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THE FICTIONAL LIVES OF SHAKESPEARE

Kevin Gilvary



The Fictional Lives of Shakespeare

Modern biographies of William Shakespeare abound; however, close scrutiny of the surviving records clearly show that there is insufficient material for a cradle to grave account of his life, that most of what is written about him cannot be verified from primary sources, and that Shakespearean biography did not attain scholarly or academic respectability until long after Samuel Schoenbaum published *William Shakespeare A Documentary Life* in 1975.

This study begins with a short survey of the history and practice of biography and then surveys the very limited biographical material for Shakespeare.

Although Shakespeare gradually attained the status as a national hero during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were no serious attempts to reconstruct his life. Any attempt at an account of his life or personality amounts, however, merely to “biografiction”.

Modern biographers differ sharply on Shakespeare’s apparent relationships with Southampton and with Jonson, which merely underlines the fact that the documentary record has to be greatly expanded through contextual description and speculation in order to appear like a Life of Shakespeare.

Kevin Gilvary received his Ph.D. in English Literature from Brunel University London in 2015. He also holds a BA and MA in Classics as well as an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Southampton. He taught at Barton Peveril College in Hampshire, UK, for twenty years.

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Early Editions of Shakespeare's Works

- Rowe Nicholas Rowe. 1709. *The works of Mr. William Shakespear; in six volumes. Adorn'd with cuts. Revis'd and corrected, with an account of the life and writings of the author.* By N. Rowe, Esq. (Second impression 1709; new edition 1714).
- Pope Alexander Pope. 1723–5. *The Works of Shakespear: 6 vols.* (Volume 1 containing the prefatory material is dated 1725; the remaining volumes are dated 1723.)
- Theobald Lewis Theobald. 1733. *The Works of Shakespear: In Seven Volumes.* (Further editions in 1740, 1752, 1757, 1762, 1767, 1772, 1773, and 1777 made it the most reprinted edition of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century).
- Hanmer Thomas Hanmer. 1744. *Works of Shakespear. 6 vols.* (Re-printed 1745; 1747; 1751 and 1760. Second edition 1770–71).
- Warburton William Warburton. 1747. *The Works of Shakespear in Eight Volumes.*
- Johnson Dr. Samuel Johnson. 1765. *The Plays of William Shakespear, in Eight Volumes.*
- Capell *Mr William Shakespeare his Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies 10 vols.*
- Steevens George Steevens. 1773. *The plays of William Shakespear* (known as Johnson-Steevens 1). Revised editions, 1778 (Johnson-Steevens 2); 1785 (Johnson-Steevens 3); 1793 (Johnson-Steevens 4); 1803 (first variorum or Johnson-Steevens 5); 1813 (second variorum or Johnson-Steevens 6).
- Malone Edmond Malone. 1790. *The plays and poems: of William Shakspeare, in ten volumes.*
- Boswell Edmond Malone & James Boswell Jr. (eds) 1821. *The Plays and Poems of William Shakspeare* 21 vols. Third variorum.



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Abbreviations

Quotations of the works of Shakespeare are taken from Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor, eds. (1986) *William Shakespeare: the Complete Works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

The following abbreviations are used:

- WS E. K. Chambers. 1930. *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*. 2 vols.
- ES E. K. Chambers. 1923. *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 vols.
- EMI *Every Man in his Humour* (Play by Ben Jonson, first performed c. 1598).
- EMO *Every Man Out of his Humour* (Play by Ben Jonson, first performed c. 1599).



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Finally a note on Authorship. Throughout this study, I have accepted the traditional attribution of the plays and works to William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, endeavouring to show that no biography of his life is possible. The question of authorship is entirely separate and any reader who wishes to pursue this interest might usefully begin with *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, eds. Stanley Wells & Paul Edmondson (2013) and *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?* eds. John Shahan & Alexander Waugh (2013).

