

Shakespeare the Man

Revised Edition

A. L. ROWSE

*What begins for
literature as background was for the
author intense with the very quality of
life.*

John Holloway

M
MACMILLAN
PRESS

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of Charlecote
Custodian of the Tradition
for the Years of Friendship

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Preface to the Revised Edition

WITH this volume I close my more than twenty years of work on William Shakespeare. It has been inspired all along by the conviction, indeed the knowledge, that to understand it, one has to see it in the proper perspective of his time – his own experience and that of his age that went into his work.

This is only common sense. 'What begins for the student of literature as background was for the author intense with the very quality of life.' For lack of this proper approach the biography of our greatest writer has been made nonsense of, even by good literary scholars, and reduced to confusion.

There is no inherent reason why they should have made 'such a mess of it' (Harold Macmillan's phrase for it). Ben Jonson, who knew Shakespeare well, tells us that his nature was 'open, honest, and free'. He did not write the Sonnets in order to create a mystery. Nor did he publish them – they were much too near the bone, too revealingly autobiographical of his relations with his known young patron and his infatuation with the dark and musical young lady, the former mistress of Lord Chamberlain Hunsdon, patron of Shakespeare's Company.

William Shakespeare was the most autobiographical of all the Elizabethan dramatists, the only one to write an autobiography in the Sonnets, during 1591–4. So it should be possible to track him in his work; this I have done, in his own words, in *Shakespeare's Self-Portrait*.

When these autobiographical Sonnets were published years after they were written, the *publisher*, Thomas Thorp, dedicated them to 'Mr W. H.', from whom he had got them. So Mr W. H. was the publisher's man, *not* the young Lord within the Sonnets – the obvious person, Shakespeare's patron, Southampton.

No one hitherto had noticed this obvious point, and for lack of it had made a complete muddle of Shakespeare's life and work. Even good scholars like E. K. Chambers, massive but imperceptive, and Dover Wilson, enthusiastic but erratic. This lack of elementary perception has put their work on Shakespeare's biography out of

court; and of course most of that written by lesser scholars is utterly confused and can be ignored. Indeed, most of what has been written hitherto on the subject is so confused as to be without much value – better not to read it, to avoid confusion of mind.

With a full knowledge of the age and the conditions in which Shakespeare lived and wrote, I have been able to reduce the unnecessary confusion to order and make sense of both life and work, give unanswerable certainty. As an Elizabethan historian I have been able to settle once and for all the dating of the Sonnets and the chronology of the Plays. There never should have been any doubt about the identity of the young Lord of the Sonnets – the obvious person, Shakespeare's patron, Southampton; but it was an unexpected bonus to have discovered the identity of the Dark Lady – I should never have done so if all my previous findings had not been correct.

With regard to the Plays, I have been able to show – what no one had previously realised – the autobiographical nature of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which ties in with the Sonnets. *Love's Labour's Lost* is shown to be no longer the enigma it was thought to be. The date and the occasion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are unquestionably settled. New light is now thrown on *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Cymbeline* and *Henry VIII*.

In short, we now have the definitive biography of our greatest writer, all confusions cleared up and problems settled, in this revised edition with a great deal of new material.

All Souls College
Oxford

A. L. Rowse

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1

Warwickshire Background

MUCH of the nonsense that has been written about William Shakespeare, in many languages, comes from ignorance of the Elizabethan age and its conditions. Such people think that we know hardly anything about him. This is a prime mistake: in fact, we know more about him than about any other dramatist of the time, with the exception of Ben Jonson, who lived rather later and had a longer life. Even with regard to him we know hardly anything about his early life, his family and origins. This is already a marked contrast with Shakespeare, about whose early life we know a great deal, for an Elizabethan.

In that age people were not much interested in the biographies of writers, especially mere dramatists, unless they were otherwise important. On the whole, we find biographies only of royal personages or grandees, of very literate or loquacious persons, bishops, academics, Puritans or Jesuit confessors. We know little or nothing of more fascinating people, like Robert Greene or Thomas Nashe, Webster, Tourneur or John Ford – let alone men of scientific genius such as Thomas Hariot or William Gilbert. What would we not give to know more about Christopher Marlowe! We are fortunate to know as much as we do about his contemporary, William Shakespeare.

