PICADOR CLASSIC

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY SIMON CALLOW

JONATHAN BATE

THE GENIUS OF SHAKESPEARE

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PART ONE

WHO IS SHAKESPEARE? WHAT IS HE?

And almost thence my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.
(Sonnet 111)

1

A Life of Anecdote

All that is known with any degree of certainty . . .

The first formal biography of William Shakespeare appeared nearly a hundred years after his death. It was written by the dramatist Nicholas Rowe and prefixed to the *Works of Mr William Shakespear*. Published in 1709, this was also the first modern edition of the plays in the sense that it had a named editor who 'corrected' the text. But by the end of the eighteenth century scholars were questioning the veracity of some of the most celebrated stories narrated by Rowe, for instance the tale of how Shakespeare was forced to leave Stratford for London because he had been caught stealing deer from the park of the local squire. In 1780 the scholar George Steevens wrote:

> As 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,* – I must confess my readiness to combat every unfounded supposition respecting the particular occurrences of his life.

For Steevens, the criterion for 'certainty' was written contemporary proof. The evidence to which he gave credence was that which could be found in the official record. Thus the documents which he trusted most were Shakespeare's will (signed on 25 March 1616, proved 22 June 1616) and certain parish records from Stratford-upon-Avon: the christening of William Shakespeare, son of John Shakespeare, on 26 April 1564; the marriage of William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway on 28 November 1582; the christening six months later of Susanna, daughter to William Shakespeare (26 May 1583); the christening of the twins Hamnet and Judith, son and daughter to William Shakespeare, on 2 February 1585; and the burial of William Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church on 25 April 1616.

Two centuries on from Steevens, we know that the official record is much more comprehensive than this. There are over fifty documents

relating to Shakespeare, his family, and his acting company in the London Public Record Office alone. For instance, on 15 March 1595 the Treasurer of the Queen's Chamber made payments to William Kempe, William Shakespeare, and Richard Burbage for performing plays at court; on 16 May 1599 an inquisition in Chancery allowed Shakespeare and his fellows to occupy the Globe playhouse; and in May 1603 warrants were issued under the royal seal authorizing Shakespeare and his company to call themselves the King's Men. Other PRO documents relate to Shakespeare's defaulting on his taxes, serving as witness in a marital dispute involving the household where he lodged in London, and purchasing property near the Blackfriars theatre where the King's Men played in the last years of his career. Other Stratford documents show him accumulating property in his home town and becoming involved in petty legal disputes.

We know a great deal more about Shakespeare's life than we do about the lives of most of his fellow-dramatists and fellow-actors. But it is in the nature of official documents that they pertain either to the bare facts of birth, marriage, and death, or to legal and financial matters – wills, conveyances of property, debts, and taxes. We learn from them that Shakespeare invested his income shrewdly and was mildly litigious. We do not learn very much from them about his character as it affects what we are interested in: his plays.

And we can all too easily read too much into them. It used, for example, to be suggested that because the first draft of Shakespeare's will made no mention of his wife and the final version only did so in order to give her his second-best bed, then he must have been unhappily married or not a very good husband. But legal historians have shown that, though it was unusual not to include a specific provision for a wife, this does not amount to a disinheritance, since under common law Anne Shakespeare would have been entitled to a third of her husband's estate and to residence in his house for the remainder of her life. The second-best bed is certainly a curious detail, but whether it was a sign of contempt or affection or neither, we cannot tell. It is pure speculation to infer that Shakespeare intended to cut his wife off 'not indeed without a shilling, but with an old bed', as Edmond Malone supposed in 1780. It is equally pure speculation to infer that the best bed would have been reserved for visitors, the second one therefore 'rich in tender marital associations', as Samuel Schoenbaum supposed in 1975.

Far more interesting is a different body of early evidence which reveals a surprising amount about how Shakespeare was viewed by his contemporaries. 'Genius' in Shakespeare's own time did not mean what *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* says that it means now: 'exceptional and transcendent creative power'. The emergence of that meaning is examined in chapter six. Rather, the word's primary meaning was 'characteristic disposition, bent, or inclination; natural character or constitution'. The word suggested the

particular combination of astral influences represented in a person's horoscope. Most of the records we have concerning Shakespeare as an actor-dramatist are anecdotal, but the *representative anecdote*, like the horoscope, is precisely a form of which the purpose is to distil someone's characteristic disposition, their 'genius'. The point of the anecdote is not its factual but its representative truth.

John Keats said that 'A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory – and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life – a life like the scriptures, figurative . . . Shakspeare led a life of Allegory: his works are the comments on it'. From the end of this chapter onwards, we will be hearing a lot about the 'Mystery' of Shakespeare's life and we will be encountering many allegorical or figurative readings of him. The key point to grasp at the outset is that the mystery and the allegories were only born after Shakespeare's death. The mystery had to be invented in order to account for the genius. I offer my initial Anecdotal Life as an antidote to the later Allegorical Lives, for what is striking about the record left by his contemporaries is not the mystery but the *mobility* of William Shakespeare.

The boy William

Shakespeare's anecdotal life begins at thirty – or to be precise, twenty-eight. His early years, like those of Jesus Christ, are shrouded in mystery and consequently dressed up with myth. The relevant records of the Stratford-upon-Avon grammar school do not survive, so we do not know for sure when the boy William was enrolled there and when he left. We do know from the parish records that at the age of eighteen he married an already pregnant older woman, Anne Hathaway, and that the couple had three children, including a pair of twins. The boy, Hamnet, died in 1596 at the age of eleven. But there are no records of Shakespeare's professional activities in the decade after his marriage. There is no reason why there should have been any: only when he began to make his name as a dramatist did others begin to pay attention to him. Some time in the late 1580s he became a player in London; sooner or later, he tried his hand as a writer of plays. Of his early career, this is all we know for sure.

In the absence of external evidence, biographers have sought to unearth anecdotes of the author's youth from details in his plays. This is a very dubious procedure. An Elizabethan play was a collaborative work that belonged to the theatrical company which performed it every bit as much as to the dramatist who wrote it. For this reason, plays were rarely the medium for self-portraiture on the part of the writer. But for the same reason, they were quite likely to include in-jokes for the enjoyment of the company.

There is a good example in *Hamlet*. When the players arrive at

Elsinore, Polonius boasts that he was a bit of an actor himself in his university days. He starred as Julius Caesar: 'I was killed i'th'Capitol. Brutus killed me.' Never one to miss the opportunity for a clutch of puns, Hamlet replies, 'It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there.' A couple of scenes later, Hamlet will – brutally – kill Polonius. In the original performance, there may well have been an added twist to this neat parallelism. Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* for his acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, about a year before *Hamlet*; the two plays were almost certainly in the repertoire together. Richard Burbage, the company's leading actor, would have played both Brutus and Hamlet. If another actor in the company who specialized in the roles of older men played both Julius Caesar and Polonius, then we have a company joke: poor old so-and-so always ends up being stabbed to death by Burbage before the play is half done.

Burbage seems to have made his name playing the role of Shakespeare's Richard III. The coincidence with his own Christian name became another company joke, as will be seen from a bawdy tale to be told later in this chapter. It may be inferred that if we are to find any Shakespearean self-portraits in the plays, the chances are that they will take the form of company jokes, perhaps involving correspondences of name.

Shakespeare invented two characters called William. One of them was the simple-minded country fellow in *As You Like It* who loses Audrey the goatherd to the witty court Fool, Touchstone. 'Art thou wise?' Touchstone asks William. 'Ay, sir, I have a pretty wit', he replies. Pretty indeed: these seven words are the longest sentence that the witless William manages to string together.

