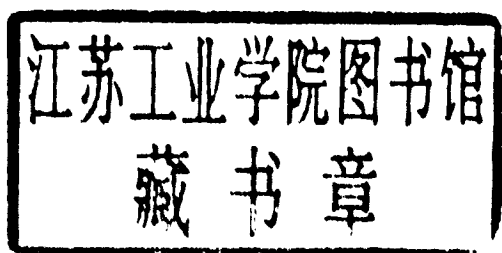
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DAVID BEVINGTON

SHAKESPEARE

*The Seven Ages of
Human Experience*

Second Edition



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To the Reader

By design, this book moves around quite a bit from play to play, from prose to poetry, from early to late, in order to pursue themes and topics that seem to have fascinated Shakespeare and that certainly fascinate me. I hope they will interest you as well. One result is that discussions touch on only certain aspects of a given play or poem in a particular chapter. I keep coming back to some plays especially, such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*, from different directions. If you find yourself wondering, for example, why a particular discussion of *King Lear* seems to centre on Edmund and his family without saying much about King Lear or Cordelia, just wait. I'll be back later in the book.

I did not realize how much I wanted to write this book until Andrew McNeillie pointed the way. I owe him my special thanks. I am eternally grateful also to the many friends and writers about Shakespeare whose ideas I have not directly acknowledged in this generally unfootnoted book and whose innovative ideas about Shakespeare I have so mingled with my own that I am not always sure which are whose. Among those to whom I am most consciously indebted are Janet Adelman, Richard Wheeler, Arthur Kirsch, Robert G. Hunter, Fredson Bowers, Alfred Harbage, Northrop Frye, A. C. Bradley, Lynda Boose, Frank Kermode, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner, David Kastan, Patricia Parker, Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, C. L. Barber, Coppélia Kahn, Meredith Skura, Robert Watson, Stephen Orgel, James Calderwood, John Velz, Inga-Stina Ewbank, Sigurd Burckhardt, Linda Charnes, Norman Rabkin, Alvin Kernan, and Juliet Dusinberre. These people have changed my life in some way, often through a single, focused, seminal idea. My list here is of course

very incomplete. In addition, I owe more than I can say to the many superb students at Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Chicago who have challenged and sharpened what I have tried to teach with their questions and often surprising observations. It has been a privilege to be invited to think out loud about Shakespeare with them on a continuing journey of discovery. This little book represents, in distilled form, something of where I have gotten to at present.

I am grateful to Blackwell Publishing for a chance to bring out a second edition. In it I have corrected a number of errors and infelicities of style that escaped me on first passage. I have tried to say more about fathers and sons than in the first edition, about the perils of courtship, about the circumstances of Shakespeare's own life that may bear on his written work, about performance history of his plays on stage and screen, about his delicate representation of gender relations in all their ambiguous uncertainties, about his sources, and still more. Two inserted passages, on *Romeo and Juliet* and on fathers and sons, are of substantial length. In a new final chapter on 'Shakespeare Today', I look at the remarkable diversity of interpretations in modern criticism and performance of Shakespeare as a key to his malleability, his 'infinite variety', his ability to adapt to a changing world. Other changes deal with particular paragraphs. The book is a little longer than the earlier version, but develops the same idea of a life cycle that never ceases to fascinate me in Shakespeare.

David Bevington

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
To the Reader	x
1 All the World's a Stage: <i>Poetry and Theatre</i>	1
2 Creeping Like Snail: <i>Childhood, Education, Early Friendship, Sibling Rivalries</i>	29
3 Sighing Like Furnace: <i>Courtship and Sexual Desire</i>	57
4 Full of Strange Oaths and Bearded Like the Pard: <i>The Coming-of-Age of the Male</i>	80
5 Jealous in Honour: <i>Love and Friendship in Crisis</i>	102
6 Wise Saws: <i>Political and Social Disillusionment, Humankind's Relationship to the Divine, and Philosophical Scepticism</i>	129
7 Modern Instances: <i>Misogyny, Jealousy, Pessimism, and Midlife Crisis</i>	160
8 The Lean and Slippered Pantaloon: <i>Ageing Fathers and their Daughters</i>	190
9 Last Scene of All: <i>Retirement from the Theatre</i>	212