Much of the confusion that has arisen with regard to him is, in part, quite unnecessary. It has arisen from even standard authorities – not only Victorians like Sir Sidney Lee, but Edwardians such as Sir Edmund Chambers and Professor Dover Wilson – leaving open questions that could have been settled, and adding to the confusion by superfluous conjectures (about ‘Mr W. H.’ notably). With an Elizabethan, it is always better to stick to facts and known historical circumstance.

Perhaps one should add that a knowledge of the Elizabethan age in depth is indispensable. One cannot fully appreciate Dickens except in terms of the Victorian age; still less can one get Shakespeare right, or even understand the *nuances* of his language, unless we are immersed in the time in which he lived, and are

familiar with its habits of thought, its values and modes of being. Of course, one can appreciate the plays, the drama, in all times and places – there is the universal element; and one can enjoy much of the poetry. But for what lies at the back of it, and for understanding the work in the round, one needs the dimension of time. And most of all with regard to the man.

Even with regard to the work, the historical sense is important and chronological order essential. How could one properly appreciate the work of Beethoven if one thought the last quartets came before the early piano sonatas? Or if one thought that *Samson Agonistes* came before *Comus*? People without historical sense, in the Augustan age, were apt to be misled by the First Folio of Shakespeare opening with *The Tempest*, his penultimate work, while the rest follow in no satisfactory order. Anyone who wants to study the development and unfolding of Shakespeare's genius should read his work in chronological order – plays, poems, sonnets, more plays. And yet, such is the strength of unimaginative and static conservatism that there is, even today, no such edition in all the world.

We must respect conservative tradition, when it is convincing and true to life; in fact, all my work on Shakespeare has been conservative and traditional. My new finds are in keeping – the last of them all, clinching the whole, the identity of the Dark Lady, in complete consistency, impossible to impugn because borne out by historical fact and based on chronological order and method.

This study of Shakespeare the Man will therefore be historical and factual. We have plenty of studies of the dramatist and poet, far too much writing about him by people with no sense of the age. This study of his life – now that the facts regarding the most significant and formative years in his career have at last been brought to light – might be alternatively entitled 'Shakespeare the Elizabethan'. For such will be its emphasis.

Warwickshire is the heart of England, and it was singularly appropriate that Shakespeare should have been born there in the Elizabethan age. The place and time, the very dates – born 1564, died 1616 – are significant: if he had been born twenty years earlier or later, his achievement would have been different, nothing like so rich and full. His career and work, what he made of his providential good fortune, provide a marvellous instance of the moment meeting with the man to express it. The age itself was an inspiration;

everything was propitious to poetry, music, drama; after a hard apprenticeship and many set-backs, in the event he was unimaginably fortunate as a writer.

His native Warwickshire – revealingly reflected in his work as it is loyally in his life – lies before us in Dugdale's map as it was in Shakespeare's day. Already, in only the next generation, Dugdale noticed the distinction conferred on Stratford-upon-Avon in that 'it gave birth and sepulture to our late famous poet, William Shakespeare'. The county is lozenge-shaped, with the River Avon – an old Celtic word for river – running through the midst roughly dividing Arden from Feldon, the woodland country in the north, remains of ancient forest, from the open fields and pastures of the south.

There was something exciting to the imagination in the very situation of Stratford, on the threshold of the wooded Arden country, from which both Shakespeare's father and mother came – she, indeed, was born an Arden – to live in the lively, busy town. In his early works the free woodland is lovingly rendered: lovers wander off into it at leisure for refreshment and their own purposes. One recognises the landscape in *Venus and Adonis*, and Cotswold country to the south in the episode of coursing the hare. When the son came to write *As You Like It*, with several flecks of biographical interest in it, he did not hesitate to bring the Forest of Arden itself upon the stage. Warwickshire is given a good show in several of his plays, from the early *Henry VI* trilogy to Falstaff marching through it in *Henry IV*.

