

1 The Shakespeare Paradox

Shakespeare is widely regarded not only as the world's supreme poet but also as its most ordinary. A prosaic man of the world, he apparently cared little for his own manuscripts, which are all missing, and even less for books in general, of which not one owned by him has ever been found. He penned no letters to family or friends, no prose works on contemporary events and no poems in memory of his dead son or in praise of his wife, daughters, friends or fellow writers. In fact, apart from six dubious signings, he left not a single word in his own hand. Nor did anyone ever report him as having said anything of any note. In terms of the life of the mind, he was truly William the Silent. Apart from acting, his everyday affairs were preoccupied with the mundane and mercenary externals of tax evasion, property ownership, money lending and selling corn and malt. Yet in the midst of this life so ordinary he is said to have written the world's greatest poetry and drama. He is, we might say, the most famous nonentity in history.

This paradoxical fusion of greatness and mediocrity has puzzled many observers, not least Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in his 1850 essay on Shakespeare simply could not 'marry' the man to the verse. "Other admirable men", he wrote, "have lived lives in some sort of keeping with their thought, but this man in wide contrast". And he continued: "that this man of men, he who gave to the science of mind a new and larger subject than had ever existed, and planted the standard of humanity some furlongs forward into Chaos – that he should not be wise for himself – it must go into the world's history, that the best poet lived an obscure and profane life, using his genius for the public amusement".

The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges penned a short reflection on Shakespeare which he called 'Everything and Nothing' (in the collection *Dreamtigers*, 1960). There was no one in him, he suggested, and behind his face and his words, which were copious, fantastic and stormy, there was

only a bit of coldness, a dream dreamt by no one. Like God, he was ‘many, and yet no one’, sacred and omnipresent, yet empty and non-existent, his selfhood only present in his work, which was acting as well as writing. “One morning he was suddenly gripped by the tedium and the terror of being so many kings who die by the sword and so many suffering lovers who converge, diverge and melodiously expire. That very day he arranged to sell his theatre. Within a week he had returned to his native village, where he recovered the trees and rivers of his childhood and did not relate them to the others his muse had celebrated, illustrious with mythological allusions and Latin terms. He had to be ‘someone’: he was a retired impresario who had made his fortune and concerned himself with loans, lawsuits and petty usury. It was in this character that he dictated the arid will and testament known to us, from which he deliberately excluded all traces of pathos or literature. His friends from London would visit his retreat and for them he would take up again his role as poet”.

Nor is this bardic denigration a recent phenomenon. It was present at the beginning. One of the first apparent references, in Greene’s *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592), seems to upbraid him as a ‘rude groom’ and one of the ‘peasants’ who plagiarised from the writings of more educated men like Greene himself – ‘an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers’. Ben Jonson is none too complimentary in appearing to tell us that ‘he wanted art’ (*Conversations with William Drummond*, 1619) and that he had ‘small Latin and less Greek’ (*The First Folio*, 1623). Thomas Fuller in *The Worthies of England* (1661) wrote that ‘his learning was very little’ and that he was, like Plautus, ‘never any scholar’. In 1663 Rev John Ward of Stratford noted that “I have heard that Mr Shakespeare was a natural wit, without any art at all”.

And so it continued in the 18th century. Alexander Pope aptly captured the paradox in his infamous couplet in the *Imitations of Horace* (1737):

“For gain, not glory, wing’d his roving flight

And grew immortal in his own despite”.

Shakespeare, he argues, was an unconscious genius who, having his eye fixed on profit, only cared for the stage because it promised an immediate financial reward, while he remained completely indifferent to the printed page, the form which was to guarantee his immortality. And to this day the notion that Shakespeare never showed the slightest interest in being a literary author remains the accepted view.

Some late 18th and 19th century writers did take a different view. Lamb, Coleridge and Swinburne, for example, regarded Shakespeare as a cultured literary superman who wrote for the study as well as the stage, but they were generally dismissed as ‘romantics’ in favour of the more ‘realistic’ conception of the professional playwright, actor and theatre manager.

