SHAKESPEARE

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INTRODUCTION
THE SHAKESPEARE CURRENCY

A year before he died, a friend of mine gave me a Shakespeare sixpence. It has Queen Elizabeth I's profile on one side of it and the royal coat of arms on the other. Someone who badly needed my sixpence has bitten into one edge to check whether it was genuine. Certainly, its silver is airy thin. I call it a Shakespeare sixpence because it was minted in 1592, marking the time when Shakespeare was first mentioned in London. The Rialto Bridge in Venice was built that same year.

Shakespeare too was a coiner – of words. He was someone who freshly minted language, and for whom poetry, laughter, tears, intellectual stimulus and sheer entertainment were a *currency* that had to flow. He died young, about the same age as my friend, and left behind a body of work and a reputation which are second to none. In Shakespeare's time, sixpence would have bought me a place in the Lords' Room at The Globe Theatre to watch his company perform, or admitted me to their indoor playhouse, at the Blackfriars. As I hold this ordinary sixpence – smooth and bright with four centuries of touch – it makes me feel as though Shakespeare's own experience of the world is somehow within reach.

His words are a currency by which we can be transported, too. The poet John Keats wrote a long and loving

letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana, over the Christmas of 1818 and into the New Year. Like all of Keats's letters it is immediate and companionable, warm and affectionate and, like many of them, it includes thoughts and ideas about Shakespeare:

> Now, the reason why I do not feel at the present moment so far from you is that I remember your ways and manners and actions; I know your manner of thinking, your manner of feeling: I know what shape your joy and sorrow would take, I know the manner of your walking, standing, sauntering, sitting down, laughing, punning, and every action so truly that you seem near to me. You will remember me in the same manner – and the more when I tell you that I shall read a passage of Shakespeare every Sunday at ten o'clock – you read one at the same time and we shall be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room.[1]

For Keats, Shakespeare represented a currency of friendship, a heightened but familiar way of acknowledging mutual affection. But there is a deeper, spiritual communion at work in Keats's words, too. Shakespeare (any passage will do) is to be read at the same time, a Sunday at ten o'clock, and then they will feel as close together as it is possible to feel, though apart. Keats, incidentally, does not factor in the time difference: his brother and sister-in-law were living in North America.

Shakespeare has always inspired strong reactions, from extreme praise to sheer and utter boredom, and occasionally condemnation. This book is written from within my own reactions to Shakespeare, which have grown and developed over the twenty years I have lived, worked, written and

taught in Stratford-upon-Avon. You never forget your first visit to this town. I was fifteen and was brought on a school trip from York to see John Caird's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1989. The fairies were dressed as punk rockers and wore Doc Martens boots; the forest was a fantastical refuse site; the mechanicals' performance of the play within the play 'Pyramus and Thisbe' in act five seemed to have us rolling in the aisles. Two weeks later I returned and showed my mother and sister around the town, and we visited Shakespeare's Birthplace and Anne Hathaway's Cottage. We felt we owned Shakespeare, for a day.

This book is not primarily 'about' performance or criticism, though both relate closely to how I understand and enjoy Shakespeare. Nor will it tell you the stories of the plays (except a few, incidentally, in passing). But it will, I hope, explain what kind of writer Shakespeare is, where his work came from, why it matters, what he means to me and why I think he is worth spending time with (though there is never any moral obligation to like his work).

The first chapter presents something of what his life and career were like, the places he spent time in, some of the people he knew, and the world in which he lived. I do not subscribe to the cliché that everything we know about Shakespeare can be written on the back of a postcard. We know more about him than about many of his fellow writers. The problem is that we do not know what we would most like to know. There is no cache of personal papers, such as letters and diaries, but that is the case for most people of his time. Shakespearian biography often compensates for this lack of information by looking for his life in his works.

Here, I present an historical overview of facts about his life, avoiding where possible the stock Shakespearian biographical vocabulary of 'perhaps', 'might have', 'surely would have', 'almost certainly' and 'must have'. Chapter Two looks at his writing process, his reading and the life of the professional theatre, the shaping force of his imagination. Chapter Three considers *what* he wrote. He was a poet and a thinker who wrote innovative plays as well as a dramatist who wrote poetry. The fourth chapter seeks to convey something of his sheer *power* as a writer through looking at how he writes about love and sex, war, history, mortality, transgression and forgiveness. Chapter Five considers the primacy of performance as a way of encountering Shakespeare, the importance of theatre reviewing, and suggests how we might place ourselves as closely as possible to his language by reading a Shakespeare sonnet aloud to ourselves. The final chapter responds to the question 'Why Shakespeare?' by presenting a variety of Shakespearian cultural currencies such as performance, study, celebrations and political action. What is all the fuss actually about? Is he really deserving of his reputation?

1
WHAT WAS HIS LIFE LIKE?

If you wait outside Shakespeare's Birthplace on Henley Street in Stratford-upon-Avon for long enough two things are likely to happen. You will be in many photographs and you will meet someone from almost every country on earth. People go there to pay homage and to understand the world as William Shakespeare knew it.