We are explicitly told that countryman William was born in the Forest of Arden. His creator, William Shakespeare, son of Mary Arden, was born in Warwickshire, where there was a Forest of Arden. William of Arden is surely William of Stratford's wittily self-deprecatory portrait of himself as tongue-tied country bumpkin.

Tradition has it that Shakespeare excelled more as a writer than an actor. He may well have given most of his energies in rehearsal to 'directing' the company, showing them how to translate his words into stage actions; his own acting roles were therefore likely to have been confined to brief cameos. He is supposed to have played old Adam, Orlando's loyal servant, in the opening scenes of *As You Like It*. The company joke would be complete if he also doubled in the role of young William towards the end of the play. William plays William in order to make fun of his own rural origins.

This, then, is a first image of Shakespeare: a country boy, provincial and therefore assumed to be boorish. He rose to prominence in the 1590s as *the dramatist without a university education*. Soon after his death, he was mythologized as a pure genius, a child of nature *warbling his native wood-notes wild*. Rural origins came to be regarded as synonymous with

lack of culture. But William Shakespeare's ignorance is part of the myth; it is very far from being the historical fact. The self-representation as tongue-tied William of Arden is deliciously ironic because Shakespeare's true wit and verbal facility are amply on display in the character of Touchstone. See this, and the question then becomes: how could the country boy have learnt the sophisticated language of the court jester who is no fool? And at this point we see one of the reasons for the emergence of the Shakespeare Authorship Controversy. People who do not believe that Shakespeare wrote the plays say that William of Stratford really did resemble boneheaded William of Arden. They say that courtly characters – dukes and princesses and sophisticated jesters – could only have been created by a courtier. A courtier such as, for instance, the Earl of Oxford.

The authorship controversy will be discussed in detail in chapter three. The point to grasp here is that it is based on a false premiss, namely the assumption that someone who was not a courtier and did not go to university could not have written learned plays with court settings. This assumption can only be made by someone who knows little of Shakespeare's contemporaries. The most successful of all Elizabethan tragedies was a learned play with a court setting: entitled *The Spanish Tragedy*, it was written by Thomas Kyd, who was not a courtier and did not go to university. Kyd did not need a higher education or inside knowledge of courtly matters in order to be able to write *The Spanish Tragedy*. It was enough that he went to a good grammar school, which equipped him with the necessary arts of reading and writing.

In act four scene one of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a boy called William is given a Latin grammar lesson by Sir Hugh Evans, a Welsh schoolmaster. Was this scene written by an earl such as Oxford who never set foot inside a grammar school in his life? Or by a man called William who as a boy was entitled, by virtue of his father's status as an alderman of the town, to attend the grammar school at Stratford-upon-Avon, where there was a Welsh schoolmaster, one Thomas Jenkins? The lesson of Sir Hugh Evans in *Merry Wives* is based on the Latin grammar book that was the standard school text of the period. It is all the evidence we need that young William Shakespeare attended the King's Free Grammar School of Stratford-upon-Avon.

What would he have been taught there? The Stratford syllabus does not survive, but those of comparable institutions do. Here, for example, are the curricular instructions for the grammar school at Witton in Cheshire. We may assume that Stratford would have offered a very similar education, not least because John Brownsword, the master there in the period immediately before Shakespeare reached grammar school age, was formerly a pupil, then a teacher, at Witton:

> I will [that the boys be] taught always the good literature both Latin and Greek, and good authors such as have the very Roman eloquence joined with wisdom, especially

> Christian authors that wrote their wisdom with clean and chaste Latin, either in verse or in prose; for mine intent is by founding of this School specially to increase knowledge and worship of God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and good Christian life and manners in the children. And for that intent I will the children learn the *Catechisma*, and then the *Accidence and Grammar* set out by King Henry the Eighth, or some other if any can be better for the purpose, to induce children more speedily to Latin speech; and then *Institutum Christiani Hominis* that learned Erasmus made, and then *Copia* of the same Erasmus, *Colloquia Erasmi*, *Ovidius: Metamorphoseos*, Terence, Mantuan, Tully, Horace, Sallust, Virgil and such other as shall be thought most convenient to the purpose unto true Latin speech.

Shakespeare's education would, then, have begun with the fundamentals of Christian doctrine, as laid out in the catechism of the Anglican Church. From there, it would have proceeded to a thorough grounding in Latin grammar. Having been drilled in his grammar, the young William would then have been led line by line through a range of set texts – first, a variety of anthologies and selections, then some original works by the major authors of classical Rome.

The instructions for Witton School indicate that an Elizabethan grammar school education would have placed a particular emphasis upon the 'pure' neo-Latin of the great humanist educator of the early sixteenth century, Desiderius Erasmus. His *Institutum Christiani Hominis* combined the wisdom of the classics with the faith of the Christian; his *De Copia* taught the art of linguistic copiousness, of rhetorical embellishment and variation; his *Colloquies* were dialogues which trained boys in the speaking of Latin. The young William's initial step towards the drama would have been taken when his class performed their Erasmian dialogues: a colloquy is a miniature play, in which appropriate words are found for particular situations and character-types.

Shakespeare's first attempts in the art of literary *composition* would have come a little further up the grammar school. He would have been set the exercise of writing letters in Latin in the style of different characters from classical myth and history. The art of fitting the emotion to the moment would have begun here. Thereafter, he would have been made to write compositions on particular themes, perhaps beginning from an edited version of Erasmus' great collection of proverbial wisdom, the *Adagia*. Many of the 'wise saws' for which Shakespeare's plays have become so renowned – the quotable generalizations about human life – can be traced back to the *Adagia* or comparable textbooks.

If Shakespeare reached the top of the school, he would have found himself composing formal orations and declamations. He would still have been writing in Latin, but he would have learned an art of rhetorical disposition – of lucidly structured argument – which would serve him well when he came to put speeches in the mouths of his dramatic creations. Meanwhile, he would have read a range of Latin literary works, most notably that great storehouse of classical mythology, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Scholarly studies have shown that the classical learning in Shakespeare's plays corresponds very closely to that provided by the

grammar school syllabus.

Grammar school techniques of composition, and in particular the emphasis on rhetorical elaboration or copiousness, stayed with Shakespeare throughout his career. He learnt in school to read a 'source' and embellish it, expand upon it; sometimes he would have to turn prose into verse. This is exactly how he worked as a playwright. He would take a history book – the English chronicles of Holinshed, the classical lives of Plutarch – and turn passages of it into a history play. He would take a prose romance or a novella and turn it into a comedy or a tragedy: a pastoral called *Rosalynd* by Thomas Lodge becomes *As You Like It*; an Italian tale about a Moor and his scheming ensign is dramatized as *Othello*. Or he would simply borrow the plot of an old play from the existing repertoire – *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* or *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* – and make it his own by greatly complicating it.

Here is an example of his compositional method in action. A passage in Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Antonius* describes the moment when Antony first sees Cleopatra, splendidly arrayed on her barge on the River Cydnus:

> the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes, hautboys, citherns, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of her self: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus, commonly drawn in picture; and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys apparelled as painters do set forth god Cupid, with little fans in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her. Her ladies and gentlewomen also, the fairest of them were apparelled like the nymphs Nereids (which are the mermaids of the waters) and like the Graces, some steering the helm, others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge, out of the which there came a wonderful passing sweet savour of perfumes, that perfumed the wharf's side, pestered with innumerable multitudes of people. Some of them followed the barge all along the river's side; others also ran out of the city to see her coming in. So that in the end, there ran such multitudes of people one after another to see her, that Antonius was left post alone in the market-place, in his imperial seat to give audience.

