

## Who Was William Shakespeare?\*

Graham Holderness

What a strange question! Shakespeare is acknowledged throughout the world as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of writers; he has an unrivalled position as the greatest author of British culture. Can you imagine anyone asking that question of any other national writer? Who was Miguel de Cervantes? Who was Dante Alighieri? Who was Johannes Wolfgang von Goethe? So why Shakespeare?

The problem is everywhere. It troubles even Gwyneth Paltrow. "Are you the author of the plays of William Shakespeare?" asks Viola de Lessops, in the film *Shakespeare in Love*. What a roundabout way of asking someone's name! "Are you William Shakespeare?" would have been simpler. But Viola is, in fact, not just after a man, but in quest of a literary biography. She knew and loved the plays, before she knew and loved the author. Like her original, Viola Compton in the comic novel *No Bed for Bacon*<sup>1</sup>, 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, in this instance, 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, little, balding, grumpy and gay. And that involved syntax even sneaks in the possibility that "the author of the plays of William Shakespeare" might

---

\* A number of passages in this article previously appeared in Graham Holderness, *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011. The biographical question is here reprised and updated.

<sup>1</sup> Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon, *No Bed for Bacon*, London, Michael Joseph, 1941; London, Black Swan, 1999.

just have been someone other than William Shakespeare... of which more later.

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"<sup>2</sup>. 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.

*Shakespeare in Love* presents the man behind the work, living the romantic life that can be imagined to have inspired the poetry. The idyll of love and loss embedded in *Romeo and Juliet* is really a side-effect of Shakespeare's passionate affair with a young lady. Life and art are one.

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"<sup>3</sup>. The jest is a bit of donnish wit 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

---

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Rowe, "Some Account of the Life, &c. of Mr. *William Shakespear*", preface to *The Works of William Shakespear in Six Volumes*, ed. Nicholas Rowe, London, Jacob Tonson, 1709, vol. I, p. i.

<sup>3</sup> Brahm and Simon, p. 27.

difficulties later encountered by people trying to work out exactly who he was.

Would we call *Shakespeare in Love* an adaptation of the Shakespeare biography? Probably not. How much of Shakespeare's life is there in it? Hardly any. Shakespeare really was an actor and theatre poet, who lodged in London and wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. In the film he alludes to his Stratford home, his wife Anne Hathaway, her cottage, his twin children. All the rest is complete fantasy. There is a lot of reconstructed Elizabethan theatre business, but all playfully reconfigured. Historical characters abound, but they don't do anything they ever did in history. The central action of the film is driven by fictions of improbability: Shakespeare having writer's block; a young lady wanting to get onto the stage; Queen Elizabeth attending a performance at the public theatre; and so on. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that *Shakespeare in Love* is an adaptation of a 1940s comic novel that set out cleverly to adapt all the old jokes the authors could find about Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth I, Francis Bacon etc. Biography hardly comes into it.

So let's consider another film about Shakespeare's life that does purport to be biographical, William Boyd's *A Waste of Shame*, which dramatises the supposed 'story' of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, in much the same way that *Shakespeare in Love* dramatises the imagined back-story of *Romeo and Juliet*.

I wanted to come up with a film that made us re-think Shakespeare in quite a radical way – to de-mythologise him, to make him human, flawed, understandable – and therefore real. Everything we know about him suggests a man rooted in the real world<sup>4</sup>.

The action of the film is thus the story of the *Sonnets*: a love triangle between the unhappily-married playwright, beautiful gay aristocrat William Herbert, earl of Pembroke (Mr W. H.) (not in this version the earl of Southampton) and a black prostitute called Lucy. Shakespeare contracts venereal disease from the latter. Boyd claimed that the screenplay was underpinned by extensive academic research of his own, and consultation with Shakespeare biographer and editor

---

<sup>4</sup> *Imagining the Bard: William Boyd Interview* (updated 27 October 2005), available from the Open University website: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/literature/imagining-the-bard-william-boyd-interview>.

of the *Sonnets* Katherine Duncan-Jones, who is credited as academic adviser. The film is supposed to represent a genuine attempt at historical biography.