19th century biographers did not hesitate to ram the same point home. Take two classic works. In his *Outlines* (1887), James Halliwell-Phillipps, who was looked upon as the greatest Shakespearean authority of the period, doubted whether there were more than two or three dozen books in the whole town of Stratford. He baldly states that whether Shakespeare ever owned a book at any time in his life is ‘exceedingly improbable’ and that he ‘wrote without effort, by inspiration not by design’ (p106). Later, Sir Sidney Lee in his *Life of William Shakespeare* (1898) writes that he was largely uninterested in his work beyond its ‘serving the prosaic end of providing for himself and his daughters’ (p279).

More recently, Stephen Greenblatt in an acclaimed biography *Will in the World* (2004) portrays him as essentially a folk artist, whose life and work are ‘a triumph of the everyday’ and who wrote “as if he thought that there were more interesting things in life to do than write plays”. In the final pages he mentions a letter by Machiavelli shortly after he had lost his position in Florence and had been

forcibly rusticated. He writes with disgust of the vulgar arguments and stupid games he was forced to watch at the local taverns. His only relief came in the evenings when he would take down from his shelves his beloved authors – Cicero, Livy, Tacitus – and feel that at last he had companions fit for his intellect. Greenblatt comments: “Nothing could be further from Shakespeare's sensibility. He never showed signs of boredom at the small talk, trivial pursuits and foolish games of ordinary people” (p.389). So the diminution is almost complete: Shakespeare was ultimately a mindless snapper-up of trifles – in short, an empty-headed bore.

This denigration plumbs the ultimate depths of banality in *Shakespeare: The Biography* (2005) by Peter Ackroyd, who strips the bard down to the level of the heretics' bare image of the 'country bumpkin'. He tells us that he didn't know what he was writing until he had written it and that he had no message, no opinions, no religious faith, no 'morality' in the conventional sense. “He is one of those rare cases of a writer whose work is singularly important and influential, yet whose personality was not considered to be of any interest at all. He is obscure and elusive precisely to the extent that nobody bothered to write about him” (p487).

So Shakespeare is literature's greatest mystery man and black hole. Indeed, because we know nothing about his private thoughts, we are free to read his mind as a bottomless pit of possibilities and contraries. Democrats have made him a democrat, aristocrats an aristocrat. Charlie Chaplin, son of a couple of music hall entertainers, thought he had 'an aristocratic attitude'. Harold Goddard, in *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, suggests, however, that “the genuine aristocrat, as Shakespeare never fails to see, is always a democrat at heart”. Yet E.K. Chambers refers to his 'easy movement in the give and take of social intercourse among persons of good breeding'. Even Marxists cannot agree. Aleksandr Smirnov views him as 'the humanist ideologist of the bourgeoisie'. And Brecht, too, saw him as a writer of emerging bourgeois individualism. For another German Marxist, Franz Mehring,

however, “Shakespeare was no poet of the court, still less of the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, he had his roots in a young and vigorous aristocracy, before which extended wide horizons, and which still remained the ruling class of a great people”.

Catholics have made him a Catholic and Protestants a Protestant, whereas the 19th century American lawyer and agnostic Robert Ingersoll extols him as a great infidel, ‘the sublimest man of the human race’, who deemed all religions ‘simple phases of human thought, or the lack of thought’. Similarly, R.M. Frye maintains that his plays are ‘pervasively secular’. The philosopher George Santayana actually entitles a book chapter ‘The absence of religion in Shakespeare’, where he argues that the references to religious beliefs and ideas are largely conventional, drawn from the society around him. According to Santayana, “he depicts life in all its richness and variety, but leaves that life without a setting and consequently without a meaning”. Yet, according to Peter Milward, in *Shakespeare’s Religious Background*, there is hardly a book in the Old or New Testament which is not represented at least by some chance word or phrase in one or other of the plays. He maintains that, despite their secular appearance, the plays often conceal a deep undercurrent of religious meaning.

