Shakespeare and the Poet's Life

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Note on Citations

EXCEPT where noted, all citations from Shakespeare's works are made from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans and others (1974). Citations from the Sonnets are from the Stephen Booth edition (1977). Abbreviations for Shakespeare's works are those of the *Harvard Concordance* (1973). For certain authors frequently quoted, I cite in the text by page number from the following editions: John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, edited by A.J. Smith (1971); Ben Jonson, *The Complete Poems*, edited by George Parfitt (1975) (all other Jonsonian citations coming from *The Works*, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson [1925-52] and made by volume and page number); Sir Thomas Wyatt, *The Complete Poems*, edited by R.A. Rebholz (1978); Sir Philip Sidney, *The Poems*, edited by William Ringler (1962). George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) is cited by book and chapter number. Because many of the contemporary works on which this study draws are not easily accessible, I provide for the more important ones their Short Title Catalogue (STC) number on initial citation. All quotations are reproduced exactly as printed in the editions cited except for normalization of *i*, *j*, *u*, and *v* and a small number of silent corrections of anomalous typography or punctuation.

Contents

Introduction

THIS STUDY is, above all, about the English Renaissance poet's life, his motivations for poetizing, his attitudes toward the economy of letters, and the attitudes of society (high society in particular) toward his profession. Paradoxically, it will focus on an author who appears to have entertained for a very short time the notion of being a dedicated (and dedicating), publishing, professional poet and will offer, from several perspectives, some answers to a highly speculative but important and fascinating question about his artistic biography: Why was it William Shakespeare's destiny as a poet to "Bud, and be blasted, in a breathing while"?

The facts are few and pointed. In 1593 and 1594, Shakespeare for the only time in his life published poetry (*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*) under his name and apparently with careful personal oversight. Both poems proved popular and were often reprinted. As for the Sonnets, most scholars assume they date from about the same time, though they did not become available for publication until 1609.[1] Barring either the unlikely discovery of other poems in manuscript or the appearance of hitherto-lost editions, we can say that Shakespeare devoted himself solely to writing for the stage during his last two London decades. Why did the blossoming young poet cease writing sonnets and epyllions, cease in his efforts to combine the professions of courting poet and dramatist, and turn more exclusively to the world of the theater?

We shall never know whether this cessation occurred by conscious choice or merely by default as the years passed. And we are also unlikely to learn what combination of personal and professional circumstances played a part. Neither can we possibly say with certainty *when* Shakespeare was a

dramatist, a poet, or a dramatist-and-poet. We can only say that, sooner rather than later, he stopped being a poet. This is enough, it seems to me, to make it worthwhile contemplating the *professional* considerations that might have caused Shakespeare—or any poet of the time—to feel impelled (as one man wrote in a dedication to Southampton) "to be freed from a Poet's name."[2] The five chapters of the present book thus converge, from widely varying directions, on a general professional question with Shakespeare particularly in mind. Organized accordingly, this study is intended to hang together in two ways: One is as a study of poets and poetizing in Shakespeare's canon. Though I cast a wide net among Renaissance poets—referring often to Wyatt, Spenser, Sidney, Greville, Donne, Jonson, and the sonneteers of the 1590s, each chapter employs evidence in Shakespeare's poems and plays as a rhetorical point of departure or arrival. Every one of Shakespeare's works figures at some point in the discussion, and a half-dozen are given extended attention. Obviously, then, I welcome readers who come with a primary interest in Shakespeare; but to my mind the second way the book hangs together is dominant, namely, as a meditation on the nature of the Renaissance poet's life. Keeping this priority firm saves me from the onus of appearing to assert the unprovable about Shakespeare's *actual* personal career choices and the onus of seeming to desire to justify them.

Lacking certain knowledge, we can scarcely expect to arrive at a simple answer to the provocative question. What is more, several aspects of the turn away from poetry ("complexifiers" in economists' parlance) urge us to conclude that a clear explanation may be too much to hope for. First is the sheer surprise of it. If several editions of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and the well-known praise from Harvey, Meres, Weever, and the *Parnassus* plays are any indication, Shakespeare gained some considerable fame from his early poetical exertions—"fame," as the King says in *Love's Labour's Lost*, "that all hunt after in their lives." Richard Barnfield's praise published in 1598, when Shakespeare was working on his seventeenth play, describes this fame and must strike us as startlingly specific: "And *Shakespeare* thou, whose hony-flowing Vaine, / (Pleasing the World) thy Praises doth containe. / Whose *Venus*, and whose *Lucrece* (sweete, and chaste) / Thy Name in fames immortall Booke have plac't."[3] Why did he walk away from such fame? Cheeky callowness, indifference, supreme artistic boldness, or shrewd calculation of the main chance? Whatever the answer(s), it is rare for authors to renounce success, rare enough to give the question in Shakespeare's case an air of puzzle and mystery.

