

1 *What Manner of Man Was He?*



IN this book I want to think about four specific aspects of Shakespeare's life and work. In this first chapter I shall discuss the general problem of discerning the personality of a writer who spent a lifetime of creative activity in depicting people other than himself. In the second chapter I shall address the question of how Shakespeare set about the task of writing a play. Thirdly, I shall ask what we can deduce about his personality from the body of work in which he seems to write most directly about himself, his sonnets. And finally I shall ask what made him laugh.

First, how can we hope to know what he was like? It's a question that characters in his plays ask about other characters. When a nobleman intrudes upon the revels in the Boar's Head Tavern (*1 Henry IV*, 2. 5.295), Sir John Falstaff asks 'What manner of man is he?' In the same scene (lines 422–423) Prince Hal asks Falstaff, who is standing in for King Henry, 'What manner of man, an it like your majesty?' In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia, referring to the disguised Viola, asks Malvolio first 'What kind o' man is he?' then 'What manner of man?' (1.5.145, 147); in *As You Like It* Rosalind asks 'what manner of man' is Orlando (3.2.201). And in *The Winter's*

Tale the Clown asks Autolycus ‘What manner of fellow was he that robbed you?’ (4.4.84).

The question, natural enough at any time and in any place, is especially relevant to a dramatist seeking to depict human beings in real-life situations (rather than, for example, the stylized abstractions of the morality plays). It would have been familiar to Shakespeare’s audiences not least from the words of St Mark about Jesus in the King James Bible, ‘What manner of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?’ (Matthew 8: 27). The clear implication here is that he – Jesus – is some sort of superman. Modern colloquial equivalents relating to ordinary mortals are ‘What makes her tick?’ and ‘What sort of a chap is he?’

The question has provoked a whole school, or technique, of criticism based on the attempt to define and analyze characters within the plays, and to discuss their origins, even to portray the girlhoods of their heroines, on the basis of what they say, and do, and on what is said about them, as if they were real people. The method, often associated especially with the late-Victorian critic A. C. Bradley, has provoked dispute as well as agreement, and was famously mocked by L. C. Knights in his 1933 essay ‘How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?’ Bradley himself has a substantial and deeply thoughtful (if ponderously expressed) essay called ‘Shakespeare the Man’ in his *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, first published in 1909, in which he sounds somewhat defensive about the enterprise: he writes that ‘the natural desire to know whatever can be known of him is not to be repressed merely because there are people so foolish as to be careless about his works and yet curious about his private life’ (p. 243). There is,

I suspect, a covert reference here to contemporary responses, such as those of Oscar Wilde and Samuel Butler, to homosexual readings of Shakespeare's sonnets. And Bradley confesses that 'though I should care nothing about the man if he had not written the works, yet, since we possess them, I would rather see and hear him for five minutes in his proper person than discover a new one' (p. 243). A rather odd admission: would you swap, say, the lost *Love's Labour's Won*, or even the joint-authored, and also lost, *Cardenio*, for five minutes with Shakespeare, possibly on a bad day?

Bradley continues: 'And though we may be content to die without knowing his income or even the surname of Mr W. H.' – to whom the publisher Thomas Thorpe dedicated the 1609 collection of sonnets – 'we cannot so easily resign the wish to find the man in the writings, and to form some idea of the disposition, the likes and dislikes, the character and the attitude towards life, of the human being who seems to us to have understood best our common human natures' (p. 313). The wish expressed here is predictable since Bradley is associated especially with character-based criticism – the attempt to write and to talk about the characters of Shakespeare's plays as if they were real people, and the tendency to value his plays especially for their psychological insights into human character.

It is natural to apply the question What was he really like? not only to characters in Shakespeare's plays but also to the author of the plays in which these characters appear. But it is not easily answered. A narrative account of the bare facts of a person's journey through life, their parentage and education, their career, the 'actions that a man might play' (*Hamlet*,

1.2.84) do not, as Hamlet knows, pluck out the heart of his mystery. A curriculum vitae or a *Who's Who* entry may supply such an account. What people show to the world around them may reveal little or nothing of their inner being, just as the visible signs of Hamlet's mourning for Claudius are 'but the trappings and the suits of woe' (*Hamlet*, 1.2.86).

Biographical studies of Shakespeare vary in the degree to which they attempt to dig below the surface to interpret the facts of his life in search of the inner man. Some accounts are pretty well wholly objective. I think for example of E. K. Chambers's *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, published in 1930, and of S. Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1977), and its lesser-known sequel, *Records and Images* (1981), which offer raw materials for the biography that Schoenbaum hoped to write but did not live long enough to accomplish. At the other extreme is Katherine Duncan-Jones's *Shakespeare: An Ungentle Life* (2001; revised 2014). It's a combative title. She is picking up on the fact that several of Shakespeare's contemporaries, including Ben Jonson, referred to him as 'gentle' (which could refer to social status, as in 'gently born', no less than to character. In Shakespeare's time a gentleman was a man entitled to display a coat of arms). In Duncan-Jones's view, the adjective as applied to his character is undeserved. Making interpretative use of absence of evidence, she remarks in the blurb of her book that 'unlike other local worthies, or his actor-contemporary Edward Alleyn', Shakespeare 'shows no inclination to divert any of his wealth towards charitable, neighbourly or altruistic ends'. This is not really fair, since he left £10 – no small sum, amounting to half of the local schoolmaster's

annual salary – to the poor of Stratford, and there are also bequests to neighbours and to other persons outside the immediate family circle.

There have also been attempts – less fashionable now than previously – to apply the techniques of psychoanalysis to Shakespeare through interpretation of both the life records and the works. An example is the volume entitled *Shakespeare's Personality* (1989), edited by Norman N. Holland and other scholars, which offers a series of essays, many of them based on Freudian psychology, relating Shakespeare's life to his works. Its index includes entries for such subjects as Shakespeare's 'abhorrence of vagina', his 'compliant tendencies', his 'erotic versus aggressive drives', his 'phallic fantasy', his 'sexual fantasies', and his 'vindictive impulses'.

