



Introduction

Shakespeare and ‘the Personal Story’

Katherine Scheil and Graham Holderness

It seems to be a kind of respect due to the memory of excellent men, especially of those whom their wit and learning have made famous, to deliver some account of themselves, as well as their works, to Posterity. For this reason, how fond do we see some people of discovering any little personal story of the great men of Antiquity, their families, the common accidents of their lives, and even their shape, make, and features have been the subject of critical enquiries. How trifling soever this Curiosity may seem to be, it is certainly very natural; and we are hardly satisfy'd with an account of any remarkable person, 'till we have heard him describ'd even to the very cloaths he wears. (Nicholas Rowe, 1709)

Thus Shakespeare biography was born. Out of the ‘respect due to the memory of excellent men’ arises a ‘Curiosity’ regarding the ‘personal story’. Since the publication of Rowe's *Account* in 1709, hundreds of biographies and imaginative works have appeared, from a single year in Shakespeare's life (1599) to a novelization of Shakespeare's dog.¹

From Rowe to Shapiro, innumerable Lives of Shakespeare have been written, by scholars and academics, by professional novelists and biographers, and by creative writers. All are in quest of the same ‘personal story’, but they tell it in different ways. Scholars typically approach the life on the basis of an extensive knowledge of the actual textual works and their critical literature; of Renaissance history, local and national; of the Tudor and Stuart theatre; and of Shakespeare's many afterlives, in drama, criticism, film, and the broader culture.

Notes for this section can be found on page 6.

The works precede the life, and it is the works that speak of the man. Professional biographers have a more difficult task, since the confessional material that is their stock-in-trade is virtually absent: there are no letters, diaries, or directly reported conversations; no testimonies from family, friends, and neighbours about 'the common accidents' of Shakespeare's life. Biographers depend on the same materials as scholars, but typically seek to supplement these by what scholarship would regard as unlicensed imaginative speculation. Creative writers give free reign to the imagination, and produce, out of the raw biographical facts and the mysterious connections between life and works, overtly fictional biographies that nonetheless demonstrate a surprising plausibility, and exercise a curious compulsion over the popular imagination. Here the 'personal story' tends to align with the impersonal patterns of myth and legend.

Scholar, biographer, and creative writer all seek to define the individuality of Shakespeare as author, and as child, young man, lover, husband, father, businessman, and so forth. But all are constrained by a lack of personal data. We know when and where Shakespeare was baptized, who his parents and siblings were, whom he married and when, how many children he had and when they died. We know about his success as a writer and much about his professional career. We know about his property dealings and the contents of his will. But we do not know exactly when he was born; where, when, or even if he went to school; what he was like as a child; if his family was very poor, or reasonably well off. We do not know if he worked for his father as a young man, or did something else; what happened to him in the 'lost years' 1585–1592; how he became an actor and writer; if he stayed in London to keep away from his family in Stratford. We do not know exactly when he died, or what he died from. We don't know for sure if he had to get married; if he loved his wife; if he ever lived anywhere but Stratford and London; if he had relations with other women, or men; if he was religious, and if so of what persuasion; if he loved his children; how much he cared about his writing. We know nothing for certain about the relation between his writing and his life. We do not know what he believed in; what he cared about; what he thought about anything at all.

Shakespeare scholars since Edmund Malone have tried to construct a biography based on the historical evidence, and to explore links between the man and his works. There is of course massively more information about the latter than the former, but the two are

notoriously difficult to connect. While Shakespeare the public man is ubiquitously visible, Shakespeare the private man remains largely mysterious and unfathomable. 'Every attempt to write a life for Shakespeare again embroiders fact and tradition into a speculative composition that is, at least, partly fictional.'²

