

## How to Write a Biography of Shakespeare\*

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What do we mean when we say that we have *known* someone, on what is our claim to knowledge based? Among the strongest claimants to accurate understanding of another person must be members of the subject's family, those who, over a long period, have enjoyed daily contacts and a shared environment. These are the people with the authority to describe certain habits or gestures as characteristic, and even predict how the subject would have behaved in certain circumstances. Almost equally strong as their claim is the one that can be made by a husband, wife or sexual partner. They have the shared environment and daily contact but also that more intimate knowledge which comes from a physical relation. If they have a disadvantage, it is that they often have no personal knowledge of the subject's early or so-called formative years, but also that the kind of relationship they enjoyed will sometimes have had an intensity which leads to warped judgement. "I can read him like a book", said the first girlfriend of D. H. Lawrence, to which he later replied that the book was in several volumes<sup>1</sup>.

People who have worked with the subject are also reliable witnesses. Standing next to a person on the factory floor, or sitting by them in an office, can yield information not necessarily accessible to a family member or sexual partner. Different kinds of work environment can

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<sup>1</sup> For the details, see David Ellis, *Death and the Author: How D. H. Lawrence Died and Was Remembered*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 156.

be more or less revealing. A soldier, for example, might well feel that nothing teaches us more about another human being than shared danger. Yet if we accept that view, it may largely be because courage happens to be very high on our scale of values. Eating out with people every week gives us a knowledge of them which is very different from that which can be acquired on the battlefield, but which may, in some respects, be just as valuable.

This last comparison dramatises the obvious truth that all eye-witness reports are partial, which does not of course deprive them of their value and authenticity. Compared with the evidence provided by a sibling, sexual partner, work colleague or close friend, the position of biographers will seem very weak, especially when they have never met the subject or, as in the most common of cases, that subject is long dead. And yet they do have certain advantages. If they are not eye-witnesses themselves, they can put themselves in a position to compare different eye-witness reports and thereby produce what might hopefully be described as a more 'rounded picture'. Working as they so often do with letters, they can deal with the fact that a letter-writer will tend to adopt a different persona for the different people addressed by surveying a whole range of correspondence. In the most favourable of cases, they will also have access to a diary or journal in which the subject has recorded thoughts and feelings not revealed to the closest of his or her intimates. It is evident that these have to be treated with great caution. People do not always tell the truth about themselves, as Freud was by no means the first to have demonstrated. But if what they say cannot always be taken at face value, it at least provides the biographer with a starting-point. Where, after all, would Freud have been if his patients had never even spoken to him?

Although nothing can replace one individual's intimate knowledge of another, there are ways in which biographers can indeed 'know' their subject. Compared with the understanding which can come from personal contact, these may seem artificial, mediated as they so largely are through the written word. Although for some this is a fatal limitation, the written word is still the major resource of most historians, and there is an obvious sense in which anyone who offers to tell the story of another person's life has to become a historian. This simple truth ought to serve as a reminder that writing biography should be subject to strict conditions and that (to come to the point) *none* of these are met in the case of Shakespeare. Most biographers, for example,

rely very heavily on letters and not one of those which Shakespeare must have written has survived. This might seem mildly surprising but less so is that he left behind no diary or journal since the habit of keeping these only became common long after his death.

The question of eye-witness reports appears at first more promising. In the second volume of his magisterial *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, Edmund K. Chambers lists fifty-eight contemporaries of Shakespeare who made allusions to him, a number of them on more than one occasion. This seems like an embarrassment of riches until the reader discovers that the vast majority of these witnesses refer only to Shakespeare's *writings* (usually in the most cursory and unilluminating fashion), and no more than six of them have anything of any potential biographical significance to say. Six is a disappointingly low number and it is only reached by counting in Anthony Scoloker who, in an epistle which accompanied his poem *Diaphantus*, refers to "Friendly Shakespeare's Tragedies"<sup>2</sup>.

A single word, without illustration or corroboration, is hardly enough to tell us whether Shakespeare was indeed a friendly man, especially when, as Ernst Honigmann has pointed out, the tone of the Scoloker epistle is playful and ironic<sup>3</sup>; and the remaining five reports or allusions are only slightly more informative. The most well-known of them is the attack traditionally attributed to the dramatist Robert Greene. "For there is an upstart Crow", the author of *Greenes Groatsworth of Wit* famously complains (echoing a line from the third part of Shakespeare's own *Henry VI*),

beautified with our feathers, that with his "Tygers hart wrapt in a Play-ers hyde", supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey<sup>4</sup>.