Shakespeare wrote for a bare stage and an appreciative ear. Where the director of a modern musical would tell his designer to build that barge, Shakespeare let his audience fashion the scene in their imagination by turning North's prose into richly evocative verse:

> The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
> Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
> Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that
> The winds were love-sick with them. The oars were silver,
> Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
> The water which they beat to follow faster,
> As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
> It beggared all description. She did lie

In her pavilion – cloth of gold, of tissue –
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature. On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-coloured fans whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did. . . .
Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
So many mermaids, tended her i'th' eyes,
And made their bends adornings. At the helm
A seeming mermaid steers. The silken tackle
Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands
That yarely frame the office. From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
Her people out upon her, and Antony,
Enthroned i'th' market-place, did sit alone,
Whistling to th'air, which but for vacancy
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2.198–225)

Our modern conception of genius makes creativity synonymous with originality. In matters artistic, there is no more severe accusation than that of plagiarism. Students are therefore surprised when you show them these two passages. They are scandalized that Shakespeare did not make up his own story. The barge and all its accoutrements, the apparel of Cleopatra herself, her gorgeous attendants, the common people running out of the city to gaze upon the exotic queen, imperial Antony left alone on his throne in the market place: each successive detail is lifted straight from the source.

But to the Elizabethans, this procedure would have been admirable, not reprehensible. For them, there was no higher mark of artistic excellence than what they called the *lively turning* of familiar material. This was the art of copiousness which they were taught in school: take a piece of received wisdom (a proverb, a phrase, a historical incident, a story out of ancient myth), *turn* it on the anvil of your inventiveness, and you will give it new life.

The genius is in the embellishment. Shakespeare takes the golden poop and the purple sails from North's Plutarch, but adds 'and so perfumèd that / The winds were love-sick with them'. Where the historian has offered mere description, the dramatist adds reaction. He imagines the wind being affected by Cleopatra's aura. Then the water follows suit: the strokes of the oars and their musical accompaniment are in Plutarch, but in Shakespeare the water falls in love even as it is beaten. That pain and love have something to do with each other is a thought he developed later in the play, when Cleopatra compares the stroke of death to a lover's pinch 'which hurts and is desired'.

In Plutarch, Cleopatra is like a picture of Venus, the goddess of love; in Shakespeare, she out-pictures the best imaginable picture of Venus.

The poet proves his art by transforming the historian's plain simile into an astonishingly complex effect: a work of art usually imitates nature, whereas the very best work of art seems to 'outwork' nature, whereas Cleopatra surpasses even that. So does her allure come from nature or from art? Through the poet's imagination, Cleopatra can contrive her goddesslike appearance so that the very elements of nature – first the winds and the waves, then the rope of the tackle, then the stone of the wharf, and finally the air itself – fall in love with her. After this, is it surprising that Antony does so too? Soon he will vacate that throne on which he has been left in the empty market place, looking rather ridiculous. The image of vacation becomes symbolic of the whole process of the play, whereby politics and power are left behind, such is the lure of Cleopatra's erotic aura.

To read Enobarbus' description in accompaniment with its source is simultaneously to see why Shakespeare was a genius in our modern sense and why he did not need more than an Elizabethan grammar school education in order to write his plays. The raw material was there in a readily accessible source. The method of *lively turning* such material was learnt in school. The uniqueness of Shakespeare is the quickness of mind and fertility of imagination that, Cleopatra-like, make effects of art seem like effusions of nature.

The upstart crow

The two characters called William stand as symbols for the essentials of Shakespeare's youth. William of Arden embodies his origins in rural Warwickshire; William of Windsor enacts his exposure to a grammar school education. Country and not city, grammar school and not university: the image precisely fits the earliest surviving allusions to William Shakespeare as dramatist.

The occupation of dramatist in late-Elizabethan England was neither dignified nor secure. In the late 1580s, that other grammar school boy, Thomas Kyd, wrote his hugely successful *Spanish Tragedy*. In 1594, Kyd died in poverty. In the same period, Christopher Marlowe achieved fame with his *Tamburlaine the Great*, *Dr Faustus*, and *The Jew of Malta*. In 1593, Marlowe was killed in a brawl over a tavern bill in Deptford. If Shakespeare had known that Marlowe was exactly the same age as himself, he could not but have been chastened by the thought that Marlowe had achieved so much before he himself had hardly begun; nor could he but have been haunted by imaginings of what Marlowe might have gone on to achieve had he not been struck down. That chastening and that haunting are my subject in chapter four.

Marlowe was one of a group of Cambridge-educated dramatists who have become known as the 'university wits'. But neither their education

nor the success of their plays brought them status or prosperity. Among the leading wits were George Peele, who was frequently in debt and died in poverty in 1596; Thomas Nashe, who eked out a living as a pamphleteer and died in poverty in 1601; and Robert Greene, whose death was as notorious as Marlowe's.

Greene's demise was described in a letter dated 5 September 1592 and published that same year. The author was Gabriel Harvey, another Cambridge man, but no friend to the playmakers. Harvey tells of how he went to London 'to enquire after the famous Author: who was reported to lie dangerously sick in a shoemaker's house near Dow-gate: not of the plague, or the pox, as a gentleman said, but of a surfeit of pickled herring and rhenish wine.' He hears that Greene has died a couple of days earlier. Hostess Isam, the shoemaker's wife, tells him, with tears in her eyes, of how on his deathbed Greene called for a 'penny-pot of Malmsey' and then scribbled 'a letter to his abandoned wife, in the behalf of his gentle host: not so short as persuadable in the beginning, and pitiful in the ending.' For all his animosity towards Greene, Harvey is impelled to pity at the decline whereby the last words of a gifted wit, noted for his fine quips and quaint disputes, are these:

> *Doll, I charge thee by the love of our youth, and by my soul's rest, that thou wilt see this man paid: for if he and his wife had not succoured me, I had died in the streets. Robert Greene.*

Within two weeks of the date of Harvey's letter, the printer and writer Henry Chettle lodged in the Stationers' Register his right to publish 'a book entitled GREENE'S Groatsworth of Wit bought with a million of Repentance'. Apparently reconstructed by Chettle from manuscripts left by Greene at his death, the *Groatsworth of Wit* narrates the picaresque adventures of a younger son called Roberto, whose life-story closely resembles Greene's. Roberto complains about the treatment of writers at the hands of the London players: the actors pay the playwrights a pittance, whilst becoming rich and famous themselves. For this reason, Greene urges his fellow Cambridge men, Marlowe, Nashe, and Peele, to renounce the stage.

Recently, he protests, the players have added insult to injury. It is not merely that they have taken advantage of the university playwrights; now, one of the actors has trespassed on their territory by setting himself up as a writer:

> Yes, trust them not: for there is 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 fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.

There can be no doubt that this refers to Shakespeare. A pun on his name is combined with a parody of one of his lines. In *The True Tragedy of*

Richard Duke of York, the historical drama which the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare's collected plays calls *Henry VI Part Three*, the Duke of York is taunted by his enemies as they place a paper crown on his head. He hits back at the 'she-wolf of France', Queen Margaret, with the words 'O tiger's heart wrapped in a *woman's* hide!' By parodying the line, Greene is complaining that Shakespeare has started writing plays in the elevated blank-verse style which was the trademark of the university wits.

Johannes fac totum means Jack-of-all-trades. Applied to Shakespeare, it means first actor, then dramatist. A Jack, furthermore, was no gentleman. Greene goes on to refer to the players as 'rude grooms'. This is a scornful allusion to the acting companies' status as 'servants' or 'grooms of the chamber' to their royal or aristocratic patrons. The narrative of *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* is a downward spiral from respectability (Master of Arts in the University of Cambridge) to poverty to death; Shakespeare is introduced antagonistically because his path seems to be going in the opposite direction, from country clown to rude groom to successful writer.