A second complicating element of the question is that it adjoins the primal query underlying all authorial effort: Why write? Many bold critics

have made asses of themselves trying to answer this question which, perhaps, hath no bottom. But it is not a question we can ignore. Richard Poirier insisted in *The Performing Self,* "We must begin to begin again with the most elementary and therefore the toughest questions: what must it have felt like to do this—not to mean anything, but to do it?"[4] The question Why write? was not ignored by the wisest Renaissance poets: "Come, let me write, 'And to what end?'" Thus Sidney begins his psychomachia-in-verse, *Astrophil and Stella* Sonnet 34 (quoted in full on page 25). Renaissance poets had frequent occasion to whisper this question in real life, though few—Sidney and Shakespeare chief among them—asked it "aloud" in or between the lines they wrote. Few poets exhibited the questing self-consciousness of their identity and methods as poets that is bared in Sidney's question. The ways it was answered, we shall soon see, at once illuminate and complicate our understanding of Shakespeare's willingness to abjure verse.

A third complication derives from the fact that our question requires us to focus on the most complex part of a writer's career, its beginnings, when the pressures and anxieties experienced are most volatile. All writers, Shakespeare surely included, are keenly subject at the inception of their careers to the kind of preoccupation described in a letter by Robert Frost: "My whole anxiety is for myself as a performer. Am I any good? That's what I'd like to know and all I need to know."[5] Such anxiety often leads to unpredictable extremities—sometimes electrifying, sometimes merely egregious. One can find passages to fit both epithets from the opening of Shakespeare's career when, clearly, an exuberant literary upstart was testing in numerous ways whether he was any good. It is tempting to think of Shakespeare arriving from the Midlands, Lancashire, or wherever in the cultural cynosure of London just as Lucentio arrives at Italy's "nursery of arts" in *The Taming of the Shrew* (possibly, the Arden editor suggests, Shakespeare's first London play): "I have Pisa left / And am to Padua come, as he that leaves / A shallow plash to plunge him in the deep, / And with satiety seeks to quench his thirst" (1.1.21-24). And *satiety*—whether of taffeta phrases in *Love's Labour's Lost*, blood in *Titus Andronicus*, preposterous hijinks in the two farces, or villainy in *Richard III*—is an apt word for the works that came from Shakespeare's youthful pen.

Shakespeare's sonnets and long poems in particular are remarkably full-dieted performances, and are generally accepted as calculated, extrovert, virtuosic vanities of a just-fledged poet's art. As the following pages urge, these performances say much about the poet and his self-image. I use the term *performances* advisedly. Poirier has also written, "Performance is an exercise of power, a very curious one. Curious because it is at first so

furiously self-consultive, so even narcissistic, and later so eager for publicity, love, and historical dimension."[6] There is, as we shall see, much eagerness of this kind in Shakespeare's poetry. Indeed, it might be said that in his early years Shakespeare consulted several plausible selves; the focus of the present study will be his self-as-poet.

A beginner's anxiety was shared by all those nonarmigerous persons who presented themselves as performers on the Renaissance literary stage, as Richard Helgerson has noted: "In those crossings of the threshold, when the author first appears before his audience, the pressure on self-presentation is greatest. To some extent, each beginning . . . brings a renewal of self-presentational pressure."[7] This self-consulting performance was exacerbated by the complex, rigid etiquette that governed all modes of social and artistic self-presentation or self- fashioning in the Renaissance. Some of this etiquette may seem to have worked on primitive levels because, with Miss Manners and her Gentle Reader, we have progressed far beyond Giovanni Della Casa's *Galateo, A Treatise of Manners* (1576), wherein the reader is advised: "when thou hast blowne thy nose, use not to open thy handkerchief, to glare upon thy snot, as if [thou] hadst pearles and rubies fallen from thy braines." Or, "let not a man to . . . lie tottering with one legg so high above the other, that a man may see all bare that his cloathes would cover."[8] But the etiquette facing the upstart courting denizen also took highly sophisticated forms. Authors were thus induced into various elaborate forms of indirection, deference, masking, and politesse, which led to very complex socioliterary transactions (studied most notably by Frank Whigham and Arthur Marotti). These will also make it harder to arrive at a clear answer to our question.

