

ONE

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The eyes that stare blankly out at us from the familiar Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare have little to tell us of the player that he was – or indeed of the man, however we choose to regard him. This should not surprise us. The artist's depiction of his features must have borne a reasonable likeness or it would not have been passed by Shakespeare's former fellows, Heminges and Condell, for inclusion in the First Folio of 1623, which they edited; but Droeshout had been only fifteen when Shakespeare died in 1616 and he is unlikely to have known him well, if at all.¹ He had probably based his engraving on an earlier portrait or sketch and, if so, whatever life the original may have had was lost in the copying.

But in fairness to Droeshout, we should bear in mind what Heminges and Condell's purpose had been in commissioning the portrait, which was to embellish a first collected edition of their friend's plays with an appropriately dignified image of their author. Shakespeare's renown as player and man of the theatre was not in question – not among those who had known him personally or had seen him perform; his reputation as dramatic poet was yet to be established. Seven years earlier in a bid to secure scholarly recognition for his own dramatic achievements, Ben Jonson had published his plays in a similarly impressive folio volume, which may have prompted Heminges and Condell to do the same for their former fellow. As they explain in their prefatory letters, the Shakespeare folio was intended as both memorial and rescue mission: 'to keepe the memory of so worthy a Friend, & Fellow alive, as was our SHAKESPEARE'; but also because whereas before 'you [the readers] were abus'd with deverse stolne, and surreptitious

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copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of injurious imposters, that expos'd them: even those are now offer'd to your view cur'd, and perfect in their limbes; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them'.² (The 'rest', it should be said, comprised no less than eighteen plays that had never before appeared in print, including *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* and *Macbeth*, which, but for Heminges and Condell's initiative in searching out Shakespeare's manuscripts and the company's prompt books, might easily, probably would, have been lost for ever.) But, like Jonson, they would also have had a larger end in view. For the paradox is that at the highest point of their achievement in the English dramatic renaissance of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the status of playwrights had never been so low, or plays so little regarded as a literary form.

In 1605, at the lowest ebb of his fortunes, the proudly assertive Jonson, committed to prison with George Chapman for their part in the writing of a play called *Eastward Ho!* that had given offence to the authorities, was so far obliged to bow to the common opinion as to write cringingly to the Earl of Salisbury that the cause of their incarceration – '(would I could name some worthier) . . . is, a (the word irks me that our Fortunes hath necessitated us to so despised a course) a play, my Lord'.³ In founding his now famous Oxford library in the years that followed, Sir Thomas Bodley was insistent on excluding plays from the newly published books that he wished to assemble on its shelves. Writing to the Bodleian's librarian in 1611/12, Sir Thomas assures him that even if 'some little profit might be reaped (which God knows is very little) out of some of our playbooks, the benefit thereof will nothing near countervail the harm that the scandal will bring unto the library when it shall be given out that we stuff it full of baggage books . . .'. In another letter, he puts playbooks in the same category of ephemera as almanacs and proclamations, and refers to them collectively as 'riff-raffs'. The 'baggage books' and 'riff-raffs' he thus dismisses as unworthy of attention would have included newly published quarto editions of plays by both Shakespeare and Jonson.⁴ Even so cultured and frequent a playgoer as the poet John Donne, writing in 1604 or

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1605 (years in which *Hamlet* and *Othello* were in performance at the Globe), does not even mention Shakespeare's name or that of any other dramatist in a catalogue of thirty-four works by thirty different authors of the time. As Professor Bentley concludes, 'he did not consider plays in the category of serious literature'.⁵ Nor even, it would appear, of literature at all in the usual sense. Though Shakespeare the player, Shakespeare the theatre director and part-owner, would certainly have been known to him, Shakespeare the playwright and dramatic poet was seemingly invisible to him.

Plays of the period were, of course, written to be performed: heard, not read. Throughout the whole of the seventeenth century – and in spite of first Jonson's, then Heminges and Condell's, best editorial endeavours – plays continued to be primarily regarded, not as books and thus belonging to literature, but as public events in which a story was enacted by means of spoken words and the movement and gestures of actors on a stage to an audience assembled at a particular time and place. They existed temporally – in the two to three hours' traffic of the stage – not spatially in the way that a book exists and can be handled and shelved. In the theatre, the words were of great importance; at no period of theatrical history have they been of *more* importance (one went to hear a play, not see it); but they were written by their author to be memorised by actors, and came into their true, intended form only when spoken. We need to remember, too, that Shakespeare was one of those actors; he was writing for himself as a performer as well as for his fellows.