The image of the crow and the accusation 'beautified with our feathers' suggest that Shakespeare may even have been filching with his pen. The phrasing is based on that of Thomas Nashe in the preface he contributed to one of Greene's earlier works, *Menaphon*. Nashe had gibed at writers who 'in disguised array vaunt Ovid's and Plutarch's plumes as their own' and at those who trick up the acting companies 'with their feathers'. The image of borrowed plumes is itself a borrowed plume, in that it is taken from a fable in Aesop concerning a crow with borrowed feathers, which the Roman poet Horace applied to literary thieves. For Greene, then, Shakespeare's is a double offence: as an actor, he gains credit for mouthing fine lines which really belong to the university wits, and as an upstart writer he is now imitating their style, even borrowing their phrases, in his own plays.

'Upstart' is a word which entered the English language with the social mobility of the mid-sixteenth century. It means 'one who has newly or suddenly risen in position or importance; a newcomer in respect of rank or consequence; a parvenu'. The word precisely denotes Greene's perception of Shakespeare: a man of low origins who has suddenly come on the scene and is being touted as an important new voice in the theatre.

We do not know whether 'in his own conceit' means that it really was Shakespeare's own joke that he was the only 'Shake-scene in a country', but it certainly was the case that apt punning on his name became commonplace once his reputation was established. Greene's principal emphasis is the new boy's 'rudeness', his lack of an advanced education. It is one of the ironies of the Shakespeare story that the first surviving reference to him concerns the very lack of a university degree which three hundred years later led people to start supposing that the plays must have been written by someone more educated.

How did Shakespeare react to Greene's insults? Like so much pertaining to his life, the answer can only be a matter of inference.

In the autumn of 1592, when the *Groatsworth* was published, the London theatres were closed. This was an occupational hazard which Shakespeare faced throughout his career: fear of public disorder and the risk of plague infection spreading through closely packed audiences meant that there were frequent bans on performance. Save for two brief seasons in midwinter (when the cold weather diminished the risk of plague), the theatres remained closed from June 1592 until June 1594. This must have been frustrating for Shakespeare, since, thanks to the *Henry VI* plays, his new career as a writer was just taking off.

According to Nashe, writing in the summer of 1592, the play featuring the brave Lord Talbot's battles against the French in the time of Joan of Arc was a triumphant success, drawing some ten thousand spectators. The play in question was printed as Shakespeare's in the First Folio, where it is called *Henry VI Part One*. It may, however, have been a work of collaboration between Shakespeare and one or more of the university wits, perhaps even Greene himself. A partnership which ended in tears, with Shakespeare ending up gaining all the credit for the hit play, is as good an explanation as any for Greene's bitterness.

With the future of the London theatres uncertain, Shakespeare had two choices: to continue as an actor and follow his company on a provincial tour, or to try to make his way through his writing. Touring was hard work with little reward; the financial returns from the provinces were too poor for it be worth writing new plays for performance there. Shakespeare made the other choice. Greene's death in poverty at exactly this moment would have been a stark reminder that this was a high-risk decision. Publishers paid writers as poorly as the actors did. One could not sustain a living as a full-time writer. The only means of advancement was to gain aristocratic or court patronage: flatter a lord or lady with an elegant and complimentary dedication and they might give you at least a guinea or two for it. Continue to ingratiate yourself with them and if you were very lucky they might then employ you in some secretarial or other post in their household. This seems to have been Shakespeare's plan of action.

Suddenly to find himself publicly tarred with the feathers of the upstart crow must have been a setback. What incentive would there be for a lord to employ a *Johannes fac totum* when there were university-educated wits aplenty on the market? It looks as if Shakespeare arranged for measures to be taken to defuse Greene's bombshell. Within three months, Henry Chettle, who had been responsible for the publication of the *Groatsworth*, was prevailed upon to offer an apology in the preliminary epistle to his collection of stories, *Kind-Heart's Dream*. He disclaimed the insult to Shakespeare, but admitted to editing Greene's papers and said that he was 'as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault'. He then added a commendation of Shakespeare:

> my self have seen his demeanour no less civil than he excellent 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.

Chettle's language inverts that of the *Groatsworth*. Social derogation is replaced by cordial respect: civility of demeanour and uprightness of dealing are the marks of the gentleman. 'Honest' means 'of good birth'; the word is intended to repair the damage done by 'upstart'. Chettle defends Shakespeare's poetic language as well as his social status; the bombastic player is transformed into a polished writer, characterized by 'art' and 'facetious grace'. 'Facetious' suggests elegance and urbanity. This is the image needed if one is to gain aristocratic patronage: Chettle's characterization marks Shakespeare's first step on the literary and social road of upward mobility.

His image intact, Shakespeare then targeted his potential patron. In April 1593 his *Venus and Adonis*, an erotic narrative poem of supreme wit and polish, was entered on the Stationers' Register in which the right to publish was assigned. The publisher was Richard Field, a fellow old-boy of the Stratford-upon-Avon grammar school. The title-page of *Venus and Adonis* came adorned with a Latin epigraph which began '*Vilia miretur vulgus*' – 'let the vulgar mass admire trash'. The quotation is an implicit renunciation of the 'low' art of playwrighting. 'I know my Latin – despite not having a university degree,' Shakespeare is also saying, 'and I am capable of drinking from the Castalian spring of classical inspiration, writing in the style of Ovid (from whom the epigraph is quoted); I have aspirations to be considered the English equivalent of that most urbane of classical poets.'

Venus and Adonis carries a dedication 'To the Right Honourable Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, and Baron of Titchfield'. Southampton was a young aristocrat who was about to come of age. It was therefore assumed that he was also about to come into considerable power of patronage. 'Your Honour's in all duty, William Shakespeare', the flattering dedicatory letter is signed. Shakespeare had made his debut in print.

We do not know exactly what form Southampton's patronage took, but it does seem that he gave Shakespeare some support in the course of 1593, since a year after the publication of *Venus and Adonis* Shakespeare considered it worthwhile to dedicate a second elegant poem to him, *The Rape of Lucrece*. The tone of the second dedication is more confident and suggests some form of acquaintance: 'The love I dedicate to your Lordship is without end', it begins. By the standards of Elizabethan dedications, this is full but not excessive. We cannot infer from it 'love' in any personal sense. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence to suggest that in 1593 Shakespeare had a degree of intimacy with Southampton's household, and that he was building up his poetic portfolio by writing sonnets as well as narrative poems for the delectation of the young Earl.

This episode will be my subject in chapter two.

If, as seems highly likely, the sonnets do belong to this period, then the opening of number 112 looks striking:

> Your love and pity doth th'impression fill
> Which vulgar scandal stamped upon my brow;
> For what care I who calls me well or ill,
> So you o'er-green my bad, my good allow?

The previous two poems in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence have hinted at the social stigma attached to the trade of acting: 'Thence comes it that my name receives a brand' (111); 'Alas, 'tis true, I have gone here and there / And made myself a motley to the view' (110) – 'motley' is a technical term for the dress of the stage Fool. What is the 'brand' of sonnet 111, the 'vulgar scandal' of 112? If the rejection of the 'vulgus' proclaimed on the title-page of *Venus and Adonis* was Shakespeare's way of trying to put the *Groatsworth* scandal behind him, we have our answer. It may be, then, that the verb in line four is a private joke. It is a nonce-word, a Shakespearean coinage never used again. In the original text it is spelt 'ore-greene'. Could it mean 'cover over Greene's insult'? The sonnet would then be saying: 'I do not care that Greene calls me ill and Chettle calls me well, all I care is that you, my fair young patron, should care for me.'

