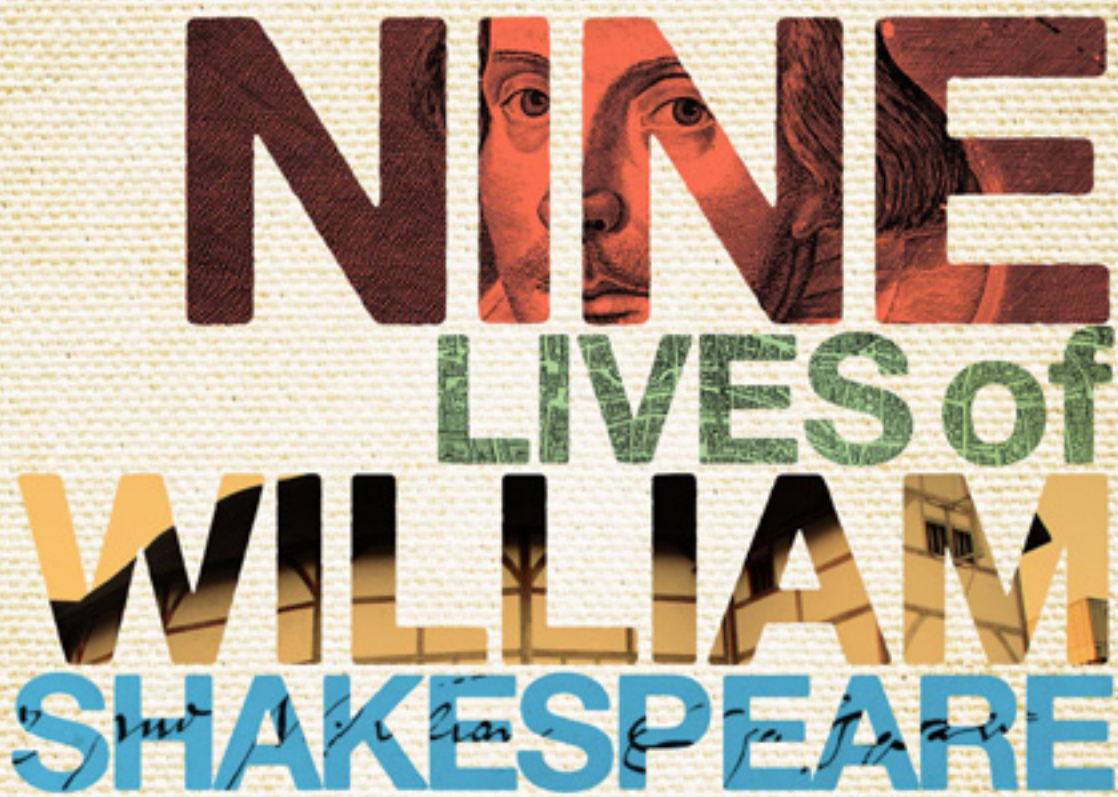
# NINE LIVES of WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

# Nine Lives of William Shakespeare

Shakespeare Now!

Series edited by Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey
First Wave:
*At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* Steve Mentz
*Godless Shakespeare* Eric S. Mallin
*Shakespeare's Double Helix* Henry S. Turner
*Shakespeare Inside* Amy Scott-Douglass
*Shakespearean Metaphysics* Michael Witmore
*Shakespeare's Modern Collaborators* Lukas Erne
*Shakespeare Thinking* Philip Davis
*To Be Or Not To Be* Douglas Bruster

Second Wave:
*The King and I* Philippa Kelly
*The Life in the Sonnets* David Fuller
*Hamlet's Dreams* David Schalkwyk
*Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* Graham Holderness
*Shakespeare and I* edited by Theodora Papadopoulou and William McKenzie

# Nine Lives of William Shakespeare

Graham Holderness

**Continuum International Publishing Group**
The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane, Suite 704
New York
NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

© Graham Holderness 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Graham Holderness has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978–1–4411–97450

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

# Contents

*General Editors Preface to the Second-Wave of the Series* viii
*General Editors' Preface* ix
*Introduction* 1

LIFE ONE
Shakespeare the Writer 24
Story: 'The Shakespeare Code' 34

LIFE TWO
Shakespeare the Player 45
Memoir: 'Master Shakespeare's Instructions to the Actors' 56

LIFE THREE
Shakespeare the Butcher Boy 62
Memoir: 'Some further account of the life &c. of Mr William Shakespear' 70

LIFE FOUR
Shakespeare the Businessman 76
Story: 'Best for Winter' 90

LIFE FIVE
Shakespeare in Love: 'Husband, I come' 96
Memoir: 'Shakespeare's Ring: First Circle' 106

LIFE SIX
Shakespeare in Love: 'Fair Friend' 111
Story: 'The Adventure of Shakespeare's Ring' 122

LIFE SEVEN

Shakespeare in Love: 'A female evil' 141

Story: "Shakespeare's Ring: Full Circle' 152

LIFE EIGHT

Shakespeare the Catholic 164

Story: 'He dyed a papist' 172

LIFE NINE

Shakespeare's Face: 'The mind's construction' 179

Fable: 'An Account of a Voyage to Bardolo' 192

*Notes* 207

*Index* 213

*For Marilyn*
*'Witty above her sex'*

# General Editors' Preface to the Second-Wave of the Series

We begin with the passions of the critic as they are forged and explored in Shakespeare. These books speak directly from that fundamental experience of losing and remaking yourself in art. This does not imply, necessarily, a lonely existentialism; the story of a self is always bound up in other stories, shared tales of nations or faiths or of families large and small. But such stories are also always singular, irreducible to the generalities by which they are typically explained. Here, then, is where literary experience stops pretending to institutionalized objectivity, and starts to tell its own story.