Now there is plenty of biographical material in the film; if anything it's foregrounded, paraded, especially in the wooden dialogue. But despite the film's academic credentials, it isn't a biography of Shakespeare. The story in the *Sonnets*, if there is one, is not necessarily autobiographical, and is certainly not corroborated by any independent evidence. There is even less evidence to identify the fair friend of the *Sonnets* with William Herbert, as there is with the earl of Southampton, and even for the latter there is nothing definite except the formal expressions of "love" in the dedications to two poems. The 'Dark Lady' of the *Sonnets* exists only as a fictional character, since there is no historical evidence linking Shakespeare with any woman other than his wife. Boyd construes her darkness as indicating a black person, her promiscuity as showing her to be a prostitute, and identifies her with the famous whore Lucy Negro of Clerkenwell. Plenty of biographers of Shakespeare have suggested all this of course before, notably Anthony Burgess (in his life *Shakespeare*<sup>5</sup> and his novel *Nothing Like the Sun*<sup>6</sup>), but none of it is in reality historical or biographical at all.

So where would we look for the truth about Shakespeare's biography? For an answer to the question 'Who was William Shakespeare?', we'd look to the biographies written by the leading Shakespeare scholars and professional writers – Stephen Greenblatt, Stanley Wells, Jonathan Bate, Peter Ackroyd, Bill Bryson, Michael Wood. And these of course are all factual, not fictional at all. Or are they?

Consider, as a 'case-study', how a number of major biographers of Shakespeare deal with the poet's death. There is virtually no data to work with, other than the facts that he made a will, died on 23 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<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Burgess, *Shakespeare*, London, Penguin, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Burgess, *Nothing Like the Sun*, London, Heinemann, 1964; London, Alisson and Busby, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare*, London, Penguin, 2009, p. 428.

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<sup>8</sup>. 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”<sup>9</sup>. 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”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>.

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, which as we have seen is promoted as a fact by William Boyd in *A Waste of Shame*, where Shakespeare is seen endur-

---

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 296-97.

<sup>9</sup> Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 409.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare: For All Time*, London, Macmillan, 2002, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2005, p. 485.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, London, BBC Worldwide Publications, 2003, p. 377.

ing the painful treatment of a mercury bath. 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"<sup>13</sup>. 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. 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 childish obscene fragments of English doggerel and bad Greek, Spanish and French<sup>14</sup>.

Duncan-Jones's "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 death bed".

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<sup>15</sup>. 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 sick-room, husband and wife may have drawn closer together"<sup>16</sup>.

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

---

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from His Life*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Thomson Learning, 2001, p. 266.

<sup>14</sup> Duncan-Jones, p. 276.

<sup>15</sup> Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007, p. 304.

<sup>16</sup> Greer, p. 309.

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<sup>17</sup>, to appreciate just how inventive, fictional, speculative and opinionated such biographical writing really is. In my book *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* I argued that Shakespeare biographers have always fictionalised their narratives, and still do. The first life of Shakespeare by Nicholas Rowe, as well as listing a few documentary facts, incorporated later seventeenth-century ‘traditions’ that modern biographers tend to regard as mythical and legendary – Shakespeare as poacher for instance. So from the beginning, the life of Shakespeare was both factual and fictional.

Most of the documentary material about Shakespeare’s work in the London theatres, and his commercial and property dealings in Stratford and London, were discovered later, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the mid nineteenth century Shakespeare biography had reached an impasse, since the historical record kept turning up nothing but details of petty financial transactions – money-lending, grain-hoarding, tax-dodging, land-enclosing – that just didn’t seem to fit with the elevated status of the national poet. Thereafter Shakespeare’s life was sought in his works, rather than in his biography.

This had two effects. One was to acknowledge an apparent disjunction between the facts of the life, and the character of the works: the life of the world’s greatest writer could surely not be so – ordinary. The other was to insist that the works themselves should be read autobiographically. As we’ve seen, both our modern film examples take the latter position for granted. But both these effects actually cleared the way for that Shakespeare Authorship doubt, which began with Delia Bacon in the second half of the nineteenth century. If there was a gap between man and works, perhaps we have the

---

<sup>17</sup> Bate, p. 428.

wrong man? And if the plays are autobiographical, then surely their author must have experienced the experiences they dramatise? If William of Stratford wasn't a courtier, didn't have a university education, didn't travel abroad, then who wrote the plays?

