

## William Shakespeare, Gentleman



*Illustrations courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library.*

*Martin Droeshout's engraving of Shakespeare from the title page of the First Folio (1623). At the time, Ben Jonson was satisfied with the picture as a likeness, but some critics have since dubbed it a "pudding-faced effigy," asserting that the playwright appears to have two right eyes.*

---

Shaw despised him, Lamb revered him, Freud didn't think he existed. William Shakespeare himself paid scant heed to posterity; he put a greater value on his contemporary status as the hometown boy who made good. But his work continues to enrich our lives. On February 14, *As You Like It*, the first in a new BBC series of Shakespeare plays, will be televised in the United States. The other 36 plays will follow. Here, Shakespearean scholar Sam Schoenbaum reviews the highlights of the poet's life; illustrations are from the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

---

*by S. Schoenbaum*

Almost 15 years have passed since I first visited Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. I have returned many times. In this handsome old building, William Shakespeare was christened on April 26, 1564, and 52 years later buried. In the same church, Shakespeare's brothers and sisters were baptized, as well as his own offspring. There his daughters were married. Prominent locals were buried within the church itself; more ordinary folk, including Shakespeare's father and mother, were laid to rest in the churchyard (despite the fact that the poet's father, before he fell on hard times, had been bailiff of Stratford). Above Shakespeare's grave in the chancel appears the famous curse, which he may or may not have composed himself:

Good frend for Iesus sake forbear,  
To digg the dust enclosed heare:  
Blest be ye man yt spares thes stones,  
And curst be he yt moves my bones.

Yet the bones are gone, the  
malediction incurred by Time itself.

A cave-in early in the last century exposed the vault's cavity; a witness reported that, when he peered in, he saw neither coffin nor bones, only a little moldering dust on the dank floor.

The details of Shakespeare's life have held up somewhat better, although it is sometimes said that all our information could be bounded in a nut-shell. As the eminent Shakespearean scholar George Steevens put it in 1780:

All that is known with any degree of certainty concerning Shakespeare, is: that he was born at Stratford-upon-Avon; married and had children there; went to London, where he commenced actor, and wrote poems and plays; returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried.

Steevens exaggerated then, and we have learned a lot since. True, much of the ground has been vexed by controversy and speculation. But thanks to the pertinacity of investigators over the centuries, we know more about Shakespeare than we do about almost all his fellow playwrights,

even though intimate records—diaries, letters, and the like—are totally lacking. We must content ourselves with the mundane details of his life, which may in their own way be revealing.

In Shakespeare's day, the population of Stratford stood at less than 2,000 souls (compared to 15,000 today), but in some ways this provincial market town on the meandering River Avon must have looked very much as it does now. The Guild Hall, today badly in need of repair, stood then just a stone's throw from the great house (since destroyed) which Shakespeare bought after he had established himself as a financial success and a leading figure in the London theater. Then as now, Clopton Bridge spanned the Avon with its 14 massive arches, pointing the wayfarer toward London, 100 miles to the southeast; Shakespeare crossed this bridge on his way to and from the capital. The basic street plan, with three principal thoroughfares running parallel to the Avon and crossed by three others at right angles, has remained intact over the centuries. If anything, Stratford was more attractive then, before the advent of souvenir shops, a Hilton hotel, and Dutch elm disease.

In this neck of Warwickshire, Shakespeare first tasted life, love, and learning. Unlike a number of his fellow playwrights—Christopher Marlowe, for example—Shakespeare

never attended a university. Such formal education as he received must have taken place at the King's New School of Stratford-upon-Avon for boys aged 6 or 7 until around 14. Before completing the course, (according to an early biography) he was obliged by his family's declining fortunes to leave school, perhaps to snip gussets for his father John, a master glover.