For all its intellectual sophistication, such work has to negotiate two difficult obstacles. One is our imperfect knowledge of the facts of Shakespeare's life. For instance, several of the contributors to Holland's volume make much of what the editor refers to in his introduction as Shakespeare's 'father's loss of patriarchal authority as a result of his financial decline' (p. 7). But that supposed financial decline is imperfectly documented and has indeed been disputed in a study by David Fallow (*The Shakespeare Circle*, pp. 34–36). John Shakespeare was buried in September 1601; William, who already owned New Place, was his eldest son and clearly inherited John's house, now known as the Birthplace, in Henley Street; only nine months later William made the most expensive purchase of his life, paying £320 for a large area of land in Old Stratford and on the Welcombe Hills. I should be surprised if all this money came from his theatrical earnings. If his father's

supposed financial decline didn't occur, theories of its supposed psychological effect on Shakespeare are invalidated.

A major obstacle to reading Shakespeare's life through his plays is the fact that they are not purely the product of his own imagination but draw heavily both for their plots and their language on historical events and on writings by other people, and so cannot be properly thought of as purely the projections of his subconscious mind or as reflections of his personal experience. To give an example close to home – in more than one sense – there is a speech in *Henry IV, Part Two* written about the time that Shakespeare was buying and, there is reason to believe, renovating New Place in which it is tempting to suppose that he was drawing on recent personal experience:

When we mean to build
 We first survey the plot, then draw the model;
 And when we see the figure of the house,
 Then must we rate the cost of the erection,
 Which if we find outweighs ability,
 What do we then but draw anew the model
 In fewer offices, or, at least, desist
 To build at all? (1.3.41–48)

The temptation to see these lines as autobiographical may dwindle, however, when we find that they paraphrase quite closely the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builder in St Matthew's Gospel, 7: 24–27.

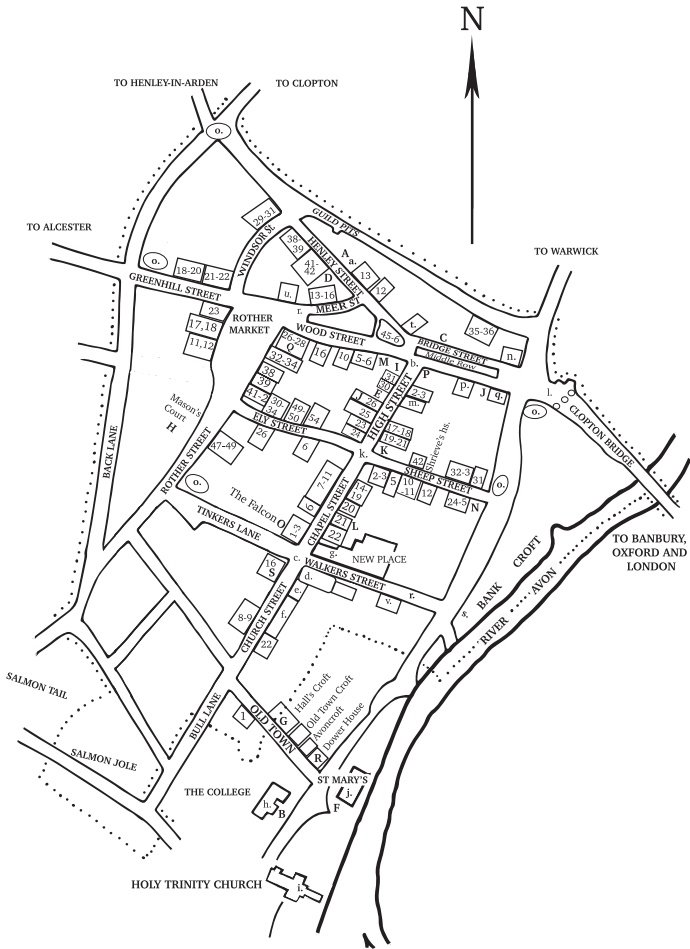
Attempts like those in the Holland volume to offer an interpretation of the external evidence in the hope of defining what Shakespeare was like must delve beneath the exterior facts in endeavouring to define the essentials of his personality, what makes him different from other men, what characterizes

his attitude to his fellow human beings and the way in which he reacts to the situations in which he finds himself, qualities such as his sense of humour, his tenacity, his conscientiousness, his predictability, his temperament, his sensibility, his sexuality, his attitudes to the great questions of life and death, his spirituality, his moral stances, and his imaginative makeup. For the Elizabethans, these qualities were determined by the four bodily humours – black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood – which in turn influenced the four basic temperaments – choleric, phlegmatic, melancholic, and sanguine. Such simplistic, rough and ready categorizations offer mere pigeon-holes into which people can be slotted with little regard for true individuality. Attempts at definition of character demand far more subtlety; they must acknowledge too that personality is not constant, that people change and develop over the years, and that appetites alter – that, as Benedick says in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a man may love ‘the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age’ (2.3.226–227).

Are there, in spite of the many notorious gaps in our knowledge about Shakespeare’s life, the paucity of personal documentation, the absence of self-revelatory letters such as we have for John Keats, of diaries such as those of the Elizabethan astrologer Simon Forman and of Samuel Pepys or, closer to our time, Virginia Woolf, intimate memoirs such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and documentary films such as we have for some more recent writers – are there, in spite of such absences, ways in which we can attempt to plumb Shakespeare’s depths?

To start with, these absences are not total. We have expressions of opinion about him from contemporaries, some

WHAT WAS SHAKESPEARE REALLY LIKE?



1 Map of Stratford-upon-Avon showing some of the landmarks and buildings present in Shakespeare's time. Stratford had around a thousand elm trees and a population of two thousand people.

WHAT MANNER OF MAN WAS HE?

Key to map

Some of the buildings that Shakespeare knew and which still survive today

Chapel Street

Nos. 1-3 (now The Falcon from around 1661); 6; 7-11; 14-19; 20 and 21; part of the buildings now known as The Shakespeare (hotel); No 22 (now Nash's House)

Church Street

Nos 8-9; 16; No 22 (now The Windmill)

Ely Street

No. 6 (now The Cross Keys); 26; 30-34; 49-50; 54 (now The Queen's Head)

Greenhill Street

Nos.18-20; 21-22; 23 (now The Old Thatch)

Guild Pits (now Guild Street)

Nos 35-36

Henley Street

No.12 (now the Public Library); 13 (now Hornby Cottage); 29-31; 38-39; 41-42

High Street

Nos. 2-3; 17-18; 19-21; 23-24; 25 (now The Garrick); 26 (now Harvard House); 30-31