Which brings us to my third filmic point of reference, Columbia Pictures *Anonymous*, directed by Roland Emmerich, which is predicated on the assumption that the true author of Shakespeare's plays was Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford. It begins with committed Oxfordian Sir Derek Jacobi, standing on a replica Elizabethan stage in modern dress, asserting that Shakespeare did not write the plays attributed to him. So immediately you have a connection between the inside of the film and the Oxfordian cause out in the real world. In the film Oxford and Essex are plotting to replace Elizabeth with an aristocratic male successor, and to head off the claims of James of Scotland, favoured by the Cecils. Oxford is writing subversive plays and wants them performed under a pseudonym. Shakespeare the actor is a virtually wordless stooge who accepts Oxford's plays as his own. The life of "the author of the plays of William Shakespeare" is thus brought into conformity with the plays of William Shakespeare – he was really the earl of Oxford.

The poster for the film – a terrific poster, in my view – encapsulates all this. The man is an author, we know from his quill pen. But his identity is concealed as we see him from behind. The ink from his pen is spattered wildly around, forming blots that may just be a random pattern, or may be Rorschach blots that could be decoded to form a hidden meaning.

Now this film about Shakespeare contains nothing at all of Shakespeare's historical life (except maybe the fact that he was an actor, and acquired a coat of arms). Again, there are real historical characters, but they don't do what they actually did in history. In fact as many people have already pointed out, the film not only invents the unhistorical, but distorts the historical to fit a thesis.

So much has already been written about the film that I'll skip a lot of it. Yes it does seem to be promoting as fact the totally groundless idea that Oxford wrote the plays. Yes it does seem to occupy the same territory as anti-Stratfordian polemic promoting alternative authors. Yes it is so full of historical inaccuracy about people, dates, plays and poems, events, that you wonder how anyone could take it seriously as an argument.



But is this really the right way to approach the film? At the end you see the conventional disclaimer affirming that it's fiction:

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Both the director and the actors who appear in the film oscillate between saying it's fact, and saying it's fiction. How can it be read as factual when it's entirely based on supposition without evidence, and the facts it does use are so distorted and misrepresented?

So if you remove the film from the environment of scholarly argument and intellectual debate; ignore what the publicity says and what the director and actors claim; and just accept it as fiction – then what's the problem? Did anybody go to see *Godzilla* and think this is really going to happen? Did anybody ever go to see *Independence Day* and start looking nervously out of the window? Did anybody go to see *The Patriot* – a film I find much more annoying than *Anonymous* – and think that Mel Gibson personally ended slavery during the American Revolution? No. Then let's get rid of the idea that *Anonymous* is anything other than a fiction, and let's appreciate and judge it as such.

Let's look at how the writer is presented in *Anonymous*. This time he is of course not Shakespeare, but de Vere. De Vere writes in secret, with absolutely no-one else privy to what he's doing. He writes in a comfortable book-lined study. Isolated from the theatre, from society, from other professional writers, he produces a series of neatly-written manuscripts of wholly completed plays, each one bound up in a leather folder. All Shakespeare's masterpieces are there, each one finished to perfection before being handed over to the professionals for them to produce in the theatre.

And what are these plays like when actually performed in the theatre? The plays are presented, in exactly the way they are interpreted in Thomas Looney's '*Shakespeare Identified*'<sup>18</sup>, as political propaganda, agit-prop for the cause Oxford espouses, the reactionary idea of putting the feudal military aristocracy back in control of the state, and disempowering the new parvenu class of civil servants repre-

---

<sup>18</sup> J. Thomas Looney, '*Shakespeare Identified in Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, London, C. Palmer; New York, Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1920.

sented by the Cecils. We see *Henry V* offering a model of heroic and popular leadership. We see *Hamlet* as a wholly transparent roman-à-clef designed to satirise William Cecil (who watches the play, though he should be dead). We see *Richard III*, performed on the eve of the Essex insurrection (in place of the play mentioned in the historical record, *Richard II*), and deployed merely to satirise Robert Cecil.

So even if we just take the film as an imaginative exploration of a fictional subject, you can see here how the plays emerge from this treatment immeasurably flattened, attenuated, reduced in significance. They appear to encode only the political ambitions of one man, which is why they need to be so perfectly finished in the study; and they act out a journalistic commentary on the contemporary political scene. They create not fictional characters who never really lived at all and so can live forever, but limited portrayals of recognisable individuals from history. As James Shapiro put it, “the author of the great plays is reduced to a political propagandist, his plays to vehicles to advance his faction’s cause”<sup>19</sup>.

