

‘Author! Author!’: Shakespeare and Biography

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“Are you the author of the plays of William Shakespeare?”

- *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden 1998)

In Lady Viola’s innocent inquiry, the plays precede the author, and Shakespeare stands in a secondary relation to the works he is known to have originated. The man Shakespeare is of prior interest to her on account of the poetry he has already written. The author derives from his work.

That is not to say, however, that for Lady Viola *l’auteur est mort*, or that he is reduced to a mere function of his text. Far from it: the film’s smooth postmodernist surface splits open to disclose a ‘romanticist fantasy of authorship’ (DiPietro 53) in which full-blooded experience drives artistic creation, and the author makes poetry out of love. Early in the film, close-up shots of Shakespeare’s hand, in the act of writing, effect a sophisticated literary joke, since he is merely trying out different spellings of his own name. Ultimately, though, inspired by love, the author’s life begins to spell out the language of art, and the hand that caresses the lady is the hand that writes the play. Shakespeare in love = *Romeo and Juliet*. Here the artist is very much alive, and art is an imitation of life.

The most prominent contemporary biographer of Shakespeare explicitly acknowledges an indebtedness to *Shakespeare in Love*. ‘The idea of *Will in the World*’, recalls Stephen Greenblatt, ‘originated ... during conversations I had with Marc Norman, who was then in the early stages of writing a film script about Shakespeare’s life’. (*Will* 15-16). Another biographer overtly refers to the film in describing his own method: ‘The Shakespeare who emerges from these pages’, writes James Shapiro, ‘is less a Shakespeare in Love than a Shakespeare at Work’. (xviii) Greenblatt and Shapiro are highly-respected Renaissance scholars, and *Shakespeare in Love*, though intelligent and sophisticated, is both anti-intellectual and resolutely populist. But the opportunity the film seems to have created, for them, is that of readmitting into cultural conversation the possibility of biography. The quest for the life that precedes the works has become again a legitimate object of inquiry. Once more we might hope to discover, in a phrase shared between Shapiro (xiii) and Greenblatt

(*Will*, sub-title), ‘how Shakespeare became “Shakespeare”’. And the question is clearly of general interest: since 1996, as Anne Barton observed (2006), at least one Shakespeare biography has been published every year.

Literary biography is a very well-established and popular form, with a long and distinguished history. But as a form biography is unusual in that, like historical study, it bases its investigations on documented facts, while its real objective, if it is to add anything to literary history and criticism, is to engage in exploring the artist’s inner life, ‘to discover the actual person’ (*Will* 12) behind the writing. Most biographies assume, as does *Shakespeare in Love*, that life shapes art. They ask the question: who was the man who wrote Shakespeare’s plays and poems? In this model, the author is sovereign, the originator and shaper of the writing, the driving imaginative force, the controlling artistic authority. The writer precedes the work. The writer is cause, writing the effect, and the literary biography should be able to delineate the character of the man who invested the works with that distinctive and unique quality of being.

But a biographer of Shakespeare, the actor and dramatist, might reasonably assume just the opposite principle, that the work precedes the writer, and that life is the product of art and artistry. There must be a text in the class before anyone can say anything about it, or about its author. The writer is an effect of the writing. Because the literary work is constructed in the act of reading, and in relation to the context in which it is read, ‘authorship’ is just one element of that process, and the primary link between the writer and the work is broken. What matters is not what the author meant by the words he/she wrote, but what we mean by them when we read them.

Most Shakespeare biographers are scholars who approach the life through the works, and the scholar of course knows better than anyone that ‘Shakespeare’ always comes first. In his biography *Shakespeare for All Time*, Stanley Wells seeks to offer a coherent ‘account of Shakespeare’s life, writings and afterlife’ (xviii). In that sentence the three components of literary biography are pragmatically lined up as if in chronological sequence, a chain of cause and effect. But the life is only accessible via the writing, which in turn cannot be read except in the context of the writing’s ‘afterlife’. Only a quarter of Wells’s book is directly addressed to the biography, while the rest deals with the writing and its afterlife. Throughout there is a

sense in which the three components relate to one another, as they must, in a complex and shifting triangulation.