A last complication worth noting is more specific to Shakespeare's beginnings as an author: His turn from poetry apparently came at a time when he had yet to discover his artistic identity and was gamely covering all his careerist bets. Jorge Luis Borges has observed, "The fate of a writer is strange. At first he is baroque—ostentatiously baroque—and after many years he may attain, if the stars are auspicious, not simplicity, which in itself is nothing, but a modest and hidden complexity." Elsewhere he made his point more prosaically: "I think a writer always begins by being too complicated. He's playing at several games at the same time."[9] Though Borges was thinking of his own career, his view applies emphatically and poignantly to Shakespeare. One need simply describe some of the works from his first few years on the literary scene to recognize that he was playing several games at once: a vast historical trilogy with its pendant "tragedy" of Richard III, a comic and a tragic epyllion, a Plautine farce (*The Comedy of Errors*), a sonnet sequence, a domestic comedy of manners

(*Taming of the Shrew*), a Senecan tragedy (*Titus Andronicus*), and an aristocratic comedy of manners (*Love's Labour's Lost*). There is an irresistible parallel here with the young pianist who exults in a spectacular technique, but without having much "to say" about the music that is specific to the musician's not-yet-matured creative personality. Thus, our question positions us to focus on Shakespeare at his most baroque, when his work was rife with ostentation—much of it "delightful," some of it "maggot" (LLL 5.1.111; 5.2.409). Peering behind Shakespeare's lines is always risk-laden, but especially so when, as in his early years, he was performing the literary corantos and capers that he perceived as suitable to the decorum of several established genres.

Enough has been said to make clear that the explanation offered here for Shakespeare's digression from what Drayton called the "nice and Narrow way of Verse" will be multifarious and not without internal contradiction.[10] The reader should also be forewarned that the picture painted in the following pages will be a darkly shadowed one, as a thesis proposed not long ago by Alvin Kernan in *The Playwright as Magician* can conveniently suggest. Kernan sees the Young Man of the Sonnets as "the Muse of courtly lyric poetry: open, clear, idealized, beautiful, changeable rather than complex in nature, polished in manners, the inheritor of a great tradition, aristocratic and male." He finds the muse of the theater represented by the Dark Lady: "illicit, darkly mysterious, sensual, infinitely complex, beautiful and ugly, common and public, the source of pleasure and pain." Kernan then speculates that Shakespeare finally chose the latter muse.[11] This thesis has its obvious attractions, but I shall argue, conversely, that the poet's life was by no means the idealized one presented by Kernan. More to my purposes are the following: the bitter complaint of Ovid Senior in Jonson's *The Poetaster* (recall that Shakespeare launched his poetical career as an Ovidian), "Name me a profest *poet*, that his *poetrie* did ever afford so much as a competencie" (4:211); Donne's reluctance to produce some verse for the Countess of Huntingdon: "That knowledge which she hath of me, was in the beginning of a graver course, then of a Poet, into which (that I may also keep my dignity) I would not seem to relapse. The Spanish proverb informes me, that he is a fool which cannot make one Sonnet, and he is mad which makes two" (*Letters*, 103); or the colloquy from a play of the 1590s in which Surrey says, "Oh, my Lord, you tax me / In that word poet of much idleness: / It is a studie that makes poore our fate," and Sir Thomas More replies, "This is noe age for poets."[12]

It should be clear that in speaking of "the poet's life" I refer to the class of Renaissance authors who produced primarily recreational, nondramatic

verse—what George Puttenham (defining "Lyrique poets") classed as "songs and ballads of pleasure." My interest is thus to inquire how Shakespeare's early experience of such a poet's life, and his observation of others who lived it as well, might have affected his achievement in that vastly larger universe created by the Folio's "Scenicke" poet. "I have endeavoured to prove," wrote Coleridge, "[that Shakespeare] had shown himself a *poet*, previously to his appearance as a dramatic poet," and the present study attempts to explore how the former identity might have been diffused in the latter.[13]

This purpose can be phrased more atmospherically. Oscar Wilde wrote in "Shakespeare and Costume Design" (1885) that "nobody, from the mere details of apparel and adornment, has ever drawn such irony of contrast, such immediate and tragic effect, such pity and such pathos, as Shakespeare. . . .He was the first to see the dramatic value of doublets, and that a climax may depend upon a crinoline."[14] Wilde's aperçu aptly reminds us of the Renaissance notion of the "garment" of poetic style. It was, for instance, Puttenham's purpose in his *Arte of English Poesie* to "apparel" the "good Poet or maker [in] all his gorgious habilliments." My purpose is thus not to search for "Shakespeare's poets"—a task, in any event, that Kenneth Muir was able to perform nicely in a short essay[15]—but to learn something of his sensitivity to the "apparel and adornment" of poetic style, to consider how he may have felt in the poet's gorgeous habiliments, and to explore how (in his later years) they became merely another, but often a quite useful, part of the tiring-house wardrobe.