*Shakespeare Now!* is a rallying cry, above all for aesthetic immediacy. It favours a model of aesthetic knowledge as *encounter*, where the encounter brings its own, often surprising contextualizing imperatives. Implicit in this is the premise that art is as much a subject as an object, less like aggregated facts and more like a fascinating person or persons. And encountering the plays as such is unavoidably personal. Much recent scholarship has been devoted to Shakespeare *then* – to producing more information about the presumed moment of their inception. But this moment of inception is in truth happening over and over, again and again, anywhere that Shakespeare is being experienced anew or freshly. For the fact is that he remains, by a country mile, the most important *contemporary* writer – the most performed and read, the most written about, but also the most remembered. But it is not a question merely of Shakespeare in the present, as though his vitality is best measured by his passing relevance to great events. It is about his works' abiding *presence*.

In some ways criticism needs to get younger – to recover the freshness of aesthetic experience, and so in part better to remember why any of us should care. We need a new directness, written responses to the plays which attest to the life we find in them and the life they find in us.

Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey

# General Editors' Preface

*Shakespeare Now!* represents a new form for new approaches. Whereas academic writing is far too often ascendant and detached, attesting all too clearly to years of specialist training, *Shakespeare Now!* offers a series of intellectual adventure stories: animate with fresh and often exposed thinking, with ideas still heating in the mind.

This series of 'minigraphs' will thus help to bridge two yawning gaps in current public discourse. First, the gap between scholarly thinking and a public audience: the assumption of academics that they cannot speak to anyone but their peers unless they hopelessly dumb down their work. Second, the gap between public audience and scholarly thinking: the assumption of regular playgoers, readers or indeed actors that academics write about the plays at a level of abstraction or specialization that they cannot hope to understand.

But accessibility should not be mistaken for comfort or predictability. Impatience with scholarly obfuscation is usually accompanied by a basic impatience with anything but (supposed) common sense. What this effectively means is a distrust of really thinking, and a disdain for anything that might unsettle conventional assumptions, particularly through crossing or re-drafting formal, political or theoretical boundaries. We encourage such adventure, and base our claim to a broad audience upon it.

Here, then, is where our series is innovative: no compromising of the sorts of things that can be thought; a commitment to publishing powerful cutting-edge scholarship; *but* a conviction that these things are essentially communicable, that we can find a language that is enterprising, individual and shareable.

To achieve this we need a form that can capture the genuine challenge and vigour of thinking. Shakespeare is intellectually exciting, and so too are the ideas and debates that thinking about his work can provoke. But published scholarship often fails to communicate much of this. It is difficult to sustain excitement over the 80–120,000 words customary for a monograph: difficult enough for the writer, and perhaps even more so for the reader. Scholarly articles have likewise become a highly formalized mode not only of publication, but also of intellectual production. The brief length of articles means that a concept can be outlined, but its implications or application can rarely be tested in detail. The decline of sustained, exploratory attention to the singularity of a play's language, occasion or movement is one of the unfortunate

results. Often 'the play' is somehow assumed, a known and given thing that is not really worth exploring. So we spend our time pursuing collateral contexts: criticism becomes a belated, historicizing footnote.

Important things have got lost. Above all, any vivid sense as to why we are bothered with these things in the first place. Why read? Why go to plays? Why are they important? How does any pleasure they give relate to any of the things we labour to say about them? In many ways, literary criticism has forgotten affective and political immediacy. It has assumed a shared experience of the plays and then averted the gaze from any such experience, or any testing of it. We want a more ductile and sensitive mode of production; one that has more chance of capturing what people are really thinking and reading about, rather than what the pre-empting imperatives of journal or respectable monograph tend to encourage.

Furthermore, there is a vast world of intellectual possibility – from the past and present – that mainstream Shakespeare criticism has all but ignored. In recent years there has been a move away from 'theory' in literary studies: an aversion to its obscure jargon and complacent self-regard; a sense that its tricks are too easily rehearsed and that the whole game has become one of diminishing returns. This has further encouraged a retreat into the supposed safety of historicism. Of course the best such work is stimulating, revelatory and indispensable. But too often there is little trace of any struggle; little sense that the writer is coming at the subject afresh, searching for the most appropriate language or method. Alternatively, the prose is so laboured that all trace of an urgent story is quite lost.