10 Shakespeare Today	235
Notes	248
Further Reading	254
Index	259

Illustrations

1	J. C. Visscher's panoramic view of London (detail), 1616 or possibly a little earlier.	7
2	Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, portrait by Jon de Critz the Elder, 1603.	13
3	The 'Armada' portrait of Elizabeth I, by George Gower, 1588.	104
4	De Witt drawing of the Swan Theatre, executed by Van Buchell, c. 1596.	131
5	Macbeth greeting the three sisters, from Holinshed's <i>The firste Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande</i> , 1577.	154
6	James I by John de Critz, before 1641.	158
7	Engraved portrait of Shakespeare by Droeshout from <i>Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies</i> , 1623, the so-called First Folio.	192
8	A playhouse based on the Swan Theatre, c. 1595, drawing by C. Walter Hodges. From <i>The Globe Restored: A Study of the Elizabethan Theatre</i> by C. Walter Hodges, 1968.	233

CHAPTER ONE

All the World's a Stage

Poetry and Theatre

This whole creation is essentially subjective, and the dream is the theater where the dreamer is at once scene, actor, prompter, stage manager, author, audience, and critic.

Carl Jung, General Aspects of Dream Psychology (1928)

What makes Shakespeare so great? Everyone wonders about that. Is he simply a cultural icon, a great name, the study of whose works has become entrenched in high school and college curricula out of inertia? Are students being obliged to make their way through the difficulties of Elizabethan English and the thickets of early modern politics simply because their elders have done so? Is the study of Shakespeare an elaborate hazing ritual? How can he speak to the twenty-first century, given his experience in a culture that was monarchist, patriarchal, pre-industrial, and unacquainted for the most part with any peoples that were not Anglo-Saxon native-born English? In our day, when dead European white males are being expunged from the curriculum, why still read Shakespeare? He is unquestionably dead, European, white, and male. In what way, if at all, does he deserve to be celebrated as the greatest English writer, perhaps the greatest writer of all time?

One can begin to answer these questions by simply observing the factual evidence of a genuine popularity that is continuing and even growing today. In an era when college enrolments in most older authors – Chaucer, Milton, Spenser, Jonson, Marlowe, Pope, etc., not to mention Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, and Dante – are on the decline, Shakespeare courses are thriving. The film industry has discovered anew that

Shakespeare can be good box-office. Postmodern criticism, after declaring its own liberation from canonical authors, turns again and again to Shakespeare to test its most acute theoretical problems about genre, sexuality, language, and politics. Ask Shakespeare a question about anything and he is likely to come back with an amazing answer, or, more importantly, a still more puzzling question. As a character in George Bernard Shaw's *Misalliance* declares in wonderment (when a thief has just quoted Shakespeare to him), 'Good. Read Shakespeare: he has a word for every occasion'. One proof of Shakespeare's sturdy durability is that, in these days when the curriculum has been liberated, teachers and critics and students turn to him by choice. He is a central text for feminists, deconstructionists, Marxists, traditional close readers, Christian interpreters, students of cultural studies, you name it. Despite his chronological antiquity, he speaks today to the condition of each of these methodologies.

Shakespeare is cited by more modern writers than any other writer in the canon, other than the Bible. This, presumably, is because he has become a by-word for situations we encounter daily. 'It's Greek to me', we say, when something is obscure, not realizing perhaps that we are paraphrasing Casca in *Julius Caesar*; having reported to Cassius that Cicero spoke 'in Greek' on the occasion of Caesar's refusing the crown, and asked 'to what effect' Cicero spoke, Casca answers that he couldn't follow the speech: 'it was Greek to me'.

Hamlet is full of lines that we appropriate to our daily lives. We see something 'in [the] mind's eye'. We agree with Polonius that one has a duty 'to thine own self' to 'be true'. We acknowledge his worldly wisdom that 'the apparel oft proclaims the man' and that it is best 'Neither a borrower nor a lender' to be. We concur with Hamlet that drinking or any other injurious overindulgence 'is a custom / More honoured in the breach than the observance'. We exclaim, with Hamlet, 'What a piece of work is a man!' When a speech or sample of writing is too long, 'It shall to the barber's with your beard'. If a speech is overacted 'It out-Herods Herod'. We know too well that 'conscience does make cowards of us all'. We nod in assent to the proposition that art must 'hold . . . the mirror up to nature'. When we wish to speak cuttingly, we 'speak daggers'. We resonate to the proposition that 'There are more things in heaven and earth . . . Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' and that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will'. Most of all, perhaps, we ponder what it means 'To be or not to be', and celebrate Shakespeare's theatre with the splendid truism that 'The play's the thing'.

These are all remarkably memorable lines that have made their way into the language. They have done so because they eloquently address issues that we deeply care about: the nature of humanity, the purposes of art, the role of divinity in our lives, the puzzling temptations of suicide, and much more.

