‘Here I am to speak what I do know’: Recent Shakespeare biographies
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakespeare Who?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Biographers’ Approaches</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lost Years</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Plays</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

William Shakespeare died almost 400 years ago, yet the most intriguing accounts of his life have not been published until this past decade. In fact, there has been a change in the form of biography and what the audience and the biographer value in it. The art of biography started with a mere succession of facts and it has remained that way for centuries. During the past decade, both biographers and readers of biographies have come to understand that biography does not only rely on facts. A biography is just as dependable on the biographer’s interpretation of facts and, especially in Shakespeare biography, how the biographer chooses to fill in the blanks. It is the biographer’s duty to ask unanswerable questions, to shed a new light on Shakespeare’s life. One has to bear in mind that composing a biography of the talented William Shakespeare remains ‘a mass of petty details, many of which can be read in more than one way, but which remain petty’ (Potter 2007, 5). The biographer’s interpretation is a unique representation of the life of a famous person and can be a valuable addition to the existing biographies. This is why so many Shakespeare biographies have been published over the past decade. The reason I am writing this dissertation is to discuss the unique contributions of eleven outstanding Shakespeare biographies that have appeared over the past decade.

My approach is to discuss the biographies introduced in more detail in chapter 1 by focusing on three themes: the lost years (chapter 2), marriage (chapter 3) and the plays (chapter 4). I have selected these themes carefully. I have chosen the lost years because there is little documentation and little is known about this period in Shakespeare’s life, therefore one has to speculate a lot. All of the biographers ‘fills the gaps’ in their own way with arguments they see fit. The marriage is a matter
which the biographers have different and often strong opinions on, so I picked this topic because I thought it an interesting one. The plays were an inevitable topic, simply because no Shakespeare scholar can write about Shakespeare without referring to his works. It is in these themes that biographers clearly show their viewpoints. I have chosen to discuss the biographies in a different order in each of my chapters depending on their relevance in relation to the theme of the chapter. Some biographies stand out or have inspired a successor to use a similar approach concerning a certain event or theme. In my chapter on the plays, for instance, the first biography I discuss is Rene Weis’, because he is famous for using the plays as a starting point in his biography. In some chapters I do not discuss all the biographies. In my chapter on the lost years, for example, I do not discuss Germaine Greer’s account, since she hardly refers to the lost years.

In order to understand the change in the biographical form, one needs to understand the context of biography. Just like understanding the conventions of the age Shakespeare lived in is crucial to the biographer, it is vital for the biographical researcher to understand the conventions of biography from the time it first became a popular phenomenon until now.

At the heart of the art of biography are two conflicting notions which have come to intermingle over the centuries: fact and fiction. Traditionally, biographies were mere chronological representations of facts. Fiction was a separate genre. Biographies were ‘documentary works judged for their accuracy and not art’ (Nadel 1984, viii). The biographers presented the reader with a description of their findings in a straightforward manner, not concerning themselves with narrative style.

In Shakespeare’s time, people did not keep a diary much less aspire to write biographies (Shapiro 2009, 9), with the exception of those written on churchmen (see
the section on Schoenbaum in my chapter *Shakespeare, Who? Various Biographers’ Approaches*. When biography did become popular in the eighteenth century, biographers ‘relied more heavily on fact than on the identification of values between biographer and subject, or the interpretation of character and narrative presentation’ (Nadel 1984, 6). This rule of sticking to just facts limited the biographers. They were not allowed to insert possible scenarios and leave their personal mark on the life of the biographee (Nadel 1984, 4).

Nadel notes that both readers and biographers have long held on to the traditional belief of sticking to facts and that not ‘until recently they have been subsumed by the ready acceptance of the illusion of fact and order in biography’ (Nadel 1984, 5). Gradually, biographers and readers have come to realize that fact needs interpretation in order to come to life. A merely factual account is no longer enough to interest the audience. Therefore, the rules have changed. ‘Biographers have departed from facts - or at the very least, altered them to exhibit a figure more consistent with their image rather than record of him’ (Nadel 1984, 7). Now that biographers have the freedom to select and order, to shape the events from the biographee’s life, they are capable of adding new insights into how these events took place and what kind of person they believe the biographee was.