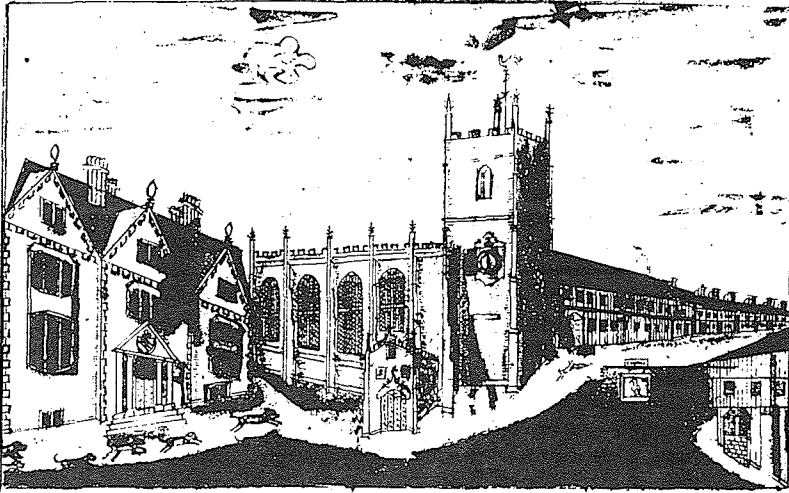
#### "Small Latin, Less Greek"

Many have marveled that a writer who demonstrates in his work such wide and varied learning with respect to literature, rhetoric, music, and the law, as well as British and Roman history—not to mention his profound understanding of the human heart—should have succeeded so astonishingly well without the advantages of a university education. Hence the "anti-Stratfordian" impulse among those who would deny Shakespeare his writings and attribute them instead to someone better educated and more highly born—Francis Bacon, or the Earl of Oxford, or even Queen Elizabeth.

Yet patient investigation of the 16th-century grammar-school curriculum reveals how broad and thorough a grounding young students received during their long hours in the classroom. Here, in the King's New School, Shakespeare would have acquired the "small Latin and less Greek" with which his colleague

---

*S. Schoenbaum, 51, discusses some of the topics taken up in this essay in greater detail in Shakespeare's Lives (1970) and William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life (1977). He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University (1953) and is now Distinguished Professor of Renaissance Studies at the University of Maryland as well as a trustee of the Folger Shakespeare Library. His film reviews appear regularly in the Times Literary Supplement. With Stanley Wells, he is coeditor of the Oxford Standard Authors edition of the complete works of Shakespeare (forthcoming).*



*"Perspective View of New Place," Shakespeare's Stratford house (left). In 1597, Shakespeare paid a reported £60 for New Place—then a tidy sum. He later bequeathed it to his daughter Susanna.*

Ben Jonson credits him, although the attention to Latin, at least, was lavish by today's standards: Cicero and Quintilian for rhetoric; Sallust and Caesar for history; Ovid, Virgil, and Horace for poetry. (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* would remain Shakespeare's favorite classic.)

A university education in those days would not necessarily have better equipped a young man for a career in letters: We do well not to confuse the modern liberal arts curriculum with the narrower course of study, inherited from the Middle Ages, of an English university in the 16th century. (The formidably learned Jonson never went to a university either.) What Shakespeare did develop in his youth, if the plays are any evidence, was a taste for reading, an interest in ideas, and a retentive memory.

Education of another kind, less

sophisticated but fatefully relevant to Shakespeare's later career, was also available in Stratford. Elizabethan actors, in much the same fashion as the players at Hamlet's Elsinore, often went on tour. The first professional troupe to visit Stratford was the Queen's Men. They arrived in 1569, when John Shakespeare was bailiff. Did little William, then five, sit restlessly (or enthralled) beside his father in the Guild Hall when they performed? Other companies followed—Leicester's Men, led by James Burbage, in 1573; Warwick's, Strange's, Derby's, and other troupes afterwards. Records show that no fewer than seven different troupes acted in the Guild Hall between 1579 and 1584. This despite the fact that the theatrical industry, as such, was then new to England.

When Shakespeare was born, a building expressly designed for the

representation of plays did not yet exist in Britain; the first theater (called, appropriately enough, The Theatre) opened its doors in London in 1576. But plays had been acted for centuries before the advent of playhouses. During the Middle Ages the cathedral towns—York, Chester, Coventry—had their elaborate cycles of Biblical plays, mounted as a matter of religious faith and local pride by the various craft guilds. Few of these plays survived the Reformation. But at Coventry, only 18 miles from Stratford, the cycle depicting the events of Biblical history from the Creation to Doomsday was still being performed in Shakespeare's time. As a boy, he no doubt acquired a familiarity with such plays, for verbal echoes from them find their way into the secular works he later wrote for the London companies.

