Bill Bryson

Shakespeare

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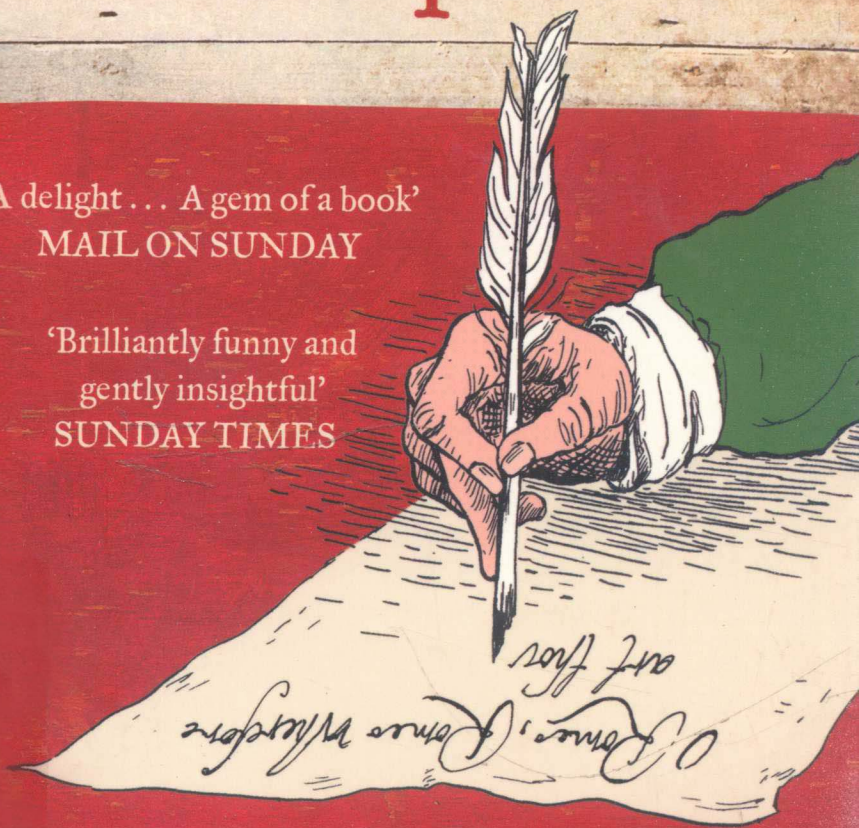

SHAKESPEARE

The World as a Stage

BILL BRYSON

ATLAS BOOKS

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Chapter One

In Search of William Shakespeare

BEFORE HE CAME into a lot of money in 1839, Richard Plantagenet Temple Nugent Brydges Chandos Grenville, second Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, led a largely uneventful life.

He sired an illegitimate child in Italy, spoke occasionally in the House of Commons against the repeal of the Corn Laws, and developed an early interest in plumbing (his house at Stowe, in Buckinghamshire, had nine of the first flush toilets in England), but otherwise was distinguished by nothing more than his glorious prospects and many names. But after inheriting his titles and one of England's great estates, he astonished his associates, and no doubt himself, by managing to lose every penny of his inheritance in just nine years through a series of spectacularly unsound investments.

Bankrupt and humiliated, in the summer of 1848 he fled to France, leaving Stowe and its contents to his creditors. The auction that followed became one of the great social events of

the age. Such was the richness of Stowe's furnishings that it took a team of auctioneers from the London firm of Christie & Manson forty days to get through it all.

Among the lesser-noted disposals was a dark oval portrait, twenty-two inches high by eighteen wide, purchased by the Earl of Ellesmere for 355 guineas and known ever since as the Chandos portrait. The painting had been much retouched, and was so blackened with time that a great deal of detail was (and still is) lost. It shows a balding but not unhandsome man of about forty, who sports a trim beard. In his left ear he wears a gold earring. His expression is confident, serenely rakish. This is not a man, you sense, to whom you would lightly entrust a wife or grown daughter.

Although nothing is known about the origin of the painting or where it was for much of the time before it came into the Chandos family in 1747, it has been said for a long time to be of William Shakespeare. Certainly it *looks* like William Shakespeare – but then really it ought to, since it is one of the three likenesses of Shakespeare from which all others are taken.

In 1856, shortly before his death, Lord Ellesmere gave the painting to the new National Portrait Gallery in London as its founding work. As the gallery's first acquisition, it has a certain sentimental prestige, but almost at once its authenticity was doubted. Many critics at the time thought the subject was too dark-skinned and foreign-looking – too Italian or Jewish – to be an English poet, much less a very great one. Some, to quote the late Samuel Schoenbaum, were disturbed by his 'wanton' air and 'lubricious' lips. (One suggested, perhaps a touch hopefully,

that he was portrayed in stage make-up, probably in the role of Shylock.)