Self-evidently there is much more of Shakespeare's work, in terms of texts, documentary evidence, commentary and critical analysis, than there is of his life. As for the life itself, the proper subject of biography, either very little is known, or a great deal, depending on whose account you are reading. The glass is half full and half empty by turns. When Nicholas Rowe set out to gather material for his *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear* (1709), there existed only a few anecdotes available in writings by Ben Jonson, Thomas Fuller, John Aubrey.¹ Rowe relied on a kind of oral history of Stratford tradition, drawing on Betterton's conversations with local people and their reminiscences. But all he managed to gather in the way of Shakespearean 'Remains' was an assortment of legendary and mythological archetypes – deer-poaching, writing the bitter ballad against Sir Thomas Lucy - all aptly but improbably illustrating the life of an unruly culture hero (see Holderness 136-7). According to Malone, Rowe mentioned only 11 facts about Shakespeare's life, and 8 of those were wrong.

Malone's own biography remained unfinished, his narrative stopping at the point where Shakespeare began writing plays, and its completion by James Boswell the younger took up the story at the point of Shakespeare's retirement to Stratford. Here the 'life' is a kind of residue that falls on either side of the works, which are left to speak silently for themselves in Malone's Shakespeare chronology. It was not until the 19th century that the Shakespeare biography as a 'life and works' continuum was fully formulated in the work of Edward Dowden, and standardised by Sir Sidney Lee's *Life of William Shakespeare* (1898).² Lee's book was mocked by Mark Twain in his essay 'Is Shakespeare Dead?' (1909), as comparable to an attempt to write a biography of Satan, about whom only 5 or 6 'facts' are with any certainty known. Twain argued that biographers of Shakespeare inevitably, in the absence of data, invest in conjecture and speculation to fill the empty space. Today Twain's objections have a very contemporary ring to them.

Most of the available 'facts' about Shakespeare's life were discovered and compiled by this great tradition of scholarly biographers, Malone, Dowden, Lee, E.K. Chambers. Between them they assembled and published the documentary sources on which any narrative of Shakespeare's life is based. Some sources came to light relatively recently, such as the

Bellott-Mountjoy papers found by Charles Wallace in 1909, papers documenting a minor legal case on which Charles Nicholls founded an entire book (2008).³ Other facts may yet be discovered. Later Shakespeare scholars have naturally exercised responsible caution in using these facts, and in making inferences from them. Samuel Schoenbaum criticised Sidney Lee's work for excessive liberty of imagination, and sought in his *Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975) to present the data in a neutral and positivistic way.

A shilling life, as Auden said, will give you all the facts (Shakespeare biographies cost a bit more nowadays), but is likely to omit what biography really wants most of all to know, the interior life, the secrets of the private man: what he believed, how he felt, whom he loved. Historical records, as Katherine Duncan-Jones admits, naturally tend to deal with social interactions of law and property:

Though surviving documents don't take us very far in answering the kind of questions that many post-Romantic readers may want to ask – did he love his wife? who was 'the dark lady'? what was his religious position, if any? or his overall vision of the world? - they do provide life records ranging from baptism to burial, with a good deal in between that is connected with his family, with property and with litigation.

(*Ungentle ix*)

Yet speculation has a role to play, according to Duncan-Jones, if the biographer is to make these dry bones live.⁴ While Schoenbaum was 'sensibly reluctant to speculate',

I quite often risk conjecture, in the hope of putting some spectral, or speculative flesh on those well-guarded bones. (*Ungentle x*)

Topics on which this biographer allows herself to speculate include Shakespeare's quest for gentility, his sexuality and his financial dealings, all of which she claims have been 'traditionally taboo' (xi) in Shakespearean biography. But this is to restrict the biographical field to the custody of those scholars who have, in addressing Shakespeare's life, shared Schoenbaum's 'reluctance to speculate'. Such topics are not only mainstream in Shakespeare criticism, they are also fundamental to biographical speculation of a more manifestly conjectural and imaginative kind - think only of Oscar Wilde, A.L Rowse, Joseph Pequigny, Anthony Burgess, Edward Bond – and of course also, in a different way, to those interested in the 'Shakespeare Authorship Question'.