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Introduction

The Fictional Lives of Shakespeare

What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom? Another yet!
Macbeth, 4.1.130

Like *Macbeth* confronted by the interminable line of Banquo's progeny, any person wanting to investigate the historical William Shakespeare must be astonished at the huge number of modern biographies about the Bard. In 1998, the popular film *Shakespeare in Love* depicted a playwright with an unattested love interest of the fictional Lady Viola de Lesseps, against an invented antagonist, Lord Wessex, while following the unlikely advice of Kit Marlowe for *Romeo and Juliet* without recognising the source of the play in Arthur Brooke's poem *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Iuliet* (1562). Since *Shakespeare in Love* there have been over twenty-five full-length biographies, some written by eminent academics such as Katherine Duncan-Jones, Stephen Greenblatt, and Lois Potter, others by established biographers such as Anthony Holden, Peter Ackroyd and Michael Wood. The number of these biographies is all the more surprising when we recall that no new information about Shakespeare has emerged from any contemporary document since 1931 when Leslie Hotson published his transcription and analysis of the Langley writ of 1596. Before that, the last new information about Shakespeare was discovered in the court records of the Bellott-Mountjoy case, and published by Charles Wallace in 1910.

Modern biographers vary considerably in their portrayal of the Shakespeare of their own imaginations. Edmond Malone was the first critic to investigate historical records for Shakespeare from which he made biographical inferences. He could not envisage that "a man of such sensibility, and so amiable a disposition, should have lost his only son, who had attained the age of twelve years, without being greatly affected by it." To this he added another inference, this time from the works, in proposing that Constance's lamentations for her son (*King John* 3.4 16–106) "may perhaps add some probability that this tragedy was written at or soon after that period." At least Malone offered a note of caution in these claims. Modern biographers however make similar assertions with no sign of doubt, often identifying a speech, a character or an idea with

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Shakespeare himself. Some writers claim to identify Shakespeare's Protestant outlook (e.g. Honan, 79–80; Ackroyd), others assert his partisan Catholic affiliations (e.g. Greenblatt, 102–103; Wood). A few find republican ideals in the plays (Hadfield), a majority find monarchical tendencies (Saccio). Echoing the sentiments of T. S. Eliot, Blair Worden explains:

In modern times, we have had a monarchist Shakespeare and a republican Shakespeare, an aristocratic Shakespeare and a bourgeois Shakespeare, Terry Eagleton's Marxist Shakespeare and Michael Portillo's Tory Shakespeare.... each interpretation tells us more about the interpreter, not the interpreted.

(29–30)

Similar differences emerge over descriptions of his supposed relationships with his wife, his patron(s), his colleagues and his rivals. These differences of interpretation, well summarised by David Bevington (2010), tend to indicate that there is no reliable basis for such interpretations. For any reader wishing to know more about Shakespeare and how he came to compose his works, the difficulty lies in choosing between these competing biographies: which one portrays the “real” Shakespeare? Which one tells the story most accurately? The answer is none of them. The few historical records do not reveal his personality or describe his “life trajectory”. What passes for Shakespearean biography offer extensive description of the historical, developed by the dubious practices of speculation, using uncorroborated posthumous anecdotes, and making biographical inferences from the works.

The critical reader will of course always bear in mind the distinction between primary and secondary sources. A primary source is a “document, image or artefact that provides evidence about the past. It is an original document created contemporaneously with the event under discussion” (Robert Williams, 58). A primary source must directly and unambiguously reference the subject to be considered part of the biographical material. On the other hand, a secondary source may present an anecdote or a claim which cannot be verified in the primary sources. If the anecdote is repeated, it becomes a myth which “comes down from the past whose truth is popularly accepted but cannot be checked” (Merriam-Webster). Myths are propagated for their significance to the culture of a people rather than for their historical accuracy. E. K. Chambers referred to such unevidenced claims as the “Shakespeare-mythos”. He lists fifty-eight writers between 1640 and 1858 whose comments about Shakespeare cannot be verified with regard to contemporary or near-contemporary records (WS ii. 238–302). Biographers of Shakespeare often claim the authority of an “early source” or a “credible tradition” to justify a line of interpretation when there is no basis in contemporary documents.