All round about the county there was the vivacious, very individual, often violent life of the time, of which we have evidences in the documents and those other documents, the tombs in the churches and the houses that remain. Shakespeare was an historically minded, backward-looking man, much interested in the memorials of a previous past, as by its chronicles and its folklore. In English history he was especially drawn to the excitements, the melodramatic chops and changes of the century before, of the wars in France and the conflict between Lancaster and York. Not far away at Warwick, in the chapel of the parish church, lay the magnificent figure of Richard Beauchamp, the Earl, who had borne great sway in France from his castle at Rouen. There is his image still, in copper and gilt, the coloured enamels and coats of arms, hands together in prayer, the fixed stare of eternity upon the noble masculine features – enough to make the past live to any boy of imagination. In

Shakespeare's maturity there came into the chapel the two Dudley earls, whom the youth would have seen about the county: the splendid Leicester, first and last in the affections of the Queen, and his elder brother Ambrose, whose widow consoled her last years.

Elizabeth had granted the castle at Warwick to the genial Ambrose; but he had no children, and King James gave it to Fulke Greville, Philip Sidney's friend. In Shakespeare's later years Greville was engaged in reconstructing the castle and making it more livable, while writing his sombre dramas. Just up over the hill to the north-west of Stratford, through pleasant elmy pastures, lay Alcester – still with a number of Elizabethan houses by the church; in that lay Fulke Greville's father, in armour and ruff, a leading figure in the county in William Shakespeare's growing days. Not far up the road was Coughton Court of the Catholic Throckmortons, where waited the women of the family for news of their menfolk involved in the Gunpowder Plot in 1605.

To Leicester the Queen – more generous than people know – granted beautiful Kenilworth. For her celebrated visit of 1575 he added on the grand lodgings we now see in ruins, to house her and the Court. The most sumptuous entertainments of the reign were laid on for her there – it was Leicester's last bid to capture her in marriage, and something of a crisis in their personal relations seems to have arisen. The men of Coventry came to present their pageants, their 'storial show' in the courtyard; the puritanically inclined City corporation were endeavouring to suppress the traditional mysteries, but this did not weigh with a cultivated queen, who bade them perform and rewarded them. In her the Shakespearian drama had a good friend; in fact, her support was decisive. Without her the Lord Mayor and Corporation of London would certainly have suppressed the theatres – a glory of the town to visiting foreigners.

In Shakespeare's time Kenilworth Castle had a large lake on the south side, upon which took place the water-pageants. Several thousand people from the neighbourhood crowded to catch a glimpse of the Queen and enjoy the shows. There is no reason why Shakespeare's father, then an alderman of Stratford, should not have brought along his clever boy of eleven, with the wide-open eyes to take it all in. Nor – with our better knowledge of the way in which contemporary events were absorbed into his experience to reappear in his work – is there any reason why there should not be a reminiscence in Cupid aiming his shaft

At a fair vestal, thronèd by the west . . .

and missing; for

the imperial votaress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.

Would it be fanciful to suppose that Warwickshire knew something of what transpired during that memorable visit? The countryside usually knows. In a stage direction in a very early play, *2 Henry VI*, Shakespeare uniquely mentions 'the terrace' at Kenilworth – naturally he would know it.

The Queen had passed close to Stratford three years before, in 1572; the town contributed loyally to the expenses of such a number, as in 1566, when twenty oxen had been consumed. In 1572 – shortly before the horror of the Massacre of St Bartholomew – she halted at Sir Thomas Lucy's at neighbouring Charlecote. (A fifteenth-century Lucy is given a good mention in *Henry VI*.) Shakespeare would recognise Charlecote still, not so greatly changed in spite of Victorian interference; the gatehouse remains as it was, with pretty diaper pattern in the brick. And there are still the three Sir Thomas Lucys he knew laid out on their tombs in the chapel.

Coming close to the town, there is Clopton House on the slope to the north; though a good deal altered, the core of the house belongs to the sixteenth century with its Renaissance porch added at the time. The Cloptons up there remained Catholics; at the time of the Gunpowder Plot the house was rented by one of the conspirators. In the later fifteenth century Sir Hugh Clopton had been Stratford's great man, and he was still very much present to a youth of imagination. For he had built the Gild Chapel into which townsfolk and scholars from the school next door crowded for services, and the fine bridge that carried across the Avon the road which led south to Oxford and London, and fame. He had also built the finest house in the town, New Place, which success in the theatre in London eventually enabled the former schoolboy to buy.