#### Poacher or Player

We do not hear of Shakespeare in London, where he would make his fortune and his reputation, until 1592. Just when, and under what circumstances, he joined the stage, history has not revealed; this is the phase of his life that biographers call the Lost Years. A venerable legend holds that Sir Thomas Lucy, master of the nearby estate of Charlecote, caught Shakespeare poaching and punished him so severely that the malefactor penned and circulated a bitter ballad, whereupon Sir Thomas redoubled his prosecution, until at length William left the family glove business in Stratford to find shelter in the capital.

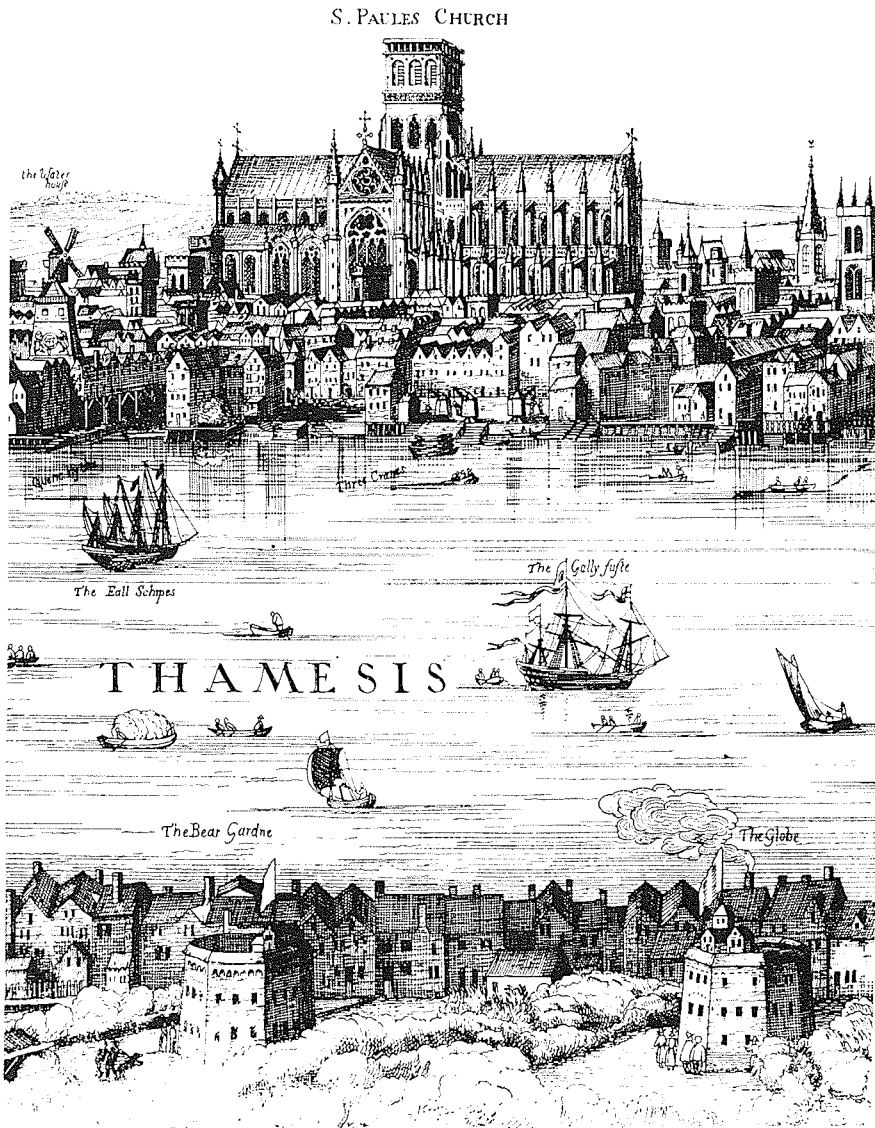
A more likely, and only slightly less romantic, possibility is that Shakespeare joined a cry of players passing through Warwickshire. When the Queen's Men stopped in Stratford in 1587, it is recorded that

they were short a man, actor William Knell having been lately killed in a brawl. Perhaps Shakespeare took Knell's place, and thus found his way to London and the stage. No one knows.