The next stage for the reader anxious to investigate the life of Shakespeare is to seek the contemporary records on which biographies are (or should be) based. Actual transcriptions are hard to find. Instead, biographers offer summaries and interpretations as E. K. Chambers observed of the biographies by Sidney Lee and J. Q. Adams (1923): writers using continuous narrative “do not set out *in extenso* the original documents on which they are based. These are summarised, and subjective interpretations [are] added” (1946, 7). This observation remains true of modern biographies.

The inquisitive reader will eventually make use of documentary collections, such as the two volume study by Sir Edmund Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (1930). Chambers generally published accurate transcriptions of records held by offices such as the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust at Stratford-upon-Avon, the British Library in London, the PRO (now The National Archives at Kew), the London Metropolitan Archives at Finsbury, and the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D. C. While Chambers’s organisation is helpful and analytical, he often merges his report of the records with his own discussion and interpretation, especially when dating the plays. In short, Chambers allowed his own subjective interpretation to intrude into his presentation of the historical record, as he himself recognised later (1946, 8).

Starting with a critical examination of biography and literary biography as a genre in Chapter 1, we find that biography is typically defined as a narrative account of a person’s life; while a literary biography attempts to relate the works of a writer to a life. In western literature, biography emerged in the classical period when the lives of powerful men were described by biographers such as Suetonius and Plutarch. Medieval monks added a second class of subject, the biographies of saints, as exemplars of the holy life. Both of these types of subject are evident in the emergence of English biography during the Tudor period with Hall’s *Chronicle* (1547) and Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1563). Literary biography only became established in England during the eighteenth century when Dr. Johnson added the lives of writers as a third major subject for biographers. These elements converge when the biographies of Shakespeare emerge in the Victorian period: a writer, who was an important person and divinely inspired. The New Biography of the twentieth century, however, attempted not only to show a more rounded view of subjects by mentioning their failings, but also offering a more intimate description of a subject’s life. Techniques such as the speculative reporting of the subject’s personal thoughts, experiences and motives were increasingly used by biographers in the 1920s and 1930s. Although these practices were dismissed by Durling and Watt as ‘biografiction’ (1941, 2–3), they remain visible in many modern biographies, especially those dealing with Shakespeare.

The extant biographical data for Shakespeare is assessed in Chapter 2, “Gaps in our Ignorance”, not just with regard to the extent of

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the surviving records, as has been attempted by many biographers such as Chambers (*William Shakespeare* 1930) and Schoenbaum in *Shakespeare's Lives* (1970, 3–72), but more importantly with regard to the limitations of the material and the lack of key records. The small number of historical documents which reference William Shakespeare offer no insight into the poet's thoughts and motives, but consist mainly of legal documents. References in printed texts allude to an author in print or to his works. Nor do the records support any reliable chronology of his works. Thus every attempt at a biography of Shakespeare lacks a framework for his literary career and any indication of the playwright's personal thoughts, experiences and motives.

Biographical comments about Shakespeare in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are considered in Chapter 3, "Inventing the Myths," where it is noted that without firm evidence about the Bard, various claims were made which have not been verified subsequently from extant sources. The only scanty notice of Shakespeare's life at this time was written by Nicholas Rowe for his new edition of the works in 1709. Rowe's anecdotes can be shown upon scrutiny to be false or unfounded. Although widely republished in the following 150 years, Rowe's *Account* was held in very poor repute by subsequent editors, such as Dr. Johnson. The biographical investigations of Edmond Malone form the subject of Chapter 4, "Doubting the Myths". Malone discovered many new documents concerning the life and times of Shakespeare, but rejected many of the unfounded assertions made by previous critics such as Rowe. He cautiously offered a chronology of the plays which has been very influential but its reliability is uncertain. Malone's great ambition was to write a life of Shakespeare, but this was never achieved.

