

## William Shakespeare, My New Best Friend?

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### *Abstract*

New trends in biographical writing often make readers imagine that they can understand and directly experience the presence of historical figures as if they knew them intimately. The essay reconsiders Shakespeare's life and career in the light of these developments arguing that thinking that we can know Shakespeare well invariably leads to ignorance rather than enlightenment because the past can never be quite like the present. The post-romantic model of the lone genius or solitary author stubbornly remains even when critics accept that Shakespeare wrote collaboratively and that his work was created 'in company'. Examining Shakespeare's career and the conditions under which his work was produced reveals a writer who was always responsive to prevailing trends and whose writing has to be understood in its context. Shakespeare played an important role within his theatrical companies; worked with other actors; and always had one eye on what his fellow writers – and rivals – were doing, facts that are often obscured but which explain how he became what he was.

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It now appears impossible to imagine early modern history without recourse to fiction. In some ways this is a good thing: in times when the arts and humanities are under attack, when science models are being imposed on research into the humanities, and, most importantly, when the current economic hardships are pressurising high achieving students into making choices based on fear for the future, the generation of a measure of interest in a subject that does not have an obvious purpose or the promise of immediate rewards seems like a welcome relief. But we might want to pause and take stock at some point. Surely something is awry when the wealth of new books on the court of Henry VIII and the actions of Thomas Cromwell are judged in terms of Hilary Mantel's best-selling novels. Diarmaid MacCulloch's review of Tracy Borman's new biography (2014) opens with 'Thomas Cromwell's ghost must be blessing Hilary Mantel for her two novels so far, and one more to come, restoring him to a life by turns engaging and



intimidating' (2014).<sup>1</sup> The historical novel that has inspired the new crop of historical works is now held up as their exemplar and judge, a strange example of circular logic. Few readers and reviewers would judge scholars of Norman England in terms of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* – well, at least not today.

The problem is that, however hard historians work to change our understanding of the past in terms of social, political, diplomatic, ecclesiastical, religious, local, environmental, popular, cultural, art or any other form of history, broadening our terms of engagement with times long ago, the great men and women always seem to pull us back into their orbit. History is invariably cast in terms of the dominant modern literary form, the novel, so that the life of, say, Queen Elizabeth, can be read alongside a fictional treatment of Æmilia Lanyer, as if they were almost the same thing, the only difference being the truthful nature of one and the imaginative cast of the other. Popular history increasingly looks like fiction, and popular fiction increasingly looks like popular history. As pressures are put ever more strongly on academics to engage with the public, the danger that a popular understanding of history and literature will subsume any academic resistance is obvious enough.

Indeed, the field where the most danger lies is in the writing of biography itself. When lives cannot easily be reassembled from the fragmentary facts, a familiar danger for anyone working on early modern figures, the biography is assembled as though it could be known (Hadfield 2014). Of course, this can be a legitimate enterprise, a case in point being the robust defence of filling in the gaps by the leading historian, Natalie Zemon Davis (2006), who had to work hard to reconstruct the life of Al-Hassan ibn Mohammad al Wazzan el Fassi (Leo Africanus). Zemon Davis took risks that a historian had to explain and defend but did so on the grounds that not writing al Wazzan's life was more problematic than actually doing so because it was necessary that a crucial hidden voice of Mediterranean history, that of a 'converso', was brought to light. Even so, it is a dangerous precedent and it is worth wondering whether the much praised reconstructed biography of John Aubrey, the father of biography, is really a good idea (Scurr 2015). One surely has to be a little worried about what has happened to the critical process of writing when reviewers praise a work because the author has become the subject's friend (with the implication that the reader can also be Aubrey's friend).<sup>2</sup> This may be one logical conclusion of Stephen Greenblatt's stated desire that he wished

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the two anonymous readers for the journal who pointed out some errors and made useful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> 'She describes him in her acknowledgements as a "wonderful friend", but *John Aubrey: My Own Life* makes it abundantly clear that she has been a wonderful friend to him, too' (Hay 2015, <<http://goo.gl/Ic4sHf>>, accessed 23 March 2015); 'Scurr allows us to feel we are in Aubrey's company, which is a generous gift indeed' (Harris 2015, <<http://goo.gl/KNWUKg>>, accessed 23 March 2015).