Shakespeare is celebrated as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of *writers* – “above all other writers”, as Samuel Johnson described him. Dr Johnson was thinking of Shakespeare as a writer like himself, a man who personally placed words on a page, with a quill pen dipped in ink. One of the iconic representations of Shakespeare is that image of a man writing, as in his funeral monument in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon: quill pen in his right hand, expectantly poised in the air, ready to begin; and a sheet of paper held firmly under the left hand. Although quills were used by all writers for a thousand years from about 700 AD, for some reason the implement has become particularly associated with Shakespeare. One of the most frequently-reproduced images from *Shakespeare in Love* is that of Joseph Fiennes as Shakespeare, sitting at a table, holding a quill, staring into space, trying to think what to put down on the blank page. Biographies of Shakespeare (e.g. those by Peter Ackroyd and Bill Bryson) often prominently feature a richly-feathered quill on the cover illustration. Thus the instrument that signs becomes itself the visual ‘signature’ standing in for the

---

<sup>19</sup> James Shapiro, “Shakespeare – A Fraud? *Anonymous* Is Ridiculous”, *The Guardian* (4 November 2011), <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/nov/04/anonymous-shakespeare-film-roland-emmerich>.

writer. In the *Anonymous* poster de Vere brandishes the quill, derived of course from representations of Shakespeare, as a banner or a weapon. Ink from the pen splashes everywhere, like spilt blood. The trailer shows the quill pen writing the name of William Shakespeare on a piece of parchment, but the name then evaporates with Derek Jacobi's choric voice-over assertion that "William Shakespeare never wrote a word".

This is writing as a physical and intellectual process, involving the whole man, a holistic relationship between mind, body and writing technology. In their preface to the First Folio, Shakespeare's friends and colleagues Heminge and Condell, who must have actually observed him in the act of composition, said that in his writing "his mind and hand went together". In such images of the writer at work, the figure is usually seen as isolated, remote from any contact with other people or with material objects. Writing is an individual action, conducted at some distance from actual living, almost a form of contemplation.

The quill pen is the defining property of the early modern writer, and the image of Shakespeare with a feathered quill is so well-established in the popular imagination that it is frequently reproduced in adverts, cartoons and comedy sketches. Yet of course we have no actual knowledge of Shakespeare's writing habits. He must have used a quill, since this was the universal implement of the period for writing with ink (though they also had lead pencils), his signatures are in ink, and the quill is often alluded to in the plays. But the feathers may well have been stripped off from his pens, so they didn't get in the way, as they are in that shot from *Shakespeare in Love*. Such unattractively bald objects feature in early modern pictures of quills, but hardly ever in later representations of Shakespeare the writer.

The image of Shakespeare monumentalised in the Stratford bust will of course continue to dominate our view of Shakespeare as a writer. The quill pen will remain the staple property of Shakespeare the literary genius. No-one however is quite sure how the funeral monument acquired that pen, since it was absent from the monument's original design. When Thomas Dugdale printed a sketch of it in his *Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656), pen and page are both notoriously absent, and the hands of the figure rest on a cushion or stuffed sack. This was the image reproduced as one of Shakespeare's portraits in Nicholas Rowe's 1709 edition of Shakespeare's works. The

sack has been thought of as a reference to Shakespeare's activities as a merchant, trading in crops such as barley, and animal staples such as wool, while others have proposed that it is really a 'writing-cushion'. Some time after this seventeenth-century installation, the figure was altered to that of Shakespeare the writer with paper and pen. Those who seek to prove that Shakespeare of Stratford was not a writer at all, but a landlord and merchant, and that someone else wrote the works, naturally find great significance in this transmutation. Annually on Shakespeare's birthday, a new quill pen is placed in the hand of the figure on the Stratford monument, as if to reiterate that this antique tool is also a modern interpolation, and has always been retrospectively placed in the writer's hand by others.

What do the biographers have to say about Shakespeare the writer? In his *Shakespeare: For All Time*, Stanley Wells presents a familiar image. Since he wrote with a quill pen dipped in ink,

[t]his means he would have been more bound to a table or desk than modern writers, who have greater freedom of movement<sup>20</sup>.