Finally, let me say that, while arriving at several uncomplimentary conclusions about the Renaissance poet's life, I do not intend to suggest that the life of a playwright and actor was necessarily less demeaning. Surely there was much discomfort in a life of stooping to the tastes of a Globe Theater "general" and in coping with the constraints of censorship, the hostility of London's city fathers, and the hazardous economics of public playing. But Shakespeare's experience as a dramatist has been studied hitherto by numerous scholars from Bentley, Bradbrook, Harbage and Bethell to Rabkin, Gurr, Wickham, Weimann, and Barish, to name but a few of the more prominent. I have therefore excluded the risky life of the London theater from consideration here. The blunt fact remains that Shakespeare's canon displays a clear professional preference; it is for us to account for it as plausibly as we can without making unnecessary, invidious comparisons between poetry and drama.

Something should be said about the place the present study occupies in the current critical landscape. My evidence is drawn primarily from contemporary letters, courtesy books, rhetorical treatises, front matter, and

biographies; my catalyzing question is one of Shakespearean biography. To some, this will seem passé in the light of recent critical fashions. But it has been my desire, employing methods dusted but surely not exhausted by "antique time," to work outward from the central locus of Shakespeare's canon in the direction of several important critical enterprises of recent birth. While I have not partaken of the paradigms or terminology of the "new" historicism or deconstructive theory, for example, I believe the present study complements several studies in these fields. The focus of one of the founders of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, has been summarized as "the forces of containment as a means of describing the paradoxical relationship of texts to society."[16] The reader will find frequent occasion in this study of the paradoxical relationship of *poets* to society to recall the insights of Greenblatt and those who have followed him. An important study, which appeared after mine was completed, underscores the complementarity I have hoped for: Joel Fineman's *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (1986). Though Fineman indulges an extremely dense discursive style and eschews reference "to an actual or biographical Shakespearean personality . . . of a kind that historical critics look for in literary and extra-literary archives" (82)—precisely my metier—I was surprised and pleased at how often his assertions ramified what I have to say: beneath our radically different methodologies are important shared premises and conclusions.[17]

Several valuable recent books (behind which loom such names as Burke, Foucault, Goffman, Elias, and Geertz) have explored exciting new paths but, tantalizingly, have only reached the Shakespearean threshold. I have tried to move toward them from the opposite direction. I am thinking, for instance, of Daniel Javitch, whose focus on the "association between court conduct and the poet's art" in *Poetry and Courtliness in Renaissance England* (1978) and other works figures often in the following pages. Richard Helgerson's concern, in *Self-Crowned Laureates* (1983), with "self-definition and self-presentation" among Renaissance poets often reflects on the less exalted professional poet's life, too. (The term *laureate*, incidentally, never occurs in Shakespeare.) Especially contiguous with my study is Frank Whigham's *Ambition and Privilege: Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy* (1984), an exploration of "rhetorical semiotics at court" and "tropes of promotion and compliment . . . combat and rivalry" employed at court. The implications of Whigham's study for the newly arrived lyric poet at court are daunting, and I have sought to draw some of them into the context of Shakespeare's London life and his imagined courtly lives. My historical-biographical focus also bears some similarity to that of Arthur Marotti's frequently speculative but illuminating *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (1986). Also

valuable is Eckhard Auberlen's *The Commonwealth of Wit: The Writer's Image and His Strategies of Self-Presentation in Elizabethan Literature* (1984), which explores in several suggestive ways the "writer's self-representation as an attempt to influence social evaluations of his position." Unfortunately, Auberlen excludes authors principally known as dramatists; Shakespeare is mentioned but a few times in passing. However, several of Auberlen's observations pertinent to the playwright-poet will be pursued here.