We want to open up the sorts of thinking – and thinkers – that might help us get at what Shakespeare is doing or why Shakespeare matters. This might include psychology, cognitive science, theology, linguistics, phenomenology, metaphysics, ecology, history, political theory; it can mean other art forms such as music, sculpture, painting, dance; it can mean the critical writing itself becomes a creative act.

In sum, we want the minigraphs to recover what the Renaissance 'essay' form was originally meant to embody. It meant an 'assay' – a trial or a test of something; putting something to the proof; and doing so in a form that is not closed off and that cannot be reduced to a system. We want to communicate intellectual activity at its most alive: when it is still exciting to the one doing it; when it is questing and open, just as Shakespeare is. Literary criticism – that is, really thinking about words in action, plays as action – can start making a much more creative and vigorous contribution to contemporary intellectual *life*.

Simon Palfrey and Ewan Fernie

# Introduction

In the film *Shakespeare in Love*, Lady Viola de Lessops, already in love herself, asks the Bard: 'Are you the author of the plays of William Shakespeare?'[1] 'Are you William Shakespeare?' would have been simpler. But Lady Viola knew and loved the plays before she knew and loved the man. She is a fan, a groupie, one who hangs round stage doors in search of an autograph. Like her original, Viola Compton in the comic novel *No Bed for Bacon,* she is in love with the theatre, enamoured of the stage.[2] She doesn't want just any man, even one as dashing and soulful and sexy as Joseph Fiennes. She wants the author of the plays of William Shakespeare; who happens, of course, to be William Shakespeare himself. And fortunately for her, Shakespeare is, in the film, dashing and soulful and sexy, and not, for example, as he might have been in life, fat, balding, snobbish, mercenary or even gay.

In Lady Viola's innocent inquiry, the plays precede the author, and Shakespeare stands in a secondary relation to the works he is known to have originated. The man Shakespeare is of prior interest to her, on account of the poetry he has already written. The author derives from his work. And this is, of course, an accurate explanation of the origins of literary biography, as Nicholas Rowe stated clearly in the first Shakespeare biography, *Some Account of the Life &c. of Mr. William Shakespear,* published in 1709, in preface to his edition of Shakespeare's *Works*. Out of the 'respect due to the memory of excellent men' arises a 'Curiosity' regarding the 'personal story.'[3] The life is of interest because of the works; which means, in practice, that the biography of a writer is always the life of an 'author,' a narrative that seeks to explain the relationship between writing, and the self who writes.

This assertion seems so obvious as to be virtually invisible: no-one could be interested in a poet who didn't write any poems, or a general who never served in a war, or a cabinet minister who never made it into government. But the obverse side of this opaque truth is that the writing, or the military campaigns, or the political achievements mediate between the observer and the person whose life is embedded in them. The man or woman is already lost inside his or her life-story, 'subdued' in Shakespeare's own words, 'to what it works in, like the dyer's hand.'

Students of literature recognize another meaning in Lady Viola's question. Major schools of criticism in the twentieth century have decreed that our relationship with poetry, or novels or drama need take no account of the writer

and his life. Literature is a public property the writer no longer controls, and it is the reader who decides what it means. French theorists Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault declared that 'the author is dead,' reduced to a mere function of the text (that is, we construct an image of the author from our reading of the work). For decades students were warned off paying any attention to a writer's life, since it had no bearing on what the 'work' might be capable of saying to its readers.

*Shakespeare in Love* of course seems innocent of such highbrow theory, and presents the man behind the work, living the romantic life that can be imagined to have inspired the poetry. The author here is anything but dead. The idyll of love and loss embedded in *Romeo and Juliet* is really a side-effect of Shakespeare's passionate affair with a young noblewoman. But the film is also self-conscious enough to acknowledge just how fictional this exercise really is. Early in the film we see close-up shots of Shakespeare's hand, in the act of writing. We assume he's dashing off a scene or a sonnet. On closer inspection it turns out that he is trying out different spellings of his own name. The joke is stolen from *No Bed for Bacon:* 'He always practised tracing his signature when he was bored. He was always hoping that one day he would come to a firm decision upon which of them he liked best.'[4] The jest is a bit of donnish wit, typical of co-writer Tom Stoppard, derived from the fact that among the surviving specimens of Shakespeare's signature, the name is spelt differently. But the scene in the film also gestures towards the problems of literary biography. Here we see Shakespeare, comically trying out different identities, as if he was already preoccupied with the difficulties later encountered by people trying to work out exactly who he was.

†

Biographers in pursuit of Shakespeare's 'personal story' are constrained by a lack of personal data. While Shakespeare the 'author' is ubiquitously visible via his works, Shakespeare the private man remains largely mysterious and unfathomable. People often say that very little is known of Shakespeare's life. Scholars retort that in fact a great deal is known, for a literary figure from that period, though there are yawning gaps such as the so-called 'lost years,' 1585–1592, from which period no documentary evidence has survived. The problem is not lack of information, or even its lack of comprehensiveness, but the kind of information we do have. The main deficiency in the available data consists in the fact that is public and not private. 'There is nothing,' states Bill Bryson, 'that gives any certain insight into Shakespeare's feelings or beliefs as a private person.'[5] There remains not a single letter, or diary entry or reported conversation, except for a court record from 1612, discussed below, documenting Shakespeare's oral deposition, which in itself is tantalizingly opaque and self-effacing.

