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William Shakespeare

The Anatomy of an Enigma

Peter Razzell



William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma

First published in 1990, the aim of this book is to reveal the William Shakespeare whose life has been obscured by centuries of literary mythology. It unravels a series of strands in order to understand the man and the major influences which shaped his life and writing. The first part advances the thesis that his relationship with his father directly influenced the character of Falstaff — helping to not only explain key events in his father's life but also critical events in his own biography. This thesis not only illuminates the Falstaff plays but also a number of other works such as Hamlet. The second part focuses on Shakespeare's own life, and includes much original research particularly on the tradition that he was a poacher of deer, discussing the influence this incident had on his later life and writings. In addition, a sociological approach has been used which illuminates a number of key areas, including questioning the view his background was narrow and provincial — which has often been used to dispute his authorship of plays of such cosmopolitan appeal.



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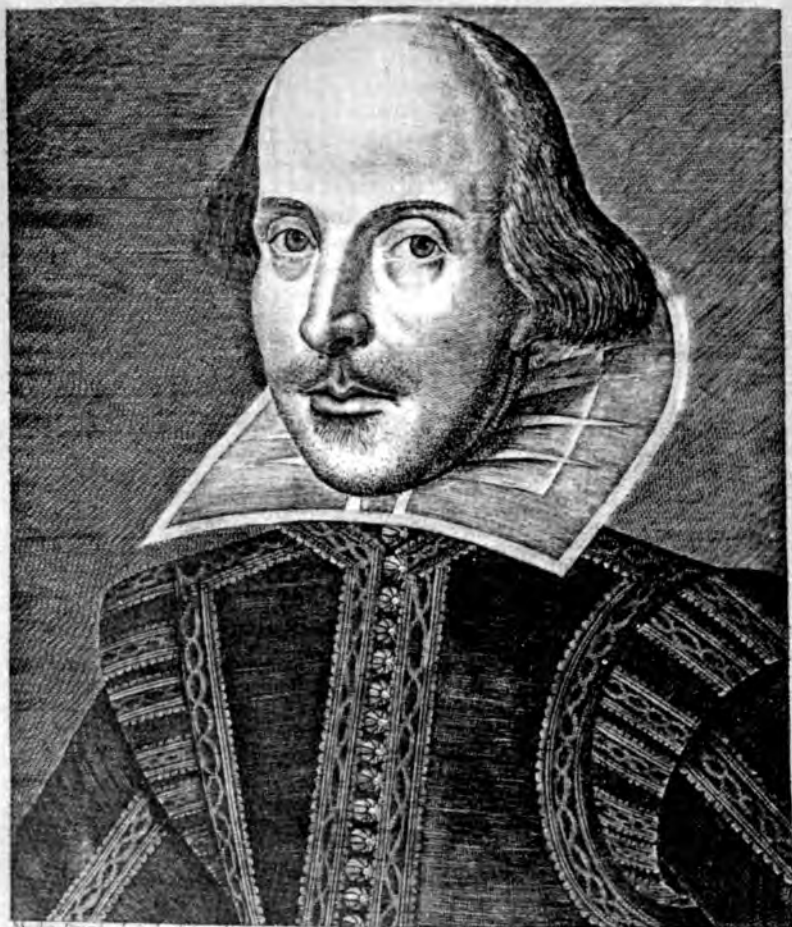
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MR. WILLIAM
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HISTORIES, &
TRAGEDIES.

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William Shakespeare: The Anatomy Of An Enigma

by Peter Razzell



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To Josephine and Luke, my daughter and son
– and to the memory of my fellow sociologist,
Stephen Schenck

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

In 1657, Thomas Plume, Archdeacon of Rochester, wrote about Shakespeare: “He was a glover’s son – Sir John Mennis saw once his old Father in his shop – a merry Cheekd old man – that said – Will was a good Honest Fellow, but he durst have crackt a jeast with him at any time.”¹ This description of Shakespeare’s relationship with his father, is virtually the only direct personal account that has come down to us, and tantalisingly, illuminates a small fragment of Shakespeare’s enigmatic biography. The major aim of this book is to unravel this enigma: to reveal the private face behind the public image, and to discover the person obscured by literary mythology. This can be viewed as “a quest for Shakespeare” – unravelling a series of strands which bring us nearer to an understanding of the man and the major events which shaped his life and writing.