If I were reading Shakespeare's life as one of allegory and finding comments on it in his works, in the manner suggested by Keats, I would say that Will's social mobility and his ability to remake himself are dramatized in the figure of Prince Hal, whilst his recognition that to have a great wit does not necessarily lead to financial reward is dramatized in the character of Sir John Falstaff – who dies in Hostess Quickly's tavern, calling out for sack and remembering a woman called Doll in an uncanny replication of Greene's death in Hostess Isam's house, calling out for malmsey and writing to a wife called Doll. But Shakespeare's life of contemporary anecdote tells us nothing of whether the relationship with Southampton ended in reward or in neglect. There is only a posthumous tradition that the Earl provided financial support (to the tune of a thousand pounds), so it can only be fancy that Southampton's funds provided Shakespeare with the money which enabled him to become a leading shareholder in the company of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, formed when the London theatres reopened in the summer of 1594.

From that point on, Shakespeare was house dramatist to the Chamberlain's (later King's) Men, regularly writing two or three plays a year, devoting himself fully to the theatre. Where the university wits' relationship with the acting companies had been one-sided, Shakespeare saw that the dramatist's best hope was to have a stake in the company himself. In that sense, he invented the *profession* of dramatist. Within a few years, others were following the trail he had blazed: Thomas

Heywood carved out an analogous position for himself as house dramatist with the Lord Admiral's Men, the other leading company of the later 1590s, and Ben Jonson became the second commercially successful dramatist without a university background.

Instead of leading to a career as a secretary in an aristocratic household, the two narrative poems worked wonders for Shakespeare's public image. *Venus and Adonis* was his most successful work, being reprinted in 1594, 1595, 1596, twice in 1599, and three times in 1602. The number of reprintings suggests that it sold over ten thousand copies in a decade, which would make it the best-selling poem of the Elizabethan age. It was certainly quoted and imitated more frequently than any other poem. Because of it, Shakespeare was known above all as a witty, sophisticated writer, as 'rich conceited', 'sweet', and 'honey-flowing'.

Most excellent in both kinds for the stage

By 1598 his dramatic works were being widely praised too. That year Francis Meres, an Oxford man resident in London and with his finger on the pulse of the literary scene, published a comparison between living English writers and dead classical ones. Meres gave the impression of being in the know among the literati by mentioning that Shakespeare was circulating 'sugared' sonnets 'among his private friends'. But he was in fact a representative witness rather than a privileged one. His opinions were nearly all Elizabethan commonplaces; precisely because they are unoriginal, they are evidence of the general view of Shakespeare. Meres regarded Shakespeare as the wittiest, most mellifluous poet of the age: this was the common currency of literary opinion. He considered *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* to have made Shakespeare a reincarnation of Ovid: this is proof of those poems' success in the work of self-promotion.

Meres described Shakespeare as 'the most excellent' English dramatist for both comedy and tragedy. He listed the plays on which his judgement was based: in comedy, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, the now lost *Love's Labour's Won*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*; in tragedy, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Six years on from Greene's scornful dismissal, and before the writing of the plays most admired in later ages, the upstart crow had made it to the top.

By the end of the 1590s Shakespeare was admired for both his verbal facility and his variety of modes and moods. He was seen to move with ease between lyric and dramatic forms, and between tragedy and comedy. No other poet, either English or classical, was praised by Meres

in so many different categories of writing.

Around 1600, Gabriel Harvey gave further witness to Shakespeare's variety, remarking that the 'younger sort' took much delight in the playful *Venus and Adonis*, while 'the wiser sort' preferred the tragic matter of *Lucrece* and *Hamlet*. Then in 1604 one Anthony Skoloker praised Shakespeare for combining light and heavy matter, comedy and tragedy, in a single play: '*Friendly Shakespeare's Tragedies*, where the *Comedian* rides when the *Tragedian* stands on tip-toe . . . pleas[ing] all, like Prince *Hamlet*.' As the image of Shakespeare the man was associated with social mobility, so the image of Shakespeare the dramatist was characterized by stylistic range and generic flexibility.

In the sixteenth century, the selling point of a play was generally its title, not the name of the dramatist. No writer's name is included on the title-pages of Shakespeare's earliest printed plays, *Titus Andronicus* (1594), *The First Part of the Contention betwixt the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster* (1594) and *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* (1595). But by 1598–9 Shakespeare's name had sufficient recognition value for publishers to think it worth a place on their title-pages. The first printed editions of plays to bear Shakespeare's name were the Quartos (slim volumes, analogous to the modern paperback) of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Richard II* which appeared in 1598, and *Henry IV Part One* and *Richard III* which appeared the following year.

That there was a widespread vogue for Shakespeare by this time is also demonstrable from a fascinating series of allusions in a pair of plays called *The Return from Parnassus*, produced by Cambridge University students between 1599 and 1601.

A character in the first of these plays is a foolish gentleman called Gullio, who wishes to impress both his mistress and the aristocracy. He thinks that the way to do this is to quote copiously from *Venus and Adonis*, *Lucrece* and *Romeo and Juliet*. He mouths Shakespeare's lines, pretending that they are his own. 'We shall have nothing but pure Shakespeare, and shreds of poetry that he hath gathered at the theatres', complains Ingenioso, a representation of the Cambridge-educated Thomas Nashe, as Gullio launches into a 'monstrous theft' from *Romeo*, then lifts a stanza from *Venus*:

> Thrice fairer than my self, thus I began,
> The gods' fair riches, sweet above compare,
> Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
> More white and red than doves and roses are:
> Nature that made thee, with herself at strife,
> Saith that the world hath ending with thy life.

The primary anecdotal value of the *Parnassus* plays is that they show us which Shakespearean styles were regarded in the dramatist's own time as his most characteristic and popular. Surprisingly from the point of view of what has been most valued down the ages, one answer proves to be

the elegant verbal play, the polished symmetry and rhetorical elaboration, of stanzas such as this. In a later scene, however, lines that are more familiar to us are shown to have been already memorable in their own time. A character is auditioned for a Shakespearean tragic lead, and the passage he is given is the astonishingly arresting start of *Richard III*:

> Now is the winter of our discontent
> Made glorious summer by this son of York.

The scene featuring Gullio the Shakespeare-worshipper continues with Ingenioso composing imitations of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare, then asking for a choice to be made between them. The foolish Gullio's choice of Shakespeare above the venerable Chaucer and Spenser carries the clear implication that from the play's 'university' point of view the vogue for Shakespeare has grown severely out of proportion. The *Parnassus* plays were a continuation of the battle between university and non-university writers.

This becomes even clearer in a later scene, when the leading actors of the Chamberlain's Men, the tragedian Richard Burbage and the clown Will Kempe, are impersonated. Burbage and Kempe stand up for their fellow Shakespeare and condemn the university wits for larding their plays with an excess of mythological imagery: 'they smell too much of that writer *Ovid* and that writer *Metamorphoses*'. Kempe's ignorance of the fact that *Metamorphoses* is a work by Ovid, not the name of another writer, is a typical 'university' put-down of the vulgar players. Ironically though, Shakespeare – as Meres recognized – had a better claim than any university dramatist to the mantle of Ovid. His immensely popular *Titus Andronicus* was the most notable Ovidian drama of the age.

Titus is characterized by a bold combination of high tragedy and black comedy, of pathos and grotesquerie, of love-language and bloody spectacle. It deliberately flouts the classical decorum which would prevent these differing tones from keeping company. Its indecorum seems to be the object of satire in another scene in *The Return from Parnassus*, when a character called Judicio, having equivocally praised the non-university Ben Jonson as 'the wittiest fellow of a Bricklayer in England', produces what is intended to be a critically judicious summary of the art of William Shakespeare:

> Who loves not *Adon's* love, or *Lucrece'* rape?
> His sweeter verse contains heart-robbing lines,
> Could but a graver subject him content,
> Without love's foolish lazy languishment.