We know when and where Shakespeare was baptized, who his parents and

siblings were, whom he married and when, how many children he had and when they died. We know about his success as a writer, and much about his professional career. We know about his property dealings and the contents of his will.

But we do not know exactly (only approximately) when he was born; where, when or even if he went to school; what he was like as a child; if his family was very poor, or reasonably well off. We do not know if he worked for his father as a young man, or did something else; what happened to him in the 'lost years'; how he became an actor and writer; if he stayed in London to keep away from his family in Stratford. We don't know for sure if he had to get married; if he loved his wife; if he ever lived anywhere but Stratford and London; if he had sexual relations with other women, or men; if he was religious, and if so of what persuasion; if he loved his children; how much he cared about his writing. We know when and where he died, but not what he died from. We know nothing for certain about the relationship between his writing and his life. We do not know what he believed in; what he cared about; what he thought about anything at all.

'A shilling life,' as W.H. Auden said, 'will give you all the facts,'[6] but is likely to omit what biography really wants most of all to know, the interior life, the secrets of the private man: what he believed, how he felt, whom he loved. If we set aside the idea that the plays and poems are autobiographical, the Shakespeare biography consists entirely of historical records. But as biographer Katherine Duncan-Jones admits, historical records deal only with public events, social interactions of law and property, baptisms and burials:

> Surviving documents don't take us very far in answering the kinds of questions that many post-Romantic readers may want to ask – did he love his wife? who was 'the dark lady'? what was his religious position, if any? Or his overall vision of the world?[7]

A brief life of Shakespeare, based purely on these historical documents, and drawing no inferences at all about any autobiographical content in the writing, would look like the following biographical sketch. Here I have not entered into any detail about these historical records, as they are all discussed more fully in the chapters that follow. But these are the inferences that can reasonably be drawn from the historical evidence. These are the facts.

†

A son William was born to John and Mary Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, and baptized on April 26 1564. Their other children were Gilbert, Joan, Anna, Richard and Edmund. We do not know exactly what Shakespeare's father John did for a living. He is described variously, in different documents, as a farmer, a tanner and a glover. In 1557 he married Mary Arden, daughter of a local

farmer, Robert Arden, who bequeathed her £6 13s. 4d. in money, and a house with 50 acres of land. John Shakespeare rose through various municipal offices to the position of bailiff, or mayor, of the town, in 1568. Afterwards his career faltered, he lost his civic offices, and there is evidence that the family may have experienced financial difficulties.

In 1582, Shakespeare married, in some haste and with some irregularity in the formalities, Anne Hathaway, also from a farming background. He was 18, she was 26. Within six months of the wedding, a daughter, Susanna, was baptized, on May 26 1583. Shakespeare's other children, the twins Hamnet and Judith, were baptized in February 1585.

There follow the so-called 'lost years,' 1585–1592, for which there is no documentary evidence at all about Shakespeare's life. By 1592 he had become a successful actor and playwright, and by April 18 1593, a published poet. Both his narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. He was an actor in the Lord Chamberlain's Company by 1594, involved for example in the presentation of two comedies, before the Queen, at Greenwich Palace, in the Christmas season of that year. He acted in Ben Jonson's plays, and in his own. On Elizabeth's death, his company became the King's Men, servants to James I, and Shakespeare is mentioned in official documents as a member of the company.

On August 11, 1596, his only son Hamnet was buried. The following year, he bought New Place, one of the largest houses in Stratford. He acquired land in 1602 and 1610, and a cottage adjoining his house in 1602. In 1605 he acquired a lease of the Stratford tithes, a purchase that involved him in litigation. In March 1613, he bought a house near the Blackfriars Theatre in London. Between 1600 and 1609, he prosecuted several suits to recover small sums of money from debtors, while at the same time the tax collectors in London were seeking unpaid taxes from him. John Shakespeare had earlier tried to secure the coat of arms for which he was eligible, but had failed to achieve it, possibly because of his money troubles. The application was renewed in 1596, probably by William, and this time was successful. The motto 'Non Sanz Droict' ('not without right') was attached to the application.

From 1598 to 1604, he lodged in the house of Christopher Mountjoy, a wigmaker, at the corner of Muggle and Silver streets near Cripplegate. This association brought Shakespeare into court on 11 September 1612 as a witness to an alleged breach of promise between his landlord and the landlord's apprentice, Stephen Bellott. Bellott was claiming a dowry of £50 he claimed was promised by Mountjoy when the apprentice married the landlord's daughter. The court record is the only instance of Shakespeare's own words having been written down. But they throw very little light, either on his character, or on the affair being prosecuted. He said he could not remember the sum agreed on for the dowry.