The first to attempt a Shakespeare biography was John Aubrey, who kept notes in the early 1660s. Aubrey’s informant was William Beeston, whose father had worked with Shakespeare in the London theaters. Aubrey’s notes, which consisted of information he got from Beeston, were not published until 1898. Aubrey was wrong about some things (he claimed Shakespeare was a butcher’s son), and he was responsible for the assumption that Shakespeare was a teacher in the country.¹

The first formal Shakespeare biographer was Nicholas Rowe\(^2\), who wrote a short biography as an introduction to the 1709 edition of Shakespeare’s plays. Although it contained inaccuracies, it also included details which might have been lost had he not preserved them.

Edmund Malone’s unfinished Shakespeare biography\(^3\) was factual, with a few ‘cautious speculations’ (Honan 1998, 417). Sidney Lee’s Shakespeare biography\(^4\) is rich in information, specific, but it contains lots of assumptions presented as facts and errors (Honan 1998, 418).

Samuel Schoenbaum continued the traditional factual Shakespeare biography tradition. He is praised by many of his successors for his factual account, which consists of a collection of reproductions of documents accompanied with factual information and hardly any conjecture. I will use Schoenbaum’s *Documentary Life*\(^5\) as a basis for comparison for the other biographies.

Park Honan’s biography of Shakespeare\(^6\) is factual and thorough with some speculation, but concise nevertheless. His biography formed the turning point in Shakespeare biography. His account has a factual and neutral tone, but it has opened the door to a more interpretative style of Shakespeare biography. His immediate successors may very well have been inspired by Honan’s conciseness but have chosen to implore a more interesting but speculative narrative.

The shift to a more open and speculative kind of Shakespeare biography is already clear in Anthony Holden’s account\(^7\), which was published only one year after Honan’s. An example of the speculative tone Holden takes on is when he discusses

\(^2\) Rowe, Nicholas. *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear*. 1709.
the possibility of Shakespeare working as a teacher and living with the Hoghton family in Lancashire, an assumption which was started by Aubrey. Whereas Honan simply paints a picture of a young man called Shakeshafte living in Lancashire who could have been Shakespeare (Honan 60-71), Holden gets completely caught up in the scenario. Honan presents the option and leaves the readers to judge for themselves, and Holden presents it as a true account.

Holden, like many of his fellow Shakespeare biographers, reads biographical details into Shakespeare’s work. He states that ‘To some lovers of Shakespeare, it is heresy to find biographical inferences between the lines of his poems and plays; to others, his true autobiography lies in his work’ (Holden 1999, 3). He tries to find a way in between the two, for he argues that ‘If the twain can never meet, it seems to me that there exists a middle ground through which it is relatively safe (and quite legitimate) to pick your way’ (Holden 1999, 3).

Some biographers clearly make use of a certain literary theory. Germaine Greer, for instance, uses the Feminist approach. She shows the reader events from Shakespeare’s life from his wife’s point of view. Her knowledge of the Elizabethan age presents Shakespeare in an entirely new light, for no other biographer has attempted to present a picture of Shakespeare from his wife’s viewpoint. Until recently, Anne Hathaway had been neglected and presented as the wife Shakespeare did not love. Greer is the first to go directly against this persistent assumption.

Katherine Duncan-Jones, the only other female Shakespeare biographer I discuss besides Greer, certainly created an interesting account. She used Ben Jonson’s

---

phrase ‘gentle Shakespeare’ and turned it into *Ungentle Shakespeare* to use it as a title for her work and set the tone of it at the same time. Her account is unmistakably negative about Shakespeare. She takes on a daring point of view in her account, presenting Shakespeare as a tough businessman who did not love his wife and was always up to no good. Duncan-Jones’ biography has to be taken in to account, for she has come up with a new point of view that is another possible scenario, which is the purpose of Shakespeare biography.