#### Shakespeare in London

With a population of 160,000 or thereabout, Elizabethan London scarcely qualified as a great metropolis by modern standards. Yet Dr. Samuel Johnson's famous judgment, delivered almost two centuries later—"When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life"—applies no less aptly to the capital city in which Shakespeare lodged and worked. On the silvery Thames, where swans glided and wherries served as water-taxis, tall merchant ships arrived laden with cargo: spices from the East, currants from Turkey, and in due course tobacco from the New World. Shops encrusted London Bridge—Britain was already on the way to becoming a nation of shopkeepers—while at the southern end of the span the heads of executed criminals mounted on pikes reminded all who passed of the law's severity.

In the Royal Exchange, the huge quadrangular bazaar modeled on the Great Bourse in Antwerp, tradesmen hawked everything from jewels to mousetraps. St. Paul's, the largest and most magnificent cathedral in England, drew visitors not only for divine services but also for such secular pastimes as the display of fashions by gallants and tailors, conferences between lawyers and their clients, and the picking of pockets. In the churchyard, bookstalls exhibited the latest sermon or catchpenny pamphlet; here, before the advent of public libraries, Shakespeare would have encountered the literary



*Detail from a 19th-century view of London (based on a 1616 panorama by Claes Jan Visscher). St. Paul's Cathedral dwarfs the landscape as eel boats ply the Thames. In the foreground (right) is the Globe Theatre, outside the purview of puritanical London authorities.*



"All Hayle Makbeth, Thane of Cawder" cries one of three witches as Macbeth and Banquo approach. From Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577).

sources for his plays. If Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* gave him detailed accounts of the kings whose reigns he dramatized, the stones of the massively forbidding Tower mutely recalled intrigues and violence past.

Much like today's West End, the playhouses served as a magnet for foreign visitors: There was nothing quite like them elsewhere in Christendom. Then, as now, the theatrical industry was vigorously competitive. Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, had Dick Burbage to act Richard III and Hamlet and the other great tragic roles, while Edward Alleyn mesmerized audiences by declaiming Marlowe's "mighty line" for the Admiral's Men at the Rose playhouse.

In this London, Shakespeare first attracted notice in 1592. The earliest surviving report, unlike all others, is hostile. As he lay dying in pitiful squalor, Robert Greene—poet, rake-

hell, and Cambridge graduate—penned his swan song, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, bought with a Million of Repentance*. In better days, Greene had made a name for himself with his plays, romances, and muck-raking exposés of the London *demi-monde*. Now, his possessions pawned, reduced to hand-outs, he could feel only bitter envy toward the 28-year-old Warwickshireman who had set up shop as a rival playwright. In the *Groatsworth*, Greene warns of an "upstart crow":

beautified with our feathers, that with his *tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide* supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; and, being an absolute *Johannes Factotum* [Jack-of-all-trades], is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.

The "tiger's heart" alludes sneeringly to a line in Shakespeare's *3 Henry VI*: "O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide!" About the target of

Greene's impotent venom there can be no question.

The intemperateness of Greene's attack was recognized at the time. Shakespeare found a perhaps unexpected champion in Henry Chettle, by trade a printer and by inclination a *litterateur* who turned out catch-penny pamphlets and perishable plays. To Chettle fell the unedifying task of preparing Greene's papers for the press. But no sooner had Greene's *Groatsworth* appeared than Chettle made amends with a handsome apologia prefacing his own prose pamphlet, *Kind Heart's Dream*:

I am as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault, because myself have seen his demeanor no less civil than he excel-

lent in the quality he professes: besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art.