Letters from the Stratford archives from around this period show Shakespeare being regarded by local businessmen as someone who might be interested in

becoming a partner in the purchasing of land, or who might lend money to his friends and neighbours.

The quarto editions of *Richard II* and *Love's Labour's Lost* were the first plays to put his name on the title page, after which publishers of the plays usually gave him credit as author. In about 1599, he became, a 'sharer,' with John Heminge and Henry Condell (fellow actors and later Shakespeare's editors), and others, in the receipts of the Globe Theatre, erected in 1597–8 by Richard and Cuthbert Burbage. In 1610, he became a sharer also in the smaller Blackfriars Theatre, after it had been acquired by the Burbages.

On June 5 1607, Shakespeare's elder daughter Susanna married Stratford doctor John Hall. His younger daughter, Judith, married Thomas Quiney on February 10 1616, also with some haste and informality. In March 1616 Shakespeare signed his will. He died on 23 April 1616, was buried in Stratford Church, and on his grave appeared a monitory epitaph:

> Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbeare
> To dig the dust enclosed heare ;
> Bleste be the man that spares these stones,
> And curst be he that moves my bones.

Seven years later, thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays were collected by his former colleagues of the theatre, John Heming and Henry Condell, whom he had remembered in his will, and published in the famous First Folio of 1623.

Of Shakespeare's handwriting, nothing has survived except six signatures and a passage of the manuscript play text *Sir Thomas More*. The signatures show variations in spelling: Shakspere, Shakespere, or Shakspeare.

Knowledge of Shakespeare's personal appearance is limited and uncertain. The bust on the monument in the church at Stratford was cut, apparently before 1623, by a Dutch stonecutter, Gheerart Janssen. It was originally coloured, later whitewashed, then re-tinted. The frontispiece to the First Folio was engraved by Martin Droeshout. Neither image is very much admired; and neither (though they are the only sources for Shakespeare's appearance) is universally acknowledged as a good likeness.

†

Many of these facts were discovered by scholars through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the details of the Bellott-Mountjoy lawsuit as late as the early twentieth century. When Nicholas Rowe set out to gather material for his *Some Account of the Life &c. of Mr. William Shakespear* (1709), there existed only a few anecdotes, available in writings by men such as Ben Jonson, Thomas Fuller and John Aubrey. Rowe also relied on a kind of oral history of Stratford tradition, drawing on the actor Thomas Betterton's conversations with local people and their reminiscences. Rowe recorded some verifiable facts with

accuracy. But most of what he managed to gather in the way of Shakespearean 'Remains' was an assortment of stories that modern biographers regard as legendary and mythological.

Rowe for example tells us that Shakespeare had to leave Stratford because he was caught poaching deer in the park of local magnate Sir Thomas Lucy. Scholars have pointed out that at the time Lucy had neither park nor deer, and that this story sounds about as historical as Robin Hood and his Merry Men. Shakespeare is perhaps being fitted here into an archetype, the unruly young man whose nocturnal adventures bring him into trouble with the law. The story had to be completed with some reference to writing, so we get the tale that he penned a 'bitter ballad' of satirical contempt against Sir Thomas Lucy, and had to flee Stratford to avoid serious consequences. Most modern biographers treat this as little more than a fairytale. But there is more to it than that.

Like historians, biographers of Shakespeare depend on a basic distinction between 'fact' and 'tradition.' Fact is documentary evidence that can be verified, or has in the past been expertly tested, or is reliably corroborated by other evidence so as to render it persuasive. Fact is evidence, dated and proved, and beyond all reasonable doubt genuine. I can walk into the Public Record Office in Kew and look at Shakespeare's Last Will and Testament of 1616. I may doubt that Shakespeare drew up the text himself; I may question the meaning of the various bequests in it; I may even believe that the man who signed the will was not the man who wrote the plays. But I cannot argue against the indisputable historical fact that this piece of parchment in front of me is the Last Will and Testament of William Shakespeare, Gent., of Stratford-upon-Avon in the county of Warwickshire, and that the shaky signature, the trembling autograph of a dying man, is his. This is a fact.

The outline of Shakespeare's life is marked out by a number of recorded 'facts' like this: birth, marriage, children, acting, publication, theatre management, business dealing, property acquisition and speculation, death. 'Traditions,' in the favoured language of Shakespeare biographers, may be facts, but their relevance to Shakespeare's life is not factual. Traditions appear later in time than facts, are further away from the actuality; they derive from anecdotes and annotations rather than legal documents; they are in the manner of stories and legends rather than pieces of concrete documentary evidence.