The argument of this book, indeed, is that Shakespeare lives among us today with such vitality because he speaks, with unrivalled eloquence and grace of language, to just about any human condition one can think of: infancy and childhood, early schooling, friendships, rivalry among siblings, courtship, the competitive way in which sons must learn to become their fathers' heirs, career choices and ambitions, sceptical disillusionment and loss of traditional faith, marriage, jealousy, midlife crisis, fathers' worries about the marriages of their daughters, old age, retirement, and the approach of death.

Shakespeare has immortalized for us the parabolic shape of this life cycle in the so-called 'Seven Ages of Man' speech delivered by Jaques in *As You Like It*, act 2, scene 7.¹ Jaques is prompted to his reflection on human existence by spectacles of suffering and injustice: the banishment of Duke Senior and his followers from the envious court of the usurping Duke Frederick, and the near-death by starvation of Orlando and his faithful servant Adam, now rescued from extremity by the charity of the forest dwellers. In his response to this situation, Duke Senior introduces the idea of our lives as a kind of theatre:

Thou see'st we are not all alone unhappy.
This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in.

(2.7.135–8)²

Jaques elaborates on this wonderful commonplace in an extended theatrical metaphor:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel

And shining morning face, creeping like snail
 Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
 Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
 Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
 Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,
 Seeking the bubble reputation
 Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
 In fair round belly with good capon lined,
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
 Full of wise saws and modern instances;
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange, eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

(2.7.138-65)

We might observe several things about this remarkable speech. First, it is masculine in its point of view. This is the story of a male child growing up to be a man and then circling back to second childhood (another common phrase for which we are indebted to Shakespeare). The occupations here are male: courtship of women, soldiership, profession, respectability of a judicial appointment, ownership of property. Is there such a thing as the Seven Ages of Woman? Well, in fact the Folger Library in Washington DC has a poem called *Seven Ages of Woman*, by Agnes Strickland (London, 1827), that traces the lifespan of women from childhood to maturity to old age, and guess what? Their only discernible occupation is childbearing and tending the family. The pattern is precisely that of a sixteenth-century German woodcut illustrating the same subject, in which, as the seven partly undraped female figures mature, their breasts become enlarged and attractive; as they age, the breasts droop until they are unsightly dugs hanging to the waist. The posture too goes from erect gracefulness to arthritic stooping. The contrast with Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man could not be more instructive. Moreover, discussion of the Seven Ages of Woman is rare; Shakespeare's generation did not think con-

sciously about women's careers as it did about men's, and not until the nineteenth century did a woman writer venture to suggest that Shakespeare's often-cited paradigm was in need of a feminist corrective. Shakespeare's portrayal of the life cycle is male, and he himself was a male. We will want to explore ways in which, thoughtfully and even anxiously, he seems to have confronted the problem of understanding the profound differences in gender that separate men and women, but we should begin by acknowledging that his point of view was inescapably that of the man.

Another point about Jaques' speech is that it is ironic. The individual portraits are uniformly wry in tone: the infant 'mewling and puking in the nurse's arms', the boy manifesting his unwillingness to go to school, the lover making a fool of himself over some young woman whom he insists on idolizing, the soldier pursuing illusory reputation and honour 'Even in the cannon's mouth', the justice complacent with worldly success, the old man covetous of possessions that will soon say goodbye to him, the dying man a child again. Life is indeed a cycle. What does it amount to? In Jaques' mordant view, it all comes to 'mere oblivion', without teeth to chew one's food, or eyesight, or taste, or anything at all.

This sounds remarkably like the plaintive chant in T. S. Eliot's 'A Fragment of an Agon': 'Birth, and copulation, and death. / That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all, / Birth, and copulation, and death.' One thinks too of Hamlet's meditations on death and oblivion in the graveyard where Yorick and so many others lie buried. Why might not the dusty remains of Emperor Alexander the Great be subject to the same kinds of indignity that Yorick's skull suffers at the hands of the gravedigger? 'As thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?' Or, earlier in the play, 'What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.'

The ironies in Jaques' speech remind us of other passages in Shakespeare as well. The description of the infant 'mewling and puking' brings to mind King Lear, when he laments that 'We came crying hither' into this world. 'Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air / We wawl and cry' when we are come 'To this great stage of fools'. Falstaff's wry disquisition on honour in *1 Henry IV* ('Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday') reads like a comment on Jaques' soldier 'Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth'. Touchstone's amusement at the clichéd verse that Orlando hangs on the trees of the forest in

As You Like It in praise of his Rosalind ('I'll rhyme you so eight years together, dinners and suppers and sleeping hours excepted', says Touchstone) is an amusing instance of Jaques' lover 'Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress' eyebrow'. The aged justices, Shallow and Silence, in *2 Henry IV* ('We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow', says Falstaff to one of them) seem to march right out of Jaques' vignette on 'the lean and slippered pantaloon'. Jaques' Seven Ages of Man reads like a blueprint for Shakespeare's dramatic portraiture of the crazy, funny, sad life of mortals on this earth.