to speak with the dead, but it is surely not quite what Greenblatt meant or intended and is a popularising – and rather dangerous – extrapolation of one strand in biographical writing. Given the class-ridden nature of past English society, it is problematic to imagine that an ordinary modern reader could easily be the friend of Georgina, Duchess of Devonshire, Thomas Cranmer, or Aphra Behn. Moreover, should we even want to be friends with such people? Shouldn't we have enough of our own anyway? And surely learning about the past is more useful than empathising with it.

Imagining and reconstructing the past in terms of a series of people who seem to be like the people who we know and recognise is a common and deep-seated problem. It is comforting to think that we can effortlessly glide from our living room where we are reading to the adjacent rooms of the past but really a dangerous fallacy. The past is not a warm, comfortable place full of our friends, but another country entirely in which people did things differently. The problem becomes especially acute when we turn to Shakespeare and the vexed issue of his biography and its relationship to his writing. Shakespeare has been the subject of more biographies than any other writer even though there is not a great deal of information that survives about his life for us to reconstruct it easily. There are legal records, a fragment of his handwriting, birth and death records, and clearly a large circle of people who stand as witnesses to Shakespeare as actor, writer and Stratford burgher (Edmondson and Wells 2016). But the absence of personal letters – something that should really not surprise anyone who works on early modern England – means that there will always be a complicated and unsatisfactory link between the life and the writing, one that leaves matters open for speculation, informed, misinformed and deluded.

The real problem may be the need to have a life that we can hold onto as a means of anchoring the work in a real person. The process began in the eighteenth century as Shakespeare's already rising star grew to obscure all others (Taylor 1991). More and more pieces of information were collected in a variety of forms and all manner of ways until there was no clear distinction between known knowns, unknown knowns and known unknowns (Schoenbaum 1991, 1992). Shakespeare's life was constructed in terms of who it was felt important that he should be rather than who he actually was or might have been. Until the twentieth century Shakespeare was most frequently imagined as an untutored genius, a feature of his life and works that was regretted throughout the eighteenth century and seen as a limitation of his achievement, and celebrated throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth. This change should give pause for thought to all those writers, critics and enthusiasts who wish to see Shakespeare as their friend, especially because now the question often asked is whether a man who did not go to university could have written such erudite and well-informed works.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I owe this point to many fruitful discussions with Neil Rhodes.

Even so, probably the most influential critical work of the post-war period was Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), a rare case of a critical work which directly influenced stage and screen productions of Shakespeare when it was adopted by Peter Brook, for his versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970) and *King Lear* (1972). Kott's work still has much to recommend it but it runs the familiar risk of imaging that Shakespeare was really one of us in his prediction of the bleak ills of the Holocaust and understanding of the bestial sexuality that lay beneath every romantic illusion. Biographies similarly flirt with danger in closing down the gap between present and past. Anthony Holden's popular work (2000), for example, casts Shakespeare in the familiar role of man of the people, a good-natured boozy heterosexual who had no time for academic pretensions; Katherine Duncan-Jones' interesting work (2001), based on the known evidence, risked making Shakespeare into a modern cynic, motivated by the desire for gain through his shareholding and grain hoarding.

There are a number of issues that we need to consider when thinking about Shakespeare's life and its relationship to his works, issues that are far from unique but which assume a particular importance in Shakespeare's case given his pre-eminent cultural status and the level of interference and noise that such fame inevitably generates. Claims that Shakespeare is not the man/writer who people assume they know almost always cause irritation and distress because the ingrained assumption is that understanding the works serves to define the individual's identity. The first issue is to ask whether we can imagine writing drama in late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century England is a similar process to writing now. More Shakespeare plays are now assumed to be co-authored than ever, making the first folio of 1623 an unreliable guide as a record of his authorship even as it was a sign of his success and the recognition Shakespeare achieved in his lifetime because jointly-written works were attributed to Shakespeare (Vickers 2002). It is worth reminding ourselves at this stage just how many of his works appear to have been co-written.