Meer Street

Nos. 13-14; 15-16

Old Town

No.1; Old Town Croft; The Dower House; Avoncroft; Hall's Croft

Rother Street

Nos.11-12; 17-18; 34; 38-39; 40-41 (now The Lamplighter); 47-49; Mason's Court

Sheep Street

Shrieve's House; Nos. 2-3; 5; 10-12; 24-25; 31-33; 42

Wood Street

Nos. 5-6; 10; 16; 26-28; 45-46

Location of some of Shakespeare's neighbours at different times of his life

- A. George Badger (next door to the Shakespeares)
- B. The Combe family (The College)
- C. Richard Field (28 Bridge Street)
- D. William Greenaway (now 46-49 Henley Street)
- E. William Walker (29 High Street)
- F. Thomas Greene (St Mary's)
- G. John and Susanna Hall (Hall's Croft)
- H. Alderman John Gibbs (Mason's Court)
- I. Adrian Quiney (31 High Street)
- J. Thomas Rogers (26 High Street, Harvard House, and 27-28 High Street)
- K. Hamnet and Judith Sadler (22 High Street)
- L. July Shaw (21 Chapel Street)
- M. Abraham Sturley (5-6 Wood Street)
- N. Richard Tyler (now around 23-26 Sheep Street)
- O. William Walford (now The Falcon)
- P. Thomas and Judith Quiney (1 High Street)
- Q. Alderman William Parsons (26-28 Wood Street)
- R. William Reynolds (The Dower House)
- S. John Sadler (16 Church Street)

Landmarks

- a. The Shakespeares' home on Henley Street
- b. High Cross or Market Cross (and from 1614 a whipping post)
- c. White Cross
- d. Guild Chapel
- e. School and Guild Hall
- f. Almshouses
- g. New Place and grounds
- h. The College
- i. Holy Trinity Church
- j. St Mary's
- k. Corn Market
- l. Toll Gate
- m. The town's first recorded jail (5 High Street)
- n. The Swan Inn
- o. Muck heaps
- p. The Crown Inn
- q. The Bear Inn
- r. Streams
- s. The Walkers' Mill
- t. The Angel Inn
- u. The King House or Hall (now the White Swan)
- v. Rowington Cottage
- ... Borough border

posthumous, many of which are gathered together in the two-volume *Shakspeare Allusion Book* (badly out of date though that work is – it was published in 1932). These start in 1592, when he was twenty-eight, with the description of him in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* as an 'upstart crow'. This is an obviously malicious and envious gibe, and it was rapidly countered by the prolific but congenitally impecunious writer Henry Chettle in his *Kind Heart's Dream*: 'I am as sorry,' wrote Chettle, 'as if the original fault had been my fault because myself have seen his [i.e. Shakespeare's] demeanour no less civil than he [is] excellent in the quality he professes, besides divers of worship have reported his uprightnes of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art.' (This is the first time the word 'facetious', from the Latin meaning 'witty', appears in English; here the phrase 'facetious grace' seems to mean something like 'amusing skill'.) It would be good to know who the 'divers of worship' were. Might they have included Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare was to dedicate *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* in the two following years? Anyhow this is a powerful character reference; and to the best of my belief, the 'upstart crow' jibe is the only denigratory surviving reference to Shakespeare's character made by any of his contemporaries throughout his career.

People liked and admired him. The minor poet John Weever addressed him as 'Honey-tongued Shakespeare' in a poem published in 1599. And he is mentioned favourably in several commendatory poems and in the three anonymously written *Parnassus* plays performed at St John's College, Cambridge around the turn of the century – 'O sweet Master Shakespeare, I'll have his picture in my study at the court,' says

Gullio, seeing him as a kind of pin-up boy. His friends and colleagues John Heminges and Henry Condell, in their dedication to the Folio of 1623, also write of his personality. He was their ‘worthy friend and fellow whose reputation they wish to keep alive’. And in their preface addressed to ‘the great variety of readers’, they write of him as a ‘gentle expresser of nature’. Of course they are not writing on oath. But the amount of effort that Heminges and Condell, actors by profession and amateurs in the art of editing, must have put into compiling the volume is itself a testimony to their affection for the man who left money for them – along with Richard Burbage, who had died before the Folio went to press – to buy mourning rings.

There are predictably laudatory posthumous comments and tributes in the First Folio, including Ben Jonson’s great elegy headed ‘To the memory of my beloved the author Mr William Shakespeare and what he hath left us’, though this is more concerned with Shakespeare’s artistry and his fame than with his personality, but the famously outspoken Jonson does refer to Shakespeare as his ‘beloved’, says that the ‘race / Of Shakespeare’s mind and manners brightly shines / In his well-turned and true-filèd lines’, and calls him ‘Sweet’ – that word again – ‘swan of Avon’.

Ben Jonson also gives us the most intimate surviving testaments to Shakespeare’s character in his notebooks published posthumously as *Timber: or Discourses upon men and matter as they have flowed out of his daily readings or had their reflux from his peculiar notion of the times* (1641). These give us what must surely be the most honest and fullest assessment of Shakespeare’s character deriving from a contemporary. Jonson says:

I loved the man, and do honour his memory on this side idolatry as much as any. He was indeed honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fancy, brave notions, and gentle expressions, wherein he flowed with that facility that sometime it was necessary he should be stopped. ‘*Sufflaminandus erat*,’ [that is to say, he needed to be checked, or reined in] as Augustus said of Haterius. His wit was in his own power: would the rule of it had been so too. But he redeemed his vices with his virtues. [‘Vices’ here surely refers to stylistic faults rather than to moral qualities.] There was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned.

Jonson’s comments on Shakespeare’s artistry are interesting but not entirely clear. ‘Excellent fancy’ presumably means ‘a fine imagination’. I suppose ‘brave notions, and gentle expressions’ means something like ‘excellent ideas which he expressed admirably’. Haterius was a Roman orator, presumably inclined to verbosity. In spite of the cautious qualification in ‘this side idolatry’, Jonson’s view that Shakespeare was ‘honest, and of an open and free nature’ represents a noble and generous character reference from a writer who had once been a professional rival, and moreover it corroborates what Henry Chettle had written many years earlier of the young Shakespeare. Jonson’s criticism that Shakespeare sometimes overwrote is one that Shakespeare himself might well have agreed with, judging by both the varying lengths of his plays and by the cuts he or his company made in, for example, the Folio versions of *Richard II* and *Hamlet*.

