SHAKESPEARE

The poet in his world

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Preface

'We *know* we cannot write a biography of Shakespeare; we *think* we can write one of Marlowe.'

These alarming words, pronounced a quarter of a century ago at Cambridge by Oxford's Merton Professor, have not deterred the biographers. Since those days reinforcements have come from the developing historical disciplines of social and cultural history, demography, the growth of art history and theatre research, enabling a legitimate expansion upon the documentary material of Shakespeare's personal life – less extensive than Marlowe's lawless career provided. Joel Hurstfield, Geoffrey Elton, Christopher Morris, have contributed directly as historians to Shakespearean studies – which indeed were always seen as relevant by the best teachers of the older generation, Trevelyan or my own preceptor, Helen Cam, Fellow of Girton and Professor at Harvard (America has contributed much here).

I have tried to see Shakespeare in his social context of Stratford and London; this contrast is set out in my first two chapters. Without his dual role as actor and playwright, Shakespeare's imagination could not have gained the extra dimensions of a performing art; he had to take, and constantly reshaped, what public taste and his fellows offered. Marlowe and Jonson influenced most powerfully his youth and his maturity; he set Henry VI against Tamburlaine, his final Romances against the Stuart Masque, as I have sketched out in chapters 3–4 and 11–12. The relation to his acting company, the third great influence, is the subject of chapters 5–7.

I have assumed that for him, in common with the rest of his age, family and religion were governing features of his inner as of his outer life. Neither is likely to be as powerful today;

but by many historians, from Lawrence Stone to Peter Laslett, the family is seen as the conditioning factor for Court and Country. Family tables show how close was the governing network in the Court circle of the players' patrons (there was a like pattern in the City of London). When Shakespeare had succeeded in London, his youngest brother and his eldest nephew quite naturally followed, to be introduced into his craft of the theatre, although neither achieved any fame. However, Charles Hart, the star of the Restoration stage, may have been his illegitimate great-nephew. He was Nell Gwynn's first love.

In its archæology and iconography, theatrical history has recently made great strides, but its sociology is still a comparatively unexplored field. In Shakespeare's day, religious conflicts dominated the political scenes – as in Ireland today, where the situation is inherited from those struggles which engaged and defeated Essex and Southampton at the end of the sixteenth century. Shakespeare, as a player, was exposed to special religious pressures from the left wing of the reformers and also to insults which seem to me to have left their mark in *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*. Doctrine was continually at war with Charity, so that for anyone of a religious temper, the inner struggle must always have been severe. In choosing the life of the theatre, Shakespeare showed not merely courage and initiative but readiness to expose himself to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, not only from slander and detraction within and without the ranks but from the natural hazards of plague. It has been recently suggested that the history of epidemics is more significant than military history for Western Europe. On the most conservative estimate, seven years of Shakespeare's theatrical career were cut out by plague.

Parallel to the new tendencies to reinforce documentary biography from social history, psychological interpretation and analysis have become almost a necessity, for which any artist provides plenitude of 'evidence'. It seems to me, however, that to put Shakespeare's collected works on the analyst's couch – those triumphs of health and adjustment, so long surviving his mortal frame – is to seek the living among the dead. Though reductive diagrams have their uses, art is not material for amateur pathologists. Although modern interests are strongly drawn to the view that, for Shakespeare the artist, his prick

was more important than his prayers, even the Sonnets contain a good deal of prayer.

The Sonnets also provide the largest area for biographical fancy: 'Mr W.H.', to whom the printer dedicated his unsponsored edition of 1609, would seem from the tone of that brief acknowledgment to be the printer's social equal, the procurer rather than the subject of the verses. Of the dozens of identifications which are recorded in the great Variorum edition, no single one has established itself. I have assumed that the fair youth was the Earl of Southampton, on the evidence as I read it; but of course it may be turned to fit many other candidates – a new one reached me by this morning's post. However, as I explain in Chapters 9 and 10, I think that the combined influences of Essex and Southampton on the writings of Shakespeare may be less significant than the Gunpowder Plot.