No complete consensus yet exists as to whether Shakespeare is being accused of plagiarism here, or criticised for being a mere actor who

<sup>2</sup> Edmund K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1930, vol. II, p. 214, my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare's Impact on His Contemporaries*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Chambers, p. 188. Shakespeare's line reads "O, tiger's heart wrapt in a woman's hide".

had not been to university and yet still had the temerity to write. The attack is significant because it shows that by 1592, when it was first published, the twenty-eight-year-old Shakespeare must have already been well established in the world of the London theatre; and it is interesting because it suggests that there was at least one person from that world who did not think much of him.

Whether that person was in fact Greene has been much disputed recently<sup>5</sup>. *Greenes Groats-worth of Wit* appeared after its supposed author's death and the heavy involvement of Henry Chettle in its publication has favoured an assumption that he must himself have written much of it. In his epistle to *Kind-Harts Dreame*, also published in 1592, Chettle writes (in apparent reference to what Greene is purported to have said of Shakespeare): "I am sorry as if the originall fault had beene my fault, because myselfe have seen his demeanor no lesse civill than he excelent in the qualitie he professes". That he is speaking here of having observed Shakespeare's demeanour *since* the attack is confirmed by his having previously said that he was acquainted with neither of the two people (usually thought to be Shakespeare and Marlowe) who have been offended by *Greenes Groats-worth*. Chettle follows his apology with: "Besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightnes of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace of writing, that approves his Art"<sup>6</sup>. Some still doubt that Chettle is here referring to Shakespeare rather than (for example) to Peele<sup>7</sup>; but on the assumption that he is, what he says could initially seem like a rich haul. He has complimentary things to say about Shakespeare's demeanour as well as reports from others ("divers of worship") about his "uprightnes of dealing". His words provide a striking contrast with Greene although, if Greene is to be absolved of responsibility for what was said in his name, they also indicate Chettle's capacity for a rapid change of mind. What is clear is that he cannot have known Shakespeare long enough to comment on anything *but* his demeanour, and that otherwise he is reliant on the testimony of others. The common suggestion that these others were powerful friends

<sup>5</sup> See, on this topic, Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 140-41.

<sup>6</sup> Chambers, p. 189.

<sup>7</sup> Someone who has made a strong case for thinking that they refer rather to Peele is Lukas Erne. See his "Biography and Mythography: Re-reading Chettle's Alleged Apology to Shakespeare", *English Studies*, 5 (1998), pp. 430-40.

of Shakespeare, who had put pressure on Chettle to apologise, only reduces the authority of his remarks. These are certainly more interesting than the single word “friendly”, but not for that reason any more reliable. They hardly take us very much further towards discovering – to use the common phrase – what Shakespeare was really like.

‘What was he like?’ is a loose phrase to apply to Shakespeare but it suggests what a reader of his biography would like to know. On one level it means no more than what did he look like? how did he dress? was he loquacious or silent in company? did he like to drink?, and so on. These may seem relatively trivial matters but they help to give the ‘feel’ of a subject. None of the witnesses in Chambers’s section of “Contemporary Allusions” record any details of what Shakespeare was like to be with which give us that feel. On this last matter of drink, a few phrases are often quoted from the notes John Aubrey made when he was preparing his “brief life” of Shakespeare. These are to the effect that Shakespeare was “not a company keeper”, that he “wouldnt be debauched”, and that if invited out he would write to say he could not come because he was in pain<sup>8</sup>. The notes belong to a period around 1681 and Aubrey’s major source for them was William Beeston, son of the Christopher Beeston who, for a relatively short period between about 1598 and 1602, was a member of the same theatre company as Shakespeare. What Aubrey is reporting, therefore, is an impression or anecdote which refers to events which are eighty years in the past and which he garners not at first, but at second hand. This means that the possibility, always strong in these cases, of the reporter having remembered one incident and then generalised from it in a way which is distorting, cannot be explored. One could easily imagine that when the members of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men went drinking in one of the few islands of free time available to them between performing and learning new parts, Shakespeare (whose responsibilities to the company exceeded theirs) declined to join them; and even that from time to time he avoided a social obligation by saying he was not well. But the evidence is too flimsy to be certain that this was so, and even if it were, our knowledge of Shakespeare would hardly be much advanced.

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<sup>8</sup> Chambers reprints Aubrey’s notes in the section of *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* which follows “Contemporary Allusions” and is called “The Shakespeare Mythos”. See vol. II, p. 252.