The house looks large, tidy and respectable. Over time (and because of Victorian renovation) it has become an icon. Actually, the site comprises three houses in one, all of which Shakespeare inherited when he was thirty-seven years old on the death of his father in 1601. His sister, Joan Hart (whose husband died a week before Shakespeare) and her descendants continued to live in an adjoining property on the western side from the early 1600s until 1806. One of the first things Shakespeare did when he inherited the property was to lease it to Lewis Hiccox who extended it at the back and turned it into a pub, The Maidenhead, a thriving business which eventually made fifteen beds available to guests. Eager development of this kind puts Shakespeare squarely and unsentimentally on the side of moneymaking. Innovation and entrepreneurship characterised both his professional and his personal lives.

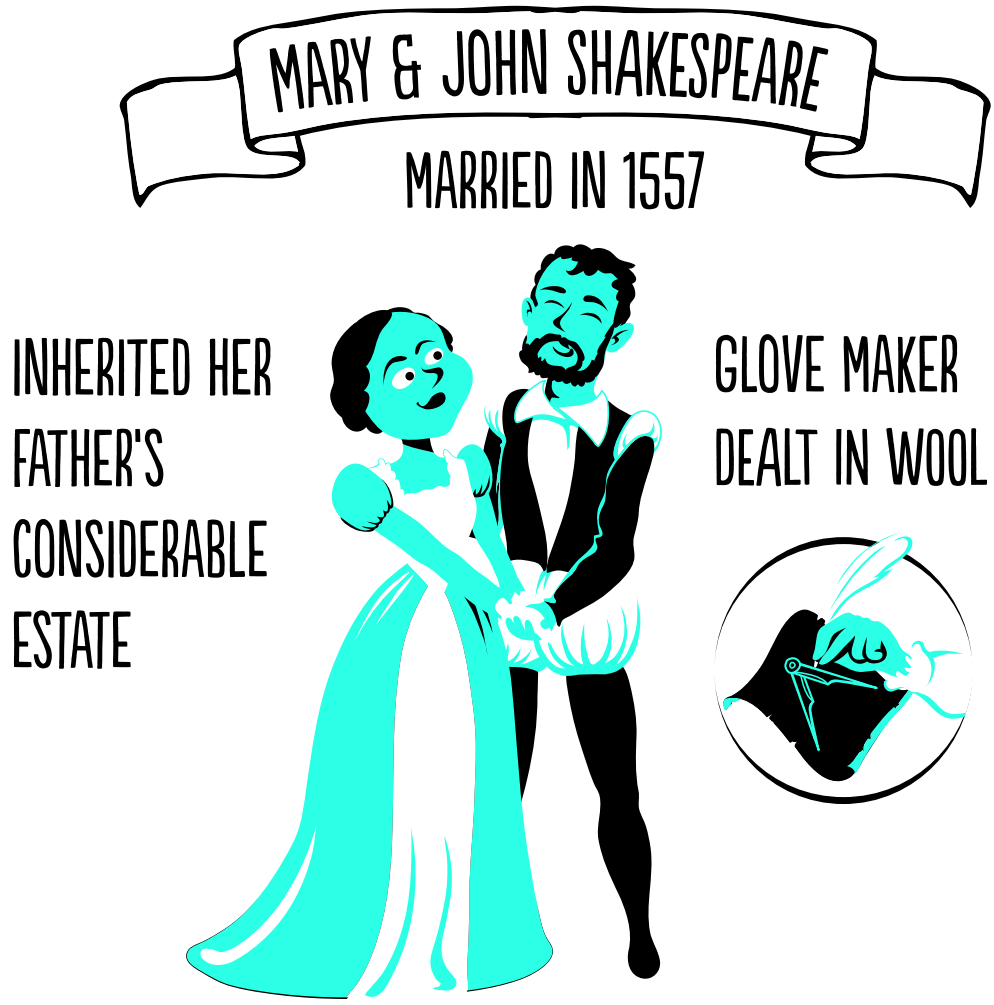
When Shakespeare's great-great-nephew, Shakespeare Hart, inherited the property at the beginning of

the eighteenth century, the pub, later called The Swan and Maidenhead, moved to the eastern part of the site. Over the next half century, the main bedroom in the central section of the house came to be known as 'the Birthroom'. In 1759 Shakespeare's Birthplace was marked on Samuel Winter's map of Stratford-upon-Avon and ten years later the famous actor David Garrick spent a night there during his celebration of Shakespeare known as the Stratford Jubilee. He hung a banner out of the window. By the late eighteenth century part of the site was turned into a butcher's shop. 'Pilgrims', after having written their names on the wall of the increasingly popular shrine upstairs, could then enjoy a drink in The Swan and Maidenhead.

JOHN AND MARY SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare was the son of aspiring parents whose ancestral roots ran deep into the Warwickshire countryside. His father, John (before 1530–1601), came from what remains a small village, Snitterfield, about four miles to the north of Stratford-upon-Avon. Uncle Henry, his father's younger brother, remained farming in Snitterfield all his life and had various scrapes with the law.