As so often, Shakespeare's capacity to touch the heart is singled out for praise, together with the sweetness of his poetic language. The phrase 'graver subject' alludes to 'some graver labour', Shakespeare's own

description in the dedication to *Venus and Adonis* of the yet-to-be-written *Rape of Lucrece*. But the final line of Judicio's characterization sounds like a parody of *Titus*, the other Shakespearean work on the classical theme of rape. In that play, the villainous Aaron compares love to 'lingering languishment' (2.1.111); he recommends rape as a better course of action. With 'love's foolish lazy languishment', the *Parnassus*-author parodies both Shakespeare's rococo alliteration and his indecorous contamination of the heroic form of tragedy with the lyric matter of erotic desire.

Ovid would have us believe that one of the functions of love poetry is to persuade people to jump into bed with you. We have one tantalizing piece of evidence that Shakespeare's quickness of wit – manifested nowhere more richly than in the lovers' wit-combats of Biron and Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Rosalind and Orlando in *As You Like It* – served him well in this regard. The story comes to us from two different sources, one of them a diary entry made on 13 March 1602 by a law student and playgoer called John Manningham. Since the existence of this diary was not known until the nineteenth century, the version of the story which circulated in the theatrical tradition in earlier centuries provides independent corroboration of the incident's underlying truth.

The story first reached print in Thomas Wilkes' *General View of the Stage*, published in 1759:

> One evening when *Richard III* was to be performed, Shakespeare observed a young woman delivering a message to Burbage in so cautious a manner as excited his curiosity to listen to. It imported, that her master was gone out of town that morning, and her mistress would be glad of his company after Play; and to know what signal he would appoint for admittance. Burbage replied, 'Three taps at the door, and "It is I, Richard the Third." ' She immediately withdrew, and Shakespeare followed till he observed her to go into a house in the city; and enquiring in the neighbourhood, he was informed that a young lady lived there, the favourite of an old rich merchant. Near the appointed time of meeting, Shakespeare thought proper to anticipate Mr Burbage, and was introduced by the concerted signal. The lady was very much surprised at Shakespeare's presuming to act Mr Burbage's part; but as he (who had wrote *Romeo and Juliet*), we may be certain, did not want wit or eloquence to apologize for the intrusion, she was soon pacified, and they were mutually happy till Burbage came to the door, and repeated the same signal; but Shakespeare popping his head out of the window, bid him be gone; for that William the Conqueror had reigned before Richard III.

There may be a little embroidery here (the cuckolding of a rich old merchant is a classic folk-tale motif), but the version of the story in Manningham's diary is identical in substance, save that in his account the citizen herself attends the play and is so impressed by Burbage's performance that before leaving the theatre she finds him backstage and makes the assignation. Manningham is also crisper on the substance of the matter: Shakespeare was 'at his game' with the woman when Burbage knocked on the door.

There is no more vivid anecdote of the life of Shakespeare's theatre. Richard Burbage puts in such a charismatic performance as Richard III that the female theatregoer responds by offering him her body, every bit in the manner of a modern pop star's groupie. Shakespeare, with his usual eye for the main chance, pops in between the erection and Burbage's hopes, then pops out of the window with a stunningly witty punchline. Burbage has no cause to complain about Shakespeare presuming to act his part, because Shakespeare has himself written the part of Richard. Shakespeare's art may not have advanced him among the aristocracy, but it has got him into a citizen's bed.

As far as Shakespeare's more serious social aspirations were concerned, they received a boost in 1596 when, acting on behalf of his father, he obtained a coat of arms and a motto to attach to the family name. By 1596, then, his plays and poems had earned enough for him to buy a piece of gentility; by the following year they had earned enough for him to buy New Place, the second-largest house in Stratford-upon-Avon. There may be some affectionate mockery of Shakespeare's social climbing in a scene in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* (1599) in which a country character called Sogliardo comes up to London and buys a patent for a coat of arms, which costs him thirty pounds but enables him to sign himself gentleman. The motto for the Shakespeare arms seems to have been 'non sanz droict', 'Not without right'. Sogliardo's motto is '*Not without mustard*'. Mustard was proverbially sharp – John Marston snarled out 'sharp mustard rhyme / To purge the snottery of our slimy time' – so the allusion could be translated as *it is not without a certain piquancy that Shakespeare claims a 'right' to gentlemanly status*. Mustard was also the cheapest of condiments: where a true gentleman would have spiced his food more exotically and expensively, mustard is a betrayal of Shake-scene's base origins.

Art or nature?

Affectionate mockery was the tone of most of Ben Jonson's allusions to Shakespeare during his lifetime. In the prologue to his revised version of *Every Man in his Humour*, he gently derided the lack of realism in the history plays. On Shakespeare's stage, the Wars of the Roses are fought with 'three rusty swords' and 'some few foot-and-a-half words', while the Chorus in *Henry V* 'wafts you o'er the seas' by pure authorial fiat. Then in the induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson teased the audience for their preference for old plays like *Titus Andronicus* and Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* over newer works – implicitly his own. He also 'apologized' for not including in his play such popular Shakespearean vulgarities as 'a *Servant-monster*' (Caliban) and '*Jigs* and *Dances*' (the musical interludes in the sheep-shearing feast of *The Winter's Tale*). The

features picked out for mockery both here and in Jonson's later pronouncements – for example that *Pericles* was a 'mouldy tale' and *The Winter's Tale* was absurd because it has a shipwreck on the coast of Bohemia, a country located one hundred miles from the sea – are breaches of that classical decorum which on the one hand demands verisimilitude in drama and on the other prescribes the separation of tragedy from comedy, high style from low.

In one of his conversations with the Scottish poet William Drummond, Jonson famously said 'that Shakespeare wanted Art'. Jonson's own method of compensating for his lack of a university education was the introduction into English Renaissance theatre of a new degree of classical regularity, an imitation of the admired examples of Roman comedy and tragedy. This is the 'art' which he claimed Shakespeare lacked.

Jonson set himself up as the English Horace. One of the arguments of Horace's *Art of Poetry* had been that the true poet combines nature with art, inspiration with perspiration. In the words of Jonson's own translation of the *Ars Poetica*: 'A good and wise man will cry open shame / On artless verse.' The true artist will go over his work again and again, and 'blot out' his 'careless' lines 'with his turned pen'.

Shakespeare's extraordinary linguistic facility had given him a reputation for composing at great speed. When his fellow-actors John Heminges and Henry Condell published his collected plays in the First Folio of 1623, they included a prefatory address 'To the Great Variety of Readers' in which they said that 'His mind and hand went together, and what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers'. According to Jonson's Horatian poetics, this absence of 'blots' was a deficiency, not a strength. It meant that the poet had not returned to his text and turned over his 'careless' passages. Jonson dissented from Heminges and Condell's praise in a passage 'concerning our Shakespeare' in his literary notebook:

> I remember the Players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare that in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out a line. My answer hath been 'Would he had blotted a thousand!', which they thought a malevolent speech. I had not told posterity this, but for their ignorance, who choose that circumstance to commend their friend by, wherein he most faulted. And to justify mine own candour (for I loved the man, and do honour his memory – on this side Idolatry – as much as any), he was indeed honest, and of an open and free nature, had an excellence Fancy, brave notions and gentle expressions, wherein he flowed with that facility that sometimes it was necessary he should be stopped . . . His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been so too.

Jonson's praise of Shakespeare's character is unstinting: 'he was indeed honest' roundly confirms Chettle's reply to Greene's abuse, while 'an open and free nature' suggests exactly that openness to all impressions and possibilities, that willingness to experiment and unwillingness to close the mind which John Keats later described as 'negative capability'.

The reason for the element of criticism in Jonson's memorandum is his view that Heminges and Condell did Shakespeare no favours by praising him for never having a second thought.