As no book on Shakespeare would be complete without the offer of a new candidate for the role of Dark Lady (or Nice Wanton), conscious that this duty has been neglected in the book itself, after much cogitation it seems to me that Mrs Winifred Burbage has the double advantage of novelty and plausibility. The lady was dark, musical and married – this is the sum of our direct information. Mrs Burbage's Christian name is Welsh; the Welsh are almost invariably dark and musical and not infrequently married. Many light o' loves in Stuart drama are named Winifred or Win; a very early story shows Shakespeare sprinting ahead of Burbage to an assignation with a citizen's wife who had fallen for the actor in his role of Richard III, and sending a triumphant message that 'William the Conqueror' was come before Richard III. Any amateur pathologist will recognize the displacement of the sonnet situation here; think too what a resonance is given to the role of Othello played by Burbage. Every ingenious reader is, of course, entitled to supply what emendations or expansions he chooses to this humble suggestion.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Professor Schoenbaum for saving me from error in the opening chapters, and the staff of Weidenfeld and Nicolson for their help.

Contents

The world he found

1 The cradle of security

> Ceres, most bounteous lady, thy rich leas
> Of wheat, rye, barley, vetches, oats and pease;
> Thy turfy mountains, where live nibbling sheep,
> And flat meads thatch'd with stover, them to keep;
> Thy banks with pioned and twilled brims,
> Which spongy April at thy hest betrims . . .
> (*The Tempest*, 4.1.60–5)

Prospero's masque presents the country where Shakespeare was born, from which his imagination was never divided; cradled by the Malvern and Cotswold hills with their sheep-cotes, it was intensely cultivated, well stocked, richly watered. Ceres responds to the invocation with blessing:

> Earth's increase, foison plenty,
> Barns and garners never empty;
> Vines with clust'ring bunches growing,
> Plants with goodly burden bowing . . .
> (4.1.110–13)

The poet's own imaginative opulence is epitomized in the warm fertility of the scene. His contemporaries singled out the natural wealth of his language; 'right happy and *copious* industry', praised by his fellow-poet John Webster, was termed 'easiness', 'facility' and 'fluency' by other contemporaries. The mere size of his vocabulary is increased by his facility in coining new words.[1]

In Shakespeare's day each region had its own pronunciation and its own poetic tradition. A certain continuity in the Warwickshire strain, powerful but not obtrusive, derived perhaps

from the situation at the heart of England. The region was rustic without being provincial, offering the main highway between north and south (eastward, the fen country almost cut England into two).

If poetic genealogy may be regional, Shakespeare's country had provided two of the greatest masters of language in the later Middle Ages, both of whom worked in oral traditions, drawing on very old forms but blending them with more modern ones. Shakespeare, like Langland in the mid-fourteenth century and Malory in the fifteenth, composed for performance. The oral tradition allows a very easy modulation from the familiar and everyday to the heights of formal grandeur, because the spoken word can effect these transitions, where writing cannot.

Langland had made his way from the Malvern hills to London two hundred years before Shakespeare; the span and strength of execution in his *Piers Plowman* passed from waking life on the hills or in the turmoil of Cheapside or Westminster Hall to spiritual heights and depths. His words are sharp, the verse moves freely and spontaneously in the free unrhymed line that derived from *Beowulf* ('a sort of talking style', as one critic terms it), where nevertheless all his force can be put behind one phrase.

> A fair field full of folk, found I there betwyne,
> Of alle manere of men, the mene and the poor,
> Worchyng and wandryng as this world asketh,

can lead to a vision of eternity, 'For I that am lord of lyfe, love is my drink,' in a complex blend of the old alliterative form with new London ways.