Stephen Greenblatt uses the New Historicist approach. He relies on facts and builds possible scenarios around these facts by using his knowledge of the time and explaining what may have happened. He relates that ‘to understand how Shakespeare used his imagination to transform his life into his art, it is important to use our own imagination’ (Greenblatt 14). Greenblatt invites the reader to imagine Shakespeare, and he uses his imagination throughout his entire account.

Both Charles Nicholl and James Shapiro chose to write about part of Shakespeare’s life. Nicholl wrote his account about the year Shakespeare lived with Mountjoys in Silver Street, and Shapiro wrote about a crucial year in Shakespeare’s life, 1599. Both of these accounts are a valuable addition to the Shakespeare biography tradition because they take a close look at what Shakespeare’s life must have been like at the time.

Bill Bryson’s Shakespeare biography is a concise and shallow account that contains many mistakes. Bryson adds nothing new to the Shakespeare biography tradition and it is clear that he simply hitched along for the ride. He is an author who

---

is famous for his witty storytelling, and his book is accessible and may be an attractive option for those who are just getting acquainted with Shakespeare. For Shakespeare connoisseurs, though, this book is of no value. Bryson does not present the reader with any new insights. He merely adds a new kind of biography to the rich Shakespeare biography tradition: a very concise, catchy, accessible account. Since speculation has become a major part of Shakespeare biography, Bryson is just as free to guess at matters as any Shakespeare scholar. The difference between his Shakespeare biography and the others I discuss is that Bryson is no Shakespeare scholar, and this shows in his work.

A major change has taken place in the biographical form. The Shakespeare biographies that have been published over the past decade reflect this change. The interpretation of facts has taken on an important role in Shakespeare biography. Because biographers have been given the freedom to interpret events form Shakespeare’s life freely they were able to provide their audience with new insights that allow us to look at Shakespeare in a different light. One of the most traditional biographers, Park Honan, understands that this change had to take place. Honan clearly understands that Shakespeare biography is something that is evolving and will keep on doing so for as long as we appreciate Shakespeare’s works. ‘Our collective picture of the poet’s life is surely best when many people test it, doubt it, discuss it, or contribute to it, and when we are not under the illusion that it is to be finished’ (Honan 1979, 424).
Shakespeare Who?

Various Biographers’ Approaches

Introduction

The conventions of Shakespeare biography have changed over the past decade. Samuel Schoenbaum presented his audience with facsimiles of documents from Shakespeare’s lifetime. ‘Thanks to Sam Schoenbaum’s *Documentary Life*, we know a lot about his business dealings, his theatrical engagements, his law suits and his buying and selling of land’ (Mortimer). As valuable as his work still is to Shakespeare biography, there was a clear need for a different kind of biography. Park Honan, the last traditional Shakespeare biographer who wrote an account that covered Shakespeare’s entire adult life in an overall factual account with not much speculation, perceived that a biography ‘succeeds or fails not alone through its accuracy, moderation, authority, and kind and quality of insights, but through its structure of feeling’ (Honan 1979, 112). He realized that ‘This always involves a tactic, a scheme of selection’ (Honan 1979, 112). As an example he mentioned that a biographer may choose to reverse or defy the normal order of events to fit his or her purpose (Honan 1979, 112). With this narrative freedom comes the multitude of terms such as ‘if’, ‘perhaps’, ‘could be’, ‘one can imagine’ that recent Shakespeare biographies are littered with. To put it in Anthony Holden’s words, these terms have become ‘an occupational hazard of Shakespeare biography’ (Holden 2004).

Samuel Schoenbaum

Schoenbaum provides a truthful and detailed account of the preserved documents from Shakespeare’s lifetime. As Schoenbaum himself explains: ‘My aim in these pages has been to present a straightforward account of Shakespeare’s life – in adequate detail, and not shirking vexatious issues like the significance of the marriage records and the second-
best bed – and to combine that account with facsimiles, faithfully reproduced, of the documents and records which comprise the biographer’s materials’ (xi). The result is unlike all other biographies, because Schoenbaum questions things\textsuperscript{15}, but he does not speculate, he presents facts in factual language. For example, he starts his first chapter with the following sentences: ‘The story of William Shakespeare’s life is a tale of two towns. Stratford bred him; London gave him, literally and figuratively, a stage for his fortune’ (3).