Shakespeare wrote or co-wrote forty plays.<sup>4</sup> Of these, the following are now, at a conservative estimate, generally assumed to be jointly-authored: 1-3 *Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Sir Thomas More*, *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, *Pericles*, *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and two more, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *King John*, have very close relationships to other plays of similar titles, which means that one or other version was revised from existing

<sup>4</sup> The figure can be disputed. I am including the lost *Cardenio* (but not *Love's Labour's Won*); *Sir Thomas More*; and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, but no possible apocryphal works such as *Edward III* or *A Yorkshire Tragedy*. It does need to be noted that some of these apocryphal plays must surely bear traces of Shakespeare's work which only serves to make my point more secure.

material.<sup>5</sup> Put another way, ten out of forty plays were created in co-operation with other writers: 25% of Shakespeare's dramatic career, quite possibly rather more, evidence which has informed important recent critical work. As Bart Van Es has argued in a major study (2013), what makes Shakespeare special and unique is the fact that he is always in company, working as part of a busy collaborative playhouse, his co-operation with other writers simply one part of his interaction with others who helped stage plays. Shakespeare was a central figure in a theatrical company where he was a shareholder; he collaborated with other writers; and he clearly also worked with actors for whom he wrote different parts and adapted his plays to suit their acting styles and preferences. As Van Es points out, the departure of the chief clown of The Chamberlain's Men, Will Kemp, for unknown reasons in 1599, and his replacement by Robert Armin transformed the nature of the plays that Shakespeare wrote and signalled a change in the company's policy and style of production. Actors obviously played a role in determining not just the parts they played but the nature of those parts, which suggests that, although it may be impossible to reconstruct the exact nature of the process, actors helped compose the drama in which they performed.

The point is that we do not really know how people wrote in early modern England, but we do know that they would have had little opportunity to write in isolation. Writing was undoubtedly a more co-operative activity than it later became when it was possible to have a room on one's own. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), was exceptionally astute in signalling the lack of private space as the central issue for writers in early modern England but her assumption that it was only women who did not have access to places where they could easily compose is probably slightly wide of the mark. The truth is that very few people had access to private space and one of the main aspects of early modern life that most people today would find most strange, alien and, probably, troubling, is the lack of privacy and the need to spend most parts of most days in the company of others (Orlin 2007). The advent of efficient chimneys with more than one flue enabled rooms to be heated from a single source and made it possible to divide houses up into smaller rooms. People could have some measure of privacy and house design changed to something more recognisably modern from the traditional medieval pattern of a large hall heated from a central fire – with smoke escaping through the thatched roof – the relatively open plan bedrooms situated on the second storey. There were concomitant advances in the technology of glass making which also made it easier to have individual rooms for different members of the household. Lighting became more efficient and cheaper which further increased the possibility of working alone. In early modern London the stark choice was between expensive

<sup>5</sup> On this last point see Clare 2014, 1-2.

wax candles and cheap but noxious ones made of tallow. It is reasonable to assume that anyone writing in the dark evenings was working surrounded by people either in a central area of a large house, or in a tavern.

It is at least arguable that such technological changes had as significant an impact on the history of writing and literature as more intellectual factors. In early modern England people were in company most of the time, whether they lived in towns or cities or in the country. The sheer volume of work in early modern England further meant that people simply had to co-operate and it is hard to imagine that producing plays for the theatre was any different from running a household. The problem with our fundamental assumption about literary writing, Shakespeare being perhaps the most important example, is that we think of an individual authoring a work even as we acknowledge that such a model does not really fit the known facts. Put another way, a post-romantic notion of authorship is imported backwards into a time when work and writing – especially writing for the theatre – was much more obviously collaborative than it has subsequently become.