The reference to the "quality he professes" acknowledges that Shakespeare served his company not only as a dramatist but also as an actor, and helps account for Greene's sneer at a mere player who dared, like the crow, to imitate his betters. Notwithstanding such audacity, Shakespeare had made friends in high places, the "divers of worship" to whom Chettle alludes. Who were they? Had Shakespeare, as some biographers infer, already found a noble patron? Probably not. Eliza-

#### "WHAT HE HATH LEFT US"

Shakespeare lives. His language forms part of the texture of our own, so that whether we realize it or not, Shakespeare is always at our tongue's tip. When we commend the glass of fashion, lament the law's delay, or reflect that ambition should be made of sterner stuff; when we make a virtue of necessity, pounce with one fell swoop, or are frightened by false fire—on all such occasions, and many others, we are quoting Shakespeare.

In my youth, almost all high school students, it seems, read *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. These plays remain set readings, but in recent years, I have begun to encounter college freshmen with no high school Shakespeare. On the other hand, more people are seeing Shakespeare on the stage than ever before.

Indeed, no dramatist, living or dead, has been more frequently reprinted or performed in so many languages. A collected edition is usually the first choice, along with the Bible, of someone asked to plan his reading matter in the event of shipwreck on a deserted island. All 37 plays live on the stage. In the United States, Shakespeare festivals dot the summer landscape from Alabama and Vermont to Colorado and Utah, Oregon and California. Throughout the school year, campus productions are regular features of university theater groups across the land. Shakespeare is reaching larger audiences than ever before, as the BBC moves ahead with plans to produce the entire Shakespeare canon over a period of six years, beginning this February. It is the most ambitious dramatic programming in the history of television.

—S.S.



bethan Englishmen made careful distinctions in their forms of address. *Worship*, as has now been established, applied to untitled gentlemen; aristocrats Chettle would have described as "divers of honor".\*

Whoever these supporters mentioned by Chettle were, they remain as anonymous as the multitudes who applauded Shakespeare's plays in Shoreditch, the northern suburb where the first theaters were built, comfortably outside the purview of the London City fathers who took a puritanical view of such idle pastimes. (Eventually Shakespeare's company would move across the Thames to the Globe playhouse and the pleasure resorts of Bankside.)

Meanwhile, by the early 1590s, Shakespeare, not even 30 years old, had established himself as a major figure in the theater. He had demonstrated his youthful mastery of the several genres: history with the *Henry VI* plays, tragedy with *Titus Andronicus*, and comedy with *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Comedy of Errors*.

The distinctive power of *1 Henry VI* was evoked by a contemporary of Shakespeare, Thomas Nashe, who described the effect on audiences of the death of Talbot, forsaken by rivalrous peers to die valiantly on a field in France:

How would it have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage, and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least (at several times), who, in the tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.

These tears were all shed in the playhouse, not the library; none of Shakespeare's plays had yet seen print. That would come soon—

without his consent or approval, for it was not to the company's advantage to make the plays publicly available for acting to anybody with sixpence to put down for a published quarto.† Shakespeare was a company man, his days now spent in the service of his troupe: Strange's Men perhaps, or the Queen's; later, we know definitely, with the Lord Chamberlain's Men. During his idle hours he could plunge into the life of the town; London, which conferred no degrees, became his university.

#### An "O'erhasty Marriage"

In the taverns, Shakespeare hobnobbed with other playwrights and poets; the Mermaid in Bread Street, not far from where he lodged for a time, is associated in legend with his name. In St. Paul's and other meeting places, he observed the several estates: country folk bemused by the ways of the metropolis, courtiers and hangers-on, citizens with their wives and apprentices. When Shakespeare's company acted at Court, at Richmond or Whitehall, he caught glimpses of how the movers and shakers conducted themselves in the corridors of power. At some time, probably in the early 1590s, he met a Dark Lady—not positively identified despite numerous candidates—who, according to the *Sonnets*, loved and deceived him.

\*By 1593, Shakespeare had found a noble patron, the Earl of Southampton, to whom he that year dedicated his *Venus and Adonis*. The next year his *Rape of Lucrece* bore a dedication, more warmly phrased, to the same lord; but this time there was no follow-up. The collected edition of Shakespeare's plays, published seven years after his death in 1616, was dedicated by the compilers to William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, and his younger brother Philip, first Earl of Montgomery, both of whom had reportedly "favored" the dramatist.