Schoenbaum clears up the matter why nobody contacted his youngest daughter Judith to collect details of Shakespeare’s personal life: at the time, literary biographies simply did not exist. The only people one would bother writing a biography on, were churchmen (John Donne, for example).

\textbf{Katherine Duncan-Jones}

Katherine Duncan-Jones explains that ‘My object has been to explore some of the areas of Shakespeare’s life that I feel that Schoenbaum and others have neglected, choosing generally, for preference, the road less travelled’ (ix). She starts her first chapter by providing the reader with useful background information on the time and place Shakespeare grew up: ‘the rich cultural context of the Midlands in the 1560s and 1570s’ (x). This factual and neutral tone changes quickly.

Michael Jensen, who interviewed Katherine Duncan-Jones for the \textit{Shakespeare Newsletter}, mentions that in her book ‘This is not the gentle swan of Avon\textsuperscript{16} found in the Romantic tradition, but a tough business man whose drive to make money shaped his character’. Duncan-Jones’ biography is different from the ‘conventionally structured biographies’ (Jensen 2005, x) that have appeared recently.

\textsuperscript{15} For example, John Shakespeare’s Spiritual Testament. The original document has disappeared but it was copied by John Jordan. Did he make an exact copy?

What Duncan-Jones refers to as ‘the road less travelled’ is actually a biography that casts a shadow over Shakespeare. She is quick to set the tone of her work. Whereas Duncan-Jones praises Anne Hathaway for her housekeeping skills and compliments her on her ‘heroic labours’ in raising the children (23), Duncan-Jones is not quite as complimentary about Shakespeare in suggesting that ‘perhaps he escaped from all those tiny children at home’ (23) and that he ‘sought out some more financially rewarding activity’ (23).

Throughout this biography, Duncan-Jones emphasizes what she sees as Shakespeare’s negligent tendencies and then skillfully moves on to more neutral topics, such as his profession during the so-called ‘Lost years’, or the reception of one of his plays. Duncan-Jones uses her ‘superb knowledge of the literary and courtly context’ (Potter 2005, 6) and reviews Shakespeare’s character in a negative way. Although bringing Shakespeare ‘down from the lofty isolation to which he has been customarily elevated’ (x) is a new approach, ‘speculation is rampant throughout, with heavy use of the usual qualifiers – seems, perhaps, possibly, I believe, I think - although one frequently gets the impression that Duncan-Jones has no doubts, and conjecture is often stated as fact’ (Thomson 367). In spite of all the conjecture presented as facts, critic Michael Jensen has a point when he says ‘It is a possible Shakespeare, and isn’t that what we want biographers to present?’ (Jensen 2005)

Although she admits that she has gone against the advice that scholars have given her, Duncan-Jones praises biographers such as Samuel Schoenbaum and Park Honan. She points out that official documents or legal documents such as the depositions of the Belott-Mountjoy suit, which Charles Nicholl based his biography on, are worth looking into.
Charles Nicholl

Nicholl presents an account of Shakespeare in the years he lived with the Mountjoys in Silver Street (roughly 1603-1605). Studying Shakespeare’s character by highlighting his part in the Belott-Mountjoy case and events that occurred in these few years provides the reader with details about the playwright that no other biographer has studied in such great detail.

Although ‘facts are surprisingly delible things, and in four hundred years a lot of them simply fade away’ (Nicholl 2008, 18), Nicholl manages to paint a vivid and realistic picture of Shakespeare at a particular time. Nicholl does not use a lot of speculative language. There is the occasional expression of uncertainty, because some events cannot be traced back to the exact dates they occurred. For instance, we do not know when exactly Shakespeare became a lodger at the Mountjoys: ‘He may have moved into the house that year…’ (Nicholl 2008, 17) It is only natural that Nicholl does not make assumptions he cannot prove to be true. He focuses on the factual, and his diction is mostly straightforward.