What is especially confusing is that things changed rapidly even during the short period – just over twenty years – that constitutes Shakespeare's writing career. The first commercial theatre in England, the Red Lion, was built in Whitechapel in 1567, twenty years before Shakespeare began writing. Theatre only really seems to have become a mass pastime in London in the 1580s. Towards the end of Elizabeth's reign more theatres were built – two existed prior to 1580, two more were built in the 1580s and six in the 1590s – and by James' reign there were very different types of playhouses staging different types of plays in a variety of spaces. Plays were only printed in any numbers in the mid-1590s and it took some years before they were commonly attributed to specific authors, obviously a response to market forces as readers started to buy works by particular authors (Erne 2003). It is likely that some works which we now know to be collaborative – such as the three *Henry VI* plays, *Timon of Athens* and *Henry VIII* in the first folio – were attributed to one author because of his particular fame when they were published.

Publishing a play in 1616 was a far cry from publishing one in 1590. Printing had become more sophisticated and techniques more advanced (roman type was now used more than the old-fashioned English black letter); paper was starting to become slightly cheaper; more books were produced; and the market for print was expanding (Barnard and McKenzie 2002). The printed book appears to have helped facilitate the development of a more individualistic culture in which a particular work was associated with a specific author (Eisenstein 1979, I, ch. 2). Furthermore, developments in the technique, cost and culture of portrait painting meant that it was far easier and more socially acceptable to produce portraits of the 'middling sort' – which included writers and playwrights – in the second half of James' reign than it had been during Elizabeth's. Accordingly, there was

a significant rise in ‘citizen portraiture’, enabling us to put faces to names and actually see what many Jacobean people looked like (Cooper 2012). There are hardly any portraits of non-aristocratic major Elizabethan writers apart from woodcuts in books – we do not know what Edmund Spenser, Thomas Nashe, Gabriel Harvey, or Barnabe Googe, looked like – but there are a wealth of portraits of writers of the next generation: Ben Jonson, John Fletcher, John Donne, and, of course, William Shakespeare (Cooper and Hadfield 2013). When literary historians looked back from the eighteenth century eager to assemble a series of images of authors to accompany editions of their works they were often bemused that none seemed to exist for those in Elizabethan England and so found possible likenesses, invariably optimistically matching writers and pictures, as was the case with Edmund Spenser. Changes that had been dramatic and pronounced around 1600 were no longer visible to later readers.

The end of Shakespeare’s career, therefore, bears little resemblance to the start. The theatre was now big business; playhouses were a staple form of entertainment for many Londoners; and authors were more celebrated and powerful and had an independent existence in print and were not necessarily as dependent on patrons as they once had been but had a more direct relationship with readers and audiences. A vital and vibrant period of collaborative authorship was coming to an end, one that did not always leave distinct traces of what had happened for later generations to reconstruct the culture out of which such writing and performing emerged.

We need to bear these factors in mind when we consider Shakespeare’s career or his role as the pivotal figure in English literary history. Harold Bloom claimed in 1998, somewhat hyperbolically, that Shakespeare actually invented the human. But, as with Virginia Woolf’s argument that privacy prevented women from becoming significant writers, there is a serious point that needs to be considered. Shakespeare became the pre-eminent figure in English literature in large part because he created characters that seemed to encapsulate the ways in which people wanted to understand literature as it was transformed from a predominantly rhetorically-based art to one based on ideas of the self. Shakespeare, being the genius who had created King Lear, Richard III, Falstaff and Hamlet, had to have a particular personality, he had to be a character like the ones that he had created. Although not enough evidence remained, a life had to be produced, which is the main reason why, just as portraits had to be found to show what writers looked like, anecdotes and vignettes had to appear to provide the author with the personality that the characters he had created possessed. It is no accident that the famous stories of the juvenile deer stealing from Sir Thomas Lucy’s estate, and Shakespeare’s sexual contest with Richard Burbage when he beds the actress instead of the leading actor with the taunt, ‘William the Conqueror came before Richard III’, date from the same period that faces were put to the names of writers.