Popular narrative biographies in the period from 1803 to 1975 are considered in Chapter 5, "Filling in the Gaps," where the main focus was to produce an exemplary biography worthy of the National Poet. Much of the description of Shakespeare's life was either derived from an uncritical acceptance of the myths first attested in the eighteenth century or through selective biographical inference from the works. This chapter then traces the influence of the New Biography in the twentieth century (up to 1975). At the same time, there was a strong current of skepticism as to the value of a Life of Shakespeare. This doubtful outlook was reaffirmed when the biographical approach to literature was dismissed as a fallacy by the New Critics such as Winsatt & Beardsley (1946) as deriving from each reader's subjective estimation of the author's character and personality. In the twentieth century, it was widely accepted that there was insufficient material for a biography of Shakespeare based on contemporary records.

Samuel Schoenbaum's *William Shakespeare: a Documentary Life* (1975) is considered in Chapter 6, "Re-Imagining the Life". This was a pivotal work in changing the previous perception that no biography

was possible. Few modern biographers look any earlier than this work when citing sources. It begins with the claim that there are more records than popularly supposed and gives large scale reproductions of over 200 documents. These are used to support a linear narrative of the life of Shakespeare. However, only a quarter of the documents contain contemporary references to Shakespeare. By linking events and situations in an imaginative way, interpreting as he progresses, Schoenbaum perpetuates many myths: that Shakespeare spent his childhood in Stratford where he received his education; that he was patronised by Southampton; that he inspired envy in Jonson; and that he retired to Stratford. None of these assertions can be verified from primary sources. Chapter 7 “After Schoenbaum” reviews a wide range of modern biographies on Shakespeare. These show a commendable desire to understand the poet and the playwright, and to share their insights regarding the great works. However, they rely on a range of historically dubious techniques to embellish and expand the established narrative outline.

The final chapters are concerned with two supposed relationships of Shakespeare, both important for any literary biography. Chapter 8, “Inventing a Patron,” reviews the thin evidence linking Shakespeare with the Earl of Southampton. Accepting the myth that Shakespeare enjoyed this aristocrat’s patronage, biographers project the playwright into the earl’s life, often by identifying him with the ‘fair youth’ of the sonnets and the underlying subject of *Venus & Adonis*. The wide variety of interpretations concerning their relationship are shown to be without foundation. Chapter 9.

“Inventing a Rival,” (Chapter 9) considers how Ben Jonson is cast as the antagonist to Shakespeare, intimately acquainted and full of admiration but ultimately consumed by envy. These views are shown to have no basis in primary sources.

While Shakespeare never mentions Jonson and alludes only rarely, if at all, to his works, Jonson’s comments in The First Folio are found to be in line with other commendations, or literary puffs for which he was likely to have been paid. In his own writings and private conversations, his rare comments serve only to disparage Shakespeare.

The extant records give a very limited framework for the life of William Shakespeare. They are lacking in detail and offer no insight into his character or personality. The literary and theatrical records are so fragmentary that no reliable account of Shakespeare as a playwright can be constructed. Moreover, no direct connection between any of the plays and any events in Shakespeare’s life, such as the deaths of his son, father or mother, can be reliably demonstrated. The records do not provide sufficient material for an evidence-based biography of Shakespeare. David Bevington notes that Shakespeare’s silence on himself and his outlook “positively invites speculation” (2010, 13). This may be so, but it is not justified in biography.

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The main gaps in the records concerning Shakespeare are Table 0.1:

Table 0.1 Gaps in the records for Shakespeare

-
- | | |
|---|--|
| a | absence of personal papers written by Shakespeare such as letters, diaries, notes or journals; |
| b | absence of personal records about Shakespeare by friends, acquaintances, neighbours or colleagues; |
| c | absence of allusion in the Stratford records to his work as a poet and playwright. The public records in Stratford state his birth, marriage, children's births and their deaths. The records indicate his increasing wealth and standing there. |
| d | absence of records of William Shakespeare from his birth in 1564 until his marriage at the age of 18; |
| e | absence of records about William Shakespeare from the birth of his twins in 1585 until the possible allusion in a 1592 pamphlet; |
| f | absence of records that he was in London between 1604 and 1612; he attended the Bellott-Mountjoy case at Westminster Hall on 11 May 1612 – the only record to locate Shakespeare to a particular place on a particular day in his life; |
| g | absence of dates of composition for his poems and plays; no document records any sequence of composition; |
| h | absence of full performance list, including premières. The extant records are fragmentary and ambiguous (e.g. the play witnessed by Platter in 1599 might not have been Shakespeare's play); |
| i | absence of records concerning his working practices: there is no evidence as to whether he worked on one play or one poem at a time, whether he ever revised his own works either for the stage or for publication, whether he ever revised the works of others, whether he ever actively worked alongside other playwrights, whether his works were initially intended for performance at court, or what he might have thought about other poets and playwrights; |
| j | no insight into the person among the allusions to Shakespeare as a poet and/or as a playwright, which only attest his reputation. |
-

Overall, modern biographies of Shakespeare have only a small factual framework. There is insufficient material upon which to construct a coherent linear account of the subject's life. Scarcely any of the claims made about Shakespeare as a writer can be verified by reference to historical records. As a result, the biographies of Shakespeare only offer historical fact in their treatment of the context and in dealing with a few of the external events of his life. For the inner man, these narratives accounts are entirely conjectural. The only acceptable methodology for considering Shakespeare's life is to undertake skeptical examination of those discrete topics for which there are primary sources. Any picture of Shakespeare will thus be very limited, but will at least have the merit of being historically based, verifiable, and not simply fiction.

1 Biography

Much Practice, Little Theory

No words or thoughts, motives or actions, should be ascribed to the subject without evidence. The sources of the evidence should be clear and verifiable.

—Anne Chisholm (2001)

A biography is widely understood to give the “the record of the life of an individual written by someone else” (*OED*) providing a factually based account of a life in a linear narrative. Literary biography, as a recognised subgenre, offers not just an account of a subject’s life, but also shows how the author’s writings came into being and traces an author’s development. Biography has been a recognised genre from the classical period and became established in early modern England with the primary intention of describing exemplary lives. In the early twentieth century, exponents of the New Biography put emphasis on a more realistic appraisal of a subject, often enhanced by reporting their inner thoughts and feelings. During this period, the subgenre of psychobiography emerged with an assessment of the subject’s childhood experiences and influences. The chapter finally considers the background to biographers, some academic, others professional, as well as publishers whose main concern is good business. Biography is a profitable genre for publishers and writers.

There is broad agreement that a biography gives “a narrative history ... of the life of a notable individual from birth to death” (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). Margaret Drabble notes that a good biographer maintains “high scholarly standards” combined with “imaginative insight and narrative skill” (*Oxford Companion to English Literature* 1985). Literary biographers likewise offer a narrative history of a writer’s life and development. *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1996) emphasises the external person, literary, and other influences on the subject. The other approach considers their internal development, recreating the creative imagination and the artistic process of the writer. A critical literary biography, such as Jocelyn Baines’s study of Joseph Conrad (1960), also contains discrete analysis of the subject’s literary works. While the broad definitions of biography and literary

8 Biography

biography are widely accepted, the formal characteristics of biography as a genre have been formulated less often. Sir Michael Holroyd notes that there are “no absolute rules – each subject differs in the opportunities and problems he or she offers, and what works best is what appeals instinctively and calls forth our most original and potent language” (*The Guardian* 1 June 2002).

From classical times until the end of the Edwardian period, the emphasis in biography was to reveal personality in a portrait, on the assumption that character was fixed. With the advent of the New Biography after World War I, there was greater interest in a life story; the need for a coherent narrative has assumed greater importance. Today a literary biographer attempts to offer a continuous and coherent account of the life of a writer, with the biographer’s own insights and evaluations.