The author of a scholarly biography typically encounters a certain embarrassment in the fact that biography is a popular rather than an academic form. High-street bookshops give far more space to biographies than to 'literary criticism', and the biographer cannot but be conscious that he or she is writing partly for a lay audience. At its worst, this pressure can oblige the biographer to present information that is well known to the scholarly community as matter of newly discovered fact, or to claim a hermeneutic expertise in the cracking of some hitherto impenetrable 'code'. At its best this popular form, in responsible hands, allows for a liberty of conjecture without which biography risks being little more than a 'shilling life'.

Duncan-Jones alludes to the 'Catholic Shakespeare' question, the resurgence of which has certainly helped to bring biography back into focus, since it inevitably deals with matters of private faith as well as literary works, historical documents and cultural history. Duncan-Jones is clearly sceptical about the Houghton will and John Shakespeare's *Spiritual Testament*: 'I have yet to be convinced that these documents have anything to tell us about Shakespeare'. (*Ungentle* xii) Biographers operating in the field of popular culture tend to be far less circumspect.⁵ Michael Wood's *In Search of Shakespeare* opens and closes with John Shakespeare's whitewashing of the Last Judgement in Stratford's Guild Chapel (9-14), and explicitly promotes a Catholic Shakespeare interpretation. This biography is the book of a television series, and TV notoriously requires of presenters the unsourced presentation of knowledge as previously unknown or undiscovered. Although it is a work of thorough historical scholarship, Wood's book has no notes, and discreetly conceals its substantial biography in a list of 'Further Reading', while the narrative itself reads like a realist novel, as if this is just the way it all happened, and the biographer just happens to know the story.

Claire Asquith's *Shadowplay* (2005) aligns itself with the popular fashion for codes - its subtitle is *The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* - though her methods of interpretation require no particular mystical expertise, and are by no means as original or as revelatory as she claims. In this book, Shakespeare's life and works are integrated into a narrative of Catholic persecution and resistance, which is familiar from a substantial body of recent historical work that has also been applied to the interpretation of Shakespeare's poems and plays, notably by Richard Wilson. And the Catholic Shakespeare question has always been naturally interested in secrecy and encoding. On the other hand, both Wood and Asquith have broken new ground (or at least turned over old ground) in making the biography form,

as distinct from critical interpretation of the works, the main vehicle for pursuing the Catholic Shakespeare claim.

Peter Ackroyd's *Shakespeare: the Biography* (2005), the work of a declared 'enthusiast rather than expert', is equally liberal with its opinions on biographical questions of personal belief and private faith, but produces a very different Shakespeare from the closet recusant of Asquith and Wood. Shakespeare was not an ideologue: 'Nothing in his life or career gives any reason to suggest that he chose a theme or story with any specific intention other than to entertain' (416). Or an aesthete: 'he did not have an aesthetic view of the drama at all, but a practical and empirical one' (458). He was devoid of empathy: 'his imagination was not violated by sentiment of any kind. He could even see himself without fellow feeling ...' (469). And he had no religion: 'he was a man without beliefs' (474). In his hollowness and impersonality this Shakespeare sounds, on the one hand, rather like the Shakespeare of Jorge Luis Borges' brilliant story '*Everything and Nothing*':

There was no-one inside him: behind his face ... there was no more than a slight chill, a dream someone had failed to dream. (319)

On the other hand, Ackroyd's Shakespeare distinctly resembles Ackroyd, who told an interviewer:

It's only recently that we've discovered that the artist's inner self is somehow more important than the public world. I'm happier to create exterior pieces for the world rather than to express something I deeply feel or wish to say. (Anthony n.p.)

Mon semblable: mon frere. Ackroyd finds his own reflection in the glass of history. Anthony Burgess also found such a glass in the Droeshout engraving:

Martin Droeshout's engraving...has never been greatly liked... The face is that of a commercial traveller growing bald in the service of an ungrateful firm. We need not repine at the lack of a satisfactory Shakespeare portrait. To see his face, we need only look in a mirror. He is ourselves, ordinary suffering humanity, fired by moderate ambitions, concerned with money, the victim of desire, all too mortal. To his back, like a hump, was strapped a miraculous but somehow irrelevant talent... We are all Will (Burgess 261).⁶