In this respect, the medium in which Shakespeare and other dramatists of the period worked – that of the popular theatre – had continuity with, and was itself an almost unique survival of, the age-old oral culture that had been dominant throughout the Middle Ages. By Shakespeare's time that popular culture of the harper-poets and itinerant interluders was in rapid disintegration and retreat before the advance of literacy and an increasing availability of printed books;⁶ a profound shift in the cultural climate that had been in slow, inexorable progress since the fourteenth century but was then brought to a critical stage by more recent religious changes. The Bible

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– previously reserved as reading matter to a Latin-speaking elite and communicated to an illiterate laity in the form of pictorial images, liturgical ritual and religious drama (all providing an essentially communal experience) – now became in its English translations generally available and subject to individual interpretation. The altar, where an action was performed and a sacrifice offered, gave place in importance to the pulpit, from which the scriptures were read and expounded, and to the chained Bible which people were encouraged to read for themselves – an essentially private act. In the religious compromise effected by the Elizabethan church settlement, the Eucharist survived, but more perhaps as a service to be read than as an action to be *done*, with the altar replaced by a removable table. The great *Corpus Christi* cycles of plays, that had survived long enough for Shakespeare to have seen at least one of them at Coventry, did not simply fall out of favour, as was once believed, but were actively suppressed in the interests of the new Protestant orthodoxy by an alliance of secular and ecclesiastical powers that within thirty years of Shakespeare's death was to close and demolish the theatres.⁷ So far as the medium of Shakespeare's expression was concerned, it was an end-game that he and his fellows were playing.

Shakespeare's plays (and those of his fellow dramatists) were no more written for publication than were the *Corpus Christi* cycles or later morality plays and interludes, and their survival as texts was to prove just as chancy. Not only were they aimed at performance, rather than publication, but their publication was, in most circumstances, firmly resisted by the companies for which they had been written, including the Chamberlain's (later, King's) Men, in which Shakespeare became a sharer. This was because, in the absence of any enforceable copyright other than that of the stationers who printed them, the effect of such publication was to make the texts of the plays freely available for performance by rival companies to the financial loss of those who had commissioned and first performed them. (The plays belonged, not to the author, but to the company. Hence the importance of the playbook, and the book-keeper who was responsible for it.) Nevertheless, as we know, some of Shakespeare's more popular plays *did* find their way into print

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during his lifetime, for the most part in pirated editions, 'maimed and deformed', as Heminges and Condell put it, 'by the frauds and stealthes of injurious imposters', and it was in response to that specific situation that they had mounted their rescue mission. In normal circumstances, only when a play was thought to have exhausted its immediate potential in the theatre and had been dropped from the current repertoire was its publication authorised by the company concerned as a disposable capital asset.

But there was another, more telling reason for Shakespeare having remained invisible to so many of his contemporaries. It was not just the ephemerality of the medium in which he worked or the low status accorded to dramatists among other authors, but a deep-seated disdain on the part of the educated and armorial classes of his day, especially the literati among them, for all those who, like himself and his fellows, earned their living in the realm of public entertainment, whether as musicians, actors or playwrights. Quite simply, they were regarded as 'below the salt', to be patronised perhaps, but otherwise excluded from respectable society. Here was the real source of that discredit which Bodley believed would reflect upon his new library by the admittance of playbooks – irrespective of their quality. It was embodied in the vagrancy laws of the period where minstrels and players were routinely cited together as 'rogues and vagabonds', subject to a whipping if caught on the road without the protection afforded by their acceptance of a nominal, but nonetheless menial, status as servants of the monarch or other great lord. Quite apart from the extreme views of Puritans such as Stubbs and Gosson, for whom acting itself was an offence against God, and players the 'Devil's brood', such attitudes were a commonplace of moderate contemporary opinion.