For an account of someone’s life that is both narrative and historically accurate, there must be sufficient primary sources from which a narrative can be constructed. The requirement of a historically documented basis for biography was stated by John Garraty, general editor of the *American National Biography* (1999). He explains how factual accuracy is the highest priority for every one of the entries:

After the staff at Columbia University had approved an essay, it was factchecked under the supervision of the ANB staff of Oxford University Press in Cary, North Carolina. The Oxford factcheckers generated well over a hundred thousand queries, and their work has immeasurably strengthened the factual foundation of our understanding of the American past.

(Garraty, Preface, ANB)

For any literary biographer, it is essential to establish a factually accurate framework of an author’s life, including dates and times of composition of their works, whether and when any revisions were made, and the date(s) of publication. Only then can the literary biographer begin to relate biographical material towards a critical appreciation of their texts.

1.1 The Western Tradition of Biography

Biography emerged as a genre in the Roman period, when Suetonius described the lives of Julius Caesar and the first eleven Emperors. While following a chronological account, Suetonius also sought to relate any anecdotes, especially from the childhood of the subject which would illuminate the subject’s character. Suetonius influenced Plutarch, a younger contemporary who wrote twenty-three pairs of *Parallel Lives* in which he linked the biographies of illustrious Greeks with famous Romans (e.g. Alexander and Julius Caesar). Plutarch announced his intention to reveal character in his most important subject:

For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles when thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities.

(*Life of Alexander*, 1)

The tendency to reveal the subject's character had a moralising element, which remained a strong element of biography until the early part of the twentieth century. After the Roman Empire became Christian, biography became divided between panegyric in praising emperors and hagiographic in the description of the holy man. Hagiography flourished during the medieval period especially as literacy the preserve of clerics.

In early modern England, the advent of print culture and the growth of literacy led to interest in biography. Biography was used for political and nationalistic purposes. Thomas More consciously followed classical models in his *History of King Richard III* (first printed 1543). Hall's *Chronicle* (1547) was organised around the lives of English kings. Medieval hagiography survived after the Reformation: English writers such as John Foxe began to reformulate religious history so as to forge a Protestant past. His *Acts and Monuments* (1563–1583), often fictitiously, described the exemplary lives and deaths of many Protestant martyrs. Thomas North's translation of *Plutarch's Lives* appeared in 1579. All of these writers exerted a strong influence not just on Shakespeare but on later biographers.

While the emphasis of biography was still mainly on powerful rulers, literary biography began to emerge when Izaak Walton (1593–1683) described the lives of religious writers, such as John Donne (1640). A much wider treatment of great Englishmen was attempted by Thomas Fuller (1608–1661) in *The History of the Worthies of England* (1662). Taking each county in turn, Fuller included brief descriptions of local saints, clerics, politicians, authors, and landowners. Within this framework, Shakespeare was accorded a few comments. John Aubrey (1626–1697) compiled notes about a wide range of people between 1669 and 1693, but showed less interest in the biographies of men of national significance than Fuller had done. Like Fuller, Aubrey included brief mention of Shakespeare.

John Dryden was the earliest English writer to use the terms 'biography' and 'biographer'. For his edition of *Plutarch's Lives* in 1683, Dryden prepared a life of the author from explicit comments which Plutarch made about himself.¹ Biographical dictionaries emerged in the late seventeenth century and expanded in the eighteenth. Shakespeare is given an increasingly important entry in these but more from a sense of nationalistic appreciation rather than for any contribution to the biographical material. The first such dictionaries in English, compiled by Edward

Phillips in 1675 and Gerard Langbaine in 1691, combined literary appreciation with some biographical content, which was often derivative, undocumented, and anecdotal. This approach influenced Nicholas Rowe in his introduction to the works of Shakespeare (1709) and remained evident in the literary dictionaries of Giles (1719–1720), Cibber (1753), and especially the six-volume *Biographia Britannica* (1747–1766). In these works, Shakespeare's significance as a national poet was increasingly established before anyone had actually investigated his life. Dr Johnson helped to establish the popularity of literary biography in the latter part of the eighteenth century. His Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, compiled mainly from secondary sources, originally served as introductions to selections of poems but were soon collected and published independently as *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–1781). Dr Johnson followed the western tradition of biography in seeking a mundane fact or hidden story as the key to understanding the character as a whole.² His achievement was to formalise the biographical approach to literary appreciation, relating criticism to a chronological framework of each writer's life and situation. There was a further boost to the popularity of the genre after the death of the great doctor as Johnson himself was the subject of many biographies, by among others Thomas Tyers (1784), William Shaw (1785), John Hawkins (1787), and most famously James Boswell (1791).