To the somewhat generalized tributes to Shakespeare’s character – his ‘uprightness of dealing’ – we can add his capacity to keep out of trouble with the law. Most of his

fellow playwrights, unlike him, spent time in prison for a variety of offences – Marlowe for, among other crimes, suspected murder; Jonson for killing a man in a duel; Dekker on numerous occasions for debt. Shakespeare seems to have had only two brushes with the law. In 1596 one William Waite served on him and on several other theatre people a writ requiring them to keep the peace ‘for fear of death and mutilation of limbs’; according to Schoenbaum, this is ‘a conventional legal phrase in such documents.’ In other words, this need imply no more than that he took part in an overly boisterous night out with his theatrical friends. The second (which includes a third) brush with the law names him as having defaulted on tax payments in both September 1597 and October 1598. There are no records of prosecutions. Shakespeare on those two occasions was probably simply living away from Bishopsgate – possibly in Stratford-upon-Avon, moving into New Place, and overseeing its renovations. These instances apart, Shakespeare appears to have been exceptionally law-abiding.

What about Shakespeare’s outward appearance? And if we knew what he looked like, how much would that tell us about his character? As Viola says in *Twelfth Night*, ‘nature with a beauteous wall / Doth oft close in pollution’ (1.2.44–45), and, to quote Duncan in *Macbeth*, ‘There’s no art / To find the mind’s construction in the face’ (1.4.11–12). Still, we keep on hoping. The popularity of portrait painting in Shakespeare’s own time and later, and also, more recently, of photographic portraiture suggests an abiding hope that character may be revealed by outward appearance. We have evidence of varying degrees of reliability about what Shakespeare looked like.

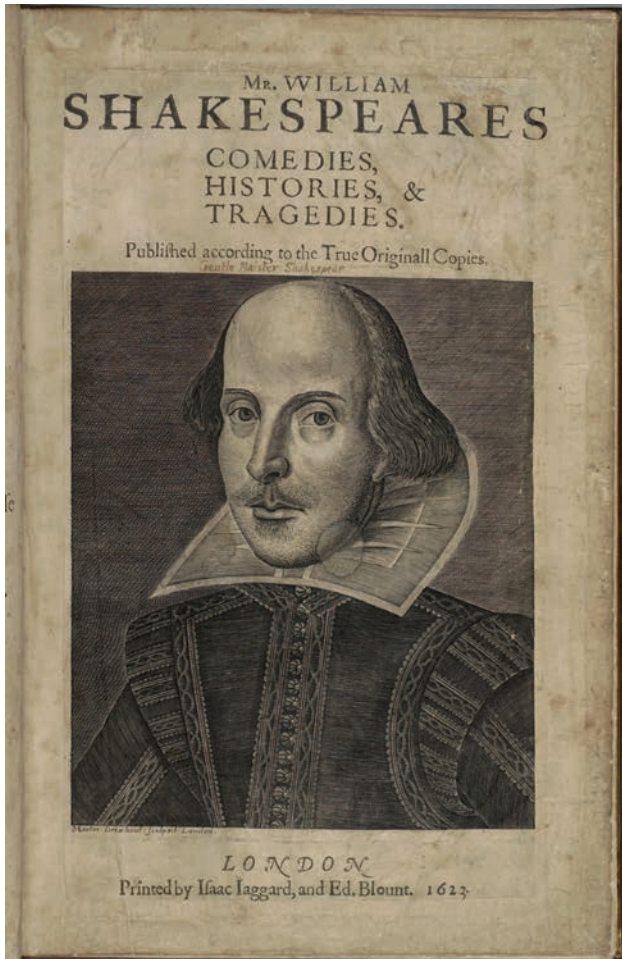
Most reliable, I suppose, are the Droeshout engraving in the First Folio, printed in 1623, certified as a true likeness by Ben Jonson in verses printed below it, and the bust in Holy Trinity Church. It has been generally assumed that the bust was made after his death, but Lena Orlin, in her book *The Private Life of William Shakespeare* (2021), fascinatingly suggests that Shakespeare designed and commissioned it himself. There are also the Chandos and Cobbe portraits, both with claims of good provenance, and the late seventeenth-century report by John Aubrey that he was ‘a handsome, well-shaped man’. Some contemporary writers had distinctive features. The satirist Thomas Nashe described Robert Greene’s hair as ‘A jolly long red peak – like the spire of a steeple’ which ‘he cherished continually without cutting, whereat a man might hang a jewel, it was so sharp and pendant’. Nashe himself was famous for his unruly shock of hair and his beardlessness – unusual at the time. And Ben Jonson was exceptionally large – he is said to have weighed over twenty stone at one stage of his life, and himself wrote of his ‘mountain belly’. Everything suggests, on the other hand, that there was nothing especially striking about Shakespeare’s appearance. By contrast with such figures as Marlowe, Nashe, Greene, and Dekker, the figure that the mature Shakespeare cut in public was conventional, middle class – we might even say, respectable. He went to the barber’s regularly, both in Stratford and in London, to have his hair cut and his beard neatly trimmed. And there is reason to believe that he – like most gentlemen of the age – wore a signet ring, which would serve both as a personal adornment and for sealing documents, and that it has survived.



2 The memorial demi-figure of Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon. Unusually, this photograph looks directly into Shakespeare's eyes, and you can see Shakespeare's teeth. The memorial, possibly commissioned by Shakespeare himself, seems at its most expressive from this angle, almost as though Shakespeare were about to speak.

It's a curious story. In 1810 a Mrs Martin was working in a field close to the Stratford churchyard when she turned up a gold ring, almost black with age. It bore the initials 'W. S.' separated by a lover's knot. She took it to a local silversmith, who put it in an acid bath to check the metal, thus restoring its original colour. Of course 'W. S.' does not necessarily stand for 'William Shakespeare', but the local historian Robert Bell Wheler wrote in 1814 that he could find 'no Stratfordian of that period so likely to own such a ring as Shakespeare'. He also intriguingly noted that no seal is affixed to Shakespeare's will, but that 'where the scrivener had

WHAT WAS SHAKESPEARE REALLY LIKE?



3 The title page of the First Folio advertises the range of Shakespeare's work. The engraved portrait by Martin Droeshout shows a formally costumed Shakespeare in a late stage of baldness. Accompanying verses by Ben Jonson certify it as a good likeness.

written “in witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal” the words “and seal” were struck out, as if Shakespeare had recently lost his seal ring’. Wheler later bought the ring and gave it to his sister, who presented it to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in 1868. (Plausible though the story is, it has to be admitted that Shakespeare is not wearing a ring in the only surviving image to show his hands, the memorial bust.)