This was a matter of great concern to the classically inclined Jonson. He dwelt upon it in his poem, 'To the Memory of my Beloved, the Author Master William Shakespeare, and what he hath left us', which was printed prominently in the First Folio, immediately after Heminges and Condell's address to the reader.

Jonson opens his poem by writing that he will not offer ignorant praise or blind affection; he will seek to explain as well as to commend. The explanation begins with an enumeration of Shakespeare's predecessors, the writers who shaped the theatre he inherited: Thomas Kyd, author of the vastly influential *Spanish Tragedy*, John Lyly, the age's first great writer of comedies, and Christopher Marlowe, who forged the 'mighty line' which is late Elizabethan verse-drama's greatest glory. Shakespeare outdid them all. Jonson then goes on to make a higher claim: that the works of Shakespeare even outdid those of the ancients. He was greater than Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in tragedy, than Aristophanes, Terence, and Plautus in comedy. His achievement is regarded as nothing less than the making of British literature as something superior to the classics.

Such a claim might sound 'insolent' and 'haughty', but Jonson neatly forestalls this potential criticism by applying those very adjectives to the drama of Greece and Rome which Shakespeare is said to overgo. 'Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe', proclaims one of the poem's several prophetic invocations. In later centuries, the writers of every country of Europe would indeed pay homage to Shakespeare, just as Shakespeare did indeed 'shine forth', as Jonson exhorts him to, as a star to light later poets and artists along the way of creativity.

One of the poem's chief conceits is that Shakespeare has succeeded in outdoing the ancients without having a great knowledge of them. That is to say, he has surpassed his predecessors in spite of his 'small Latin and less Greek'. Jonson's purpose in mentioning Shakespeare's lack of advanced accomplishment in the ancient languages was not to condemn his friend for ignorance or to say that he had no education. This, however, is what later readers have often assumed was his point, with all sorts of unfortunate consequences which I discuss in later chapters. The point is rather that Shakespeare's genius has reanimated the spirits of the fathers of tragedy without any attempt at a conscious imitation of them. What has enabled him to do this is his direct truth to nature: 'Nature herself was proud of his designs, / And joyed to wear the dressing of his lines.'

But then, keeping in mind his Horatian sense of the need for both inspiration and perspiration, Jonson writes,

Yet must I not give Nature all; thy Art,
My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part.
For though the poet's matter nature be,
His art doth give the fashion; and that he
Who casts to write a living line must sweat –
Such as thine are – and strike the second heat
Upon the muses' anvil, turn the same,
And himself with it that he thinks to frame;
Or for the laurel he may gain a scorn,
For a good poet's made as well as born.
And such wert thou.

Here Shakespeare is praised for doing exactly what Heminges and Condell said that he did not do: having second thoughts, blotting and improving his lines. Jonson goes on to write of his fellow-dramatist's 'well-turned and true-filed lines': turning and filing constitute Horace's praise of the poet as *craftsman* rather than as natural genius. Turning is the art of chiselling raw blocks of Plutarch's prose into the finely honed verse of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

But Jonson failed in his attempt to create an image of Shakespeare as both poet of nature and scrupulous craftsman who knew the need to work and rework his material. The image from the opening pages of the First Folio which endured was that of Heminges and Condell: Shakespeare writing so smoothly and so perfectly that he scarce blotted a line. This image paved the way for the later apotheosis of Shakespeare as pure genius untrammelled by art.

In 1640, a new edition of Shakespeare's *Poems* was published with a dedicatory epistle by Leonard Digges. It was a point-for-point reply to Jonson's poem in the First Folio. It opens with the words 'Poets are born, not made.' This is a deliberate rebuff to Jonson's 'a good poet's made as well as born'. In Digges' poem, Shakespeare's works are characterized by 'Art without art unparalleled as yet'. A series of claims are then made about Shakespeare's achievement. Whilst Jonson's image of Shakespeare revising and polishing his work – striking the second heat upon the Muses' anvil – has been forgotten, Digges' praises became critical commonplaces:

Next, nature only helped him, for look through
This whole book, thou shalt find he doth not borrow
One phrase from Greeks, nor Latins imitate,
Nor once from vulgar languages translate,
Nor plagiary-like from others glean,
Nor begs he from each witty friend a scene
To piece his acts with. All that he doth write
Is pure his own: plot, language exquisite.

In 1623, Jonson's Shakespeare had held nature and art in Horatian balance; in 1640, Digges' Shakespeare is all nature, all instinct. Misunderstanding Jonson's phrase about Shakespeare's 'small Latin and

Hathaway one long June afternoon' – a woman eight years his senior, she was six months pregnant when they married. It was not enough.

He goes to London and becomes an actor. He gains a singular satisfaction from impersonating other beings. But still this is not enough, so he takes to imagining other beings. He writes plays himself:

> And so, while his flesh fulfilled its destiny as flesh in the taverns and brothels of London, the soul that inhabited him was Caesar, who disregards the augur's admonition, and Juliet, who abhors the lark, and Macbeth, who converses on the plains with the witches who are also Fates. No one has ever been so many men as this man, who like the Egyptian Proteus could exhaust all the guises of reality.

Did he ever leave any hints in these plays as to his true identity? Borges thinks that he only did so at those moments when he recognized that identity is itself play – when Richard III says that he plays the part of many and Iago proclaims 'I am not what I am'. His most famous passages – Hamlet's soliloquies, Jaques' oration on the seven ages, Prospero's 'Our revels now are ended' – suggest that 'existing, dreaming and acting' are all three one and the same thing.

> For twenty years he persisted in that controlled hallucination, but one morning he was suddenly gripped by the tedium and the terror of being so many kings who die by the sword and so many suffering lovers who converge, diverge and melodiously expire.

He sells his share in his theatre and returns to his native town. He takes up another role, that of 'a retired impresario who has made his fortune'. He has to do something: he concerns himself with 'loans, lawsuits and petty usury'. But

> History adds that before or after dying he found himself in the presence of God and told Him: 'I who have been so many men in vain want to be one and myself.' The voice of the Lord answered from a whirlwind: 'Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one.'

'Are you', not 'is you': the form of Shakespeare is plural. Borges called his allegory 'Everything and Nothing'.

bicycle'. Asked what a piece of his music *meant*, Robert Schumann played it again.

It is in the context of this argument that we must read Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare. That Shakespeare's similes are bad is a suitably dramatic way of announcing that we shouldn't bother ourselves with the traditional aesthetic criteria. The proof of his greatness is in its effect, in the reactions and actions it brings about. 'You just have to accept him as he is if you are going to be able to admire him properly' doesn't mean that Shakespeare doesn't inherently mean anything in particular; it means that 'greatness' should be thought about in terms of effects, not causes.

This, it seems to me, is the only way we can satisfactorily answer the question of why the works of Shakespeare are indisputably greater than the collected cartoons of Bugs Bunny. Internal causes can always be disputed: 'You might think Aesthetics is a science telling us what's beautiful – almost too ridiculous for words', remarks Wittgenstein, 'I suppose it ought to include also what sort of coffee tastes well'. But specific effects can be observed: 'Perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetics is what may be called aesthetic *reactions*'. In the intensity and variety of the reactions and actions it provokes, the 'Shakespeare Effect' is greater than the 'Bugs Bunny Effect'.

That is an unfair comparison because Shakespeare has been around for longer than Bugs Bunny. A better comparison would be with the 'Ben Jonson Effect'. Jonson's works were available in a collected edition from around the same time as Shakespeare's; when the English theatres reopened after the Restoration, Jonson held a more prestigious position than Shakespeare in terms of both influence and revivals (his *Epicoene* fathered more of the best of Restoration drama than did any Shakespearean comedy); in aesthetic theory, his art was more admired than Shakespeare's. But, as the eighteenth century unfolded, the Jonson Effect waned while the Shakespeare Effect waxed. In particular, the Shakespeare Effect started working outside the author's own native country, something that happened barely at all with the Jonson Effect. If the argument of the New Iconoclasts were right, it would be as possible to 'mean by Jonson' as to 'mean by Shakespeare', but it has not been possible so to do.