†His first published plays were *Titus Andronicus* and *2 Henry VI*, in 1594.



*If scholars can authenticate the "W. Shakespeare" at left, it will become the seventh known Shakespeare signature. Barely visible on the title page of a 1568 edition of Lambarde's Archaionomia, it is shown here in reverse, as the ink has bled through the paper.*

Whatever the allurements of the metropolis, however, Shakespeare maintained his ties with Stratford. Other London dramatists of the Elizabethan age had come, like him, from the provinces—men like Greene from Norwich, Marlowe and John Lyly from Canterbury. Most forsook their roots; Shakespeare nurtured his. An early memorialist, John Aubrey, tells us in his "Brief Life" (1681) that Shakespeare was wont to go to his native country once each year. In Stratford, with growing income from the playhouse, Shakespeare invested in houses and land.\* There he drew up his will, using the services of a local solicitor. There he visited his wife and children, and there, still in his 40s, he retired.

Since Shakespeare returned annually to his family—and eventually settled permanently back home—his marriage could hardly have been disastrous. But was it tolerably happy? The circumstances—he had wed Anne Hathaway in 1582—give one pause. He was only 18 at the time; his bride, some eight years older than he, was pregnant; and the vows were exchanged in haste, after only one reading of the banns, instead of the usual three. There is no evidence, however, that Shakespeare married Anne unwillingly.

In 1583, just six months after the wedding, she gave birth to a daughter, Susanna, christened on May 26, 1583. Less than two years afterward, she bore twins, a boy and a girl. Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare, named after Shakespeare's friends and neighbors, the Sadlers, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Thus Anne gave William a male heir.

Did Shakespeare ever repent his "o'erhasty marriage"? Biographers, conscious of the discrepancy in years between this husband and his older wife, have combed Shakespeare's works for passages that might give some clue to his feelings. In *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, Hermia and Lysander have the following exchange:

*Lysander.* The course of true love never did run smooth;  
But either it was different in blood . . .  
Or else misgraffed in respect of years—  
*Hermia.* O spite! too old to be engag'd to young.

More striking is the passage in *Twelfth Night*, where the Duke speaks

\*As a shareholder in the profits of the Globe and the Blackfriars (from 1609, the company's second theater) Shakespeare earned perhaps £200 a year. The figure may not seem great by modern standards, but it was ten times what a well-paid Elizabethan schoolmaster made.

thus to Viola, who is disguised as a man:

Let still the woman take  
An elder than herself; so wears she to him,  
So sways she level in her husband's heart.  
For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,  
Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,  
More longing and wavering, sooner lost  
and won,  
Than women's are.

The difficulty for the biographer, of course, is that these and similar passages occur in plays, not in memoirs, and the writer does not speak with his own voice, but with that of his dramatic imagination. How can we safely say that the sentiments I have quoted represent Shakespeare's own views?

### The Second-Best Bed

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are more intimate. "With this key," Wordsworth wrote of them, "Shakespeare unlocked his heart." Since they deal, in part, with an intense, and intensely unhappy, liaison with a woman herself married, they suggest that the marital bed was, for Shakespeare, not always a comfortable one. But in these poems, too, experience is shaped by imagination. It is at our peril that we read the *Sonnets* as straightforward autobiography.

Shakespeare's last will and testament, however, does provide a clue to his marital relations. The will contains only one reference to the woman Shakespeare had married some 30 years previously: "Item [the will reads], I give unto my wife my second best bed with the furniture," i.e., with the hangings, bed linen, and the like, that make up this elaborate item of Jacobean domestic furnishing. That is it; not a word more.

What are we to make of this be-

quest? Some biographers see it as a husband's scornful dismissal of his wife.