Then again, perhaps Shakespeare was so highly endowed with what Keats called negative capability – “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” – that he eschewed all conviction on politics, morality or religion. Did he live gracefully and creatively within a permanent state of existential uncertainty about almost everything? Yet can he have been so untouched by contemporary events that he really had no views of his own on public issues such as the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, the Machiavellian scheming of the Cecils, the Elizabethan religious compromise, the Essex Rebellion, the Stuart succession, the pacifism of James I or the Gunpowder Plot?

And what kind of person was he? Yet again, opinions differ enormously. Simon Callow imagines that he was the kind of guy who goes to a party, nurses one glass, says nothing, and goes home with the prettiest girl in the room. Nicholas Rowe, writing in 1709, suggests that he was “a good-natured man, of great sweetness in his manners, and a most agreeable companion” – indeed, ‘sweet swan of Avon’, as Ben Jonson avers, or ‘sweet William’, as Michael Pennington titles a recent work. Or, on the contrary was he, to quote the title of a 2001 biography by Katherine Duncan-Jones, ‘ungentle Shakespeare’ – a rancorous skinflint who hoarded his wealth, dodged his taxes, left only his second-best bed to his wife, and gave nothing to the poor? In Edward Bond’s 1973 play *Bingo*, he is even depicted as a cold husband and a cruel father, haunted by the sense that his life has been worthless. While he was an unrivalled observer of the human condition, he wasn’t especially humane himself.

And what were the secrets of his private life? A.L. Rowse believes that Shakespeare was a full-blooded heterosexual and that his affection for the ‘fair youth’ in the Sonnets was entirely platonic. Germaine Greer, in her biography of *Shakespeare’s Wife* (2007), thinks that he consorted with London prostitutes and surmises that he died of syphilis. Sir Ian McKellen, however, has no doubt that he was gay and that he slept with men as well as women. Don Paterson, author of a recent commentary on the sonnets, writes: “the question: ‘was Shakespeare gay?’ strikes me as so daft as to be barely worth answering. Of course he was. Arguably he was bisexual, of sorts, but his heart was never on his straight side” (*Guardian*, 16th October 2010). On the other hand, Stephen Booth, in his 1978 commentary on the Sonnets, concludes that Shakespeare was ‘almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual’ – the works themselves provide us with no evidence on the matter.

How, then, is this curious Shakespeare riddle explained? Few answers are ever offered beyond vague references to the ‘mystery’ or ‘paradox’ of genius or ‘the unfathomable depths of the human personality’ – cabalistic phrases which save the trouble of thinking further on the matter. Of course, a paradox is actually an *apparent* contradiction and indeed I shall argue that the word is entirely appropriate here because most of the confusions and contradictions do not really exist at all. What sustains them is a collection of myths about Shakespeare, and if we unravel them we can better dispense with the paradox at the heart of the mystery. They include the notions that Shakespeare was an untutored and unconscious genius, that he wrote for the stage, not the page, that he wrote largely for money, that he had no serious religious, moral or political opinions of his own, and that his private life is absent from his works. All of these ideas are complete travesties of the truth, yet they clearly endure for reasons that will become apparent in this work. For the moment, it will suffice to say that they act as underpinnings for the most enduring myth of all.

Where do we find the evidence for this process of demythologisation? The answer lies not least in the works themselves. We shall follow the advice given at the beginning of the *First Folio*, first, by Ben Jonson in his short poem ‘To the Reader’ – “look not on his picture, but his booke” – and second, in the address ‘To the Great Variety of Readers’ signed by John Heminge and Henrie Condell – “Read him, therefore; and again, and again”. For people are made up of careers, knowledge, gifts and talents – and also of themselves. We should not think of Shakespeare as an exception, and indeed the works do tell us a great deal about the world’s greatest literary colossus.

Isaac Asimov once said that, properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived. Similarly, the Shakespeare works themselves are the best evidence for the truth about Shakespeare. If time’s glory does indeed unmask falsehood, then let the light of truth shine brightly on the immortal works and the mastermind behind them.