How sociable Shakespeare was with his colleagues will seem a minor issue but it slides easily into a clearly more significant category of 'what was he like' because it concerns his attitudes, and between his attitudes to drink and (for example) noise, foreigners, pets, cruelty, women, there is a short step to his beliefs in the realms of politics and religion. The witnesses have next-to-nothing to say on these crucial matters being only slightly more forthcoming when it comes to general questions of what we call character. Scoloker holds his place among them because of that single word "friendly"; but one might also ask whether Shakespeare was cheerful, resolute, moody, vengeful, reliable, or a host of other adjectives habitually used to define character. Of course, many will feel that they know the answers to questions like these, as well as to those which concern attitudes, because they have read or seen his works; but there are major problems in taking that view which ought by now to be familiar. Other character-defining adjectives, apart from "friendly", can be found in the reports of those in Chambers's list of those claiming to have known Shakespeare, who is referred to in at least one of them as "honest" and "gentle". But those words alone tell us very little and they call out for some illustration or gloss which is invariably lacking.

Without letters or diaries, and with no eye-witness reports of any substance, the private life of the biographical subject becomes inaccessible. Yet not all of life is private. Human beings perform actions in the world easier to trace than their thoughts and feelings and, in relation to these, the outlook in Shakespeare's case is a little less gloomy. His biographers are fond of observing that he is very well known to us in comparison with playwrights of roughly the same period (Marlowe and Jonson excepted); but since our knowledge of the private lives of writers such as George Peele, Thomas Kyd or Anthony Munday is practically non-existent, that is hardly an impressive claim. They are nevertheless quite right to imply that our ignorance is far from complete. There are surviving records which refer to the dates of Shakespeare's baptism, marriage and death as well as to the christening of his children; and numerous documents relating to his financial or legal affairs. From these, it has become possible to construct what might be called a rough *chronicle* of his life (of the kind, for example, in Peter Holland's excellent entry on Shakespeare in the 2005 edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography*), although it remains very rough indeed. For long stretches we have very little idea where he was or

how he was passing his time so that what cannot be established is that basic tool of all biography: an accurate chronology. Between the christening of Shakespeare's twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585, for example, and that public attack on him in 1592 as a brash newcomer on the London theatrical scene, there is only one surviving record<sup>9</sup>. It has therefore become customary for biographers to refer to this seven-year period as 'the lost years'. This is an instinctively cunning move in that it implies that all the others have been found. In fact, if one thinks of biography as an attempt to describe what the subject was like, to recover details of tastes, behaviour, friendships, temperament or character, all Shakespeare's years might accurately be described as lost; but even on the bread-and-butter questions of where he was when, how he passed his time and whom he knew, the record remains very sparse indeed. There is more about the public than the private man but even that does not (one would have thought) take us very far.

One response to our ignorance of Shakespeare's life is to say it does not matter. Why should we care when we already have his writings? There is a hard-line position according to which all biographical information is distracting and our ignorance of Shakespeare is therefore a good rather than bad thing in that it leaves us freer to appreciate his poems and plays. Whether or not one adopts this view must be chiefly a matter of taste, but there is at least one argument against it. Shakespeare is the national Bard and every Briton is therefore expected, through exposure during childhood and youth, to understand what he has to say. But the insufficiently acknowledged truth is that he is often a difficult writer who can on occasions be impenetrably obscure. That knowledge of the biographical as well as historical circumstances in which certain of his more difficult lines were written would clarify them is a likelihood which applies particularly to his sonnets. In the 1890s, A. E. Housman wrote a poem about a young man who is being dragged off to prison because of the colour of his hair: "But they pulled the beggar's hat off for the

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<sup>9</sup> In 1588 Shakespeare's name was associated with that of his parents in a case brought in London against the Lamberts, relatives to whom John Shakespeare had ceded a property which he had acquired on his marriage as part of his wife's dowry. For Jonathan Bate there are details of this case which provide "pretty strong evidence of Shakespeare's presence in London (not Lancashire, let alone abroad) in the Armada year of 1588". See his *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and Work of William Shakespeare*, London, Penguin, 2009, p. 323.

world to see and stare, / And they're taking him to justice for the colour of his hair"<sup>10</sup>. The naïve reader of the day must have felt that persecuting people for their hair colour indicated a pretty poor state of affairs; the less naïve one that the colour of the young man's hair must have been intended by Housman to stand for something else. For those who first read the poem without knowing anything about its author and then learnt that he was a homosexual, dismayed by the punishment meted out to Oscar Wilde, every line in it would have undergone a radical and irreversible change. It is quite possible that many of the more difficult lines in Shakespeare's sonnets would not only be clarified but also radically altered if we knew to whom they were addressed, when precisely they were composed (or revised), the circumstances of their composition, and whether Shakespeare himself approved or supervised their publication: all questions to which centuries of scholarly enquiry have failed to provide definitive answers.