'Well, the painting is from the right period – we can certainly say that much,' Dr Tarnya Cooper, curator of sixteenth-century portraits at the gallery, told me one day when I set off to find out what we could know and reasonably assume about the most venerated figure of the English language. 'The collar is of a type that was popular between about 1590 and 1610, just when Shakespeare was having his greatest success and thus most likely to sit for a portrait. We can also tell that the subject was a bit bohemian, which would seem consistent with a theatrical career, and that he was at least fairly well to do, as Shakespeare would have been in this period.'

I asked how she could tell these things.

'Well, the earring tells us he was bohemian,' she explained. 'An earring on a man meant the same then as it does now – that the wearer was a little more fashionably racy than the average person. Drake and Raleigh were both painted with earrings. It was their way of announcing that they were of an adventurous disposition. Men who could afford to wore a lot of jewellery back then, mostly sewn into their clothes. So the subject here is either fairly discreet, or not hugely wealthy. I would guess probably the latter. On the other hand, we can tell that he was prosperous – or wished us to think he was prosperous – because he is dressed all in black.'

She smiled at my look of puzzlement. 'It takes a lot of dye to make a fabric really black. Much cheaper to produce clothes that were fawn or beige or some other lighter colour. So black clothes

in the sixteenth century were nearly always a sign of prosperity.'

She considered the painting appraisingly. 'It's not a *bad* painting, but not a terribly good one either,' she went on. 'It was painted by someone who knew how to prime a canvas, so he'd had some training, but it is quite workaday and not well lighted. The main thing is that if it is Shakespeare, it is the only portrait known that might have been done from life, so this would be what William Shakespeare really looked like – if it is William Shakespeare.'

And what are the chances that it is?

'Without documentation of its provenance we'll never know, and it's unlikely now, after such a passage of time, that such documentation will ever turn up.'

And if not Shakespeare, who is it?

She smiled. 'We've no idea.'

If the Chandos portrait is not genuine, then we are left with two other possible likenesses to help us decide what William Shakespeare looked like. The first is the copperplate engraving that appeared as the frontispiece of the collected works of Shakespeare in 1623 – the famous First Folio.

The Droeshout engraving, as it is known (after its artist, Martin Droeshout), is an arrestingly – we might almost say magnificently – mediocre piece of work. Nearly everything about it is flawed. One eye is bigger than the other. The mouth is curiously mispositioned. The hair is longer on one side of the subject's head than the other, and the head itself is out of proportion to the body and seems to float off the shoulders, like a

balloon. Worst of all, the subject looks diffident, apologetic, almost frightened – nothing like the gallant and confident figure that speaks to us from the plays.

Droeshout (or Drossaert or Drussoit, as he was sometimes known in his own time) is nearly always described as being from a family of Flemish artists, though in fact the Droeshouts had been in England for sixty years and three generations by the time Martin came along. Peter W.M. Blayney, the leading authority on the First Folio, has suggested that Droeshout, who was in his early twenties and not very experienced when he executed the work, may have won the commission not because he was an accomplished artist but because he owned the right piece of equipment: a rolling press of the type needed for copperplate engravings. Few artists had such a device in the 1620s.

Despite its many shortcomings, the engraving comes with a poetic endorsement from Ben Jonson, who says of it in his memorial to Shakespeare in the First Folio:

> *O, could he but have drawne his wit*
> *As well in brasse, as he hath hit*
> *His face, the Print would then surpasse*
> *All that was ever writ in brasse.*

It has been suggested, with some plausibility, that Jonson may not actually have seen the Droeshout engraving before penning his generous lines. What is certain is that the Droeshout portrait was not done from life: Shakespeare had been dead for seven years by the time of the First Folio.

That leaves us with just one other possible likeness: the painted, life-size statue that forms the centrepiece of a wall monument to Shakespeare at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he is buried. Like the Droeshout it is an indifferent piece of work artistically, but it does have the merit of having been seen and presumably passed as satisfactory by people who knew Shakespeare. It was executed by a mason named Gheerart Janssen, and installed in the chancel of the church by 1623 – the same year as Droeshout's portrait. Janssen lived and worked near the Globe Theatre in Southwark in London, and thus may well have seen Shakespeare in life – though one rather hopes not, as the Shakespeare he portrays is a puffy-faced, self-satisfied figure, with (as Mark Twain memorably put it) the 'deep, deep, subtle, subtle expression of a bladder'.