Once, it may have been otherwise. 'Plaiier', John de la Casa admits in 1615, 'was ever the life of dead poesie, and in those times, that Philosophy taught us morall precepts [he means the classical era], these acted the same in publicke shoves'; but 'Player is now a name of contempt, for times corrupt men with vice, and vice is growne to a height of government'; for 'Players, Poets, and Parasites', he goes on, 'doe now in a man joyne hands [in Shakespeare? In Marlowe

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and Jonson, who at one time had also been players?]; and as Lucifer fell from heaven through pride: these have fallen from credit through folly: so that to chaste eares they are as odious as filthy pictures are offensive to modest eyes'.⁸

Here, perhaps, are those 'public means which public manners breeds' referred to by Shakespeare himself in Sonnet 111:

Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
And almost thence my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.

Or, as Shakespeare's friend and admirer, John Davies of Hereford, was to bluntly express it in 1603, 'the stage doth staine pure gentle blood'.⁹ The same snobbish disdain for the occupation of player was to fester on until comparatively recent times.

The publication of the First Folio was not only, then, a work of fellowly piety to preserve the text of Shakespeare's plays and rescue them from the pirates; it also implied a claim for recognition of his genius as a dramatic poet, which, seven years after his death, remained largely unacknowledged. And the engraving Heminges and Condell commissioned Droeshout to make for it was designed to promote a reformed image of Shakespeare as poet and man of letters in circumvention of the contemporary prejudice against him as public entertainer. In the immediate term, their efforts met with only limited success;¹⁰ but, as the book found its way into libraries (the earliest reference is to a copy bound by the Bodleian in 1624), it was to light a long fuse to an explosion of scholarly interest and a still-thriving academic industry – all centred, naturally enough, on the plays as literary texts. It is the Droeshout engraving – the only authenticated, contemporary portrait we possess – that has dominated the imagination of the book's users ever since.

The Droeshout engraving is immediately followed in the First Folio by Ben Jonson's tribute to his dead colleague and friend and, as if in acknowledgement of its limitations, the reader is urged by him to 'look/Not on his picture, but his book'.

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The memorial bust of Shakespeare in Stratford church (of uncertain date but installed by 1623 at the latest) reinforces this message. (See Plate 2.) Beneath a carving of the now familiar figure, holding a quill in his right hand and resting his left on a sheet of paper, the passer-by is enjoined to stay, and

READ IF THOU CANST, WHOM ENVIOUS DEATH HATH PLAST,
WITH IN THIS MONUMENT SHAKSPEARE: WITH WHOME,
QUICK NATURE DIDE: WHOSE NAME DOTH DECK ^S TOMBE,
FAR MORE THEN COST: SIEH ALL, ^T HE HATH WRITT,
LEAVES LIVING ART, BUT PAGE, TO SERVE HIS WITT.

The inscription is misspelt and over-punctuated; nor does Shakespeare lie 'with in this monument' but under the floor of the church some yards away, but its purport is identical to that of Jonson's epitaph. If we seek the soul of Shakespeare, his 'living art', we have nowhere left to look but to the pages of his book; in that time and place, the theatre was not considered an acceptable option.

A long succession of biographers and scholars have since applied this advice in the most literal way by searching the speeches of the fictional characters he created, and the changing themes of his plays, for clues to Shakespeare's inner, emotional life, or his political and religious opinions. The method is not altogether without interest or value; but the material available to this kind of research is so large and so various that, like the Bible, it can be used selectively to support a multiplicity of contradictory views. So prone is it to subjective bias that all too often the portrait that emerges is found to be more reflective of the researchers' own preconceptions and prejudices, and of the values and assumptions of the period in which they are writing, than it is of Shakespeare; these look for Shakespeare in the mirror of his book and see only a cloudy image of themselves. In so far as such enquiries proceed from a belief that in writing his plays Shakespeare was primarily engaged in a form of self-expression, rather than in responding to the practical needs of the theatres he served and the changing demands and tastes of the public with whom he was in constant touch in the most intimate way possible – as an actor on the

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stage – they rest on a fallacious premise. This is not to deny that, like all great poets and writers, Shakespeare was able to mould whatever material came his way to an aesthetic expression of his own unique experience of life and of the world around him, or to do so in words that at their finest and best reach to universal truths; but, by definition, such intuitive insights are not to be found on the surface of his mimetic inventions; and unless we start from a true appreciation of his initial motivations in putting pen to paper, of choosing one theme, one treatment of a theme, one story rather than another, and always with a particular end in view – a play for a specific group of actors to perform in a specific theatre at a specific time that would give pleasure to a specific audience – we go badly astray. In search of his ‘living art’, we discover only a life. And is it really Shakespeare’s?