Where would that desk have been? Certainly, after Shakespeare had purchased New Place in Stratford, it would have been there:

Writing is a solitary occupation. It calls for peace and quiet. Shakespeare's plays are the product of intense imaginative and intellectual activity, deeply pondered and intricately plotted. To write them he needed space for thought<sup>21</sup>.

In addition, being a very literary writer who drew directly from books, Shakespeare must have had books by him, some of them very large and bulky tomes that couldn't have been easily transported in commuter trips between Stratford and London. What all this adds up to is that within the rural retreat of New Place, Shakespeare must have had his own "study":

We know little about the contents of New Place, but my guess is that it contained a comfortable, book-lined study situated in the quietest part of the house to which Shakespeare retreated from London at every pos-

---

<sup>20</sup> Wells, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> Wells, p. 36.

sible opportunity, and which members of the household approached at their peril when the master was at work<sup>22</sup>.

Now Peter Ackroyd in his biography also offers a similarly detailed account of Shakespeare's habits as a writer, based on the same repertoire of facts: the quill pen, the bulky literary sources, the places in which Shakespeare is known to have lived. But his Shakespeare is an entirely different kind of writer. Ackroyd describes Shakespeare at work, in an improvised "study" that would have been "fitted up for himself in the sequence of London lodgings that he rented":

It is sometimes suggested that he returned to his house in Stratford in order to compose without noise and disturbance. But this seems most unlikely. He wrote where he was, close to the theatre and close to the actors. It is doubtful if, in the *furia* of composition, noise or circumstance affected him<sup>23</sup>.

What about his books, those bulky volumes that in Stanley Wells's view must have kept him anchored to one spot? He took them with him as he shifted from one lodging to another. "He is likely to have owned a book-chest". He also probably kept notes in small notebooks, that could also be transported:

He could have jotted down notes or passages that occurred to him in the course of the day; other writers have found that walking through the busy streets can materially aid inspiration<sup>24</sup>.

In both cases what little is definitely known of Shakespeare serves as a template for the construction of two radically different images of Shakespeare as writer. In one scenario Shakespeare the writer needs peace and quiet for the prolonged and intensive labour of literary composition. He is also firmly fixed to a particular workstation, by the technical requirements of his writing implement, and the size and weight of his literary sources. So he willingly forsakes the bright lights and loud noises of London for the tranquillity of Stratford. There in his big house he retreats even further to a comfortable book-

<sup>22</sup> Wells, pp. 37-38.

<sup>23</sup> Ackroyd, p. 257.

<sup>24</sup> Ackroyd, p. 257.

lined study, maintaining some distance from the business of family life, where his poetic and dramatic imagination can operate at the right level of undistracted concentration.

In the other scenario Shakespeare the writer is far more unfixed and itinerant, since he lives not in his own house in Stratford, but in a sequence of rented lodgings in London. He moves easily from place to place, taking his tools of books and pens with him in a box. He stays here to be right in the thick of cultural London, close to a teeming milieu of theatres and actors and printing presses. He wanders the crowded streets, picking up ideas and images as he goes, jotting them down in little portable notebooks. As he writes, he is surrounded by the disturbances of noise and social activity, but remains independent of all distractions.

No one ever thought to describe Shakespeare engaged in the practice of writing: where he sat, when he wrote, whether he wrote alone or in company. Most frustratingly, the sheets of paper on which his plays were written have all disappeared. We have Shakespeare's signature on legal documents; but the 'signature' we would wish to have, the name signed on manuscripts of the plays, the endorsement that would indissolubly connect the writing with the writer, is absent.

We do, on the other hand, have a specimen of Shakespeare's literary handwriting, in the form of a scene written into the collaborative play about the sixteenth-century statesman and Catholic martyr, executed by Henry VIII, *Sir Thomas More*. But this example does not present us with writing as the unmediated product of an individual's private vision. The manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* is a collaborative work, to which Shakespeare was obviously asked to contribute after it had been critically reviewed by the censor. Shakespeare's handwriting lies on the page, together with the hands of several others, all writing and revising in a continuous collaborative process.