But this distinction is a relative latecomer to the Shakespeare biography scene. In Rowe's biography, details now confidently regarded as factual are freely interwoven with 'traditions.' The few facts listed by Rowe include: Shakespeare's baptism and those of his siblings, his marriage to Anne Hathaway, the authorship of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* with their dedications to the Earl of Southampton, his retirement to Stratford, the marriages of his daughters and his death in 1616. All these can be verified from the historical record. Most of Rowe's account, however, is taken up with traditions that are unsupported by facts. That Shakespeare attended the local grammar school, but had to leave to work in his father's business; that he had to quit Stratford for London on

account of the deer-stealing episode; that he arrived in London's theatre-land as a poor young man, and entered the playhouse in a servile capacity:

> It is at this Time, and upon this Accident, that he is said to have made his first Acquaintance in the Play-house. He was receiv'd into the Company then in being, at first in a very mean Rank; But his admirable Wit, and the natural Turn of it to the Stage, soon distinguished him, if not as an extraordinary Actor, yet as an excellent Writer.[8]

Rowe goes on to assert that Shakespeare was favoured by the Queen; that the Earl of Southampton lent him £1000; that he helped Ben Jonson get a play accepted for performance. None of these assertions can be found in the documentary record. There is no evidence of Shakespeare's early education, no trace of when or why he left Stratford, no record of how he entered the theatrical profession, and no particular mark of any personal royal favour.

Some of these details are nonetheless generally accepted as probable: e.g. the author of the plays and poems must have had an education, and the local grammar school was the obvious place to obtain it; or plausible, e.g. Shakespeare and Ben Jonson certainly had a professional relationship, so he may have done him a favour. Other details have gained less credence: Rowe couldn't believe the loan of £1000 from the cash-strapped Southampton; and although we know Shakespeare's company played before the Queen, that touch of personal royal favour from Queen Elizabeth seems too good to be true.

†

Yet to any historian, such early records would necessarily claim our attention, and may even hold priority over the modern analyst's opinions. It is not merely that these traditions, written down in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, lie much closer to Shakespeare than do the experiences and assumptions of a twentieth-century scholar. The traditions themselves derived from sources – some verifiable and others not – that can be traced back very closely indeed to the historical moment they describe and interpret. Rowe took his data from actor Thomas Betterton, who had undertaken a field trip to Stratford to research Shakespeare's life:

> I must own a particular Obligation to [Mr. Betterton], for the most considerable part of the Passages relating to his Life, which I have here transmitted to the Publick; his Veneration for the Memory of *Shakespear* having engag'd him to make a Journey into *Warwickshire*, on purpose to gather up what Remains he could of a Name for which he had so great a Value.[9]

John Aubrey collected fragments of information for his *Lives of the English Poets* from Restoration actors such as William Beeston and John Lacy. Beeston

succeeded to the management of the Cockpit Theatre in Drury Lane when his father Christopher Beeston died in 1637. Christopher Beeston is named among the actors who, with Shakespeare, took part in the first production of Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. Lacy, leading Restoration actor and dramatist, and author of an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, was a member of the Caroline theatre troupe, the King's and Queen's Young Company, colloquially known as 'Beeston's Boys' since it was created by the same Christopher Beeston. What would a modern biographer give for information acquired from the son of an actor who played alongside Shakespeare in a Ben Jonson play? Or from one who served as a boy player in that same actor's company?

In place of the crude historicist notion of 'tradition' as little more than inauthentic invention, later accretion, myth and legend, we need something more like the meaning 'tradition' holds in religion. Jewish, Islamic and Catholic Christian scholarship all give priority to the holy scriptures, Torah, Qur'an and Bible, but also give weight to the subsequent interpretations and supplementations of the scriptures in Midrash, Hadith and Tradition. In Shakespeare's time the Christian Reformers tried to insist on the Bible as the only source of truth ('*sola scriptura*') against the Roman church's reverence for Tradition. In the same way many biographers have dismissed the assertions of Rowe and Aubrey, because they are late in the day, second-hand, unverified and improbable. In Shakespeare biography it is possible to view 'tradition' as in its own way authentic. Rowe's life incorporated information derived by Thomas Betterton from the people of Stratford. Aubrey took his data from men like Lacy and Beeston, the very people who were best placed to have received information about Shakespeare, handed down through the theatres and the acting companies he worked with and wrote for. A certain Mr. Dowdall visited Stratford in 1693, conversed with an elderly parish clerk whose life might have overlapped with that of Shakespeare himself, and wrote down some of his findings in a letter. Stratford neighbours, parish clerks, local gossips, actors and theatre managers of the seventeenth century – where else would we go for reliable information about the life of Shakespeare? On the other hand these 'traditions' are obviously telling a story as well as citing a fact, so the information they provide may well be both factual, and yet to some degree already partly fictionalized.

†

Shakespeare scholars since Rowe have tried to construct a biography based on the historical evidence, and to explore links between the man and his works. Self-evidently there is much more of Shakespeare's work, in terms of texts, documentary evidence, commentary and critical analysis, than there is of his life, but the two are notoriously difficult to connect. Hence biographers use Shakespeare's poems and plays as repositories of hidden or extant information about the poet's feelings and attitudes and beliefs. But every single word in

the plays is spoken by a dramatic character, and may have no personal origin at all. Even Shakespeare's famous *Sonnets* may not be as confessional as many readers like to believe. Data from the 'life' and the 'works' are then invariably supplemented by the use of the biographer's imagination, in order to deliver to the reader those speculations essential to disclosing the things we really want to know.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, in the last few years there has been an explosion of interest in the life of Shakespeare: according to Anne Barton's count, at least one formal biography of Shakespeare has appeared every year since 1996. From Nicholas Rowe to Peter Ackroyd, innumerable 'Lives of Shakespeare' have been written, by scholars and academics, by professional novelists and biographers, and by creative writers. All are in quest of what Rowe called the 'personal story,' but they tell it in different ways.