The first monograph to deal with biography as a genre was James Stanfield's *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography*, which emphasised the didactic purpose in "developing the principles of man's active and moral nature" (1813, v). This approach continued to dominate the genre throughout the Romantic and Victorian periods. Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) at this time enunciated the significance of the biography of great men. His lecture, "The Hero as Poet: Dante and Shakespeare," showed his greater interest in a writer's reputation than in his life: "Consider what this Shakespeare has actually become among us. Which Englishman we ever made, in this land of ours, which millions of Englishmen, would we not give up rather than the Stratford Peasant?" (Carlyle 1841, 132). One major development during this period was increased interest in childhood, especially with the publication of novels by Charles Dickens. With no record of Shakespeare's childhood between his baptism and the issue of a marriage licence, Victorian writers such as Charles Knight (1843) and John Payne Collier (1844) chose to invent one, a utopian vision of a warm and caring family, described in exceptional detail. From this flowed the national campaign to purchase of the 'Birthplace' in 1847. The process of national celebration through biography reached its zenith with the publication of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, beginning in 1885 and amounting to 63 volumes by 1900. Both the first of the two editors, Leslie Stephen (the father of Virginia Woolf) and Sidney Lee, warned against the Victorian tendency towards

unconditional hero worship. Lee saw his role as a narrator, not a moralist, and he insisted on the investigation of primary material (1911, 25–26; 41). His *Life of Shakespeare* (1897, 1898, 1915), restrained by the standards of the day, is examined in Chapter 5. Despite the observations of Lee and the emergence of the New Biography, uncritical eulogy has remained evident in celebrity biography into the twenty-first century, and nowhere is this more evident than in biographies of Shakespeare.

New Biography and New Criticism

The emergence of a “New Biography” after World War I has been attributed to Lytton Strachey’s publication of *Eminent Victorians* (1918), in which he attempted to debunk some of the more extreme myths surrounding Victorian heroes such as General Gordon and Florence Nightingale. In the preface, Strachey rejected the majority of existing biographies for “their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design” (1918, viii). The New Biography was characterised by a demand for factually based judgements, selectively used. The second feature was interest in the subject’s failures and failings. Third, he was keen to reconstruct the thought processes of the subject, in line with the stream of consciousness as a narrative mode in fiction. Virginia Woolf in *The Art of Biography*, written in 1939, noted that reliable, personal material was indispensable for any biography showing interior thought processes. Contrasting Lytton Strachey’s portraits of Queen Victoria in *Victoria* (1921) and Queen Elizabeth in *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928), Woolf explains:

it is clear that the two Queens present very different problems to their biographer. About Queen Victoria everything was known. Everything she did, almost everything she thought, was a matter of common knowledge. No one has ever been more closely verified and exactly authenticated than Queen Victoria. The biographer could not invent her, because at every moment some document was at hand to check his invention... [Of Queen Elizabeth] very little was known – he was urged to invent.

(Woolf, *The Art of Biography*, edn. 2008, 119)

Woolf then concluded that biography “must be based upon fact. And by fact in biography we mean facts that can be verified by other people besides the artist” (2008, 120). Woolf was aware that fiction was common in biography in the 1920s. Many exponents of the New Biography were deplored by Durling & Watt for an assumed ability to “read his [sic] subject’s mind, freely using the interior monologue or stream of consciousness made popular by novelists” so that the biographer “not only manipulated deeds for dramatic effect but supplied an accompaniment