The relationship which had the most influence on him, and had the greatest impact on his writing, was that with his father, John Shakespeare. The first half of the book will be about John Shakespeare – including his relationship with his son – and the central thesis of this part of the book can be stated as follows: the character of John Falstaff was based directly on Shakespeare’s father, helping to explain not only key events in John Shakespeare’s life, but also critical experiences in Shakespeare’s own biography. Not only does this thesis help illuminate the Falstaff plays – *The Merry Wives Of Windsor*, *Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2* and *Henry V*, but also a number of the other works, including *Hamlet*. The second half of the book will focus on Shakespeare’s own life independently of his father’s – but even here, I will argue, John Shakespeare cast a long shadow over his son’s life, including a history of alcoholism.

Although all the documentary evidence for a biography of Shakespeare and his father will be scrutinized in careful detail, and this will be supplemented wherever appropriate by evidence from the plays and poems, one additional major source of evidence will be used: that derived from sociological research. This has been carried out in the belief – along with C. Wright Mills – that the “sociological imagination” has a crucial role in explaining personal biography. Elements of economic and social history have been used by previous biographers of Shakespeare, but this has not been done in a systematic fashion. Much new work has been carried out in the last few years, using a more sociological approach to history, and this can illuminate biography, sometimes in quite a vivid way. For example, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. Previous biographers have thought of her as an “older woman” – yet recent research has shown that the average age of first marriage of women in rural areas surrounding Stratford was about twenty-five, whereas the average age for men in Stratford was twenty-seven. From this we can conclude that it was not so much that Anne Hathaway was an “older woman”, but rather that Shakespeare was a “younger man”, compared to his contemporaries marrying during the same period.

This is a relatively minor example of the use of a sociological perspective, and a further example will help illustrate a more major theme. Shakespeare has always been thought of as coming from a narrow provincial background, which has been one of the difficulties in accepting his authorship of the plays. His father is known to have been a glover and probably a butcher at one stage of his career. The idea that the man who wrote some of the greatest plays ever written, should have been the son of a butcher – and even apprenticed to that butcher – just seemed too unbelievable to some Shakespeare admirers. I will be arguing later that this represents a misunderstanding of Shakespeare’s Stratford experience; but more importantly, it was not realised until recently, that John Shakespeare was not merely a Stratford artisan, but in fact was a trader operating on a large scale, buying and speculating in a number of commodities (including the lending of money), and operating over a wide geographical area, including London.

This type of trading activity – designated by Everitt as “individual free trading” – gave rise to a particular way of life, with distinct and separate cultural values. In particular, these traders were highly cosmopolitan and lived not only in a provincial world, but operated in a metropolitan

cultural setting. This helps to explain how Shakespeare came to acquire the cultural knowledge which enabled him to write plays of such universal appeal. But this conclusion can only be reached by examining a great deal of economic and social historical evidence, as will be the case with a number of the other themes in the book. At times, it will be necessary to switch from the realm of the personal and the biographical, to a more abstract sociological level, but in every case, the discussion of detailed economic and social historical evidence will lead to a greater understanding of Shakespeare's life and work.

Although a sociological perspective is central, much of the book is devoted to Shakespeare's more personal development. This has been undertaken through a careful examination of the known documentary material, linked to a textual analysis of a number of the plays. The linkage between biography and textual analysis is necessarily speculative and clearly must be approached with great caution, if only to avoid the imaginative but fanciful and untestable speculations that have marred much Shakespeare scholarship. Such a linkage can only be justified if it illuminates a major and central aspect of Shakespeare's life and work, while at the same time following the documentary and textual evidence in rigorous detail.

Far too many works on Shakespeare have been marred by excessive idealisation of their subject, illustrated by the recent tendency to use the Chandos portrait, rather than the well-attested Folio illustration or the bust of Shakespeare placed in Stratford Church by his wife and daughters. One critic complained that the latter made Shakespeare look like a "self-satisfied pork butcher"; the fact that his father was probably a butcher (among other occupations), and that Shakespeare was apprenticed to his father, seemed to have escaped this critic. For such scholars, the Shakespeare that they venerate, must appear as a figure matching his literary stature – perhaps understandable in an age when most of our traditional "gods" have been found wanting. And it is perhaps for this same reason, that the move to deny Shakespeare's authorship of the plays (in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary) has flourished. Although some of this is a form of class snobbery – how could a butcher's son and apprentice write such great works of art? – I will be arguing (as we have seen above), that Shakespeare's background was much more cosmopolitan than previously realised.

A good biography must include "warts and all", but excessive denigration is just as undesirable as excessive idealisation: any biography

of Shakespeare must scrupulously follow the known documentary, legal and oral-historical evidence. Where the plays are used as a source of evidence – as they are in this book – it is important that material selected is used systematically, and not just in isolated fashion to buttress a particular case. It is for this reason that I have quoted extensively, and often *verbatim* from the plays and poems, allowing the material as much as possible, to speak for itself.