This intellectual justification for knowing more about Shakespeare is probably only a minor component in the appetite which exists for details of his life. In many cases, as John Updike has been one of many to point out, people are anxious to learn about the life of a writer in order to prolong the pleasure which that writer has given them, "to partake again", as he puts it, "from another angle, of the joys [...] experienced within the author's oeuvre"<sup>11</sup>. They can on occasion be disappointed as when, for example, someone they have admired for his depictions of domestic harmony turns out to have been a wife-beater; but in general they are able to continue through biography an acquaintance they have first formed through poems, novels or plays. Any discordance between life and art is in any case often overborne by the strong curiosity which exists about anyone who has achieved something remarkable in life. It is no doubt this, rather than any more specifically literary feeling, which takes thousands to Stratford every year, keen to see precisely where the great man was born and grew up. There is perhaps here a satisfaction in discovering that, allowing for the difference in period, Shakespeare was in his origins much like the rest of us; but perhaps also amaze-

<sup>10</sup> *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1997, pp. 157-58.

<sup>11</sup> See the essay on "Literary Biography" in John Updike's *Due Considerations*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 2007, pp. 4-5.



ment that an apparently ordinary human being could have gone on to achieve so much that was exceptional.

Whatever the reasons for wanting to know about Shakespeare, that desire certainly exists so that those proud to be without it must be conscious of belonging to a minority. It is an appetite which began to grow fifty or so years after Shakespeare's death and has been on the increase ever since. Great scholars such as Edmond Malone in the eighteenth century, James O. Halliwell-Phillipps in the nineteenth, or Edmund K. Chambers in the twentieth, dedicated many years of their lives to satisfying it, and not without some modest results. It was Malone, for example, who succeeded in clarifying the question of Shakespeare's brothers and sisters, and who found what is still the only extant letter written to him (though there is some considerable doubt whether it was ever sent). Many advances of this kind were made but all three men had ways of acknowledging, more or less implicitly, that none of these was of crucial biographical significance. Malone's way was the most implicit of all in that he died with only a fragment completed of the biography on which he had spent over twenty years (it took the story up to 1592). Halliwell-Phillipps lived to publish the results of his researches in 1881, but he then called them *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* and they obstinately remained what this title suggests through many subsequent editions. Nearer to our own time, Chambers was surely warning his readers not to expect miracles by entitling his major contribution to Shakespeare biography *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, and by then making clear that, in any attempt to reconstitute the details of Shakespeare's life, there were far more of the latter than the former.

By temperament and training, these three towering figures were inclined to tread warily but they all had contemporaries, and then successors, who were more fancy-free. Less inhibited biographies than theirs began to appear regularly in the nineteenth century, increasing in number as time passed. They were nourished by the occasional minor discovery, usually associated with Shakespeare's parents or his Stratford background rather than the man himself. The last significant documents with a direct relation to his life were unearthed in 1909. It was then that two Americans (a husband-and-wife team called Wallace), working away in the Public Records Office, came across the transcripts of a civil suit brought by Stephen Belott against his

father-in-law, Christopher Mountjoy, and discovered that Shakespeare had been one of those required to testify. Because nothing of similar importance has been found since then, one might expect the supply of biographies to have tapered off. Rather the opposite is the case and there was a particular glut of them at the beginning of this century, with biographical studies of Shakespeare by (amongst many others) Katherine Duncan-Jones, René Weis, and Jonathan Bate on one side of the Atlantic, and Stephen Greenblatt and James Shapiro on the other. Previously, the authors of lives of Shakespeare had largely been professional writers or 'men of letters', but these five authors confirmed a trend whereby biography became a prize for those Shakespeareans from the Academy who had become eminent in their profession. Given the limitations of data with which they then had to deal, this was as if highly trained athletes were required to qualify at international level so that they could then participate in an annual British sack race. The puzzle was how they could participate at all when the information with which they had to deal was not only so limited but had been in the public domain for so long. What resources of intelligence, scholarship or ingenuity did they possess that allowed them to make bricks without straw?

The wide variety of methods which Shakespeare's biographers have developed over the years in order to overcome the inevitable disadvantages of their position are amply illustrated in the book to which these remarks are the introduction; but there is room here for a brief indication of the major ones. Because so little is known about Shakespeare, and all authors of his 'life' are obliged to speculate, one of their problems is how to acknowledge this uncomfortable fact without giving their readers the impression that they might just as well have opened an historical novel. Part of the solution lies in phraseology: finding the right expressions and knowing how to put them in the right places. Those weasel words 'perhaps', 'if', 'probably', 'could have', 'may' etc. are difficult to avoid when the subject has left behind diaries or letters, and there are numerous eye-witness reports; but, deprived of these resources as Shakespeare biographers inevitably are, they become essential. Skilfully handled, they can function to recall that moment in many an American court room drama when the handsome defence attorney suddenly suggests to his hostile male witness the scenario which makes him responsible for the murder of which his