This is not to say that Shakespeare is only, or even chiefly, an ironist, a satirical observer in the vein of Voltaire or Swift or Aristophanes. Instead, the Seven Ages of Man speech helps us to see that Shakespeare is an unsurpassed observer of *la comédie humaine*, along with Leo Tolstoy, Jane Austen, William Faulkner, E. M. Forster, and Honoré de Balzac. Shakespeare's observations of human folly are both acute and compassionate. Jaques' speech, to be fully understood, must be read in the context of a scene in which human charity and forgiveness do much to atone for Jaques' witty indictment of the existential meaninglessness of human existence. The present book, using Jaques' speech as a kind of outline, hopes to explore the ways in which Shakespeare sought to balance ironic and satiric observation with charity and compassion. It is in this balance that we find what is so deeply humane in him.

The young Shakespeare, turning up in London some time before 1592 in search of a career, found himself drawn to the theatre and to the writing of poetry. We know rather little about his life prior to that time. He was born in 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, the son of a man who prospered as a manufacturer and salesman of leather goods and who became the equivalent of mayor of the town, though he also seems to have experienced financial difficulties and to have been fined for absence from town meetings – probably as the result of his having overextended himself in his business dealings, though the possibility that he incurred official disfavour for clinging to the Catholic faith of his youth continues to intrigue those who wonder if Shakespeare himself was Catholic in his sympathies. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, came from a good family of well-to-do yeoman farmer's stock. Though the school records have perished owing to the ravages of time, we cannot doubt that the son of the town's leading citizen would have gone to the King's New School there, where, tuition free, he would have received instruction chiefly in Latin, along with some Greek.

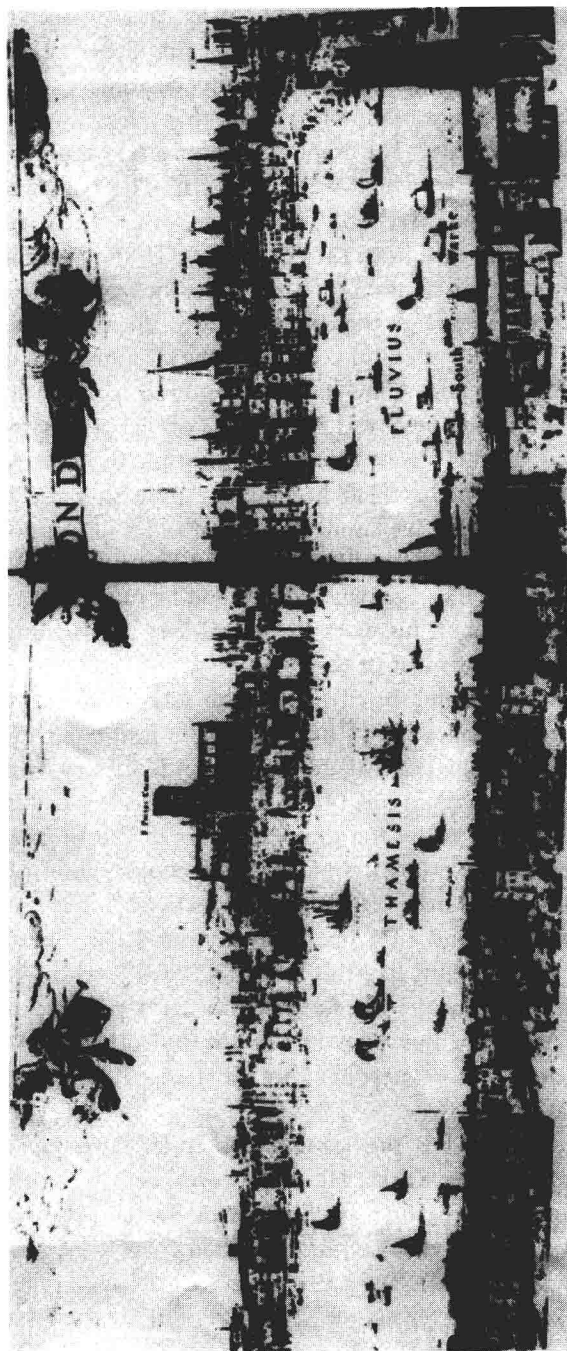


Plate 1 J. C. Visscher's panoramic view of London (detail), 1616 or possibly a little earlier. © copyright The Trustees of the British Museum.