Various other potentially revealing areas of investigation exist. It is possible, for example, to assess Shakespeare’s attitudes to work. We may deduce something about his ambition, his conscientiousness, his industry, by looking at the tasks he undertook. Early in his career he wrote the two long narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, published in 1593 and 1594 respectively. Maybe this is because he saw the need for an alternative career while the theatres were closed during outbreaks of plague. In his early years, at least, he worked as an actor – the 1616 Folio of his rival Ben Jonson’s plays names him in the actor list of his comedy *Every Man in His Humour*, played at the Curtain in 1598, and as one of the ‘principal tragedians’ in Jonson’s *Sejanus* in 1603, and he heads the list of actors in the 1623 First Folio of his own plays; but ‘Less for making’ is scribbled beside his name in a copy in the Glasgow University Library, which may suggest that as time passed his colleagues gave him time off from his acting duties so that he could ‘make’, or write, plays. He worked too as a theatre administrator, helping for two decades to manage a single theatre company, which suggests a high degree of business acumen, of stability of character, and of conscientiousness. Above all he worked as a playwright, producing an average of around two plays a year over two



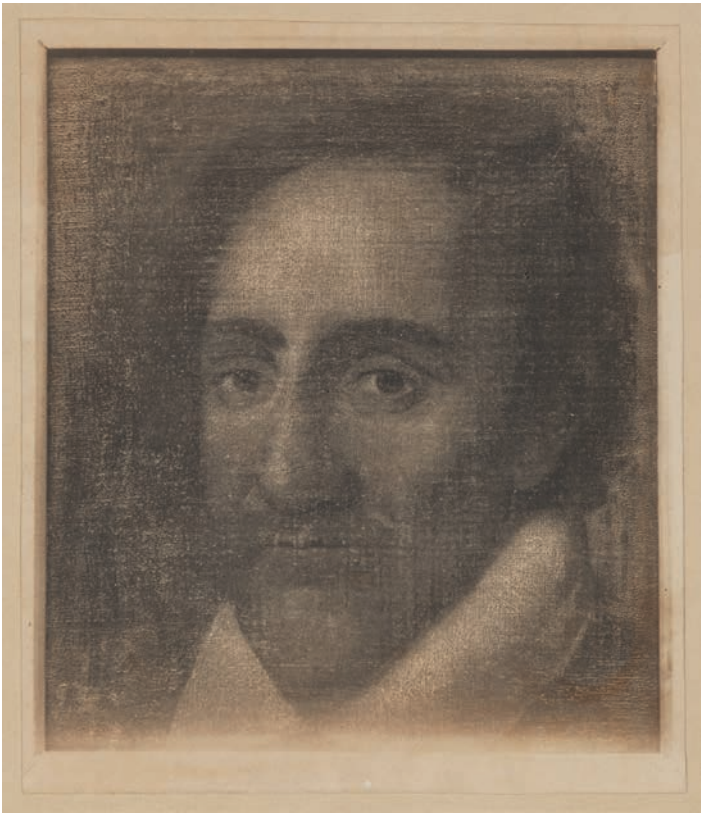
4 Shakespeare's signet ring. This gold signet ring used for sealing documents bearing Shakespeare's initials turned up in a field near Holy Trinity Church in 1810.

decades or more, but ceasing it would seem around 1613, three years before he died. And, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, much serious reading and fundamental brainwork lie behind his writings. He was a hard-working man for most of his life. He was also a man who developed. More clearly, it seems to me, than any other writer of his time, he went on changing, maturing, growing in technical skill and in emotional maturity throughout his career. To read through his complete works in chronological succession is to marvel at their variety, their experimentalism, their emotional range. It is a far cry from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* to *The Tempest*, from *Titus Andronicus* to *King Lear*, from *King John* to *Coriolanus*. Each work is, to use T. S. Eliot's words, 'a fresh raid on the inarticulate,' evidence at one and the same time

of an awareness of the commercial value to his company of a varied repertoire but, more inwardly, of an ever-deepening imaginative response to experience.

We may learn more about him too by thinking about how he got on with his theatrical colleagues, observing for instance that they stuck together over long periods of time and that he received a bequest from one of them and made bequests to others. He was a true company man, writing with individual actors in mind for specific roles. He knew his colleagues' strengths and their limitations. As Richard Burbage, his leading actor and co-founder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, grew older so Shakespeare provided for him star roles that did not require him to appear youthful. It would be interesting to know how long Burbage, born in 1567, went on playing Romeo, written for him when he was about twenty-seven, and Hamlet, the role he created at the age of about thirty-three; certainly the central characters in plays written later in the careers of the playwright and his leading actor are less youthful than in the earlier plays. And in the speech prefixes in the first printed text of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the quarto of 1600, the names of the great comic actor Will Kemp and his colleague Abraham Cowley are printed instead of the names of the characters Dogberry and Verges, suggesting that Shakespeare had these actors in mind as he wrote.

We can learn about Shakespeare too by thinking about his financial affairs, his purchases, and his investments – how extensive they were, where they were, and when and to what end he made them. It is surely significant that he appears to have lived relatively modestly in more than one neighbourhood in London and to have poured



5 Richard Burbage (1568–1619). Member of a theatrical family closely associated with Shakespeare throughout his career, Burbage created most of Shakespeare's leading tragic roles and was deeply mourned on his death.

most of his financial resources into property and land in his hometown. From the age of thirty-three – only three years after the founding of the Lord Chamberlain's Men – he owned New Place, the largest house in the borough of

Stratford-upon-Avon. Five years after this, in 1602, he paid £320 for the Welcombe estate, a property of some 107 acres – almost as big as the whole of the borough of Stratford-upon-Avon (109 acres). And only three years later, in 1605, he paid £440 for a share in the Stratford tithes. His last known investment, and his only known purchase of property in London, came in March 1613 – three months before the destruction by fire of the Globe playhouse – when he, along with three associates, agreed to pay £140 for the lease of the Blackfriars Gatehouse, which was close to the Blackfriars playhouse. Such information may help us to assess where his priorities lay, how much he cared about his family and about his social status.