Notwithstanding, in the last few decades there has been an explosion of interest in the life of Shakespeare: according to Anne Barton's count, at least one formal biography of Shakespeare has appeared every year since 1996. Popular interest in the Bard's life, based on his massive literary achievement, but focusing on the more romantic or salacious possibilities of his personal life, also shows no sign of abating. Since Rowe collected stories about Shakespeare's youthful misdemeanours, there has been an inexhaustible public appetite for such Shakespearean legend, culminating in the hugely successful 1998 film, Tom Stoppard and Marc Norman's Oscar-winning *Shakespeare in Love*, which explains *Romeo and Juliet* as the side effect of a love affair. From this popular mythology the lay observer could be forgiven for assuming as fact that Shakespeare had to get married and hated his wife, was gay lover to the Earl of Southampton, loved a Dark Lady who was probably a prostitute, and died of syphilis. None of this colourful material has any firm basis in history, but all of it has achieved 'a hold on popular affection that no argument can weaken'.³

The early decades of the twenty-first century have been a particularly fruitful period for Shakespearean biographies; interest in both popular and academic biographies continues to grow;⁴ and imaginative works about Shakespeare's life have flourished, in the form of novels, poems, plays, films, radio and television drama, and artworks, including Robert Nye's epistolary novel *Mrs. Shakespeare*, Grace Tiffany's novels *Will and My Father Had a Daughter*, Peter Whelan's play *The Herbal Bed*, Vern Thiessen's play *Shakespeare's Will*, William Boyd's film *Waste of Shame*, Tom Stoppard's *Shakespeare in Love*, and the television series *Upstart Crow* and *Slings and Arrows*.

Capitalizing on the analytical potential in this growing body of work, several of the essays in this issue were initially written for a seminar at the 2008 International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford, focusing on the various ways in which Shakespeare's life has been constructed, appropriated, and refigured in the last 300 years. Contributors consider what is at stake in the many 'texts' of Shakespeare's life in various historical periods, cultures, and contexts, and how Shakespearean biography relates to other cultural, literary, and political climates. The essays

in this issue take into account aspects of Shakespeare's life and the multifarious ways his story has been configured.

Just as the life materials of Shakespeare himself have provided a seemingly endless proliferation of biographical and fictional works, so too have the lives of those connected to Shakespeare. Robert Sawyer looks at how the relationship (and "rivalry") between Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe has been refigured over the last hundred years according to various critical and political climates, and how Marlowe has served a particular purpose in constructing versions of 'Shakespeare'. Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway does not escape the fictionalizing fervour; Katherine Scheil offers a paradigm for how Hathaway's life has been imagined along the lines of domesticity and sexuality, inspired by the problematic 'second best bed' phrase from Shakespeare's will. One of the key aspects of the personal story that has recently assumed new importance due to a resurgence of the 'Catholic Shakespeare' question, is religion. The topic of Shakespeare and religion is taken up by Sonja Fielitz, in her essay on the influence of Catholicism on Shakespeare.

In the second half of this volume, four biographers of Shakespeare reflect on the process of writing biography. Park Honan, Peter Holland, Lois Potter, and René Weis offer an insider's view about their own experiences as biographers, facing the challenge of creating a life for Shakespeare in the modern age.

Park Honan, the author of the well-respected biography *Shakespeare: A Life* (1998), posits several factors affecting the reception of literary biography, and the relationship between social history and life writing. The boundaries between biography and fiction seem a particularly fruitful area for analysis; as Honan points out, biography should be 'able to depict as much about life as works of fiction can'. Honan acknowledges that 'no rules govern the nature of biographical writing of course, so one makes up one's own rules'. With Shakespeare, the relationship between the literary works and the life is perhaps the central structural question for biographers to determine in crafting a life of Shakespeare. While Honan focuses mainly on the life details, he describes a 'romantic crush' on Shakespeare's plays that kept them in his mind while writing about Shakespeare's growth and development.

Peter Holland reflects on his long-standing connection with Shakespeare, from childhood trips to the theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, to his fascination with Samuel Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare's Lives* in graduate school, culminating with his monumental entry on Shake-

speare in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the longest entry in the collection. After writing a biography of Shakespeare, what's next, he ponders. The continuing interest in Shakespeare's life, most recently in the BBC tv sitcom *Upstart Crow*, can provide solace for the biographer who has already written the life.