Biographers, perhaps even more than critics, seem to conduct their search for history, or reality, or truth in an environment strongly influenced by contemporary preferences and priorities. The 'historicist' question - what sort of man was Shakespeare? - lies close to the 'presentist' question - *what sort of man would we prefer Shakespeare to have been?* Agnes Heller called this attitude to the past 'nostalgia'. Her image is that of a well, into which we peer, and to the surface of which we seek to draw the elusive shapes of the past. Nostalgia 'cannot resurrect the dead...but it makes the dead speak and act as if they were alive. Having been brought to the surface from the well, which mirrors our faces whenever we lean over it, these dead are everything we desire to be'. (Heller 40) While we imagine that what becomes visible in that long, receding tunnel, that well, is the past itself; we find that in actuality we are engaged in a narcissistic contemplation of the reflection of our own wishes and desires in the surface of the water.

I began with the desire to speak with the dead...[but] I never believed that the dead could hear me ... I knew that the dead could not speak ... It was true that I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those textual traces make themselves heard in the voice of the living ... (*Negotiations* 5)

The opening, of course, of Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*. For the Greenblatt of the 1980s, founder of New Historicism, both literature and history consisted of 'textual traces' from which the life has disappeared, but which remain capable of living expression. They are not however 'sources of numinous authority', but 'signs of contingent social practices'. (5) The reader frequents the texts of the past to find out what the past means. But he/she believes that there is no transhistorical human nature; that history is a contemporary narrative, a story we tell ourselves about the past; and that language is not a transparent and unmediated window onto an objective and independent reality, but rather a closed system within which all our perceptions and interpretations are contained. A word or object from the past exists and has meaning only within the perpetual contemporaneity of living language. The author is still here in this process, but assuming a diminished role; and the emphasis is resolutely 'presentist', since the voices of the dead can only be heard when mimed by the voices of the living.

But almost twenty years on, in 2004, Greenblatt published *Will in the World: how Shakespeare became Shakespeare*, an attempt to bring those dead back to life. The book is a formal biography, using the established facts and traditions, reading the plays and poems in the light of them, and producing potential explanations of how the life and the works might be interrelated. *Will in the World* was alternately praised and criticised as a popular/academic crossover text. It was seen both as a fulfilment of Greenblatt's New Historicism, and as an act of 'apostasy' against it. It was celebrated for the quality, and castigated for the poverty, of its scholarship. Above all it was attacked for investing more in speculation and invention than in historical evidence; and lauded for exactly the same thing. The book is just a 'biographical fiction' said Colin Burrow. (9) 'Entirely Greenblatt's fiction', and indeed 'an improbable fiction', said Richard Jenkyns. (22) Alistair Fowler, in one of the most hostile reviews Greenblatt received (in *TLS*), suggested that the biographer might have been better off making 'a crossover into historical fiction' where he could freely have fomented conjecture with even less respect for evidence. This should not be the case in a literary biography: here the 'subject veers too much between Shakespeare's imagination and Stephen Greenblatt's own'. (Fowler 5)

Other reviewers lined up to praise Greenblatt's imaginative and inventive approach to his subject. The book should be read as 'imaginative writing'. (Aune 2006) Greenblatt's 'chief allegiance is to imagination', says Lois Potter. (375) and the book rightly stresses 'the importance of imagination in our approach to this supremely imaginative writer'. Charles Marowitz calls the book an 'extended flight of fancy', but of a valid kind: 'a speculative leap into the murky life of Shakespeare, using one's knowledge of the period, hints from the collected works and a creative use of conjecture, is a perfectly legitimate endeavour'. (Marowitz n.p.)

Apart from Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (which was a companion volume to the full-blown biography and mythography *Shakespeare's Lives*) there is no such thing as a speculation-free biography of Shakespeare. How could there be? Greenblatt's challenge to orthodoxy was to be much more overtly fictional or metafictional in his method, much more self-reflexive in declaring the conjectural and speculative character of his writing.

The best-known example is the meeting Greenblatt provisionally stages between Shakespeare and Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion, which he invents as a possible event in Shakespeare's lost years. But the episode is clearly signalled as a piece of story-telling. Are you sitting comfortably? 'Let us imagine the two of them sitting together'. (*Will* 108) The reader who is disinclined to join the author in his flight of fancy knows what to do.