We can think too about his family concerns. We can examine his will, made not long before he died, and we can think about what it reveals about his standing in the local community at the time of his death, what it suggests about his attitudes to his surviving relatives and friends, to his fellow Stratfordians, and to his theatrical colleagues. But the motives for individual bequests can only be guessed at, and wills were primarily legal documents, not personal testaments. Lena Orlin discusses the interlined bequest to Anne of the second-best bed in exhaustive detail, suggesting finally that it may refer to ‘a bed in which Anne may have given birth to three children and from which one of them, some eleven years later, was taken to his grave’ (*The Private Life of William Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 195).

Even without the aid of psychoanalytical techniques, such as those deployed by Norman Holland and his



6 An artist's reconstruction of New Place. Shakespeare bought this, the biggest house in the borough, in 1597. Archaeological excavations from 2011 to 2016 revealed its full extent. It is thought to have had between twenty and thirty rooms.

associates, we can assess much from Shakespeare's writings about his mental qualities. We can say confidently that he was highly articulate, at least on the page; that he had a wide, flexible vocabulary which developed over the years. We can observe that the Latin that he learnt at school lies on the surface in his earlier writings but goes underground later. We can examine his vocabulary to see what it can tell us about his areas of knowledge such as the law, the court, and the countryside, hunting, shooting and fishing, his familiarity with dialects and with languages other than English, and with various kinds of technical language. We can see how

he deployed his vocabulary in his writings, his awareness of rhetorical devices and the development of his skill in using them, his innovative powers. We can observe, for example, that he uses highly specialized language of horse breeding in a speech by Biondello in *The Taming of the Shrew* (3.2.42–61), and that a speech in *Much Ado About Nothing* shows remarkable familiarity with women's clothing – the Duchess of Milan's gown was made of 'cloth o' gold, and cuts, and laced with silver, set with pearls, down sleeves, side sleeves, and skirts round underborne with a bluish tinsel' (3.4.18–21) – and we may wonder where he got all this from.

He clearly had an exceptional sense of verbal rhythm, an ear for the musical qualities of language, and a capacity to tussle with complex ideas. And we know that he was capable of extreme sexual wordplay, used sometimes to scintillatingly comic ends but also in profound explorations of sexual torment and disgust in plays such as *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and in the Sonnets.

We have no record of his exercising his verbal skills in private life. Indeed the records of what he actually said are sparse. There is one salacious anecdote, reported in the diary of John Manningham, a lawyer at the Middle Temple, who saw *Twelfth Night* performed there on 2 February 1602. A few weeks later, on 13 March, Manningham wrote:

Upon a time when Burbage played Richard III there was a citizen grew so far in liking with him that before she went from the play she appointed him to come to her that night by the name of Richard III. Shakespeare, overhearing their conclusion, went before, was entertained and at his

game ere Burbage came. Then message being brought that Richard III was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard.

It is a good story, worthy of theatrical circles, and it may be true. It is funny but of course it has serious biographical implications in its presentation of a promiscuously adulterous Shakespeare.

The only other contemporary record of words actually spoken by Shakespeare is of an occasion on which he said very little. In the spring of 1612 he was called upon to give evidence in a London lawsuit involving the family of Christopher Mountjoy, a French Huguenot immigrant whose wife, Marie, manufactured elaborate headdresses for court ladies (and perhaps also for actors.) Shakespeare had acted as go-between in marriage negotiations between their daughter, Mary, and Mountjoy's apprentice, Stephen Belott. He may even have supervised a hand-fasting agreement between them such as he portrays taking place between Orlando and Rosalind in *As You Like It* (Act 4, Scene 1, 116–189). His memory of what happened is imperfect and the evidence he gave is reported in legal language, but the case shows him in a favourable light as helping a pair of young lovers in their marriage negotiations.

The sparse records of conversations and correspondence with his Stratford friends about the controversial Welcombe enclosures tell us little, though Duncan-Jones may be right in discerning a significant, even hypocritical division between the man who can make King Lear pray for 'poor homeless wretches' and the landowner who, a few years after writing that, seems more concerned about his financial security than about the interests of the poor people of his

native town. People don't always practise what they preach, and Shakespeare was clearly interested in securing what was best for his family.

We can deduce much from Shakespeare's writings about his education, and we can relate this to what is known of the curriculum of the school that was available to him. Sometimes, especially in his early plays, he quotes directly from works of classical literature in the original language (repeatedly, for example, in *Titus Andronicus*). We know a lot about the amount of reading he had to do for some, at least, of his plays. We can assess his knowledge of the Bible, and we may try to deduce which parts of it he found most to his taste. We can even deduce what he was reading at certain times. To give one example, in *Antony and Cleopatra* Mark Antony's 'Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth' echoes the Book of Revelation, 21: 1. (Naseeb Shaheen in *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (University of Delaware Press, 1992) says that 'Shakespeare's use of the Bible in *Antony and Cleopatra* is outstanding' (p. 644).) We can argue, as people have interminably argued, about whether his writings betray his religious leanings – Was he a Protestant? Did he have Roman Catholic sympathies? How did he feel both personally and professionally about Puritanism? If I had to express my own views I should say that he was a conforming Protestant, did not have Roman Catholic sympathies, and profoundly disliked the Puritans.

We can see, from the sources that he drew upon, that he went on reading assiduously and widely throughout his working life, and we may make deductions from this about his sociability – aided perhaps by John Aubrey's remark,

dating admittedly from late in the seventeenth century, that he ‘was not a company keeper; lived in Shoreditch; wouldn’t be debauched, and, if invited to, writ he was in pain.’ He needed time to himself. We can see that he had a taste for, or at least that he saw that he could make use in his own work of, certain sorts of literature – the poetry of his contemporaries and predecessors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Christopher Marlowe, and Sir Philip Sidney; works of English and classical history; Italianate romance; popular English fiction by writers including Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge; philosophical writings including the essays of Montaigne; studies of contemporary issues such as *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* by Samuel Harsnett (1603) (Harsnett became Archbishop of York), which influenced *King Lear* – and we can be certain from the date of publication of some of these books that he remained an assiduous reader for most, at least, of his life. We may note absences from the record, too, such as the small impact on his work of Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590).

We can envisage Shakespeare as both a playgoer and a reader of dramatic and poetic texts, interacting with contemporary literary and dramatic trends, following some and ignoring others, and we can think what, if anything, this tells us about his personal cast of mind. We can deduce that he saw and learnt from plays and poems written by his contemporaries, including Marlowe, whose poem *Hero and Leander* clearly influenced *Venus and Adonis* and who is the only contemporary to whom, under the guise of a ‘dead shepherd’ (*As You Like It*, 3.5.82), he alludes in his plays, as well as writers such as Thomas Kyd, Thomas Nashe, Richard Barnfield, Samuel Daniel, and of course Ben Jonson.