Lois Potter offers insight into the challenge of being a biographer in the modern era of identity politics. As both the author of *The Life of William Shakespeare: A Critical Biography* (2010) and 'the biographer who had the least in common with Shakespeare', as she puts it, Potter resists linking her own story to Shakespeare's. In the end, however, she realized that her biography told 'the story of a competent professional like me rather than the exciting rebel' that appears in other biographies.

René Weis makes a case for the importance of Stratford-upon-Avon in Shakespeare's life, depicted in the 'detailed, house-by-house' reconstruction in his rich *Shakespeare Revealed: A Biography* (2008). Explaining the challenge of writing in the shadow of other biographers, Weis contemplates the conundrum biographers face when dealing with the surviving documents. Shakespeare's will, for example, would have been imagined by biographers, but 'not the version that has survived.' The works remain tantalizingly problematic in illustrating the life, as each biographer wrestles with 'the fluid boundaries between fact and fiction.'

To complete this representative sample of the work of scholars and biographers, we have included some examples of creative, fictional biography. Graham Holderness offers a 'second edition' of Nicholas Rowe's *Account*, which incorporates later anecdotes about Shakespeare and affirms the vitality and possibilities inherent in the life and afterlife of Shakespeare, thus beginning in scholarly biography, and ending in fiction. Concluding the volume we include Rowan Williams's play *Shakeshafte*, a piece of dramatic fiction which parallels the 'Catholic Shakespeare' work represented elsewhere in this book. Williams imagines a meeting between the young teacher and poet, and the great Jesuit missionary and martyr Edmund Campion, thus endorsing our claim that scholarship, biography and imaginative fiction all belong together in the study of Shakespeare's life.

Katherine Scheil is Professor of English at the University of Minnesota. Her publications include *The Taste of the Town: Shakespearian Comedy and the Early Eighteenth-Century Theater* (Bucknell, 2003), *Shakespeare/*

SHAKESPEARE AND BIOGRAPHY

Edited by Katherine Scheil and Graham Holderness

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Adaptation/Modern Drama (University of Toronto Press, 2011, co-edited with Randall Martin), *She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America* (Cornell, 2012), *Imagining Shakespeare's Wife: The Afterlife of Anne Hathaway* (Cambridge, 2018), and editor of *Shakespeare & Stratford* (Berghahn Books, 2019). She is working on a book about the history of women in Stratford-upon-Avon, as well as a book on the afterlife of the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

Graham Holderness is the author or editor of some 60 books of literary criticism, theory, scholarship and theology; 'creative criticism'; and creative writing in fiction, poetry and drama. Key critical works include *The Shakespeare Myth* (MUP, 1988) *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (Routledge, 1992); *Shakespeare: The Histories* (Bloomsbury, 2000) and *The Faith of William Shakespeare* (Lion Books, 2016). Works of creative criticism, which are half criticism and half fiction, include *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury/Arden Shakespeare, 2011); *Tales from Shakespeare: Creative Collisions* (Cambridge, 2014) and *Re-writing Jesus: Christ in 20th Century Fiction and Film* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He has published a poetry collection *Craeft: Poems from the Anglo-Saxon* (Beeston: Shoestring Press, 2001), and four works of fiction: *The Prince of Denmark* (University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001); *Ecce Homo* (Bloomsbury, 2014); *Black and Deep Desires: William Shakespeare Vampire Hunter* (Top Hat Books, 2015); and *Meat, Murder, Malfeasance, Medicine and Martyrdom: Smithfield Stories* (Brighton: EER, 2019).

Notes

1. Nicholas Rowe, *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear* (London, 1709), i-ii; James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); Leon Rooke, *Shakespeare's Dog* (Toronto: General Publishing Company, 1981).
2. Graham Holderness, *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (London: Continuum, 2011), 18-19.
3. Alice Fairfax-Lucy, *Charlecote and the Lucys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 5.
4. Anne Barton, 'The One and Only,' *The New York Review of Books* 53.8 (11 May 2006). As Barbara Everett has remarked, 'of Shakespearean biography in particular there has been a flood over the last few decades, good, bad and indifferent.' *TLS* 17 August 2007.