Will in the World has two main methods: reading from documentary facts or recorded traditions towards the works; and reading back from the works in an attempt to bestow distinguishing features on the life. In short, Greenblatt uses the author and the writing as both cause and effect. He posits a Shakespearean 'self' that drove the writings: but he accepts that this 'self' is 'obscure' and impenetrable. He accepts that the channel of causation from self to work is hard to map; but presupposes that some such transference must have occurred.

This book ... aims to discover the actual person who wrote the most important body of literature of the last thousand years. Or rather, since the actual person is a matter of well-documented public record, it aims to tread the shadowy paths that lead from the life he lived into the literature he created. (*Will* 12)

Some of these paths seem very shadowy indeed. Take the long chapter called 'Speaking with the Dead', which focuses on *Hamlet*, and on the deaths of Shakespeare's son Hamnet and his father John. As Gary Taylor (9) points out, although this is all about Shakespeare's imagined attempts to speak with the dead, the phrase is the famous one used by Greenblatt himself in his earlier work: 'I began with the desire to speak with the dead'. So who is speaking here? And who's dead?

The biographical basis of the chapter rests in a few documentary facts. Shakespeare's 11-year old son Hamnet died in 1596. His father John Shakespeare died in 1601. Between these two deaths Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. The play is of course permeated by all sorts of emotions and questions a bereaved father might feel and ask. But the hero of the play, Hamlet, is haunted by the ghost of his dead father, not afflicted by the loss of a son.

Greenblatt tells, or rather re-tells, a story that aspires to explain the play that lies between these two momentous departures. Shakespeare ‘undoubtedly’ returned to Stratford for Hamnet’s funeral. (*Will* 312) There he heard the words of the burial service that echo eloquently in the play. But there, Greenblatt suggests, he became acutely aware of how much he and his family missed in being deprived of Catholic rituals for the dead: the Latin memorial prayers, the candles, bells and crosses, the alms-giving and requiem masses. Shakespeare wanted, Greenblatt suggests, to mourn his son in the traditional pattern of worship, and was unable to do so. ‘What ceremony else?’, he must have thought as he stood by the grave-side, unable to pray for his son’s soul.

The Roman Catholic ‘spiritual testament’ signed by John Shakespeare and hidden in the rafters of his Stratford house requested those he leaves behind to ‘vouchsafe to assist and succour me with their holy prayers and satisfactory works, especially with the holy Sacrifice of the Mass, as being the most effectual means to deliver souls from their torments and pains’. Greenblatt goes even further and suggests that John Shakespeare may have pleaded with William, ‘appealed urgently to his son’ (*Will* 316) to have masses said for the soul of Hamnet. This is of course pure invention, but Greenblatt makes it sound convincing enough: ‘The arguments, or pleading, or tears that may have accompanied such appeals are irrevocably lost’. (*Will* 316) This is of course the anguished pleading we also hear from the Ghost in *Hamlet*, who comes from Purgatory.⁷

Greenblatt is drawing on historical work that assessed the impact of the Reformation on the relationship between the living and the dead, and which earlier formed the basis for his *Hamlet in Purgatory*. He also echoes his own earlier work in *Shakespearean Negotiations*: ‘What mattered’ he says in *Will in the World*, ‘was whether the dead could continue to speak to the living, at least for a short time, whether the living could help the dead, whether a reciprocal bond remained’. (*Will* 315) But out of these diverse roots, Greenblatt imaginatively creates a vivid drama in which a father, perhaps nearing death, appeals to his son to maintain a practice of traditional piety; and the son is perhaps unable or unwilling to do so. Now this is not just about Shakespeare.

In the 'Prologue' to *Hamlet in Purgatory* Greenblatt writes about *his* father, who died in 1983. Scarred by the painful death of his own father, Greenblatt Sr. lived in a perpetual denial of death. Yet, 'when we read his will', Greenblatt says,

... we found that he had, after all, been thinking about his death. He had left a sum of money to an organisation that would say kaddish for him – kaddish being the Aramaic prayer for the dead, recited for eleven months after a person's death and then on certain annual occasions ... the prayer is usually said by the deceased's immediate family and particularly by his sons ... Evidently my father did not trust either my older brother or me to recite the prayer for him. (*Purgatory* 6-7)