History and fiction have always had a close relationship – which is not to suggest that they are the same and can or should be equated. The reception of Shakespeare's work has been intimately bound up with his perceived/imagined character in a symbiotic relationship. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that *Hamlet*, his most famous character, has often been seen as the key to unlocking the mysteries of Shakespeare's mind.<sup>6</sup> A belief that *Hamlet* is a key play in Shakespeare's oeuvre is something that connects both Shakespeare scholars and Shakespeare authorship enthusiasts.<sup>7</sup> As James Shapiro (2010) has argued, such links should not surprise us because the establishment of modern literary critical ideas in the nineteenth century was founded on the assumption that understanding an author's works enabled the reader to understand his or her character. The authorship question is the *doppelgänger* of the traditional literary establishment.

The central irony of this history of literature and criticism is that the conditions under which the works of Shakespeare appeared have been obscured from view. Shakespeare's writing life has not so much been distorted as inverted or even obliterated. We are still beset with images of the solitary Shakespeare in his garret, virtually blank paper on his desk, searching for inspiration. The most potent example of this is probably that of Joseph Fiennes as the young Shakespeare, desperately trying to finish a play in John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), a frequently reproduced image, notably on the cover of Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells' *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* (2013). One should probably not be too critical of such a cunningly knowing script which made so many jokes at the expense of common beliefs about Shakespeare and his world, flattering and mocking its audience at the same time. Shakespeare's play is called 'Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter' until he falls in love with Viola De Lesseps and his personal experience transforms the play into *Romeo and Juliet*, cleverly mirroring what happens to Romeo in Shakespeare's play when he abandons Rosaline for Juliet and consequently improves the nature of his verse (see below). It is Viola who understands the beauty of the poet's writing and who manages to persuade him that plays should not concentrate on fight scenes and dog jokes. Moreover, we should note that it is in company that John Madden's Shakespeare finds his inspiration and transforms himself into Shakespeare.

Even so, Shakespeare is represented as a man we might well know and who we are undoubtedly supposed to like: he is a slightly confused youth, ambitious but also eager to please, and his undoubted literary talent lacks focus until he finds the right vehicle for his desire for love and writing. He is governed by passions which he struggles to contain and which simultaneously

<sup>6</sup> For the history, see Foakes 1993.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Beauclerk 2010.

advance and hinder his literary progress. Shakespeare is shown to be both everyman and a poetic genius, ambitious but surprised by the nature of his talent; and, despite more nuanced versions of his character, especially works that pay attention to the collaborative nature of writing for the theatre, this is probably the principal way he has been characterised since the eighteenth century, especially in popular culture.<sup>8</sup> For all its surface brilliance and smart plotting, *Shakespeare in Love* reproduces a very familiar version of the Shakespeare story. Shakespeare narrates the stories of characters who are true to life and it is in the light of these that we should read his own personality. Shakespeare, more than any philosopher or psychologist, is one of us who somehow manages to show us who we are, which is the peculiar nature of his genius and why he is the most famous author in the world. He is so pre-eminent that he is a mystery (one reason why his authorship is often questioned), and our friend, a normal bloke. We might want to have a beer with Ben Jonson or Christopher Marlowe, but we would discuss them afterwards with William Shakespeare.

This version of history/literary history has the plays emerging *ex nihilo* rather than out of a context, a convenient belief that makes more extensive analysis often seem like ungenerous carping. But, as many recent studies have pointed out, Shakespeare looks like many other dramatists in the early 1590s and only becomes Shakespeare later in that decade. Why? First the issue of his stake in the Globe as a shareholder needs to be considered, a transformation of Shakespeare's status as a writer that gave him control over his plays and direct dealings with actors, enabling him to change the nature of his plays, and having to change the nature of his plays through direct interaction with the stage (Shapiro 2006, chs. 6-8). The forces that shaped Shakespeare's career directed him towards the creation of character as the most notable feature of his drama. Indeed, Shakespeare's plays show a remarkable interest in character, one that is later rivalled by Webster and Middleton, who probably had the best claim to be Shakespeare's literary heirs (Neill 2008, 23-27). Shakespeare's predecessors, Kyd and Marlowe, were more interested in rhetoric, argument and plot than character. Most importantly, his most significant rival as a playwright, Ben Jonson, created a series of clever moral and satirical plays and developed the comedy of humours. Shakespeare's romantic comedies, as has long been recognised, were staged as conscious rivals to Jonson's comedies, theatre companies trying to establish distinct identities in order to attract theatre-goers by making the public aware of what they had to offer (Harbage 1952; Bednarz 2001).