Here we see Shakespeare the writer putting his pen not to a pristine sheet of blank paper, but to the pages of a text already written, and already revised, by others. We see him not necessarily, as the classic writerly image suggests, alone and isolated, withdrawn from the world, communing only with the voices of his imagination. Instead, we see him working as a professional writer within a busy, noisy and stressful environment, where writers worked together under enormous pressures of time, censorship, theatrical practicalities, to get the show on the road.

The Elizabethan dramatist's workshop must have been more like

the open-plan office of a modern national newspaper, than the book-lined study of a scholarly recluse. We can imagine Shakespeare as a writer who wrote with others, and with others around him; who combined writing with acting, theatre management, property dealing and general trading. We can think of writing more in the modern sense as a collective and collaborative cultural activity, a practical process that Shakespeare the writer undoubtedly led, but did not accomplish alone.

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<sup>25</sup>. In parallel with these major contemporary biographies, a number of works have recently been published that adopt a more peripheral view. I am thinking of Charles Nicholl's *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street*, which employs a "thick description" of the district Shakespeare lived in for a brief period of his life<sup>26</sup>; of Germaine Greer's *Shakespeare's Wife*, which approaches the Shakespeare biography from the perspective of Anne Hathaway's life-story; and James Shapiro's *Contested Will*, which throws light on the Shakespeare biography by studying attempts to prove that someone else was, in fact, responsible for producing Shakespeare's works<sup>27</sup>. These works indicate a kind of 'disintegrationist' movement in Shakespeare biography that I've tried to exploit and pursue in *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare*. 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. All of these are adaptations of the basic Shakespeare life-story. Are they entirely different in kind, or only in degree?

As I've suggested at the beginning, Shakespeare biography suffers from a peculiar historical deformation. By the mid nineteenth century, Shakespeare life-writing had reached an impasse, since the largely legal and commercial evidence unearthed seemed radically

---

<sup>25</sup> Anne Barton, "The One and Only", *The New York Review of Books*, 53:8 (11 May 2006), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2006/may/11/the-one-and-only/>.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street*, London, Allen Lane, 2007; London, Penguin, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> James Shapiro, *Contested Will*, London, Faber & Faber, 2010.

disconnected from the spirit of the plays. Thereafter the Victorians preferred to seek the life in the works. By the early twentieth century, however, Shakespeare biographers had become singularly assertive in their insistence that the available evidence sufficiently completed our picture of the poet's life and that no further explanation was necessary. A confident positivist historicism dominated the biographies of Sir Sidney Lee and Edmund K. Chambers, and was popularized with a touch of arrogance by Samuel Schoenbaum. A life of Shakespeare should consist of documentary facts; all undocumented traditions should be treated with suspicion or mistrust; and conjecture was forbidden. Shakespeare biography was declared a speculation-free zone.

It is now evident that the supremely confident scholarship of Lee, Chambers and Schoenbaum was unconsciously shaped by a shadow: the 'Shakespeare Authorship Problem' that began, from at least the middle of the nineteenth century, to question the capacity of 'the Stratford man' to produce those works, and to attribute them to Francis Bacon, or the earl of Oxford, or a host of other Renaissance illuminati. Mainstream Shakespeare biography declined to engage with these initiatives, treating them as at best eccentric, and at worst insane. But these maverick amateur intellectuals were raising questions of great interest and importance, questions avoided by the biographical establishment – which is why so many great minds (Hawthorne, Emerson, Mark Twain, Henry James, Freud) were interested or even persuaded by the anti-Stratfordian case. What is the relationship between art and the artist's life? Is drama autobiographical? Why are there gaps and inconsistencies in the Shakespeare life-story? Why is it that unlike other comparable national poets, Dante or Cervantes or Goethe, Shakespeare's life seems somehow not to fit with his works?

So I think we need a 'New Biography' of Shakespeare, one that is prepared to address all the questions and anxieties suppressed by the mainstream biographical tradition. For a start I think we need a more self-conscious approach to biography. Biographers will tell you that they just take the documented historical facts and explain them, expound them, flesh them out, fill in the gaps. But actually what they're doing is turning a documentary narrative into a literary one, converting the bare and sometimes incongruous facts into a coherent and plausible drama. It's much the same as taking a novel, and converting it into a screenplay.