Kaddish is a central Jewish prayer, praising the power and glory of God, one version of which is used as a memorial prayer for the dead. So all this talk of bereavement, and maimed rites, and fathers appealing for ancient observances, and speaking with the dead, is certainly about Shakespeare, and about *Hamlet*. But it is also about Stephen Greenblatt. John Shakespeare and other Catholics, he says, in requesting requiem masses 'were asking those who loved them to do something crucially important for them'. (*Will* 317) Greenblatt's father did not ask him to say kaddish, and that in itself was clearly doubly painful for the son. But he says it anyway, 'in a blend of love and spite' (*Purgatory* 7), and ends the preface to *Hamlet in Purgatory*: 'this practice then, which with a lightly ironic piety I, who scarcely know how to pray, undertook for my own father, is the personal starting point for what follows'. (9)

Greenblatt, says Gary Taylor (9), has 'mined his own life to supply the emotional raw materials that energise this book'. So there is a 'personal starting point' for this exercise as well as a starting point in the author, and innumerable others in the historical context. By the end of this chapter in *Will in the World* all these are merged together:

Shakespeare drew upon the pity, confusion and dread of death in a world of damaged rituals (the world in which most of us continue to live) because he himself experienced those same emotions at the core of his being. (*Will* 321)

The world of damaged rituals is that of Protestant early modernity, which killed off the old Catholic consolations of purgatory and efficacious prayer for the dead. But it is also the world of secular modernity, in which the son of a pious Jew involuntarily absorbs his culture's agnosticism and feels a consequential loss. Shakespeare lived in this world, *Hamlet* lives in that world, and so too does Greenblatt. All experience these fundamental emotions of irreparable loss, aching nostalgia and the desire to speak with the dead, 'at the core of ... being'.

We have clearly reached a significant point here, the 'core of being', the 'heart of the matter'. Once Greenblatt would not have talked about the 'core of being'. The phrase speaks to pre-modern ideas of human nature and essential being. In the universe of post-structuralist criticism and theory, identity is unstable and changeable; the reality of human existence lies in the externalities of language and social context; literature is not about personal experience but about the circulation of social energy. To return to the 'core of being' is to revert to much more traditional notions of the self, identity, existence and essence. But interestingly what lies at the core of being is not the isolated autonomous and disconnected individuality that Marxist theory attributes to bourgeois ideology. Instead what we find in those depths of human emotion and desire is – another. In Greenblatt it is the father; in Shakespeare the son; in *Hamlet* father and son. Greenblatt can admit that he has a core of being because someone else has, by his death, penetrated it so deeply. He reads and hears the self-same ache of painful love in *Hamlet*; and from there he speculates that it must have lain at the core of Shakespeare's being too.

In trying to account for the effect great literature has on him then, the critic is to some extent making it up as he goes along. But this is not just a sort of opportunistic appropriation of the work, perverting it from its original meaning: since the motivation for doing it comes from a very deep source, what Greenblatt calls the 'core of being'. Literature touches us so deeply that we are driven to presuppose that the author must also have been touched in some comparable way, depth calling to depth.

Like all of Shakespeare's work, this is a story that cannot be proved (or disproved). It is a story woven between the pegs of certain documentary facts: the death of Hamnet, 1596; the

death of John Shakespeare in 1601; the composition of the play *Hamlet*, first published in 1603; John Shakespeare's Spiritual Testament. But it is also a story mapped between certain poles of emotional truth: first what we read in the play, the anguish of the father, the grief of the son; and secondly Greenblatt's own sense of bereavement and obligation. These two points are then triangulated against a third that cannot be known in the same way, the condition of the author's heart and soul; what was passing in the core of the Shakespearean being.