If one has the eye to look below the surface of the hideous accumulations of the population-explosion of our time – though it is rapidly requiring the techniques of archaeology to do so – it is surprising how much remains. Now within the borough boundaries is the old manor-house of Alveston, with Elizabethan wing. In 1603, when Shakespeare was acquiring property in and around the town, Nicholas Lane bought the house, whose odd effigy with padded sleeves is up-ended in the truncated shut-up church. It was his

nephew, John Lane, who was cited to the Consistory Court at Worcester for slandering Shakespeare's daughter, Susanna.

The house where Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, was brought up remains in the village of Shottery: still recognisable under its thatched roof, in their day it was known as Hewlands Farm. Now practically a suburb of the borough, it was then approached across the wheat fields and the rye, a pleasant walk for an ardent youth.

It was a lover and his lass,
 With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonnino,
 That o'er the green cornfield did pass,
 In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
 When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding;
 Sweet lovers love the spring.
 Between the acres of the rye,
 With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonnino,
 These pretty country folks would lie,
 In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
 When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding;
 Sweet lovers love the spring.

On the Elizabethan stage such a song would be accompanied by appropriate, suggestive gestures; but it was at harvest-time, at the end of August 1582, that William Shakespeare's first child was conceived hereabouts, when he was passing eighteen.

Or we may take the road up and out to Wilmcote, on a little ridge to the north-east, whence we see the blue sickle of the Cotswolds on the south-west horizon. In the village is the Tudor house now known as Mary Arden's, for it belonged to Shakespeare's grandparents, the Ardens, whence his mother married John Shakespeare. The Ardens were superior folk, related to the Arden gentry of Park Hall in north Warwickshire.

It is in the churches that things are least changed – like his own, with its noble spire reflected in the Avon that washes the churchyard wall. At Snitterfield, whence his father married Mary Arden and to which his grandfather came in the reign of Henry VIII, the old church still has its fine stalls of the time, just before the Reformation, the font in which many of the family were baptised. At Rowington is the church where earlier Shakespeares were buried, still with its Elizabethan altar-table, oak chests and alms-box. Aston Cantlow has more woodwork from the Forest of Arden – oak pulpit, chests, a candelabrum; and here Shakespeare's parents would have been married, for it was Mary Arden's parish.

And so down again into the lush water-meadows of the Avon – hardly a couple of miles across is Clifford Chambers, beloved of that other Warwickshire poet, Michael Drayton. (It is endearing to think how closely the age brought into association, and how fruitfully, those Warwickshire men: William Shakespeare and Richard Field, printer and publisher; and Michael Drayton and Holinshed the chronicler.) As Shakespeare used to come back to Stratford every summer, from London or touring the country, so Drayton used to spend the summers with his friends the Rainsfords at moated Clifford Chambers. The charming old half-timbered house was burned down this century, but Sir Henry and his wife – whom Drayton celebrated in his cool sonnets *Idea's Mirror* – remain upon their monument in church, kneeling face to face.

Drayton also was an Arden man by origin, brought up at Polesworth, by the River Anker in the north of the county. He was not a family man, but a bachelor, more of a bookish fellow. A voluminous and a good poet, he had no success with his plays and made no money. But he, at least, was without envy of his fellow countryman (the Elizabethans used the word to mean from the same county) in that quarrelsome age, and Shakespeare's good nature was not one to attract spite for long. Drayton paid him the compliment of drawing upon *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in his exquisite poem *Nymphidia* – both full of Warwickshire folk- and fairy-lore. It is an old tradition, which there is no need to reject, that the two countrymen would foregather in summer.