It could be argued that it is an error to assume that the plays can be used as a source of biographical material, when in fact they were written for a public and commercial audience. It could be further argued that the plays were a product of historical, cultural, political, literary, psychological and philosophical forces of such complexity, that they do not lend themselves to biographical analysis. It is self-evidently true that Shakespeare's plays are highly complex in their origin, with innumerable factors shaping their content and nature. But this should not deter us from focussing on particular aspects of the work; no analysis or criticism would be possible without specialist focus, and if at times this involves discussing material out of context, this can be justified if it adds to our understanding of the author and his work. Of course characters in the plays are not real people and they were put there by Shakespeare mainly for dramatic purposes, but I hope to show that particular plays were of special autobiographical significance, and that certain characters – in particular Falstaff – were of central importance in Shakespeare's own life. This does not mean that there can be any literal translation of character into biographical reality, but it does mean that certain characters can reveal important truths about a writer's life, and if taken in this spirit, can illuminate the author both as a man and a writer.

From Ben Jonson onwards, critics of Shakespeare's work have noted the imaginative, free-flowing quality of the plays, with frequent errors of historical fact and logical inconsistencies in plot and structure. Many of the plays have an almost dream-like quality, and can be seen (to use Freud's phrase) as "over-determined", with multiple determinants of content, including a biographical dimension. In some instances, this has been widely acknowledged; for example the "little eyases" passage in the Folio edition of *Hamlet*, which is universally recognized as a reference to the influence of the children's theatre. It is a good example of how Shakespeare used material of personal significance, and introduced it into the texture of the play, as if it were an intrinsic part of the drama. This only becomes obvious where the material is of a relatively public nature,

and it becomes more difficult to recognize passages of private personal significance, particularly where the material is “unconscious”, although we tread on notoriously dangerous ground with this potentially lethal concept. One of the characteristics of Shakespeare’s work is that he will often take a theme – for example the issue of the morality of pre-marital conception in *Measure For Measure* – and work it, and re-work it, through various characters and sub-plots: and very often these thematic repetitions are of autobiographical significance.

Unfortunately, Freud, Ernest Jones and other psychoanalysts writing on Shakespeare, applied the psychoanalytical method purely speculatively, and in such a manner as to make any empirical evaluation difficult. Although the psychological analysis of a particular theme in a dramatic work is sometimes productive, it is necessary to assess the effect of other factors which might account for the phenomenon in question. For example, the character of Falstaff is largely an invention of Shakespeare’s, and not a reflection in detail of a known historical or literary character, but this conclusion can only be reached through an examination of the historical and literary evidence. This cautionary process is well-understood, being so near to self-evident common-sense, but it is not so well-understood from the other side, i.e. the importance of checking purely literary and historical conclusions against psychological considerations. An important example perhaps of this is the question of the date on which *Hamlet* was written. There has been much scholarship and analysis of historical and literary source material, but as far as I know, no detailed discussion of an important psychological fact, the date of Shakespeare’s father’s death, and how this might fit into the known chronology of the writing of the play.

An appeal to examine all forms of empirical evidence in testing ideas will command universal assent, but some of the speculation in this book will predictably provoke a critical response. The justification for speculation exists where it is possible to test at least part of the ideas through further historical research. Much speculation takes place tacitly, with biographers decrying the validity of using the plays as a source of biographical material, and then proceeding to do just that, albeit in a piecemeal rather than a systematic fashion. Random historical and empirical research is unlikely to throw up much new material on Shakespeare’s life, whereas the systematic search for material directed by particular hypotheses may well lead to important discoveries.

An example of this is the oral tradition of Shakespeare poaching deer from Sir Thomas Lucy; this tradition has been viewed with scepticism by some Shakespeare biographers, largely on the ground that there is no evidence that Sir Thomas Lucy owned a deer park at the time. But an examination of the plays makes it clear how important this incident was to Shakespeare (references to killing deer are to be found in eighteen of the plays). Because of this, a detailed search was made for further evidence, resulting in the discovery of much new important material. I will argue that being caught and punished for this, had a profound effect on his subsequent development, particularly in leading to his exile from Stratford and creating the reaction against his youthful wildness. Much of this new evidence is on deer parks owned by Sir Thomas Lucy, and although highly detailed and at times quite technical, I hope this will make a substantive contribution to Shakespeare biography.