In answer to the question 'Why has the Shakespeare Effect been greater than the Jonson Effect?', the New Iconoclast will reply: 'Because Shakespeare is a site of greater cultural authority than Ben Jonson – he is a talisman which people want to have on the side of their own ideology'. But this argument is strictly circular: why is Shakespeare a site of greater cultural authority than Ben Jonson? Because people have made a greater investment in making meaning out of him. Why have people made a greater investment in making meaning out of him? Because he is a site of greater cultural authority. Etc. Etc. We need another explanation.

Since the Shakespeare Effect has been and is so much greater than the Jonson Effect, I conclude that it is possible to make judgements about

'greatness'. But still we need to ask what it is about the plays themselves that exercises this great effect. Wittgenstein insists that we must attend to the whole effect. It is no use picking out some individual feature – elegance of plot, complexity of character, inventiveness of language. Some other writers have as good plots as Shakespeare, as complex characters and equally compelling poetry (often, indeed, written in a more accessible and less self-indulgent language). But the effect of those other writers is not so great as the Shakespeare Effect.

Wittgenstein was an ambitious and optimistic young philosopher. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) he attempted to demonstrate that we can infer the logical structure of reality from the logical structure of language. But the attempt could not account for certain illogical things like religious and aesthetic experience. Since these were things whereof we cannot speak logically, the young Wittgenstein thought that we should remain silent about them.

The older Wittgenstein renounced the confidence of the *Tractatus* and reined in the ambitions of philosophy. He also found a way of talking of those things about which he had previously said we should keep silent. But he discovered that in order to talk about them usefully and to avoid lapsing into nonsense, he had strictly to circumscribe the terms in which he conducted the conversation. Indeed, what he did was to pay close attention *to* the terms of the conversation.

Imagine arguments about things like metaphysics and aesthetics as analogous to games. A game makes perfect sense according to its own rules; you only run into trouble if you start trying to play it by the rules of another game. The later Wittgenstein's favoured method of arguing was the 'language game'. He says: let us attend to the particular thing we are doing with words here, let us not attempt to make language instrumental in a passage to some higher realm of metaphysics. This is what he means by giving up philosophy. Giving up literary criticism would mean something similar: let us attend to the particular thing Shakespeare is doing or making happen with words and actions here, let us not attempt to pass to some higher realm of aesthetics.

Performative criticism

What is the best name for this kind of philosophy, this kind of literary criticism? In 1955 the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin published a book called *How to Do Things with Words*. To make philosophers regard their profession as a matter of doing things with words was Wittgenstein's most enduring achievement. Austin was especially interested in utterances which effect an action by the act of being spoken (promises and apologies, for instance). He coined a new word for this kind of utterance: 'performative'. What his book demonstrated was that many

kinds of utterance ordinarily classified as statements have an element of performativeness. Wittgenstein, who had died just a few years earlier, would not have been surprised by this conclusion; he would have recognized that *performative* is exactly the right name for his own later philosophical procedure. His method was to choose an example and work it through with close linguistic attention; the working through did not *lead to a conclusion*, it *performed the point*.

Two consequences followed from this method. The first was that Wittgenstein never again made a general theoretical statement like that of the *Tractatus*. The second was that he never published another book: his performative method meant that he had to perform his philosophy in notebooks, conversations, seminars, and lectures. To commit a position to print would have been to put an end to the performance, to stall the process of working through and thinking aloud which was the whole point of the enterprise.

What analogies are there for the performative way of thinking? The game is one, as we have seen. Another is the dream. An intellectual born in Vienna in 1889, as Wittgenstein was, could not but have been fascinated by Freud's attempt to decipher the grammar of dreams. A dream performs a psychological function for the dreamer. Like a game, a dream makes perfect sense according to its own rules.

A third performative kind of thinking is theatre. Indeed, theatre has the best claim to be the original performative mode. See this and you see another meaning of Wittgenstein's 'Give up philosophy!' Philosophy was born with Plato, who regarded his enterprise as a rival one to that of theatre. Though it grew from the profoundly dramatic method of the Socratic dialogue, the Platonic pursuit of wisdom and of essence could not abide theatre's implicit claim that everything is performance. By returning thinking to the performative mode, Wittgenstein was bringing to an end the centuries-long battle between philosophy and theatre. Giving up philosophy means acknowledging the superiority of theatre's way of doing things.

In the English language since Shakespeare's time, the words *perform* and *play* have had a special association with acting. The creation of that association in conjunction with the creation of a public theatre may be regarded as the most enduring achievement of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. There is a beautiful propriety about the fact that *The Oxford English Dictionary*'s earliest citation for the special sense of 'perform' as 'to act a part in a play' is Prospero to Ariel: 'Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou / Performed, my Ariel' (*The Tempest*, 3.3.83–4).

Like a dream-world, a play-world has its own rules. Wittgenstein says:

> Shakespeare and dreams. A dream is all wrong, absurd, composite, and yet at the same time it is completely right: put together in *this* strange way it makes an impression. Why? I don't know. And if Shakespeare is great, as he is said to be, then

> it must be possible to say of him: things *aren't like that* – and yet at the same time it's quite right according to a law of its own.

Like a language-game and a dream, a Shakespeare play has what we may call a *performative truth*. Its truth, Wittgenstein suggests, is achieved not in spite of but because of the wrongs of decorum, the absurdities of fable and the composite mingle-mangle of styles that is Shakespeare's distinctive strangeness. In front of Shakespeare, Wittgenstein says both 'It's all wrong, this is not how things are' and 'It's quite right, this is how things are'. As with the question of the nature of light, it is only in the twentieth century that it has become possible to say two such apparently contradictory things simultaneously.

A performative literary criticism will be a manifestation of how Shakespearean drama, in Wittgenstein's phrase, 'makes an impression'. It is not only theatre companies who perform Shakespeare, not only actors who interpret Shakespearean roles. To undertake a 'reading' of Shakespeare, whether re-creative (e.g. Berlioz) or critical (e.g. Empson), is also to perform him. People have gone on performing Shakespeare in all sorts of different ways for four hundred years: such is his genius. Wittgenstein might have said that the Genius of Shakespeare is not a factual hypothesis, but a truth-function of the difference it makes to the lives of those who maintain it.

One of the things that makes Shakespeare so performable is his memorability. A good performance depends on an actor becoming word-perfect in a script. Shakespeare's are the best scripts in the business not least because they stick in the mind. William Hazlitt said something simple, important, and empirically true about the old play of *Gorboduc*, which is sometimes described as the first English tragedy: 'As a work of genius, it may be set down as nothing, for it contains hardly a memorable line or passage'. There is no other writer like Shakespeare for condensing ideas and feelings into memorable words and phrases. Furthermore, his memorability is not restricted to language. There is that peculiarity of emotive gesture singled out by Tolstoy. And, as I suggested in the previous chapter, his plays also achieve memorability through iconic 'visible representation'. That is why even if you dispense with the dialogue of *Romeo and Juliet*, you still have an unforgettable idea of what 'Romeo and Juliet' stand for. And that is why with Hamlet you get a dramatic creation so memorable that he can be lifted from his play and put down in a novel by Goethe or a psychological treatise by Freud, where he manages both to remain himself and to become the epitome of struggling, searching, dreaming humankind.

I have tried to adopt the performative approach in this book. Like Wittgenstein with his language-games, I have tried to offer a performative description of the Genius of Shakespeare. My assumption has been that it is impossible to 'describe the whole environment' and I have accordingly preferred to imagine the Genius of Shakespeare as a

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