Those unwilling or unable to accept the plain fact of his profession as player, or its necessary implications, have found ‘evidence’ for a whole series of alternative occupations to fill the so-called ‘lost years’ of his youth and early manhood: schoolmaster, soldier, sailor, butcher, glover, dyer, scrivener, lawyer, barber-surgeon – nothing is too far-fetched if it can serve to postpone the moment of his emergence, ‘exelent in the qualitie he professes’, as player. Others would avoid that moment of truth altogether by attributing the plays to some other contemporary figure considered to be more fitted by birth and education to be their author. Sir Francis Bacon, the earls of Rutland, Derby, Southampton and Oxford have been among the leading contenders for the coveted title. The mystery these set out to solve is of their own making, and the effect of their conjectures merely to muddy the waters of genuine research.

For those who focus on Shakespeare’s poetry in isolation from the dramatic uses to which he put it, there is no mystery; or rather the mystery is seen as endemic to the nature of poetry itself, for as Keats explained in a letter,

. . . the poetical Character . . . is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing. It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusts, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. . . . A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in

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existence; because he has no identity – he is continually in and filling some other Body. The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute – the poet has none; no identity – he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures. . . .¹¹

For Jorge Luis Borges likewise, 'There was no one in him; behind his face (which even through the bad paintings of those times resembles no other) and his words, which were copious, fantastic and stormy, there was only a bit of coldness, a dream dreamt by no one'. But Borges situates this quality of 'negative capability' not in Shakespeare's nature as poet, but in his predestined profession as actor. 'No one', he goes on to assert,

has ever been so many men as this man who like the Egyptian Proteus could exhaust all the guises of reality. At times he would leave a confession hidden away in some corner of his work, certain that it would not be deciphered; Richard affirms that in his person he plays the part of many and Iago claims with curious words 'I am not what I am'.¹²

And certainly, if part of his peculiar genius as dramatist and poet lay in his capacity to identify with the thoughts and feelings of his characters, and to speak with their voices out of the situations in which he had placed them, that authorial gift cannot have been wholly unconnected with the actor's ability – which, as a senior member of the leading company of his day, he would also have enjoyed – to identify with the characters he played and to make the words of the playwright his own – which in his case, of course, they normally *were*. It is this protean component in Shakespeare's identity that leads so many biographers astray and confuses the critics.

I have said that in publishing the First Folio, Heminges and Condell had planted the seed for an extraordinary, if belated, awakening of scholarly interest in the plays, but the repercussions of it were to spread much further afield.

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By the time of Shakespeare's death in 1616, the theatre to which he had contributed so greatly was already in decline; in 1642 the playhouses were closed by government decree, and were to remain closed for the nineteen long years of the interregnum, during which time they fell into ruin and were demolished. The companies disbanded and, apart from occasional scratch performances in private houses, makeshift booths or taverns, theatrical activity came to an end. Much that is now obscure and confusing in Shakespeare's life story is directly attributable to this break in tradition. When, at his restoration in 1660, Charles II licensed the building of two new theatres in the capital, they were of a very different type from those that Shakespeare had known and written for, and his plays had only a fitful presence in them. When occasionally revived, it was usually in 'improved' (that is to say, mutilated) versions that their author would have had difficulty in recognising as his own.

It was not, then, principally through the theatre that the great upsurge of interest in, and admiration for, his plays was mediated, but rather through publication of a long and continuing series of revised, annotated editions of the First Folio, to which many of the most learned men of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contributed. And as more popular versions of these proliferated in the nineteenth century (lacking notes but often lavishly illustrated by imagined scenes from the plays), the 'book', to which Jonson had recommended the reader to look rather than its author's portrait, came to occupy an honoured place beside the Bible in every Victorian home. And the higher that Shakespeare's reputation as poet and author rose to a pinnacle of universal praise as National Bard, patriotic spokesman, secular prophet and moral exemplar, the more desirable it became to distance him from his theatrical roots and from his occupation as player; while Baconian eccentrics balked at any such connection, these were simply passed over by the mass of biographers as an incidental circumstance of his social situation at a particular period of his life that he was soon to transcend. The tendency was to delay his adoption of the base trade to as late as possible and contrive his retirement from it as early as possible.