Malory, who had died in a London prison about a hundred years before Shakespeare's birth, came from Warwickshire and learned from the unrhyming alliterative poets before he took to translating Arthurian tales from the French.[2] In Arthur's death scene there is a foreshadowing of *3 Henry VI*, 2.5; in both, the ultimate horror of civil war being mutual destruction of fathers and sons. The heroic tale is grave, masculine, concerned with personal relations as part of the social fellowship of the Round Table.

Both these writers re-worked and remoulded their great cyclic masterpieces, not being constrained by the artificial stability of print. Shakespeare's too was an art of performance, and so maintained continuity with the earlier times. Community of theme with his country life emerged in the rural parts of *King Henry IV*, *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*.

Shakespeare's contemporary and near neighbour, Michael Drayton, invoked Ceres too in writing of Warwickshire:

> As still the year goes on, that Ceres once doth load,
> The full earth with her store, my plenteous bosom strowed
> With all abundant sweets....
>
> (*Polyolbion*, 16th Song, 395–7)

He knows the rural legends – 'a pretty tale I of my grandam had' who, by the winter's fire, tells of 'a knight hight Cassaman', living 'far in the country of Arden', who was 'bold as Isenbras'.

The diamond-shaped wedge of Warwickshire, divided between the northern woodland of Arden and the richer southern plain of Felton, resembles the country which was to be divided by King Lear (who gave his name to Leicester, a neighbouring shire),

> With shadowy forests and with champains rich'd,
> With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads ...
>
> (*King Lear*, 1.1.63–4)

but down in the south-westerly quarter, the comfortable little borough town of Stratford lies nearer to the Cotswolds and their hill cotes, to the apple orchards of the cider country, the gentler, warmer airs, dairy pastures and thickly planted gardens round cottages of wattle-and-daub in the Vale of Evesham than to the windier flat plains of Leicestershire. The town comes into view best where from the crest of the Evesham road it appears below, spread out beside the slowly moving Avon, with Trinity Church at the nearer end and at the farthest the great Tudor bridge of rosy brick that leads the London road across from Butts Green; while behind, along the Evesham road, lie Worcester and Bristol.

Shakespeare's town is still small, though perhaps five times

the size it was in his day; yet the streets suddenly deposit the traveller in open country – the walk to Shottery and Anne Hathaway's cottage is still rural. The house in which he was born stands about five minutes' walk from the site of the one where he died, just across Chapel Lane from the school where he acquired what formal learning he chose to take: another seven minutes would bring him past the house where his elder daughter was to live, to the parish church.

He had been lucky – lucky in his birth, neither to great riches nor to great poverty, the son of a man who had moved in from one of the necklace of villages that surround the little market town. John Shakespeare, brought up a farmer's son in Snitterfield four miles to the north, where there was not even a vicar, only a poor curate, did not learn to read or write. Perhaps Shakespeare's cousin James, who farmed there after his uncle Henry died in 1596, could not read or write either. John Shakespeare was a glover and 'whitawer' by trade – that is, he cured delicate white skins for gloves for falconers and huntsmen; he was a dealer in wool (shreds were to be found between the floor boards of the eastern half of the Birthplace, which served as the shop); he also bought timber and barley; above all he bought houses and leased them. He had made a good and prudent marriage – in fact, he married his landlord's daughter, for his father Richard had been a tenant of Robert Arden of Wilmcote. Some time before 1558 John Shakespeare married the youngest daughter, Mary, who was by then an orphan possessed of comfortable property and her father's executor.

She seems to have laid claim to gentility and to have sought relationship with the very ancient family of Ardens of Park Hall; but although the Heralds' Office was later to allow a grant of arms to John Shakespeare, on his first application, in 1576, they drew and then crossed out the arms of the Ardens of Park Hall, which he wished to impale with his own. Mary Arden was *not* the daughter of Robert Arden Esquire but of Robert Arden yeoman. (The habit of claiming kinship with great families is a familiar weakness of poets; with Elizabethans it was endemic. Spenser, son of a very poor London journeyman, claimed kinship with the great Spencers of Althorp, though they were a new family, Middleton the dramatist with Sir Hugh Myddelton.) William Shakespeare reapplied,