He married, at eighteen, Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior and already some three months pregnant; a special licence had to be obtained to marry quickly, without the customary reading of the 'banns' or announcement of intent to marry that normally proceeded over three successive Sundays. The implications of a 'shotgun' wedding are clear, and is a matter to which we will return. The couple's first child, Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. Two other children, the twins Hamnet and Judith, were born on February 5, 1585. ('Hamnet' was the name of a Stratford neighbor.) These were the last children born to William and Anne. Although the absence of any other children could have been the result of some medical condition, the circumstance may suggest instead that William and Anne did not continue to share a bed. Birth control, rudimentary at best, was essentially non-existent; families tended to be large, though this was by no means uniformly the case. At all events, Shakespeare appears to have left home some time after the birth of the twins. He never brought his family to live with him in London. Once he became prosperous he did acquire property in Stratford in which his wife and children were able to live handsomely, and he must have visited home when not occupied with his work in the big city, but he and his family did live apart much or most of the time.

I should say something, briefly, about the authorship controversy that has swirled about Shakespeare's head since the mid-nineteenth century. To many non-academics the issue remains unsettled. How could a provincial lad who never attended one of the universities of his day (Oxford and Cambridge) turn out to be the greatest writer in the English language? Why is it that we have no papers of his? How could a country boy depict with such acumen the lives of rulers and courtiers? Surely the work that survives shows the hand of a university-educated wit, like Christopher Marlowe, or an aristocrat, like the Earl of Oxford – who wrote sonnets and whose father-in-law, Lord Burghley, bears a passable resemblance to Polonius. Are there not clues in *Hamlet* and other plays that reveal biographical details more pertinent to the Earl of Oxford than to the boy from Stratford?

The Earl of Oxford is the leading contender currently as the rival author of Shakespeare's works. He is, however, only one of several who have been put forth. The first was Sir Francis Bacon, proposed briefly in the middle of the eighteenth century and then championed in America in 1852 and afterwards by Delia Bacon. Attracted perhaps to the idea by her sharing a last name with Sir Francis, she promoted the thesis that the plays

were not by Shakespeare but by Bacon, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Edmund Spenser as a means of spreading secretly a liberal philosophy. In her estimate, William Shakespeare of Stratford was nothing more than an 'ignorant, low-bred, vulgar country fellow, who had never inhaled in all his life one breath of that social atmosphere that fills his plays'. Although her book in 1857 on the subject was not well received, and although she went on to suffer delusions that she was herself 'the Holy Ghost and surrounded by devils', the movement lived on; an English Bacon Society came into being in 1885, followed by an American counterpart in 1892. Christopher Marlowe has been another candidate; so have others. The very existence of this plethora of candidates is suspicious. So is the fact that the so-called 'anti-Stratfordian' theory did not emerge for two centuries or more after Shakespeare's death, and not with any noticeable following until well into the nineteenth century. Prior to that time, no one doubted that the plays and poems were by William Shakespeare. Mark Twain, himself an anti-Stratfordian, saw the humour of this. The works, he said, are not by Shakespeare but by another person of the same name.³

Well, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, as someone once said, but is it true that it doesn't really matter if someone other than Shakespeare wrote these plays? Oxfordian apologists allow that a man called Shakespeare did live and act in the London theatre, but not as a playwright. (Shakespeare is listed at the top of 'the principal comedians' in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, performed by 'the then Lord Chamberlain His Servants' in 1598, and as one of 'the principal tragedians' in Jonson's *Sejanus*, acted in 1603.) The Earl of Oxford, according to this theory, being inspired to write but ashamed to sully his aristocratic name by lending it to a disreputable enterprise like playwriting, needed a front man. Shakespeare, an actor and 'actor-sharer' (that is, company member and part owner) of England's premier acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (renamed the King's Men in 1603), was deemed a suitable candidate. This argument, unprovable by any documentary evidence, rests instead on the assumption that we need to find an author for the plays and poems who was suitably well-born and university educated. It presupposes that the many persons in London who knew Oxford and Shakespeare must have agreed not to talk about the arrangement and thus to keep the 'true' identity of the plays' author a secret. Authors did sometimes use pseudonyms in the Renaissance, but I know of no instance in which an author concealed his identity by adopting as a fictional cover the