Still developing studies in authorship and dramatic collaboration suggest that in his earlier years Shakespeare was enough of a team player to collaborate with George Peele (on *Titus Andronicus*), and possibly with Thomas Nashe and Christopher Marlowe. From the founding of the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1594 onwards we can see him continuing to plough his own furrow as an essentially romantic dramatist in the face of the growing popularity of city comedy, led by Ben Jonson, and of satirical tragedy in the works of writers such as John Marston and Thomas Middleton, even though in his later years he found enough sympathy with Middleton to collaborate with him and to draw on his individual talents for the more satirical scenes of *Timon of Athens*; and we can perhaps more readily understand how he found a congenial collaborator in the romantically inclined John Fletcher (1579–1625), a younger man who may have seen Shakespeare as a mentor. At the same time we may wonder how he got on in his collaboration on *Pericles* with the villainous George Wilkins, brothel keeper and woman beater; indeed, our knowledge that he worked with Wilkins may extend our sense of his powers of social adaptability.

Through study of texts on which Shakespeare collaborated with other writers we can think about what collaboration involved. It doesn't for example necessarily mean that he sat down in the same room as Marlowe or Middleton or Fletcher or Wilkins, and that they worked on both plot and dialogue in intimate communion. Ben Jonson boasts in the Prologue to *Volpone* that he wrote the play single-handed within the space of five weeks:

'Tis known, five weeks fully penned it
 From his own hand, without a coadjutor,
 Novice, journeyman, or tutor.

Here Jonson usefully identifies four different kinds of collaborator. 'Coadjutor' is an ecclesiastical term referring to a bishop's assistant, so here I suppose we may take it to apply to a more or less equal collaborator; 'novice' seems to imply a beginner or apprentice playwright, 'journeyman' a hack writer, and 'tutor' an experienced writer working alongside and advising a novice. George Peele, with whom it is now believed Shakespeare worked on the early *Titus Andronicus*, was eight years older than Shakespeare. Was he, as it were, the tutor and Shakespeare the novice? If Shakespeare really did collaborate with his almost exact contemporary Christopher Marlowe, were they genuine coadjutors or was the already more experienced Marlowe in charge? Or did they perhaps devise plots together and then write their allotted scenes independently? In Shakespeare's later years, was he perhaps 'tutor' to Thomas Middleton and John Fletcher, both of whom were about sixteen years younger than he?

Study of the structure of his plays can help us to identify qualities of mind that made him successful as a plotter, as someone who could construct a complex dramatic structure, who had a practical knowledge of the theatrical conditions of his time, of the limitations imposed by the fact that only male actors would appear in his plays, that he needed to lay out his plot so that an individual actor might be required to take more than one role. We can sometimes identify limitations in his dramatic technique, and developments in it as he gained in experience. Even early in his career there is a

great leap forward between the relatively amateurish plotting of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* – which I believe to be his first play – and the masterly construction of *The Comedy of Errors*, written only a few years later, in 1594.

We can see him as an observer of the life around him, as someone who knew, whether from direct experience or through his reading, about domestic life, about the law, and music, and philosophy, about plants and gardens, and about hunting and wildlife. We can think – as I shall do in the last chapter – about his sense of humour, what made him laugh – or at least what he thought might make other people laugh. We can think about his sense of individual character, both by observing how he makes characters in his plays speak and behave and also by observing what he makes them say about other characters in their plays, their moral attitudes, their foibles and sensitivities. We can look at his portrayal of human idiosyncrasy, observing his sympathetic amusement at the ramblings of the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* and of Justice Shallow in *Henry IV, Part Two*, at the immature illusions of the lords in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the affected language of Osric in *Hamlet*, the social pretensions of the Old Shepherd and his son in *The Winter's Tale*. We can try to assess his sensibility by examining how in his plays he imagines himself into his characters' attitudes to the life around them. We can observe, for example, that he was capable of empathizing with the suffering of animals: 'the poor beetle that we tread upon / In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great / As when a giant dies,' says Isabella in *Measure for Measure* (3.1.77–79). And in *Pericles* Marina evinces the same kind of sensibility:

Believe me, la.
 I never killed a mouse nor hurt a fly.
 I trod once on a worm against my will,
 But I wept for it. (Scene 15, 126–129)

We can wonder how common such empathy was at the time – I remember my mentor Professor Terence Spencer saying that he had observed it only in Shakespeare and Montaigne.

Reverting to the life records, we can think about Shakespeare's dedications to the young Earl of Southampton, nine and a half years his junior, of his narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) – the second expressed in unconventionally loving terms – and what they may imply about his relationship with the Earl, and we can link this with related anecdotal evidence, such as the legend that Southampton gave him a thousand pounds (it seems an awful lot, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* allows that the word 'thousand' had for several centuries been 'used vaguely or hyperbolically for a large number', so it may just have been a way of saying that the Earl gave him a hell of a lot of money. 'I owe you a thousand pound,' says Falstaff to Justice Shallow (2 *Henry IV*, 5.5.73)). In contrast to this is Shakespeare's apparent lack of concern for the publication of his plays. Is it because publication would have brought him little or no money? Or because he was indifferent to the opinions of the reading public? Or simply that he was too busy? Was his bequest of money to Heminges and Condell and Burbage motivated by the hope that they would publish the 1623 Folio? And we may ask how his attitude to publication compares with that of contemporary playwrights.



7 Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, as a young man. This oil painting of the Earl aged around nineteen was believed to depict a woman until the late twentieth century. He was proud of his long tresses, depicted in other portraits.

We can think about the absences in the literary as well as the biographical record; about for instance the fact that in spite of his massive literary talent he wrote almost entirely for the theatre, taking little or no interest in the printing of his plays, that he appears not to have written masques for the court, or pageants for the City, or what we may call ‘public’ poems such as commendatory verses for other writers’ work, or comments on national events, or tributes on the death of members of the royal family such

as Queen Elizabeth in 1603 or the young Prince Henry in 1612 – both of which elicited extensive comment from fellow writers. We can wonder about his mystical poem ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle’ of 1601 – How did it come to be published? What are its apparently esoteric significances? What relationship, if any, did Shakespeare have to Sir John Salusbury, who was associated with the volume in which the poem appeared and whose son addressed a sonnet to his ‘good friends’ Heminges and Condell on the publication of the 1623 Folio, saying that they had ‘pleased the living, loved the dead’?