although in his father's name, renewing the earlier appeal, and arms were granted in 1597, not without some disagreement among the heralds, for gentlemen were one thing and players another. However, his fellow-players Burbage and Heminges, Phillips and Pope, all devised or simply appropriated coats-of-arms. As one of the King's Players, after 1604, Shakespeare, when deputed to wait on the Spanish Ambassador, could go suitably equipped. He hoped to found a family of country gentlefolk; his grand-daughter died as Lady Barnard; indeed, his elder daughter might have been Lady Hall, if her sensible husband had not preferred to pay a fine of £10 to evade the honour.

Just as a household was effectually represented by its head, who appeared on behalf of his family, initiated actions in court, recorded votes, so the gentry had a voice in the affairs of the county denied to lesser men. In practice, of course, communities were as important as hierarchies: a clever servant could rule his master or a shrewish wife her husband; at a dispute between lord and tenant, memories of the oldest inhabitant might prevail (in 1601 John Shakespeare, Gent., testified against the Lord of the Manor's enclosures in Stratford). But, as Sir Thomas Aston was later to say, 'The primates, the nobiles, with the minores nobiles, the gentry, consult and dispose of the rules of government; the plebeians submit to and obey them' (*A Remonstrance against Presbytery*, 1641). If the shape of society was changing, new men adopted old forms. Ralegh, mere Devon gentry, contrived sixteen quarterings for his coat-of-arms, while Essex (only the second earl) denounced him as an upstart.

The little country town of Stratford, which since Domesday Book had been a manor of the bishops of Worcester, at the Reformation was seized by the Crown, and suffered a period of administrative chaos. The laymen who were now lords of the manor could not, though they tried, assert rights of old custom; the town was run by its leading families, though the chief officer was still termed Bailiff, not Mayor. The old Guild of Holy Cross (suppressed in 1547), which under the bishops had administered town affairs, had built a school and almshouses, which still stand (their beautiful register, which contains 'sisters' as well as 'brethren', is also preserved). Some endowments went to the town to pay the stipend of vicars and

schoolmasters, though nomination remained with the Lord of the Manor. The first town charter (1553) named fourteen Aldermen who had the right to choose fourteen other members of common council. That rapacious man John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, the first secular Lord of the Manor, had put in Thomas Guildford as Bailiff. After Dudley was attainted of treason for his attempt to make Lady Jane Grey queen, the Crown re-granted the Lordship to Dudley's son, the Earl of Warwick, who attended court leets in 1583 and 1584.

Everyday business was carried on by the Bailiff and Aldermen – they supervised the fairs, the Court of Record, the care of the bridge and highways, school, church, chapel.

In their lists are names still to be seen today in Stratford – Whateleys and Quineys (the Quineys, vintners, into which family Shakespeare's younger daughter married, now deliver milk). These men became John Shakespeare's friends, for he must have been out of his apprenticeship before the charter put an end to administrative chaos and gave the burgesses their chance. By 1552 he was a householder.

Unlike her big neighbour Coventry, Stratford had not been a town of specialists. (The famous Coventry blue thread was known all over England.) There were three markets to be supervised by the old religious guild – one at the cross, where Bridge Street leads up from the river to the High Street, running safely beyond flood level; the Rothermarket for cattle, still a market centre; with a third outside the Guild Chapel for dairy goods. Henley Street, where John Shakespeare lived, leads off from the Market Cross; excellent leather goods may still be found nearby. The town was still well wooded, with gardens, two little brooks running down to the Avon, willows along the banks. The College of Priests, founded to serve the church by John de Stratford, Archbishop of Canterbury in Chaucer's day, had been suppressed along with the guild; their building was snapped up by a leading local family, the Combes. Under the eye of such men Stratford was enjoying its new form of self-government. Of the local gentry round about, some belonged to the old faith – Catesbys and Winters, Treshams and Cloptons, some to the new – like the Grevilles, one of whom now held the Lordship of the Manor from the Earl of Warwick, and the Lucys of Charlecote; while the Throckmortons produced

nationally famous specimens of both Puritans and Papists – Job Throckmorton wrote for the secret Marprelate Press in 1589, a later Throckmorton conspired in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