John Shakespeare was more interested in self-improvement, but he, too, had his fair share of being caught out in a highly litigious culture. On 29 April 1552 he was fined for making a dungheap outside his home in Henley Street and in 1559 he and Master Clopton of New Place (the great house on Chapel Street which would later become



SHAKESPEARE BORN 1564

William Shakespeare's family home) were fined 'for not keeping their gutters clean'. John managed to buy the eastern wing of the Henley Street home in 1556 and another house in nearby Greenhill Street. In 1557 he married Mary Arden of nearby Wilmcote. She was her father's favourite and the most able of his children. As the youngest of eight daughters (apparently from Arden's first wife) she had, unusually, inherited most of her father's considerable estate in 1556, two farmhouses and as much as

a hundred acres of land. For John Shakespeare it was a socially aspiring marriage; for her part, Mary Arden found a husband full of promise and civic intention.

John served on the Town Council and was a tradesman, whose 'mystery' or craft was that of a 'whittawer', a worker with white leather, and a maker of gloves. John used the symbol of a pair of glover's compasses instead of a signature when witnessing an assessment of fines in 1559 and 1561, and again in 1564. He was of a generation that did not need to write (which does not mean he could not read). It is sometimes said that he would have prepared the leather he needed for his craft at the back of the birthplace, but this is doubtful. Leather making then, as now, was a smelly business that needed specialist equipment and lots of space, and Stratford-upon-Avon had designated tanneries. Importantly, he also dealt lucratively and extensively in wool (a booming business), partly collected from the skins used to make the gloves. In the nineteenth century the landlord of The Swan and Maidenhead described finding remnants of fleece-dealings and wool combing when the parlour floor was being relaid.

John occupied several major public offices. He became one of the town's ale-tasters (an important role in a significant industry), constable in 1558 and 1559, chamberlain from 1561 to 1563, alderman from 1565, and eventually bailiff (the equivalent of mayor) from 1 October 1568–69. He was elected as Chief Alderman and a Justice of the Peace in 1571, and also served as deputy bailiff.

In August 1569 he authorised, as bailiff, two playing companies to perform in Stratford-upon-Avon: the Queen's

Men, and the Earl of Worcester's Men, the first time that troupes of professional actors had come to the town. William Shakespeare was five and a half. Another event burned itself into the town's memory during that same year. John Shakespeare was legally obliged to oversee the white-washing of the vivid medieval wall paintings in the town's Guild Chapel. The state, in pursuit of religious uniformity, required that any suspiciously sensual aspects of Roman Catholicism such as images were covered over or removed. Protestant plainness claimed to be more holy, if far less visually stimulating.

THE WORLD INTO WHICH HE WAS BORN

Stratford-upon-Avon had, since 1196, been a market town with the right to hold an annual fair. By 1564 it was highly prosperous with around one thousand eight hundred inhabitants. Its central location between Wales, London and towns to the north, made it a crossroads of commerce and culture, but it was rural and leafy with many orchards and a thousand or more elm trees. The plague that struck the town in 1564 killed around two hundred inhabitants, including four children of the Green family who lived just three doors away from the Shakespeares. Baby Shakespeare was lucky to escape.

Birth certificates did not exist but the parish registers recorded baptisms. According to the Book of Common Prayer, babies had to be baptised on the next saint's day after their birth or on the following Sunday. St Mark's Day

(the patron saint of Venice) was on 25 April, a day which Elizabethan superstition considered unlucky. Shakespeare was baptised in Holy Trinity Church on Wednesday, 26 April 1564, after morning or evening prayer, in the old Norman font which can still be seen there today. Traditionally, Shakespeare's birthday has been identified as the preceding Sunday, 23 April, St George's Day. The patron saint's day coincides with the birth of the national poet. For corroborative evidence that Shakespeare was born on 23 April we can look to his monument in the north chancel wall of Holy Trinity Church. This tells us he died on 23 April 1616 (the record of his burial was entered on 25 April) aged 53, which means the beginning of his fifty-third year, hence the understanding that he was born and died on the same date.

John and Mary's two previous children had died in infancy: Joan (1558) and Margaret (1562). William was the oldest of five subsequent children. His brother Gilbert was born in 1566 (d. 1612), another Joan in 1569 (d. 1646), Anne in 1571 (d. 1579), Richard in 1574 (d. 1613), and Edmund, who followed in his big brother's footsteps and became a 'player', an actor, in 1580 (d. 1607). That means that by the time Shakespeare was sixteen there were seven people living in the small family home, which by our modern standards allowed for little or no privacy, peace or quiet.

The conventional view of Shakespeare's background is that his father sought and won public approval, position and wealth in the first part of his career and then made some bad errors of judgement, with the result that from the middle of the 1570s he fell on hard times. He bought two more houses in 1572, and that same year he was caught illegally dealing in