Shakespeare's literary achievement was shaped by his interaction with other writers and other companies, producing his plays and poetry as part of a wider literary culture. It is not immediately obvious but *As You Like It*

<sup>8</sup> For a nuanced assessment of Shakespeare's individuality see Knapp 2007.

(1599-1600) and *Twelfth Night* (1601-1602) probably owe much to Ben Jonson's *Every Man In His Humour* (1598) and *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599). Shakespeare's plays are shape-shifting comedies that make significant play with the gender identities of the actors and characters so that we witness a male actor pretending to be a woman character who pretends to be a man in both plays. This important plot device stands as a pointed contrast to the significance of caricature in Jonson's plays and the stress placed upon the unchanging identity of the characters in his satirical comedy. Jacques in *As You Like It* has been given a name that appears to signal sophistication through its Frenchness. But it would also have sounded like Jakes (privy) reminding theatre-goers of a more basic requirement/problem of the playhouses, the difficulty of relieving oneself (Partridge 2009, 165). The bathetic contrast high and low status mirrors the names of Jonson's character and the plots of his plays. More significantly, Jacques' melancholy humour and disaffection throughout *As You Like It* would have reminded the audience of what they would have witnessed on Jonson's stages, most notably in the character's most famous speech:

All the world's a stage,  
 And all the men and women merely players:  
 They have their exits and their entrances  
 And one man in his time plays many parts,  
 His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
 Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;  
 And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel  
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
 Unwillingly to school; and then the lover,  
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
 Made to his mistress' eyebrow; then a soldier,  
 Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,  
 Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
 Seeking the bubble 'reputation'  
 Even in the cannon's mouth; and then the justice,  
 In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
 Full of wise saws and modern instances -  
 And so he plays his part; the sixth age shifts  
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
 For his shrunk shank - and his big manly voice,  
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
 And whistles in his sound; last scene of all,  
 That ends this strange eventful history  
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (1.7.139-166)

The speech is frequently reproduced as if it were meant to be read as a piece of profound wisdom about the human condition, perhaps slightly whimsical, but nevertheless full of the bard's insights about the basic nature of life. But the comparison in the opening sentence to acting, with men and women cast as merely players, should alert us to the more satirical purpose of Jacques' words. Jacques is suffering from an excess of black bile, which in humoral theory causes introspection, an excessively rational approach to life and detachment from one's fellow humans: i.e., melancholy. What Jacques says may be true but his words have a particular cause and similar sentiments could have been witnessed at *The Curtain* as Jonson's early plays appeared on stage. At one level *Every Man in His Humour* works as a tutorial on humoral theory outlining the absurdities of each character's views when in the grip of a particular humour. Stephano, a country simpleton, tells Matheo, another fool who dabbles in poetry, that he is seized by melancholy, which Matheo explains may well be to his advantage:

*Steph.* Ay, truly, sir, I am mightily given to melancholy.

*Math.* Oh Lord, sir, it's your only best humour, sir. Your true melancholy breeds your perfect fine wit, sir. I am melancholy myself divers times, sir, and then do I no more but take pen and paper presently, and write you your half score or a dozen of sonnets at a sitting. (2.3.64-68)

Shakespeare is calling his rival's bluff in writing melancholy literature parodying Jonson's work. Jonson wants to sneer at the poor literature produced by fools who know that melancholy is the poetic temperament and so imagine that by simply thinking they are melancholy they will be able to write good poetry. In Jacques' lines Shakespeare is showing that he can actually write good poetry, imitating the sort of poetry that melancholy poets produce, enabling his discerning audience to laugh at melancholy fools, humoral plays, and to enjoy his fine words all at once.