Scholars typically approach the life on the basis of an extensive knowledge of the actual textual works and their critical literature; of Renaissance history, local and national; of the Tudor and Stuart theatre; and of Shakespeare's many afterlives, in drama, criticism, film and the broader culture. The works precede the life, and it is the works that speak of the man.

Professional biographers have a more difficult task, since the confessional material that is their stock-in-trade is virtually absent: there are no letters, diaries or directly reported conversations; no testimony from family, friends and neighbours about 'the common accidents' of Shakespeare's life. They depend on the same materials as the scholars, but typically seek to supplement these by what scholarship would regard as unlicensed imaginative speculation.

Creative writers give free reign to the imagination, and produce, out of the raw biographical facts and the mysterious connections between life and works, overtly fictional biographies that nonetheless demonstrate a surprising plausibility, and exercise a curious compulsion over the popular imagination. Here the 'personal story' tends to align with the impersonal patterns of myth and legend.

As interest in both popular and academic biographies of Shakespeare continues to grow, so too imaginative works about Shakespeare's life have flourished, in the form of novels, poems, plays, films, radio and television drama and artworks. There is not such a huge difference between these different biographical genres as many of their authors would like to think. Restless under the constraints of the historical record, biographers end up telling us about many things besides Shakespeare, and filling the empty spaces with their own preoccupations.

In Jonathan Bate's biography *Soul of the Age*,[10] for example, there is a strong emphasis on Shakespeare as a countryman rather than an urbanite, who emerged from, and always belonged to, the little provincial town of Stratford. London was for 'business and busy-ness,' he writes, Stratford for 'home and rest' (p. 13). This sounds as if London was the real focus of Shakespeare's life, and Stratford his dormitory-town commuter retreat. But this rural countryside of the Midlands was no mere suburb of the metropolis, according to Bate,

but England's very heart, to be found 'not in Westminster, but somewhere in the midlands, deep in the shires' (p. 35). Bate displays a strong personal investment in this Midland 'heart of England,' and in this rustic Shakespeare who came from 'deep in the shires,' like some Tolkienian hobbit. Bate works at the University of Warwick, and 'I live,' he writes, 'at the edge of a cornfield three miles out of Stratford-upon-Avon' (p. 58). The life of the biographer, here unnecessarily obtruded upon his theme, and the life of his subject, are mirrored in this emphatic provincial placing.

Peter Ackroyd in *Shakespeare: the Biography*[11] also describes Shakespeare as country-bred, though his Stratford is significantly more urban than Bate's. But the real heart of his book is London. Shakespeare's life and career become part of that great metropolitan experiment that Ackroyd has enthusiastically chronicled in his earlier work *London:The Biography.*[12] Shakespeare's temperament in this biography is urban, secular, modern, rather than rural, pious and medieval. Indeed, his detachment from ideology, religion and empathy make him sound more like a modern professional writer than an early modern dramatist; more like Peter Ackroyd himself, than like William Shakespeare.

All biographers of Shakespeare, whether they realize it or not, supplement the facts with their own speculations, and their speculations are inevitably to some degree subjective. Consider, as a case-study, how a number of major biographers of Shakespeare deal with the poet's death. There are virtually no data to work with, other than the facts that he made a will, died on 23rd April 1616 and was buried in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford. Jonathan Bate baldly states the meagre record: 'the only solid facts are the record of the burial,' the gravestone and the monument.[13]

A seventeenth-century tradition, noted in his diary by Stratford vicar John Ward, is that Shakespeare had a 'merry meeting' (i.e. a booze-up) with Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton, and contracted a fever from the after-effects.[14] Park Honan surmises that the 'fever' Shakespeare died of was typhoid, and speculates about some of the symptoms he may have experienced. 'He would have suffered incessant headaches, lassitude and sleeplessness, then terrible thirst and discomfort.'[15] Stanley Wells permits himself to mention this speculation as a reasonable hunch: 'The best guess – it is not more – is that he was suffering from typhoid fever.'[16]

Peter Ackroyd agrees about typhoid, for him a conveniently urban disease arising from water-borne infection. Ackroyd then goes on to narrate, as if factually, a typical seventeenth-century ritual of embalming, winding and viewing the corpse:

> He was wrapped in a linen winding sheet and two days later he was carried down the well-worn 'burying path' to the old church.[17]

Ackroyd doesn't actually know that this happened, of course, but assumes that Shakespeare died and was buried according to respectably Protestant rites and

services: he was buried in the church because of 'his status as a lay rector.' So it *must* have happened like this. On the other hand Michael Wood, whose biography promotes a 'Catholic Shakespeare,' speculates that dying, the poet was 'drawn to his childhood certainties at the end,' and received extreme unction from a Catholic priest.[18]