This example of the poaching tradition also illustrates one major weakness in existing Shakespeare scholarship: many biographers have been primarily interested in the literary aspect of Shakespeare's life, and as a result have tended to take a "metropolitan" view, and therefore been somewhat disdainful of the oral tradition, which has invariably been locally based. (It is perhaps for this reason that there has been no definitive scholarly study of the history of Stratford-on-Avon – all the more remarkable when we remember the vast amount of material which has been collected on the town, lending itself eminently to new historical techniques and methods of research.) Malone was a major example of this, listing the various errors he believed that Rowe had made in his biography based mainly on oral sources. In fact, Rowe has stood the test of subsequent scholarship remarkably well, in particular with his knowledge of John Shakespeare's occupation as a wool dealer, his information on Shakespeare's wife's maiden name, and I will be arguing in this book, his description of the young Shakespeare's poaching activities. Many scholars have on general grounds decried the value of the oral tradition, and then have proceeded to smuggle it into their argument to buttress a particular thesis. Given the paucity of information on Shakespeare's life, a general principle for the use of the oral evidence – at least that which derived from living memory – should be that it is to be treated as valid, until proved otherwise.

That the oral tradition could span long periods is shown by Richard Gough's vivid recollections on the lives of the people of the village of Myddle, Shropshire, written at the end of the seventeenth century, and

published in *The History Of Myddle*.² Gough in his accounts of individual families, occasionally spanned a period of nearly two hundred years, showing that at least for a village in Shropshire, the oral tradition was very strong indeed. And Gough's delightful language gives us historical insight into the cultural world that helped shape Shakespeare. Those who find it difficult to believe that Shakespeare could have written the plays, do not understand the richness of this oral tradition, which can be documented from at least Gough through to Henry Mayhew and beyond. In fact, I would argue, it is difficult to imagine the plays being written by anyone not educated in this tradition, and this is particularly true with respect to the great popular comic characters, such as Falstaff.

Bold hypotheses following known evidence are not in themselves sufficient: for an idea to be worthwhile it must be testable through future documentary research. It is the nature of this book, that it lends itself to detailed factual scrutiny, particularly with respect to the character and nature of John Shakespeare's associates in later life. For example, John Shakespeare's two friends and associates John Audley and Thomas Cooley, acting for surety for John Shakespeare and each other in the Queen's Bench Court in 1580 – further research on these two figures will shed considerable light on John Shakespeare's character and behaviour. Hopefully, there are a number of ideas in this book which will lend themselves to critical scrutiny, so that the book's conclusions will be open to future evaluation. Whether or not subsequent research validates all elements of this book, it is hoped it will make a stimulating and provocative contribution to Shakespeare scholarship. In the last resort, the interest of the book will derive from all our fascination with the man who produced some of the greatest written works of art in the English language. If it adds to our understanding of the man and his work, it will be worthwhile.

CHAPTER 2:

THE RISE OF JOHN SHAKESPEARE

Other than the sole brief contemporary description of John Shakespeare, the evidence for his biography is exclusively documentary. Halliday has summarized this evidence in his *Shakespeare Companion*, as follows:

“**Shakespeare, John** (d.1601), son of Richard Shakespeare, and the poet’s father must have left Snitterfield sometime before 1552, when he is first mentioned in the Stratford records, he, Humphrey Reynolds and Adrian Quiney each being fined 12d. for making a dunghill in Henley Street, where presumably he was living. In a suit of 1556 he is first called a ‘glover’, a trade he followed until at least 1586, when he again appears as a glover; he did not sign his name, but made his mark, sometimes in the form of a pair of gloves’ dividers. He also traded in barley, timber and wool, and possibly other commodities. In other documents he is styled ‘yeoman’, that is, a man of substance under the degree of gentleman. The twenty years of 1556-1576 are years of prosperity:

1556. Buys two houses; the ‘Woolshop’ in Henley Street and another in Greenhill Street.

1557. Marries Mary Arden, daughter of his father’s landlord at Snitterfield.

1558. Birth of his first child, Joan. (Six other children were born 1562-74, and Edmund in 1580.)

1557-62. Successively borough constable, affeeror (assessor of fines), and chamberlain.

1561. Administers his father’s estate.

1564. Birth of William Shakespeare.

1565. Alderman; 1568 Bailiff (mayor); 1571 Chief Alderman and J.P.

1575. Buys two more houses; sites unknown, but probably the Birthplace, and an adjoining house to the west, destroyed in the fire of 1594.

The twenty years of 1576-96 appear to be years of adversity.

1577. He ceases to attend council meetings.

1578-9. Mortgages his wife’s Wilmcote property, lets Asbies, and sells her share in the Snitterfield estate.

1580. Fined £40 for failing to appear before the court of Queen’s Bench to