Shakespeare's varied career as a poet and playwright shows him to have been always keenly aware of what his rivals were doing.<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare's sonnets are hard to date with any precision and it is not known whether they can really be read as a carefully designed sequence. They may have been written in the 1590s or in the early 1600s nearer their publication date of 1609. What is clear, however, is that they are written with an acute understanding of other sonnet sequences. The genre had been inaugurated by Sir Philip Sidney's narrative of thwarted passion, *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), the story of the star-gazer's love for the star who had once nearly been his but who now made another man rich: at one level an easily decodable version of Sidney's

<sup>9</sup> On Shakespeare's career, see Cheney 2008.

own life and the plans that were made for him to marry Penelope Devereux. *Astrophil and Stella* tells the tale of a desire that becomes ever more adulterous until the woman, perhaps more out of duty than conviction, repels his attempts on her married honour. Sidney's sequence led to a host of similar literary works by other writers, the most important of which were Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), which celebrate through an elaborate series of literary, religious and numerological features his courtship and marriage of his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle, and end with the *Epithalamion*, the first marriage hymn that celebrates the poet's own marriage written in English; and Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621), the work of Sidney's cousin, who transformed the poetry of her long dead uncle into a lament for the hypocritical treatment of women in love.

Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, like those of Spenser and Wroth, are alive to the possibilities of poetry as well as love and sexuality. While Spenser transforms Sidney's sequence into an autobiographical account of his own marriage, in doing so showing how Sidney's pre-eminent status as a poet had now passed on to him, Shakespeare cunningly tries to outdo both poets. He first tells of his homosexual passion for a younger man, then for a mysterious dark lady, and then has the two of them making love behind his back:

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,  
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:  
The better angel is a man right fair;  
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.  
To win me soon to hell, my female evil  
Tempteth my better angel from my side,  
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,  
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.  
And whether that my angel be turned fiend  
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell,  
But being both from me, both to each friend,  
I guess one angel in another's hell.

Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,  
Till my bad angel fire my good one out. (sonnet 144)

The sonnets may well have a basis in Shakespeare's experience as Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (2004) argue. But surely the main thrust of this poem is literary, an attempt to show that whatever the major poets of the time had done he (Shakespeare) could do better.

Shakespeare was certainly eager to have his skill as a poet recognised, and a strong case can be made that he was as keen to be acknowledged as a poet as he was as a dramatist and might well have continued his career had circumstances not dictated that it was easier to make money as a shareholder in a theatre company than as a poet. In *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), the

work that announced his arrival as a major poet, Edmund Spenser's alter ego, Colin Clout, is in love with a mysterious young woman, Rosalind. Although she is discussed at considerable length by the shepherds in the eclogues, she never appears in the poem. Instead, she inspires a number of the songs and lyrics in a work designed to show off its author's impressive command of English verse forms and styles.

By the time that Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* (c.1595, published in the first quarto, 1597), Spenser had emerged as the dominant English poet of the 1590s, with the publication of the first part of *The Faerie Queene* (1590). In Shakespeare's play Romeo is in love with a young woman, Rosaline, who, like Spenser's lady, does not appear on stage. Romeo is first seen praising her beauty in the hackneyed oppositions of stock Petrarchan conceits:

Alas that Love whose view is muffled still,  
Should, without eyes, see pathways to his will!  
Where shall we dine? O me! What fray was here?  
Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all:  
Here's much to do with hate, but more with love:  
Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,  
O any thing of nothing first create!  
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,  
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms,  
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,  
Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!  
This love feel I, that feel no love in this.  
Dost thou not laugh? (1.1.162-174)