But another interpretation is possible. May not the best bed have been kept in a special room, and there reserved, out of gracious hospitality, for overnight visitors to the fine house Shakespeare had bought in Stratford? If so, the best bed would have been regarded as an heirloom and would have naturally formed part of the estate he wished to keep together primarily for his legal heir—in this case, his daughter Susanna. (His son, Hamnet, had died in 1596, and his daughter Judith had made a poor marriage to a local man of good family who was destined never to amount to much. Just after the marriage, and only a month before his death, Shakespeare altered his will, apparently lowering Judith's share.)

The second-best bed, according to this interpretation, would then have been the matrimonial bed, with a special, intimate significance. Other wills of this period refer to such beds with tender associations. In fact, we can only speculate as to what Shakespeare had in mind when he made his wife this bequest; but he did not have to make other testamentary provisions in order for her to be looked after properly when he died. By English common law, enforced by local custom, a widow was automatically entitled to a life interest in one-third of her husband's estate.

### A Man of Property

The first extant reaction to Shakespeare's will was set down in 1747 by Joseph Greene, a Stratford curate, who had come upon a 17th-century transcript. He expressed positive disappointment when he described it

in a letter to a friend; quite simply, Greene found the will dull:

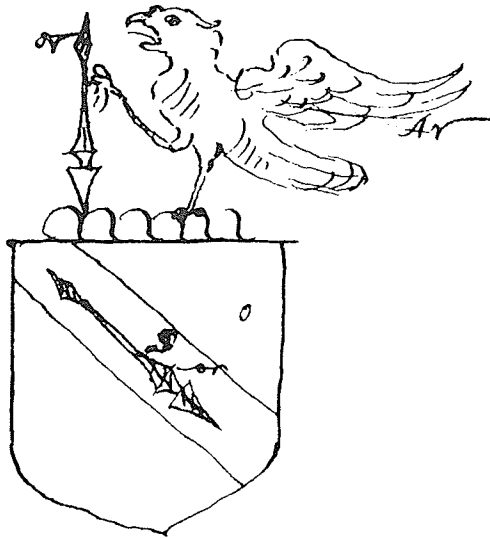
so absolutely void of the least particle of that spirit which animated our great poet; that it must lessen his character as a writer, to imagine the least sentence of it his production.

There is nothing in this document about Shakespeare's life in art; only references to fellow players—Richard Burbage, John Heminges, and Henry Condell, to whom, after the fashion of the time, he left a small bequest for the purchase of mourning rings. Shakespeare mentions no manuscripts of his plays or his personal library. No wonder the will has stoked anti-Stratfordian fires!

But testaments are eminently

practical documents that tend to follow a set form, and Shakespeare's lawyer, Francis Collins, may have discouraged personal flourishes. Moreover, in those days, Shakespeare's scripts would have become the property of the acting company for which he wrote them, and so were not at his disposal. The books comprising his library are another matter. We don't know how large a collection he assembled, but we can be sure he read widely, and any catalogue would of course hold inestimable interest for the study of his sources. Such a catalogue may well have existed as part of the inventory of possessions made, as a matter of routine, upon Shakespeare's decease. Unfortunately the inventory has never surfaced.

*William Shakespeare's coat of arms, from a 1602 compilation by the York Herald, Ralph Brooke. Brooke cited 23 cases, including Shakespeare's, where, he alleged, arms had been awarded to ineligible persons. The appellation "player" was no doubt pejorative.*



*Shakespear if Player  
by Garter*

### THE BARD IN BOOKS

#### *The Collected Works*

**The Riverside Shakespeare.** Edited by G. Blakemore Evans. (Houghton Mifflin, 1974)

**William Shakespeare: The Complete Works.** Edited by Alfred Harbage. (Penguin Pelican Series, rev. ed., 1969)

**New Companion to Shakespeare Studies.** Edited by Kenneth Muir and S. Schoenbaum. (Cambridge, 1971, cloth and paper)

#### *Biography and Criticism*

**A Short History of Shakespearean Criticism.** By Arthur M. Eastman. (Random, 1968, cloth, out-of-print but available in libraries; Norton, 1974, paper)