own female client stands accused (the genders are interchangeable). Although the prosecuting counsel then leaps to his feet with "Objection!", the idea of that witness as the real culprit is firmly lodged in the jury's mind well before the judge can say "Sustained". The weasel words I mention have this same function of "Sustained" in that they acknowledge the rules in the very moment when they are being broken. They announce an intellectual responsibility which would make writing yet another life of Shakespeare very difficult while at the same time presiding over what is – if the work is to get written – its very necessary abandon. What is particularly distinctive about their use in the case of Shakespeare is that they tend to accompany speculative answers to questions which have always proved unanswerable – how he managed to become an actor, for example, or the number of times he returned to Stratford once he was settled in London – and then vanish on the subsequent occasions these answers are taken for granted as essential narrative building blocks. One can see why this must be so. What might perhaps have been has to become what certainly was the case if the biography in which this transformation takes place is not to suffer a life-threatening loss of weight.

Even when the weasel words of qualification are not simply dropped, and the mood covertly changed from the conditional to the assertive, the English language is full of devices which help hard-pressed Shakespeare biographers to make what is speculative sound certain, or build into an apparently definitive statement touches which give it what has come to be widely known as plausible deniability. But logic can come to their aid also. Over the years a technique has been developed for solving some of their difficulties which could be termed the argument from absence. This consists in making the lack of information with which Shakespeare biographers have to deal work for them, in turning a negative into a positive.

The most familiar way this method operates can be seen in general statements about Shakespeare's character. If there is one word in these which now appears more often than any others it is 'discreet': here was someone, the impression given usually is, who steered clear of trouble and liked to keep his head down, a man who (as Jonathan Bate has recently put it) had "an instinct for caution" and a "track record of staying out of trouble"<sup>12</sup>. It will be obvious imme-

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<sup>12</sup> Bate, p. 345.

diately how this way of presenting Shakespeare transforms the fact that we know virtually nothing about him from a weakness into a strength. Viewed from this perspective, the absence of information is not so much a result of the passage of time, accident, or Shakespeare's social status (whether or not aristocrats wrote more letters than ordinary people, those they did write were more likely to be preserved), but of particular patterns of behaviour. If in his private capacity Shakespeare left so little mark on his age, it is because it was in his nature to do so. This conclusion is open to challenge from those who say that it cannot be drawn without reference to some standard of comparison, but that is not far to seek. In his *Shakespeare: A Life*, Park Honan is one of many to indicate what the standard is when he insists that

[a]s a man [Shakespeare] would lack a quirky egotism, as seems clear from his relatively peaceful career in the theatre, a hive of tension. He was not involved in Ben Jonson's kind of embroilments, or Marlowe's. He has a calm, fine control of emotive materials, and his sonnets, in the artfulness of their structures, reveal a lordly, easy play over feelings<sup>13</sup>.

The final phrases in this extract may be especially questionable but what the whole of it illustrates is the freedom for calling Shakespeare discreet, or peace-loving, which can be derived from the fact that he did not leave a conspicuous trail in the law courts, and was never arrested for counterfeiting or murder, as Marlowe and Jonson were. However true it may be that not all manifestations of violence, aggression and unpleasantness end up in the courts, the failure to uncover a trace of any legal difficulties comparable to those suffered by his two great contemporaries has allowed biographers to arrive at conclusions about his character which are otherwise hard to draw.

The argument from absence works best when the reader can be persuaded that a gap for which there might in reality be many different reasons has only one explanation. A slightly more specific illustration of it involves the vexed question of Shakespeare's religious views. Since his was a period of violent religious controversy,

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<sup>13</sup> Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 18.

nothing could seem more biographically significant than some clear indications of where he stood on religious matters. In recent times, it has become fashionable to suggest that he was a Catholic, not merely sympathetic to the old faith but rather someone willing to support those working to restore it. Since this was a dangerous position to hold, it is clear that as a covert Catholic Shakespeare would not have been keen to advertise. It is this which leads the well-known Shakespearean scholar, Gary Taylor, to write, "I can't prove Shakespeare was a Catholic. But then, if he were one, he would have had strong incentives to prevent *anyone* from being able to prove it"<sup>14</sup>. It is not difficult to see how this has encouraged some to imply that it is precisely because Shakespeare never reveals he was a Catholic that we know he probably was one. Useful as this move may be, it leads to an absurdity which has been well described by Robert Graves in his novel, *They Hanged My Saintly Billy*. This tells the only lightly fictionalised story of Dr William Palmer who was executed in 1856 for the murder by strychnine of his betting partner, John Cook. There was strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that Palmer had committed this crime but nothing of a more definite variety so that at one point the prosecution's chief pathologist appeared to be arguing that, since strychnine is very rapidly absorbed into the body, the absence of any hint of it in Cook's showed that Palmer must certainly have used it to poison him<sup>15</sup>.