Only in the next scene do we learn that the lady who has caused such suffering for Romeo is called Rosaline. Given the unusual nature of the name, employed in literature only by Spenser and, after him, his schoolfellow Thomas Lodge in the prose romance that served as the principal source for *As You Like It*, Shakespeare was surely making a deliberate reference to Spenser. Furthermore, Shakespeare ensures that we do not miss the significance of the name. The exchange between Romeo and Friar Laurence in 2.3 forcefully reminds the audience that the absent Rosalind no longer features in Romeo's plans. When asked by the friar, 'wast thou with Rosaline?' (44), Romeo replies 'I have forgot that name, and that name's woe' (46), only for the friar to express surprise and ask Romeo again in the next speech, 'What a change is here! / Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear, / So soon forsaken?' (65-67). Romeo claims that he has now forgotten Rosalind but her name is repeated six times in thirty-seven lines in this exchange (44-81). He may be trying to forget her but the audience is forced to remember her.

There is a vast difference between the hackneyed poetry that Romeo utters at the start of the play and the inspired verse that he produces after he

has met Juliet. In calling attention to that difference, Shakespeare relies on a standard joke in Elizabethan times (exploited in parodic works such as Sir John Davies' *Gulling Sonnets* [c.1594]), that the tired, unimaginative Petrarchan conceit was the antithesis, as the lover protested that he burned in ice and froze in fire. This is exactly what Romeo states in a variety of forms in his praise of Rosaline, so that she could be any lady and he any lover imagining that he can write poetry. In fact, the twelve lines that Romeo produces in praise of Rosaline can be read as a rather half-hearted sonnet, with botched rhyme schemes, and broken off before the end with no proper concluding couplet. As soon as he meets Juliet the couple point the way towards their impassioned relationship by producing a perfect Italianate (Petrarchan) sonnet, each speaking alternate lines:

*Romeo* [*To Juliet*]. If I profane with my unworthing hand  
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this,  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

*Juliet*. Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotion shows in this,  
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,  
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

*Romeo*. Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

*Juliet*. Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

*Romeo*. O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do:  
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

*Juliet*. Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

*Romeo*. Then move not while my prayer's effect I take. (1.5.92-105)

This sonnet (by contrast to the first, botched one) is a literary tour de force, showing that Shakespeare could write dialogue that was as sophisticated as the best poetry produced by the finest living English poets. The interlaced rhyme scheme, abab cbc b cd cd ee, sees the lovers produce two quatrains that echo each others' rhymes, as well as produce new ones alternately to produce the octave dextrously interweave their lines in the sestet, ending with alternate rhymes for the concluding Shakespearean couplet. The subject matter of the poem is daringly blasphemous, comparing their forbidden love to the holy devotions of a pilgrim, and arguing, sophistically, that as a pilgrim touches the body, shrine or statue of a saint as a means of communicating with the almighty, so should their lips kiss as a similar form of loving devotion. The theme is apposite for daring young lovers, especially those whose union is expressly forbidden, and shows them aware that their passion is pushing new boundaries. It is also appropriate for Shakespeare the poet, showing that he too can take risks in a play and pull them off, eclipsing the achievements of rival playwrights and making a case for his pre-eminence as a poet.

If we want to understand Shakespeare we need to take his literary work seriously. In this obvious way biography and literary output cannot be separated. What we should not do is rely on a post-romantic understanding of literary authorship in order to unlock the secrets of Shakespeare's life and art. Rather, we need to think carefully about how he did produce his work, an enterprise that will of necessity require us to try to understand how he wrote. Shakespeare was an intermittent collaborator in his writing – he worked with other writers at the start and end of his career and on his own in between – but was clearly keen to work with others in the playhouse. He was also a writer who always had one eye on what his rival poets were doing, and was happy to absorb and use their ideas and writing when it suited him, but also assert his own status as a writer when necessary. Our current understanding of literature as a collaborative act serves more to bring Shakespeare the writer to life than to make his literary persona disintegrate. It is a wonderful irony of literary history that the conditions that helped Shakespeare to create the array of characters that have become the main focus of his literary identity have been obscured in part because of the very success of Shakespeare's mode of writing. We do not have a great enough distance between fiction and reality when we imagine people of times past, a conflation that has obscured Shakespeare's real identity beneath his literary one. I would dearly like to understand Shakespeare better; but I don't think we'll ever really be friends.

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