If there’s anywhere that Shakespeare seems to be speaking in his own person it is in his sonnets. How personal are they? To what extent, if at all, are they based on real-life situations in which he was implicated? How much do they reveal about his relationships with other men and with women? Were they written for love or for money? Were they intended for publication? Are they truly a sonnet sequence, intended to be read from start to finish? The sonnets are so central to the theme of this book that I shall devote the whole of the third chapter to them.

We can think about the implications for Shakespeare’s personality of his choice of subject matter for his plays, of the fact that almost all of them are set in the past and (except of course for the English history plays) in foreign lands. And in relation to this we can consider how his choice of subject matter compares with that of his contemporaries – of his fondness for Italian sources, of the comparative absence from his plays of clear topical reference, of his general avoidance of direct contemporary satire.

We can observe his sympathetic portrayal of morally dubious characters such as Bardolph and Doll Tearsheet (in *Henry IV, Part Two*), Paroles (in *All's Well That Ends Well*), Sir Toby Belch (in *Twelfth Night*), and even Falstaff (in *Henry IV, Parts One and Two*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and we can contrast this with his evident dislike of such cold fish as Prince John (in *Henry IV, Part Two*), and Angelo (in *Measure for Measure*), Don John (in *Much Ado About Nothing*), Octavius Caesar (in *Antony and Cleopatra*), or Giacomo (in *Cymbeline*). Some characters in his plays, such as Richard III and Iago, may seem unmitigatedly evil, but other villains, such as Macbeth and even Edmund (in *King Lear*), are portrayed with some degree of sympathy and understanding, and he is not judgemental about, for example, the illicit passions of Antony and Cleopatra.

We can, I think, deduce something about Shakespeare's personal opinions from the plays. He seems to me to have distrusted people, like Iago in *Othello*, and Goneril, Regan, and above all Edmund, in *King Lear*, who express a severely rationalistic view of life and of morality, and to have sympathized more easily with the sceptical irrationality of Edmund's father, Gloucester and indeed of Hamlet. There is a speech by Lafeu in *All's Well That Ends Well*, unnecessary to the action, in which I think that for once we can hear Shakespeare speaking: 'They say miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons to make modern [meaning 'commonplace'] and familiar things [that are] supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear'

(2.3.1–6). He is suggesting that ‘clever’, excessively rational people, try to reduce to a commonplace level matters that are beyond human understanding, reducing the mysteries of the universe to a series of scientific formulae, making ‘trifles of terrors’ instead of opening their imaginations to the fullness of experience – or, as he puts it, submitting themselves ‘to an unknown fear’ – that is, to the uncertainties of the unknown and unknowable. It is an exact description of the error that Lady Macbeth makes in thinking that she can ignore the promptings of the imagination. ‘Make thick my blood,’ she says as she prepares to urge her husband to murder Duncan, ‘Stop up th’access and passage to remorse, / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose’ (*Macbeth*, 1.5.43–45). Essentially, it seems to me, this identifies Shakespeare as someone who acknowledges the mystery of human life but is not bound by any dogma.

We can also, I suggest, discern something about the subconscious workings of Shakespeare’s mind in images not directly demanded by the narrative, in a manner that was adumbrated by Caroline Spurgeon in her book *Shakespeare’s Imagination and What It Tells Us* (1935) and, more subtly, by Edward Armstrong in his *Shakespeare’s Imagination: A Study of the Psychology of Association and Inspiration* of 1943, where he discerns recurrent image clusters that help to track the working of Shakespeare’s subconscious mind. He shows, for example, that the word ‘hum’ is closely associated in Shakespeare’s mind with death: ‘Shakespeare uses the word in twenty contexts and in twelve of these there is death or sleep imagery’ (p. 45).



8 Ellen Terry (1847–1928) as Princess Innogen in *Cymbeline*. This miniature showing Innogen imagining Posthumus's departure belonged to Terry's great-nephew, Sir John Gielgud, who kept it on his theatre dressing table.

I notice too a recurrent preoccupation with imagery of diminution, as in Edgar's description of Dover Cliff:

The fishermen, that walk upon the beach,
Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark,
Diminished to her cock; her cock, a buoy
Almost too small for sight.

(*The Tragedy of King Lear*, 4.5.17–20)

It comes again elsewhere, as in Innogen's imagining of Posthumus's departure:

I would have broke mine eye-strings; cracked them, but
To look upon him, till the diminution

Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle;
Nay, followed him till he had melted from
The smallness of a gnat to air, and then
Have turned mine eye and wept ...

(*Cymbeline*, 1.4.17–22)

And maybe this preoccupation relates also to recurrent imagery of a coming together of opposites, as several times in *The Winter's Tale*, as when Camillo says of Leontes and Polixenes

... they have seemed to be together, though absent;
shook hands, as over a vast; and embraced as it were
from the ends of opposed winds (1.1.28–31)

and in the Clown's

I am not to say it is a sea, for it is now the sky. Betwixt
the firmament and it you cannot thrust a bodkin's point.
(3.3.82–84)

And this observational quality is also present in *Othello*:

For do but stand upon the foaming shore,
The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds,
The wind-shaked surge with high and monstrous mane
Seems to cast water on the burning Bear
And quench the guards of th'ever-fixed Pole. (2.1.11–15)

These are just a few instances of points in the plays where the poetic content seems to me to be determined as much by Shakespeare's subconscious mind as by his literary intentions.

In brief, it seems to me that Shakespeare lived a life of external respectability and that he achieved personal popularity and worldly success, but the amazing degree of imaginative fecundity and emotional ferment to which his works bear abundant witness surely reflects a life of inner turmoil. His life is a tale of two cities (or one town and one city). In Stratford he is the prosperous and outwardly respectable family man. But he leads a double life, disappearing at frequent intervals to the metropolis. There he is the successful poet, actor, and playwright, leading member of the most successful theatre company of the age, a frequenter of the royal court and also of the Inns of Court. I see him as a man whose inner tensions were contained with stern self-discipline in an external appearance of harmony, but who found release in the creative energy that informs his plays and especially in his Sonnets. In the most intimate of those, I believe, he delved deeply into his innermost being, discovering for himself what manner of man he was and in the process revealing a tortured sexual life. I discuss the Sonnets in the third chapter, but in the next one I shall remain with Shakespeare's professional life and consider how he wrote his plays.