While all these male biographers like to think of Shakespeare as carried off by an infection, female biographers prefer the tradition that Shakespeare died of tertiary syphilis, contracted in his youth from prostitutes. Katherine Duncan-Jones believes that Shakespeare probably was drinking to excess, as John Ward recorded, but that would have been to palliate his pain, since he was already severely ill from the symptoms of the pox. 'My own guess is that heart and circulatory troubles were now added to latent syphilitic infection.'[19] This disease could have made the dying Shakespeare mad and 'furiously angry with those around him.' She speculates that the final scene of Ben Jonson's play *The Devil is an Ass*, in which the protagonist Fitzdotrell feigns mortal illness, actually portrays details from the real death of Shakespeare.[20] Fitzdotrell

> … is apparently mad and apparently dying. He laughs crazily, abuses his wife as a whore, foams at the mouth, uses foul language to an eminent lawyer, and comes out with childishly obscene fragments of English doggerel and bad Greek, Spanish and French (p. 276).

Duncan-Jones' 'ungentle' Shakespeare dies hating his wife: the curse on his gravestone was designed to prevent her from ever joining him in 'his angry and unshared deathbed.'

Germaine Greer, writing a biography not of Shakespeare but of Anne Hathaway, agrees that Shakespeare had tertiary syphilis, but argues that he died from the cure not the disease: poisoned by the mercury then freely used as treatment for syphilis.[21] Greer speculates that, as a consequence of being clinically poisoned by mercury or arsenic, Shakespeare became increasingly detached from society, reclusive, confused and helpless. This assumed decline created a dependence, which enabled his wife Anne to become the heroine of the story, nursing him to his end. 'In those quiet hours in the sickroom, husband and wife may have drawn closer together' (p. 309).

Here we see a clear pattern in the ideological inflections of these biographical stories. Some scholars respectfully stay away from the deathbed, invoking as their excuse a lack of evidence. Others argue that Shakespeare died a fairly ordinary death, carried away by a common infection. Some see him dying a Protestant, others a Catholic. These accounts are all partly fictional. The most inventive interpretations come from the female scholars, Duncan-Jones and Greer, who build up imaginary cases for seeing Shakespeare either as raving mad, or as prematurely senile. In the former case the wife is the victim, abused and vilified; in the latter she is the angel of the house, who lovingly cares for her helpless husband.

We scarcely need to remind ourselves that 'the only solid facts' are the record of the burial and the tomb,[22] to appreciate just how inventive, fictional, speculative and opinionated such biographical writing really is. Often, it seems, the biographer is like God, creating the subject in his or her own image. 'Trying to work out Shakespeare's personality,' wrote Samuel Schoenbaum, is 'like looking at a very dark glazed picture in the National Portrait Gallery: at first you see nothing, then you begin to recognize features, then you realize that they are your own.'[23] A biography of Shakespeare can be a thinly disguised self-portrait of the biographer.

†

Often this manifest similarity between the biographer and his/her image of Shakespeare seems mainly unconscious. But in one of the most successful – and controversial – of modern Shakespeare biographies, written by one of the world's foremost Shakespeare scholars, this subjective investment is rendered explicit, and developed via an overtly speculative and imaginative method of composition.[24] Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: how Shakespeare became Shakespeare,* is a formal biography, using the established facts and traditions, reading the plays and poems in the light of them, and producing potential explanations of how the life and the works might be interrelated. But the book was strenuously attacked, despite the author's reputation, for investing more in speculation and invention than in historical evidence.[25]

Now as I have argued, there is no such thing as a speculation-free biography of Shakespeare. Greenblatt's challenge to orthodoxy was to be much more overtly fictional, or meta-fictional, in his method, much more self-reflexive in declaring the conjectural and speculative character of his writing: to admit that at times he was making it up. The best-known example is a possible meeting Greenblatt provisionally stages between Shakespeare and Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion, which he invents as a possible event in Shakespeare's 'lost years.' Campion was a Jesuit missionary executed in 1581. There is evidence that William's father John Shakespeare was a devout Roman Catholic: a document of Catholic profession, known as 'John Shakespeare's Spiritual Testament,' was unearthed from the house in Henly Street in the eighteenth century. Some scholars have argued that William Shakespeare and an actor in a Lancastrian Roman Catholic household called 'Shakeshafte,' were one and the same person, and that the dramatist was therefore probably himself a crypto-Catholic. This in itself is speculative, as no-one can prove that Shakespeare was Shakeshafte, and some scholars regard the identification as spurious. So the meeting with Edmund Campion is speculation based on speculation, indeed little more than a fantasy. But Greenblatt is fully aware of this, and clearly signals that the imaginary episode he is narrating is a piece of story-telling. He even begins with 'Let us imagine the two of them sitting together …'[26] Here the biographer is not dealing in fact, or even tradition, but fleshing out an