**Shakespeare's Professional Skills.** By Nevill Coghill. (Cambridge, 1964)

**Prefaces to Shakespeare.** By Harley Granville-Barker. 2 vols. (London: Batsford, 1946-47)

**Four Centuries of Shakespearean Criticism.** Edited by Frank Kermode. (Avon, 1965)

**Shakespeare's Festive Comedy.** By C. L. Barber. (Princeton, 1972, cloth and paper reissue)

**A Kingdom For a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays.** By Robert Ornstein. (Harvard, 1972)

**Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth.** By A. C. Bradley. 2nd. ed., 1905. (St. Martin's, 1956, paper)

Yet the will we have, first drafted less than three months before the poet's death, tells us a good deal about the position Shakespeare had achieved for himself in the world, not as an artist, but as a Jacobean gentleman whose art had brought him the material rewards and social prominence in his Warwickshire town that apparently mattered to him. His substantial investments included £320 in cash for arable land in the neighborhood. That was in 1602. Three years later, he laid out £440 for a half interest in a lease of tithes in some hamlets near Stratford, an expenditure that netted him £60 per annum. In London, just a few years before his death, he purchased Blackfriars gatehouse, although he seems never to have lived in it—this appears to have been purely an investment. Thus, Shakespeare became a man of property. In his will, he was careful to hold together this considerable estate, and the status it conferred, for his heirs.

There is little in this testament that accords with the romantic idea of the poet, but of course Shakespeare lived before the Romantic period. In an age that valued tangible success, he was not indifferent to its allure. No letters of Shakespeare survive, but we have one letter addressed to him. It was set down in October 1598 by Richard Quiney, who wrote to his "Loving good friend and countryman Mr. Wm. Shakespeare," requesting a loan of £30. The letter makes no reference to Shakespeare as the esteemed poet and playwright of the London stage; he is seen as a man who might, when properly approached, help a fellow townsman out with a substantial sum. Presumably it was the dramatist who, in his father's name, applied to the Heralds' College for a coat of arms, and took pleasure, after it was awarded, in subscribing himself Gentleman. Shakespeare became a pillar of his community. "The latter part of his life was spent," accord-

ing to an early biographer, "as all men of good sense will wish theirs may be, in ease, retirement, and the conversation of his friends. He had the good fortune to gather an estate equal to his occasion, and, in that, to his wish."

Some may be dismayed that the testament of William Shakespeare—behind whose creativity lies God knows what sensitivities and sufferings—should reveal him to be a man of common sense. Yet to my mind, there is great and salutary evidence in the will's very ordinari-ness. Shakespeare must have been in so many ways like other folk. His personality, when he rubbed shoulders in the taverns with the wits of his day, made no such impression as did Ben Jonson's, so forcefully assertive. Stanley Wells, editor of the Oxford Shakespeare, has acutely observed that Shakespeare must have been a great listener rather than a great talker. He spoke in his art.

#### A Worthy Friend

Surely the ordinariness belongs to the fabric of his achievement, for his plays express, more profoundly than any that Jonson or the others wrote, fundamental human relationships between parents and children and husbands and wives and lovers. Never mind that Shakespeare found literary inspiration in Ovid or Plutarch, or that blue blood courses through the veins of his *dramatis personae*, or that he chose for his settings Ephesus or Illyria or Rome:

The men and women he portrays experience such passions as he himself must have felt or observed.

Good company he must have been, too. Indeed, one of the legends recounting his death holds that he expired after a "merry meeting" with Ben Jonson and the Warwickshire poet Michael Drayton. True or not, it is at least certain that he was highly regarded by friends and colleagues. Heminges and Condell, Shakespeare's fellow actors with the King's Men (as the company was known after the accession of James I), were the editors who finally brought together the first collected edition of his plays in 1623. They described their task as a labor of devotion, undertaken "without ambition either of self-profit or fame; only to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive, as was our Shakespeare."

That volume, the First Folio, is graced by one of the noblest poems of tribute in the English language, Ben Jonson's "To the memory of my beloved, the author Mr. William Shakespeare and what he hath left us." I'll let Jonson have the last word:

Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to  
show,  
To whom all scenes of Europe homage  
owe,  
He was not of an age, but for all time!  
And all the Muses still were in their  
prime,  
When like Apollo he came forth to warm  
Our ears, or like a Mercury to charm!