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In 1908, Thomas Hardy, replying to an appeal for a donation to a Shakespeare memorial that was to take the form of a national theatre, was able to reply that he did not think that Shakespeare

appertains particularly to the theatrical world nowadays, if ever he did. His distinction as a minister of the theatre is infinitesimal beside his distinction as a poet, man of letters, and seer of life, and that his expression of himself was cast in the form of words for actors and not in the form of books to be read was an accident of his social circumstances that he himself despised.¹³

Recent scholarship, to which we are indebted for more detailed information about the theatrical conditions in which the plays were conceived and first performed than was previously available and, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the restoration to the plays in the theatre of a fuller, more accurate text and a better understanding and respect on the part of actors and directors for Shakespeare's intentions and methods in writing them, has gone some way to restore the balance. No one today would write about Shakespeare's plays without paying at least lip service to the theatrical context of their original creation or seek to deny (as Hardy did) its relevance to a more complete appreciation of them as works of art.

But the pattern of late entry to the players' profession and early retirement from it first set by Shakespeare's early biographers on the basis of imperfect knowledge and Warwickshire legend persists. And as the Droeshout engraving and the Stratford monument have continued to cast their baleful gaze over subsequent generations of readers, and a great, still burgeoning quantity of academic writing – ranging in quality from the brilliantly perceptive to the near-lunatic and barely comprehensible – has descended on the plays considered primarily as texts to be studied rather than as plays to be enjoyed, Shakespeare the player and man of the theatre has remained in the shadows. While literally millions of words have been devoted to authorial and textual problems, few have thought it worthwhile or necessary to treat in any detail of Shakespeare's consecutive career as

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player, or the possible ways in which his experience as an actor may have influenced his writing. The situation that confronted Heminges and Condell in 1623 has thus been exactly reversed. The unacknowledged dramatist whose reputation they sought to promote in face of scholarly neglect has come to occupy nearly all of the frame while the player and man of the theatre whose memory they revered is relegated to the margins.

Does any of this really matter? True, we do not know for certain how good a player Shakespeare was and, for the most part, can only conjecture as to the roles that he played. Again, the art of the actor, however accomplished, and the art of the theatre in general of which he was undoubtedly a master, are essentially ephemeral and, to that extent, beyond our recall. In these circumstances, it is not to be wondered at that his supreme achievement as dramatic poet, for which we have the firm evidence of the printed plays, is seen as of greater importance than any necessarily speculative estimate of his histrionic skills. But from an historical and biographical point of view, it is surely necessary to an adequate understanding of the period, the society in which he lived, and his place within it, to seek an authentic portrait of the man in the fullness of his being; and how can we hope to do this without taking due account of his professional occupation during much the greater part of his life – the occupation by which he was mainly known to his contemporaries? Rob a man of his profession or ‘quality’ (as the actor’s profession was termed in his time) and you rob him of an essential part of his identity. And this is perhaps more true of the actor than anyone else. But there is another objection to those who regard Shakespeare’s occupation as player as more or less peripheral to an appreciation of his genius as ‘poet, man of letters, and seer of life’; for, in attempting to separate the two – the man from his works, the works from the context and original purpose of their creation – you distort and obscure the meaning of the works themselves.

Here, precisely, is the vacuum that lies at the heart of so much biographical and academic writing about Shakespeare, past and present. And how deeply alienating it can be to those who are brought to approach his plays for the first time in preparing for

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school examinations, when the incomparable music of his verses is reduced to numbered, chopped-up parcels of dead learning. 'Explain and discuss'!

Certainly, unless we place this fact of his occupation at the centre of our consideration of his life and works, we are left with an insoluble enigma; of how a well-educated but inexperienced young man from a small Warwickshire town with no theatrical background or training came to have such command of theatrical ways and means, such knowledge and understanding of the poetic and dramatic techniques of his predecessors and contemporaries as, in his earliest-known works, to have surpassed them in achievement and, in a few short years, gone on to write the greatest plays in the language.

To get to grips with the man himself, we have to go behind the literary legend, the invisible man of the Droeshout portrait and the Stratford monument; to make a big leap of historical imagination to put ourselves into that pre-literary, theatrical world that Shakespeare actually inhabited, when the words that he wrote in his London lodgings, or in the snatched intervals of repose on his visits home or on tour, were words to be acted, words for himself and his fellows to speak and be heard from a stage. This I attempt from the perspective of a fellow performer, a latter-day working actor, in the chapters that follow.