



## THE FICTIONAL LIVES OF SHAKESPEARE

Kevin Gilvary



William Shakespeare is rightly acclaimed as the greatest playwright in the English Language and possibly in the world. Every year his birthday is celebrated on 23 April, yet surprisingly little is known about the life or the working practices of this great poet.

This study begins with a short survey of the history and practice of biography and then surveys the very limited biographical material for Shakespeare. Although Shakespeare gradually attained the status as a national hero during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were no serious attempts to reconstruct his life during this period. Shakespearean biography is a post-modern phenomenon, not attaining academic respectability until Samuel Schoenbaum published *William Shakespeare A Documentary Life* in 1975.

The absence of evidence does not hinder or deter the would-be Shakespearean biographer. Far from it. Modern biographies of William Shakespeare abound. However, close scrutiny of the surviving records clearly show that there is insufficient material for a cradle to grave account of his life, that most of what is written about him cannot be verified from primary sources. Almost everything written about Shakespeare is fictional – derived from speculation, conjecture and guesswork.

To take a major example. Biographers like to tell us just what Shakespeare was thinking at key moments in his life: at his marriage to Anne Hathaway, on the premature death of his son Hamnet, and with the greatest triumph on the stage, *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. Yet Shakespeare has left no record whatsoever on any of these topics. Or indeed on any other topics.

Modern biographers make much of the apparent friendship between Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. yet in 1616, shortly after Shakespeare's death, Ben Jonson published his *Works* in a Folio numbering about 1000 pages. He only mentions Shakespeare twice – and then only on the list of actors for just two of his plays. None of the 126 epigrams mention Shakespeare; perhaps epigram LVI entitled 'On Poet-Ape' refers to Shakespeare, but it is very unflatteringly. There is no occasion when they are known to have been in the same place at the same time.

## Other major Gaps in the Records

There are many other gaps in the records: there is no mention from his baptism in 1564 until his marriage in 1582 – the lost years of childhood. There is no mention from the birth of the twins in 1585 until an enigmatic reference to a plagiarist by a disgruntled poet who was dying – the lost years of early adulthood. In short, any attempt at a life of Shakespeare is merely an exercise in fiction.

- (a) absence of personal papers by Shakespeare such as letters, diaries or notes;
- (b) absence of personal records about Shakespeare;
- (c) absence of allusion in the Stratford records to his work as a poet and playwright.
- (d) absence of records from his birth in 1564 until his marriage at the age of 18 in 1582;
- (e) absence of records about William Shakespeare from the birth of his twins in 1585 until the possible allusion in a 1592 pamphlet when aged 28;
- (f) absence of records that he was in London between 1604 and 1612 when he attended the Belott-Mountjoy case at Westminster Hall on 11 May 1612;
- (g) absence of dates of composition for his poems and plays; no document records any sequence of composition;
- (h) absence of performance list, including premières;
- (i) absence of records concerning his working practices: there is no evidence as to whether he worked on one play or one poem at a time, whether he ever revised his own works either for the stage or for publication, whether he ever revised the works of others, whether he ever actively worked alongside other playwrights, whether his works were intended for at court, whether he enjoyed the patronage of any person, or what he thought about other poets and playwrights;
- (j) no insight into the person among the allusions to Shakespeare as someone who wrote poetry and/or plays.

The study therefore is concerned with demythologising Shakespeare by exposing numerous fictions. The first scholar to research records for material about Shakespeare, Edmond Malone, eventually accepted that no narrative account of Shakespeare's life was possible.

The earliest biographies of Shakespeare only emerged in the 1840s, offering a highly idealised but almost entirely undocumented exemplary life in line with Victorian values. Both Sidney Lee (1897) and Samuel Schoenbaum (1975) tried to construct a life of Shakespeare but their commendable efforts were thwarted by the lack of evidence.

# ***The Fictional Lives of Shakespeare***

## 1 Biography: Much Practice, Little Theory

*The Western Tradition of Biography; Coherence and a Linear Narrative;  
Types of Biographical Material*

## 2 Gaps in Our Ignorance: the Biographical Material for William Shakespeare

*Source Material for Shakespeare; Public Records: Stratford-upon-Avon;  
Public Records: London; Literary & Theatrical Records*

## 3 Inventing the myths: the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

*Early Fictions; Nicholas Rowe's Some Account of the Life &c (1709);  
Reprints of Rowe's Account; Dr Johnson's Unattempted Life of Shakespeare;  
Edward Capell's Neglected Insights*

## 4 Doubting the Myths: Malone's Unwritten Life of Shakespeare

*Attempt at a Chronology of the Works; Use of the Poems for Biographical  
Inference; Malone's thwarted Ambition for a Life of Shakespeare.*

## 5 Filling in the Gaps: Constructing a life of Shakespeare: 1805-1975

*Skepticism in the Nineteenth Century; Emergence of Romantic Biography;  
Exemplary Life and National Biography; Dowden and the Adoption of a  
Chronology; Rejection of Bardolatry in the Twentieth Century  
Persistence of Bardolatry in the Twentieth Century (to 1975)*

## 6 Re-inventing the Life: Samuel Schoenbaum

*Shakespeare's Lives (1970); William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life (1975)  
"Gentle" Shakespeare*

## 7 After Schoenbaum

*Modern Shakespearean Biographies;  
Critique of Modern Shakespearean Biography 141*

## 8 Inventing a Patron: the Earl of Southampton

*Shakespeare's Dedications to Southampton; Rowe's Mention of a £1,000 gift  
Plays written for Southampton? The 'fair youth' of the Sonnets  
The "Classless Milieu" of Elizabethan Theatre*

## 9 Inventing a Rival: Ben Jonson

*Did Shakespeare purge Jonson? "Shakespeare wanted Arte"  
Dedications in the First Folio; Jonson's Timber or Discoveries (1641)*