We don't know exactly what the effigy looked like originally, because in 1749 the colours of its paintwork were 'refreshed' by some anonymous but well-meaning soul. Twenty-four years later, the Shakespeare scholar Edmond Malone, visiting the church, was horrified to find the bust painted, and ordered the churchwardens to have it whitewashed, returning it to what he wrongly assumed was its original state. By the time it was repainted again years later, no one had any idea of what colours to apply. The matter is of consequence because the paint gives the portrait not just colour but definition, as much of the detail is not carved on but painted. Under whitewash it must have looked rather like those featureless mannequins once commonly used to display hats in shop windows.

So we are in the curious position with William Shakespeare of having three likenesses from which all others are derived: two that aren't very good by artists working years after his death, and one that is rather more compelling as a portrait but that may well be of someone else altogether. The paradoxical consequence is that we all recognize a likeness of Shakespeare the instant we see one, and yet we don't really know what he looked like. It is like this with nearly every aspect of his life and character: he is at once the best known and least known of figures.

More than two hundred years ago, in a sentiment much repeated ever since, the historian George Steevens observed that all we know of William Shakespeare is contained within a few scanty facts: that he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, produced a family there, went to London, became an actor and writer, returned to Stratford, made a will, and died. That wasn't quite true then and it is even less so now, but it is not all that far from the truth either.

After four hundred years of dedicated hunting, researchers have found about a hundred documents relating to William Shakespeare and his immediate family – baptismal records, title deeds, tax certificates, marriage bonds, writs of attachment, court records (many court records – it was a litigious age) and so on. That's quite a good number as these things go, but deeds and bonds and other records are inevitably bloodless. They tell us a great deal about the business of a person's life, but almost nothing about the emotions of it.

In consequence there remains an enormous amount that we

don't know about William Shakespeare, much of it of a fundamental nature. We don't know, for one thing, exactly how many plays he wrote or in what order he wrote them. We can deduce something of what he read, but don't know where he got the books or what he did with them when he had finished with them.

Although he left nearly a million words of text, we have just fourteen words in his own hand – his name signed six times and the words 'by me' on his will. Not a single note or letter or page of manuscript survives. (Some authorities believe that a section of the play *Sir Thomas More*, which was never performed, is in Shakespeare's hand, but that is far from certain.) We have no written description of him penned in his own lifetime. The first textual portrait – 'he was a handsome, well-shap't man: very good company, and of a very readie and pleasant smooth witt' – was written sixty-four years after his death by a man, John Aubrey, who was born ten years after that death.

Shakespeare seems to have been the mildest of fellows, and yet the earliest written account we have of him is an attack on his character by a fellow artist. He appears to many biographers to have spurned his wife – famously he left her only his second-best bed in his will, and that as an apparent afterthought – and yet no one wrote more highly, more devotedly, more beamingly, of love and the twining of kindred souls.

We are not sure how best to spell his name – but then neither, it appears, was he, for the name is never spelled the same way twice in the signatures that survive. (They read as 'Willm Saksp', 'William Shakespe', 'Wm Shakspe', 'William

Shakspere', 'Willm Shakspere' and 'William Shakspeare'. Curiously, one spelling he didn't use was the one now universally attached to his name.) Nor can we be entirely confident how he pronounced his name. Helge Kökeritz, author of the definitive *Shakespeare's Pronunciation*, thought it possible that Shakespeare said it with a short *a*, as in 'shack'. It may have been spoken one way in Stratford and another in London, or he may have been as variable with the pronunciation as he was with the spelling.

We don't know if he ever left England. We don't know who his principal companions were or how he amused himself. His sexuality is an irreconcilable mystery. On only a handful of days in his life can we say with absolute certainty where he was. We have no record at all of his whereabouts for the eight critical years when he left his wife and three young children in Stratford and became, with almost impossible swiftness, a successful playwright in London. By the time he is first mentioned in print as a playwright, in 1592, his life was already more than half over.

For the rest, he is a kind of literary equivalent of an electron – forever there and not there.

To understand why we know as little as we do of William Shakespeare's life, and what hope we have of knowing more, I went one day to the Public Record Office – now known as the National Archives – at Kew, in west London. There I met David Thomas, a compact, cheerful, soft-spoken man with grey hair, the senior archivist. When I arrived, Thomas was hefting a large, ungainly bound mass of documents – an Exchequer

memoranda roll from the Hilary (or winter) term of 1570 – onto a long table in his office. A thousand pages of sheepskin parchment, loosely bound and with no two sheets quite matching, it was an unwieldy load requiring both arms to carry. 'In some ways the records are extremely good,' Thomas told me. 'Sheepskin is a marvellously durable medium, though it has to be treated with some care. Whereas ink soaks into the fibres on paper, on sheepskin it stays on the surface, rather like chalk on a blackboard, and so can be rubbed away comparatively easily.

'Sixteenth-century paper was of good quality, too,' he went on. 'It was made of rags and was virtually acid free, so it has lasted very well.'