Several pertinent instances of the argument from absence are illustrated in my book, but like the use and misuse of words which imply doubt or uncertainty, it is a relatively minor resource for Shakespeare biographers in comparison with two other, major ones. The first of these could be summed up briefly as making historical background stand in for an absent biographical foreground. In the writing of a biography of someone whose life has been written many times before, there is always an initial difficulty. Theoretically speaking, there are as many possible biographies as there are

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Taylor, "Forms of Opposition: Shakespeare and Middleton", *English Literary Renaissance*, 24:2 (Spring 1994), p. 298.

<sup>15</sup> The same pathologist had originally recorded finding non-lethal traces of antimony in Cook's body and hence the popular rhyme which Graves reproduces on p. 228 of *They Hanged My Saintly Billy* (London, Faber & Faber, 1957): "In antimony, great though his faith, / The quantity found being small, / Taylor's faith in strychnine was yet greater, / For of that he found nothing at all".

people willing to write them: new perspectives on the same old material; but in practice the public like to be given the impression that their biographers have been driven to composition by material which is new. This is perhaps why the blurb for Michael Wood's 2003 life of Shakespeare talks of "a wealth of unexplored archive evidence" and "fascinating new discoveries". Since the only recent discovery about Shakespeare which can be described as fascinating dates back (as I have said) to 1909, the new material Wood refers to here must be of an historical rather than strictly biographical nature: more information, that is, on Stratford, the rise of the commercial theatre, Court politics, or Elizabethan and Jacobean life in general. It is this which many biographers use to compensate for their inevitable ignorance of the details of Shakespeare's life: though there is little to say about the man himself, the supply of information about his times is ever increasing and inexhaustible. According to Samuel Schoenbaum, it was the Victorian biographer Charles Knight who was the first person properly to "associate Shakespeare with the circumstances around him" and thus triumph over the "limitations of his data"<sup>16</sup>. This method of dealing with their difficulties is one which Knight's successors have been employing ever since, yet whether it is really the triumph Schoenbaum calls it must be considered doubtful. One of the exciting historical events which took place while Shakespeare was still a boy, for example, was the 'mission' of Edmund Campion to England in 1580. A member of a small group of Jesuits who came from the continent with the intention of reconverting as many English people as possible to the old faith, the charismatic Campion is thought by some to have passed through Warwickshire; yet whether he met Shakespeare's parents or, as at least one biographer would have it, Shakespeare himself, is unknown and remains unknown however many details of Campion and his sad fate are provided (he was arrested and executed in 1581). Much later in Shakespeare's life, an episode of similarly intrinsic, historical interest was the effort made by the out-of-favour earl of Essex in 1601 to defeat his enemies at Court. Shortly before he launched what was later interpreted as the beginnings of an unsuccessful attempt to seize and perhaps murder the Queen, a group of his followers went to the Globe and

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<sup>16</sup> Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1991, p. 277.

commissioned a special performance of *Richard II*, a play in which a monarch is deposed. Shakespeare's biographers have given increasingly detailed and interesting accounts of this episode but without being able to establish how far Shakespeare himself was involved (if indeed he was involved at all), or where his sympathies lay. This is because, although historical background may be essential for a full understanding of an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions, it can never compensate for an initial lack of information on those three matters. To think it can is to be like a man who takes a cart, carefully refurbishes or paints its structure, and then expects the horse suddenly to materialise, panting between the shafts.

The method Charles Knight inaugurated has become increasingly popular in recent times as Shakespeare biography has been more and more the preserve of academics who have often spent many years accumulating background knowledge. Their specialist interests have strengthened the tendency for a life of Shakespeare to be a history book, and often a very interesting history book, which is only disguised as biography. A particularly successful example of this tendency was James Shapiro's *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. None of the reviewers who welcomed this work commented on the ambiguity of its title which would have led ordinary readers to expect some account of how Shakespeare passed his time in the spring, what he did in the summer, and how he fared in the autumn and winter of 1599. What they in fact were offered was something much more like a narrative of various important happenings in 1599, one of the years in which Shakespeare happened to be alive. Even more than in many other comparable works, that is, history (cultural, social or political) was made to do the work of life-writing. Nearly always doing that work also, however, is the second major resource of the Shakespeare biographer, the one which consists in inferring the details of his life from his writing, or seeing those details reflected in it. T. S. Eliot once warned us against this habit when he famously claimed that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates"<sup>17</sup>; but he had been anticipated in this view by Halliwell-Phillipps who, in a preface to his *Outlines of Shakespeare's life*, wrote that

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<sup>17</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in *Selected Essays*, London, Faber & Faber, 1932, p. 18.

it must surely be admitted that the exchange of the individuality of the man for that of the author is the very essence of dramatic genius, and, if that be so, the higher the genius the more complete will be the severance from personality<sup>18</sup>.