Even a little village like Snitterfield had its bailiff – in 1530, it was Thomas, Lord Wriothesley, the future Earl of Southampton's grandfather, who would not disdain to collect his fee, and might stand good lord to his friends.[3] The Steward was even nobler – Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, Henry VIII's brother-in-law, but doubtless he also collected his fee.

The little community at Stratford knew its neighbourly differences. Some men, like the Catholic George Badger (a draper) and Nicholas Barnhurst (another draper and a Puritan), engaged in public disputes. It was when Will Bott was expelled from the council for 'opprobrious words' that the vacancy was to be filled by John Shakespeare. The neighbours fined each other for small breaches of conduct – John Shakespeare's first appearance in the records, together with his neighbour Quiney and others, was a fine on 29 April 1552, for having an unauthorized muck-heap in the street before his house. As one of the main roads to the market cross, it should not be blocked – similar objections are made nowadays to the presence of too many motor-coaches outside that same dwelling, where, on or about 23 April 1564, William Shakespeare was born.

Throughout the first eighteen years of Elizabeth's reign, John Shakespeare continued his successful public life; the year after the birth of his eldest son, in 1565, he became an Alderman, one of the small leading group. As Chamberlain he supervised the accounts, making his mark with a pair of glover's compasses, the sign of his trade. In the year 1569, when young Will was five, John was Bailiff, and in that year the armed insurrection of the Northern Earls – the last serious armed attempt on English soil against Elizabeth's rule – meant that he had to supply the eight men the town sent to the musters with armour from the town armoury.

Not only would John Shakespeare have taken the oath to the Queen, he would also serve as JP, President of the Court of Record, clerk of the market, King's escheator, coroner and almoner. An absolute Johannes Fac Totum! (Next year, with the new Bailiff, Adrian Quiney, he went to London on business for the town.)

But in the winter, with rebellion still not quelled and the captive Mary, Queen of Scots, rushed south to Coventry, stories of the old days would be revived, days when Nevilles, Percys and Cliffords from the north fought across the length and breadth of the country in the Wars of the Roses. John Shakespeare's forebears had done valiant service for the Earl of Richmond, who became King Henry VII in 1485. Or so the heralds were told as John essayed to follow Adrian Quiney, who had already obtained a coat-of-arms and wrote himself gentleman.[4]

The sons and daughters of John and Mary Shakespeare were brought up in an illiterate household – neither parent witnessed except with a mark. In such surroundings oral memory is improved, and tales by the fire become the natural resource on winter nights, whether history, legend or romance:

> a tale of an hour long ... look you, gammer, of the giant and the king's daughter and I know not what; I have seen the day, when I was a little one, you might have drawn me a mile after you with such a discourse.
>
> (George Peele, *Life and Works*, ed. Prouty, III, 390)

This is the prelude to 'a merry winter's tale' for the early stage, but in one of Shakespeare's later romances, which is full of country lore, little Mamillius tells us 'a sad tale's best for winter' and is encouraged by his mother,

> Let's have that, good sir.
> Come on, sit down; come on, and do your best
> To fright me with your sprites; you're pow'rful at it.

He whispers in her ear, 'There was a man dwelt by a churchyard ...' (*The Winter's Tale*, 2.1.25–30). King Richard II imagined that 'the lamentable tale of me' would send the hearers weeping to their beds; more prophetic of what was to come is the account of how he could people one little room with his thoughts 'like unto the people of the world'. The Shakespeare family would hear of the legendary local hero, Guy of Warwick, of his adventures in distant lands and how he came home at last in disguise and begged alms at his own castle gate. They would hear too the great local fairytale of the man whose family