My study of Shakespeare's self-consciousness as a poet and his self-conscious deployment of poetical style also draws upon recent linguistic and rhetorical approaches. Richard Lanham's *The Motives of Eloquence* (1976) figures in the opening of chapter 1, and the relevance of Marion Trousdale's *Shakespeare and the Rhetoricians* (1982), which rests on the assumption that "poetic language to the Elizabethans was always a conscious language," will also become clear. Keir Elam's Shakespeare's *Universe of Discourse: Language-Games in the Comedies* (1984), combining the disciplines of linguistics, the philosophy of language, language-oriented sociology, and semiotics, is "a study of the self-consciousness of Shakespeare's language" and "the intense linguistic awareness" of Shakespeare's age. Further evidence of these characteristics appears often in my study.

A third area of scholarship toward which my approach has seemed to impel me is metadrama, spawned as long ago as Anne Barton's *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (1962). Though metadramatic criticism often veers into discourse on the hermeneutics and ontology of the theatrical experience, the genre's less theoretical and more sociological manifestations will be found relevant to much that I have to say. James Calderwood in *Shakespearean Metadrama* (1971), for example, says of a play to which I devote much attention, *Love's Labour's Lost*, that it focuses on "language and the durability of art" and on "the poet's relations to society and language." This same reflexive awareness is much in evidence in my discussion of the poet's self-identity. It might be more accurate, though, to say my quarry is more specifically the manifestation of a metapoetics in Shakespeare's plays.

Chapter 1 sketches some of the general features of the poet's courting life, offering first a reading of *Venus and Adonis* as a parable of both the courtier's and the courting poet's experience "in waiting," then turning to other images of this experience in *Love's Labour's Lost* and the Sonnets. Chapter 2 addresses the strategies of front matter. Title pages, dedications, and epistles to the reader were the bibliographical and typographical forms of "courtesy" during the Renaissance; here I explore authorial courting from this peculiar, often exasperating, sometimes amusing part of the literary terrain. Chapter 3 focuses first on the patron-client relationship and on

various attitudes toward the writer's profession as they are conveyed in Shakespeare's diction, then on his changing presentations of patronage in *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Timon of Athens*, and *The Tempest*. Because poetic virtuosity and courtly dexterity were then perceived as intimately related, chapter 4 explores the illuminating intersections between the courtier's and the courting poet's lives. Central here is a canvass of the half-dozen roles of the poet to be found in Shakespeare's imaginary courts. The chapter closes with a look at the ways two of Shakespeare's richest creations, Falstaff and Iago, combine all of these shadow roles of the poet. Chapter 5 shows, through close consultation with the Young Man sonnets, that the private goals and circumstances of a neophyte suitor are deeply ingrained in these poems. G.K. Hunter has called Spenser's *Amoretti* in a limited sense "the history of a courtship," and in a similarly limited sense I argue that the Young Man sonnets present the history of a courtiership.[18] As an envoi and summary of my speculations, I offer in the epilogue a brief allegorical reading of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

"Thou Thing Most Abhorred"

The Poet and His Muse

I wish not there should be
Graved in mine Epitaph a Poet's name.
—Sir Philip Sidney

VENUS, Shakespeare's first masterly comic character to appear before the public in print, has—like virtually all his subsequent protagonists—evoked reactions wildly at variance with each other. C.S. Lewis, decidedly immune to her charms, wrote that she reminded him of those corpulent older women with expansive bosoms and moist lips who harassed him when he was a boy. Others have more recently nominated Venus genetrix of eloquence, predatory Freudian mother, protean temptress, a forty-year-old countess with a taste for Chapel Royal altos, and the embodiment of infinite desire. One critic, wishing to encompass all of Venus's many facets, has suggested that Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* "nicely catalogues" them: "A mother, and a mistress, and a friend, / A phoenix, captain, and an enemy, / A guide, a goddess, and a sovereign, / A counsellor, a traitress, and a dear" (1.1.167-70). Commentators on *Venus and Adonis*, which announced Shakespeare's arrival on the poetical scene and was the work most often reprinted in his lifetime, have transformed Venus many times in their effort to demonstrate what the voluble heroine and her poem (hers it assuredly is) are about. Several of the most illuminating interpretations have been unabashedly tendentious, as, for instance, when Richard Lanham asserted in *The Motives of Eloquence* that *Venus and Adonis* and the other narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, are "*about* rhetorical identity and the strategies of rhetorical style."[1] In this exordium for a study of the poet's life in Shakespeare's time, I will approach *Venus and Adonis* in the same narrowly focused way, namely, with a view of the poem as being "about" the poet's identity and his strategies in the lists of patronage and clientage.

The poem at first blush is about coitus: what Shakespeare in Sonnet 20