To my untrained eye, however, the ink had faded to an illegible watery faintness, and the script was of a type that was effectively indecipherable. Moreover the writing on the sheets was not organized in any way that aided the searching eye. Paper and parchment were expensive, so no space was wasted. There were no gaps between paragraphs – indeed, no paragraphs. Where one entry ended, another immediately began, without numbers or headings to identify or separate one case from another. It would be hard to imagine less scannable text. To determine whether a particular volume contained a reference to any one person or event, you would have to read essentially every word – and that isn't always easy even for experts like Thomas, because handwriting at the time was extremely variable.

Elizabethans were as free with their handwriting as they

were with their spelling. Handbooks of handwriting suggested up to twenty different – often very different – ways of shaping particular letters. Depending on one's taste, for instance, a letter *d* could look like a figure eight, a diamond with a tail, a circle with a curlicue, or any of fifteen other shapes. *A*'s could look like *h*'s, *e*'s like *o*'s, *f*'s like *s*'s and *l*'s – in fact, nearly every letter could look like nearly every other. Complicating matters further is the fact that court cases were recorded in a distinctive lingua franca known as court hand – 'a peculiar clerical Latin that no Roman could read', Thomas told me, smiling. 'It used English word order but incorporated an arcane vocabulary and idiosyncratic abbreviations. Even clerks struggled with it because when cases got really complicated or tricky, they would often switch to English for convenience.'

Although Thomas knew he had the right page and had studied the document many times, it took him a good minute or more to find the line referring to 'John Shappere alias *Shakespere*' of 'Stratford upon Haven', accusing him of usury. The document is of considerable importance to Shakespeare scholars, for it helps to explain why in 1576, when Will was twelve years old, his father abruptly retired from public life (about which more in due course), but it was only found in 1983 by a researcher named Wendy Goldsmith.

There are over a hundred miles of records like this in the National Archives – nearly ten million documents altogether – in London and in an old salt mine in Cheshire, not all of them from the relevant period, to be sure, but enough to keep the most dedicated researcher busy for decades.

The only certain way to find more would be to look through all the documents. In the early 1900s an odd American couple, Charles and Hulda Wallace, decided to do just that. Charles Wallace was an instructor in English at the University of Nebraska who just after the turn of the century, for reasons unknown, developed a sudden and lasting fixation with determining the details of Shakespeare's life. In 1906 he and Hulda made the first of several trips to London to sift through the records. Eventually they settled there permanently. Working for up to eighteen hours a day, mostly at the Public Record Office on Chancery Lane, as it then was, they pored over hundreds of thousands – Wallace claimed five million* – documents of all types: Exchequer memoranda rolls, property deeds, messuages, pipe rolls, plea rolls, conveyancings and all the other dusty hoardings of legal life in sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century London.

Their conviction was that Shakespeare, as an active citizen, was bound to turn up in the public records from time to time. The theory was sound enough, but when you consider that there were hundreds of thousands of records, without indexes or cross references, each potentially involving any of 200,000 citizens; that Shakespeare's name, if it appeared at all, might be spelled in some eighty different ways, or blotted or abbreviated beyond recognition; and that there was no reason to suppose that he had been involved in London in any of the things –

* This was probably stretching it. If the Wallaces averaged five minutes, say, on each document, it would have taken them 416,666 hours to get through five million of them. Even working around the clock, that would represent 47.5 years of searching.

arrest, marriage, legal disputes and the like – that got one into the public records in the first place, the Wallaces' devotion was truly extraordinary.

So we may imagine a muffled cry of joy when in 1909 they came across a litigation roll from the Court of Requests in London comprising twenty-six assorted documents that together make up what is known as the Belott–Mountjoy (or Mountjoie) case. All relate to a dispute in 1612 between Christopher Mountjoy, a refugee Huguenot wigmaker, and his son-in-law, Stephen Belott, over a marriage settlement. Essentially, Belott felt that his father-in-law had not given him all that he had promised, and so he took the older man to court.

Shakespeare, it appears, was caught up in the affair because he had been a lodger in Mountjoy's house in Cripplegate in 1604 when the dispute arose. By the time he was called upon to give testimony eight years later, he claimed – not unreasonably – to be unable to remember anything of consequence about what had been agreed between his landlord and the landlord's son-in-law.

The case provided no fewer than twenty-four new mentions of Shakespeare and one precious additional signature – the sixth and so far last one found. Moreover, it is also the best and most natural of his surviving signatures. This was the one known occasion when Shakespeare had both space on the page for a normal autograph and a healthily steady hand with which to write it. Even so, as was his custom, he writes the name in an abbreviated form: 'Willm Shaksp'. It also has a large blot on the end of the surname, probably because of the comparatively