These are two statements the full implications of which most people quite reasonably find difficult to accept. It is hard not to believe that, as Stephen Greenblatt puts it in the preface to his biography, the words Shakespeare wrote “contain the vivid presence of actual, lived experience”<sup>19</sup>. The difficulty is that connections between those words and the “lived experience” must often have been extremely indirect and subtle so that there have to be strict criteria which govern any attempt to establish them. To understand how the life of any author is made manifest in his writings, the biographer needs to know both a great deal about that life and the particular circumstances in which individual works were composed. To say these criteria are not met in the case of Shakespeare would be the understatement of the year. “We know more about the life of Shakespeare than about that of any of his literary contemporaries bar Ben Jonson”, Anthony Holden blithely declares and he goes on, “[a]nd the rest is there for all to see, in and between every line he wrote”<sup>20</sup>. But deciphering the plays in the way this suggests is not as easy as he implies. Many people might agree that, when Hamlet talks about acting to the players who visit Elsinore, we are hearing Shakespeare’s own thoughts (although, since Hamlet is a character in a drama, these might also have been intended as the thoughts of a typical aristocratic patron of the Elizabethan theatre); but does that then mean we have direct access to his own views or feelings when Falstaff pronounces on honour, or Othello on women? Searching for characters in the plays who can be taken as articulating Shakespeare’s own thoughts is the simplest and perhaps crudest method for helping the biographer to make bricks without straw. In my book the reader encounters several more, as well as the special and delusively promising case of the sonnets with

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<sup>18</sup> James O. Halliwell-Phillipps, *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare*, London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1886 (6<sup>th</sup> edition), vol. I, pp. vi-vii.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2004, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Holden, *William Shakespeare: His Life and Work*, London, Little, Brown & Co., 1999, p. 2.



their apparently autobiographical 'I'. But as an introductory example of the general difficulty, and of how Shakespeare's biographers overcome it, the fate of his son Hamnet will serve as well as any.

Hamnet died in August 1596, when he was eleven, and the loss of his only male heir must, one imagines, have been a blow to Shakespeare. Any serious student of his life would like to know how it affected him. Since there are no private documents which tell us this, his biographers have traditionally found his reaction to the event in the words of Queen Constance in *King John*, after her young son Arthur has been captured and she rightly fears his life will be in danger:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,  
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,  
Remembers me of all his gracious parts [...] (III.iii.93-96<sup>21</sup>)

Biographers have found it reasonable to believe that what we hear in these moving lines is Shakespeare lamenting the death of his own son because Hamnet and the Arthur of the play would have been pretty much of an age, and *King John* is usually assigned to early 1597 when the memory of Hamnet's death would still have been fresh. Unfortunately for them, at least two distinguished scholars have argued strongly for a date which is much earlier, and it is clear that Shakespeare could not have been mourning Hamnet's loss long before it took place<sup>22</sup>. Chronology of composition is a remarkably tricky business in Shakespeare studies. Duncan-Jones describes *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as a play which "can be dated with unusual precision" and she goes on to say that, in his representation of young William Page in that play, Shakespeare was assimilating his dead son "into what he happened to be writing in the spring after his death". For her, therefore, William may be the nearest Shakespeare ever came to providing

<sup>21</sup> For the sake of convenience, all the quotations from Shakespeare's plays or poems in my book were taken from the revised Arden edition of his complete works edited by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London, Thomson Learning, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> The two scholars referred to are Ernst A. J. Honigmann and Richard Dutton. See also David Bevington, *Shakespeare and Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, where the composition of *King John* is described as a matter on which "the jury is still out" (p. 103).

for Hamnet “a public memorial”<sup>23</sup>. Her book bears the Arden imprint but when Giorgio Melchiori came to edit *The Merry Wives* in Arden’s Third Series, he decided it belonged to 1599, or later<sup>24</sup>.

This lack of consensus as to when the plays were written (as opposed to registered or performed) is a considerable inconvenience to those looking for the man in his work; but that activity is too important to the biographers for them to be much troubled by it and, in any event, it is always open to them to say (in relation to *The Merry Wives*) that, although Shakespeare would not have written a memorial to his son while he was still alive, he could still have been remembering him not merely one, but three or four springs after his death. This is the approach adopted by David Bevington who, sympathetic to the idea that the effect of Hamnet’s death can be found best not in *The Merry Wives* but in *Twelfth Night*, explains away a delayed reaction of four years or so by saying that “mourning for such an event can take time and patience”<sup>25</sup>.