I think we need to look at the history of Shakespeare biography, and understand some of the unconscious ideological assumptions that lie behind those works. I think we need to acknowledge the extent to which biography is a form of fiction. Since Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World*<sup>28</sup>, 'conjecture' and 'speculation' have acquired a new positive status. People are starting to look again at biographical fictions, and considering them as evidence alongside the facts.

Biographers of Shakespeare will tell you that they deal predominantly with facts. Anti-Stratfordians say the same thing. At the moment they are lining up for a clash of the Titans over the film *Anonymous*, each side appealing to truth and evidence. Now if we argue that actually it's all to a large extent fiction, then these rival narratives can only be judged by how compelling they are as stories. I myself think there is a difference between making biographical drama out of historical fact, and making it out of nothing.

But we still have a problem in terms of the relationship, in biographical work on Shakespeare, between fact and fiction. It's obvious that the largely legal and commercial evidence about Shakespeare's life unearthed in the nineteenth century has seemed to many people radically disconnected from the spirit of the plays. In the controversy around *Anonymous* we see a significant restatement of this position. In their e-book *Shakespeare Bites Back: Not So Anonymous*, Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells offer "a summary of the factual evidence", and refute the challenges to Shakespeare's authorship as "a web of fantasy"<sup>29</sup>:

Here we reach the dangerous heart of conspiracy theories. Fictions we might choose to tell ourselves about the past become no less valid than interpretations constructed through empirical evidence such as documents and material remains. [...] Those who know virtually nothing about the history of a particular period may enjoy engaging with and creating fantasies about it.

The mindsets of conspiracy theorists allow these fantasies to have the same status as properly informed interpretations of the facts. It may

---

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, New York, Norton, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare Bites Back: Not So Anonymous*, e-book produced by The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in partnership with Misfit, Inc., 2011, p. 10. The e-book can be downloaded from: [http://bloggingshakespeare.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Shakespeare\\_Bites\\_Back\\_Book.pdf](http://bloggingshakespeare.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Shakespeare_Bites_Back_Book.pdf).

be enticing to believe in stolen documents, secret codes, buried treasure, and illegitimate children of Elizabeth I. But the belief itself doesn't make the fantasy true<sup>30</sup>.

This positivist approach to some degree satisfies the needs of scholarship and criticism, but doesn't answer, often doesn't address, many of the problems endemic to Shakespeare biography: not so much the paucity (there's plenty) but as the wrong kind of evidence; the total absence of any personal traces among the mundane historical data; the missing years; the apparent incongruities between a life dominated by small-town and city commercial and property dealing, and a body of work almost universally acknowledged as the pinnacle of human artistic and intellectual achievement.

My book *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* accepts that Shakespeare's lives are multiple and discontinuous, and yet they are facets of a single life. It speculates freely about Shakespeare's life, but admits that the exercise is one of speculation. Half of the book deals in historical facts, showing how much and how little we know about Shakespeare; and showing how these facts have been interpreted and embroidered by biographers. The other half is fiction. Each chapter gives the facts and their interpretation, then adds a fictional component. Some are historical stories; some reflect on Shakespeare's 'afterlife': his reputation, his mythology. Other fictions quit the territory of biography proper, in those cases where the historical record actually contains very little evidence. Examples include stories that circle around the legends of 'Shakespeare in love' with the earl of Southampton and the 'Dark Lady of the *Sonnets*', for which there is virtually no evidence at all. Hence it seems legitimate for a fictional commentary to take the form of invention, and I've taken that about as far as it can go. Which is why people might be surprised to find in the book characters like Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, Ernest Hemingway and so on.

There is a Shakespeare Authorship problem: but it's a problem about authorship, not a question of authorial identity. I've tried in the book to embrace all the mystery, inconsistency and incongruity that surround the figure of 'the Stratford man'. Traditional scholarly

---

<sup>30</sup> Edmondson and Wells, p. 19.

biography as practised by scholars like Schoenbaum, sticking rigidly to the documentary facts, gives us a boring Shakespeare; one who couldn't possibly have been author to those anything-but-boring plays and poems. Shakespeare Authorship doubts give us biographical excitement: mystery, passion, conspiracy, betrayal. I want to see these qualities, to be found so abundantly in the plays, reassigned to Shakespeare the man in all of his – at least – *Nine Lives*.