Where does this leave us? We have the author back from the dead. His emotional experience predicates the writing, causes it to be. But that remains an inferential relationship impossible to prove or demonstrate. So the biographer has recourse to his imagination, and creates a narrative consistent with the documentary facts, and with the emotional truths embedded in the hearts of both biographer and subject, and mediated in both cases through writing. As one critic puts it, Greenblatt has 'let his imagination loose in the fields of his knowledge'. (Middlebrook 16)

Every subject of biography is two things: an outer world of social behaviour, theatrical display and cultural performance, and an inner, secret world of 'private life'. The former, in the case of a celebrity life, is likely to be well-documented and recorded; while the latter is likely to remain elusive to the inquirer, even where there is autobiographical and confessional material, and testimony acquired from close relatives, friend and colleagues.⁸ Normally, in order to access the private, the biographer must use data derived from the public sphere. In the case of an author, the writing clearly lies between public and private, but is unlikely to be a straightforward map of the interior (think of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*). The quest for the private takes the biographer into realms of personal intimacy which have often been kept secret and concealed, in cases where, for example, the subject was a closet homosexual, or a crypto-Catholic, or just obsessively averse to being known. Biography deals in secrets. Many biographers avoid the pitfalls of the exercise by not confronting the domain of the secret, the concealed, the unacceptable, and producing bland and neutral narratives that avoid personal offence to any custodian of the artist's reputation. These are shilling lives, that list the external facts, and miss the mystery and uniqueness of the person.

But biography must tamper with this realm of the personal, with the hidden life of the subject, and with the efforts of those who try to own and define that life. Biography is a violation of privacy. Biography pursues the elusive personality of the subject, and the biographer needs to have the skills of a novelist, rather than those of a diplomat. Biography should be emotionally involved, not dispassionate; self-reflexive, not neutral; experimental and innovative, not realist and documentary. In addition a biography should be metabiographical, explicitly telling the story of the biographer's engagement with the subject.

This imposes on the biographer of Shakespeare an almost impossible brief, since there is so little of the personal, and so much of the public, in the subject. The writer and his work were separated at a very early stage. When the *First Folio* gave the Shakespearean oeuvre its characteristic posthumous shape, the writer himself was both invoked and distanced: look not on his picture, Jonson advised, but his book. The writer is already inside the work: Shakespeare has become 'Shakespeare' before we reach the first page. Even while the living dramatist and actor was, in the flesh, treading the stage of this world, and words from his own lips were reaching the ears of his audience, the plays themselves were entering a cultural market relatively free of authorial control: some published anonymously, others in disputed textual forms. And the author himself, with his famous cloak of invisibility, seems to have spent a lifetime resisting the legible clarity of a manifest personality. In other words, the question of 'how Shakespeare became Shakespeare' seems to have arisen almost as soon as pen touched paper.

Perhaps, before the tyranny of the logos took hold, when reality reverberated between voice and ear, in the theatre where, as a living actor and dramatist, Shakespeare performed and wrote, the author would appear at the end of a play to take a bow, and define his ownership of the work just performed. Or perhaps not. In an episode of *Dr Who* (Palmer 2007) at the end of a performance of *Love's Labours Won*, amidst tumultuous applause, the cry of 'Author! Author!' rises from the audience. But it emanates not from the Elizabethan audience, but from the doctor's assistant, and is an anachronism imported from the future.⁹ 'Shakespeare' is retrospectively attributed to Shakespeare. Shakespeare the man is recognised, with hindsight, by the time-travelling modern spectator, as originator of 'Shakespeare' the myth. And perhaps this is always the way in which Shakespeare becomes "Shakespeare".

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² I have found the work of Shoichiro Kawai useful in this section.

³ 'A book about Shakespeare that is largely, and perhaps refreshingly, not about Shakespeare at all' (Dobson 11).

⁴ '... deeds and bonds and other records are inevitably bloodless. They tell us a great deal about the business of a person's life, but nothing about the emotions of it' (Bryson 7).

⁵ An exception is that of Bill Bryson (2007), which maintains a healthy and independent scepticism: 'It cannot be emphasized too strenuously that there is nothing – not a scrap, not a mote – that gives any certain insight into Shakespeare's feelings or beliefs as a private person' (17).

⁶ The most bizarre implication of this observation is the idea that Burgess ever thought of himself as ‘ordinary’ (see Lewis 2002).

⁷ The forger who replaced the lost first page of the testament made sure of this connection by interpolating the Ghost’s words from Shakespeare’s play, a fraud that has caught some biographers such as Anthony Holden (2000).

⁸ I am indebted in this section to discussions with Roger Lewis, biographer of Laurence Olivier, Anthony Burgess and Peter Sellers.

⁹ Martha Jones provides Shakespeare with his Dark Lady, and of course the Doctor provides the poet with some of his best lines.