Most of the recent biographers are quite anxious about chronology but one it seems to leave untroubled is René Weis, who feels he can not only guess when the plays were written but also divine more or less exactly what Shakespeare was doing at the time of their composition. So precise is he on the latter question that he finds Constance’s words in *King John* slightly *pre-dating* Hamnet’s death; but he then shows the resourcefulness all Shakespeare’s biographers require by suggesting they were written when he already knew his son was dying<sup>26</sup>. The play in which he finds a more powerful expression of grief, however, is *Romeo and Juliet*. The sorrow expressed by the Nurse, Capulet and Lady Capulet in that play over Juliet’s death is, he says, “raw and heart-rending”, and to him an obvious echo of what Shakespeare must have felt in losing Hamnet<sup>27</sup>. In the course of elaborating this case he finds an alternative answer to an objection to which Duncan-Jones might be said to expose herself in identify-

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from His Life*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Thomson Learning, 2001, pp. 97-99.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Melchiori, “Introduction”, in William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Thomson Learning, 2000, pp. 18-30.

<sup>25</sup> Bevington, p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> René Weis, *Shakespeare Revealed: A Biography*, London, John Murray, 2007, pp. 183-84.

<sup>27</sup> Weis, p. 203.

ing memories of Hamnet in William Page. He is after all a character surrounded by cheerfulness and one who certainly does not die. But that, says Duncan-Jones, is inevitable in a “festive farce, with no scope for any expression of private grief”<sup>28</sup>. In dealing with the comedy in *Romeo and Juliet*, Weis takes a different tack, noting how

Shakespeare managed to conjure up a lively, funny maverick like Mercutio, at a time when he was presumably overwhelmed by grief, testimony perhaps to an iron resolve. Perhaps *Romeo and Juliet* was an act of solace and atonement, a determined creation of children in the teeth of adversity and death, children who, unlike his son, would be resurrected every time the Chorus stepped out to launch another performance<sup>29</sup>.

The strategy employed here is of the ‘heads-I-win-tails-you-lose’ variety, and one which, in this instance, allows Weis to decide that either Shakespeare is directly expressing his grief and sense of loss in the plays he wrote shortly after Hamnet’s death, or that the exuberant cheerfulness in many of them represents a compensatory mechanism for overcoming his sorrow. It would be wrong to imagine that arguments of this variety can be countered. What Weis says here may be true, but it may just as well be false. There is nothing which survives that would allow anyone to decide the issue. Nor, if one excludes chronology, is there anything to confirm or deny the effect of Hamnet’s death in the very many other places, apart from *Romeo and Juliet*, where it has been found (*Hamlet* is a favourite hunting-ground), or the claims of those who decide to make that effect general. Anthony Holden, for example, attributes to Hamnet’s death “the personal grief which now becomes a recurring strain in [Shakespeare’s] work [...] lifting his history to quite another poetic plane”<sup>30</sup>, while Michael Wood, ignoring the predominantly comic mood of the plays which appear to have been written shortly after 1596, describes the effect on Shakespeare’s writing of losing his only son in this way:

Within the next year or two a change gradually came about not only in Shakespeare’s themes but also in his way of writing, in his lan-

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<sup>28</sup> Duncan-Jones, p. 99.

<sup>29</sup> Weis, pp. 204-5.

<sup>30</sup> Holden, p. 151.

guage and imagery. The great tragedies followed, plumbing 'the well of darkness'. This was not only a personal tragedy but a powerful intimation of mortality<sup>31</sup>.

It stands to reason that Shakespeare must have been affected by the death of Hamnet but it is a smart move to let the reader decide exactly where in the plays this is evident, in case one of the likely candidates was written before it took place, but also because relevant quotations which readers themselves recall have more effect than any the biographer could choose for them. That with the right kind of encouragement (or the wrong one, in my view), any reasonably informed reader can find such quotations ought nevertheless to be a worry. This may be a case where the ability of very many people to come up with different answers to the same question is not significant since the effect of Hamnet's death on Shakespeare's writing can always be described as *pervasive*. Yet the ease with which the operation may be carried ought surely to be felt disturbing. It is one of which information-starved biographers are nonetheless fond because the apparent access it gives to Shakespeare's private feelings constitutes, along with the reliance on history, such a major reason why lives of Shakespeare can still continue to appear.

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, London, BBC Worldwide Publications, 2003, p. 166.