A small county from the Anker in the north to Barton-on-the-Heath in the south – where Shakespeare's uncle and aunt lived, Edmund and Joan Lambert, and the creation of his early fancy, Christopher Sly, 'old Sly's son of Barton Heath' – but, with its cathedral city of Coventry, its grand castles like Warwick and Kenilworth, with their splendid denizens and the comings and goings of Queen and Court, the numerous manor-houses of Grevilles, Throckmortons, Comptons, Lucys, the busy little towns like Stratford with their intimate teeming life, the churches and schools, the vivid, variegated inhabitants: it made a full world for the imagination to feed upon.

2

A Stratford Family

IF Shakespeare could return to Stratford, he would find his native town still very recognisable – remarkably so, considering the hideous population explosion of our time. We still approach it from the south over Hugh Clopton's strained and tottering bridge; on the left the open space used for archery in Shakespeare's day, now presided over by the *genius loci*. The towering Theatre is all that is new in that direction; behind it, on the exquisite curve of the river, the tapering spire known all over the world, in the shadow of which he and his family lie.

Ahead of us is Bridge Street, now double in width, for a row of houses used to run down the middle. There, conveniently placed at the entrance to the town, were the three chief inns, the Swan, the Bear, the Angel – only the last remains, much translated. In 1583 we find the Earl of Warwick staying at the Swan, which had a Protestant inflexion, while the Bear had a Catholic flavour. At the top, at the intersection of High Street with Henley Street stood the market-cross in Catholic days; in Shakespeare's, it was replaced by a covered structure, under which his father had his standing with the other glovers on market days – the eldest boy would have helped here. Here too was the pound (pinfold) remembered in the early *Two Gentlemen*:

You mistake: I mean the pound – a pinfold.

A half-turn to the right takes us along Henley Street to the house where he was born, not so much changed inside. One of these two small houses was the glover's shop, the other the family home. At the back a wing extends into a pretty garden, now filled with the son's favourite flower, roses. It would have made a cosy little home to bring his wife to, if somewhat cramped in the Elizabethan manner, when people lived their briefer lives more gregariously, more intensely. The living-room still has its open fireplace of brick and stone, raftered ceiling and flagged floor; at the back the kitchen with open hearth; upstairs the big family bedroom dominating the house, the place of birth and death.

An admirable old custodian of the place writes: 'it gathers memories and fancies. Shadows and weird noises are in the rafters, the wind is in the chimney, crickets are on the hearth, through the casement windows shines the moon, from without comes the "to-whit, to-whoo" of the owl.' It must have been a fine place for owls: there were a thousand elms in and about the town in 1582, the small houses bowered in trees and birdsong, the upper end of Henley Street open country, orchards and a grove of ash and elm. Here was Shakespeare's home, until in 1597 he was able to buy New Place, the grandest house in the town: a significant gesture – much in keeping with what Robert Greene wrote about him. He did not occupy this house much till closer to retirement, however; most of the year he would be away, in London or on tour.

Round about were the little homes of the people he knew as boy and youth – as later he came to know the better-off residents at the other end of town, remembering a number of them in his will. For he was essentially a family man, a good townsman, with a sense of community – in contrast to Christopher Marlowe, and unlike Ben Jonson. Next door in Henley Street lived an unrespectable tailor, in spite of being a Wedgwood. Alderman Whately, draper, was very respectable, though there were skeletons in his cupboard in the shape of his brothers, two fugitive Catholic priests. In his garden he had beehives, 'wax, honey and other things in the apple-chamber' – how delightfully it must have smelt! There are still Whateleys in Stratford. A few doors away was another glover, Gilbert Bradley, for whom Shakespeare's brother would have been named.

A stream flowed across the street into Rother Market, thence by New Place down Chapel Lane to the river. Below the stream was Hornby's smithy. When Shakespeare came to write *King John* – with its touching reflection of grief for his only boy, who died young – he remembered also:

I saw a smith stand with his hammer, thus,
The whilst his iron did on the anvil cool,
With open mouth swallowing a tailor's news;
Who, with his shears and measure in his hand,
Standing on slippers, which his nimble haste
Had falsely thrust upon contrary feet. . . .

Evidently a familiar scene: the tailor lived in Henley Street, the smith round the corner.

Down at the bottom in High Street lived the more prosperous shopkeepers and principal burgesses. Adrian Quiney, mercer, was