Like a detective, Nicholl takes a close look at the court documents, Shakespeare’s testimony, his part in the marriage arrangement between Stephen Belott and Mary Mountjoy, and reveals Shakespeare the way he truly was. ‘This is the world Nicholl reproduces in an account that is as interesting as it is intricate. He has brought to life an aspect of Shakespeare’s career that has been less exhaustively studied than most, and for that reason alone his book is worthy of praise’ (Ackroyd 2007, 2).

Park Honan

Honan is one of the few biographers praised by Katherine Duncan-Jones. As he explains himself, ‘This book differs from those biographies which imagine for him political roles,
sexual relationships, or colorful intrigues not in the factual record’ (ix). He relies on factual documents: ‘Honan has taken the trouble to chase up the kinds of legal and financial records that most of us find boring, and manages to integrate all the details into his story, documenting them properly, and quoting the appropriate sources, without losing momentum’ (Potter 2005, 5).

Katherine Duncan-Jones calls Honan’s biography of Shakespeare an extremely detailed and reliable chronicle’ (Duncan-Jones x). He may not provide his readers with new information, but he offers them a truthful account. He is ‘concise because he does not pad out his facts with more speculation than they can bear’ (Potter 2005, 5). Honan uses factual language, he does not take his speculation too far and he ‘draws on a sort of common sense psychology where it seems appropriate’ (Potter 2005, 5). For instance, he does not suggest that Shakespeare spent so much time in London to avoid the company of his wife. He suggests the city provided Shakespeare with the kind of work he loved to earn a living with: writing and acting. This may very well have sufficed to keep him in the city and in no hurry to return to Stratford.

**René Weis**

Weis pays attention to detail, and he questions things that previous biographers have overlooked, such as the remarkable fact that the people of Stratford planted so many elm trees. An inventory of Stratford’s elm trees is included in a survey of all of the town’s property, which was published in 1582; the year that Shakespeare got married. Elm trees were expensive and it is unclear why they were preferred over oaks, of which there were plenty in the nearby forest of Arden.

In his search for biographical details, Weis makes good use of his sources. He even goes so far as to try to mend the reputation of Shakespeare biographer Nicholas
Rowe, who wrote his biography when Shakespeare’s daughter Judith was still alive. ‘His refusal to dismiss any biographical anecdote, especially those that are usually rejected as too good to be true, leads him to ask interesting questions and, sometimes, to come up with new answers’ Potter 2007, 2).

Weis keeps the reader at pace by constantly asking questions: ‘Did Shakespeare, on that long journey south, have it in mind even then to join a theatrical company?’ (83) He enthusiastically explores the possibilities, sometimes a little too enthusiastically. Weis treats Shakespeare’s works as evidence of his life. One conclusion he draws from references to lameness in Shakespeare’s plays is that Shakespeare was a cripple, and that he made use of this when casting himself as an actor. Weis admits that contemporary biographers do not share his point of view; he even quotes John Aubrey’s claim that Shakespeare was a ‘handsome, well-shaped man’ (Potter 2007, 3). Weis’ diction is, at times, paradoxical. At times he uses persuasive words such as ‘undoubtedly’, ‘self-evident’ and ‘likely’, only to start the next sentence with ‘if’. This shift is not surprising, since a biography has to be more than a mere series of facts. Speculation is inevitable.

**Anthony Holden**

Anthony Holden wrote a convincing account of Shakespeare’s life. He backs up his arguments with factual information as he attempts to trace Shakespeare’s footsteps. He does this persuasively and with straightforward language. Holden insists, for example, that Shakespeare spent the best part of his ‘lost years’ in the household of a wealthy Catholic family in Lancashire. This seems plausible, and in Holden’s descriptive account it almost becomes tangible. Yet there is no permanent evidence to place Shakespeare in this particular setting, there is just a reference to playclothes, players and the request to be
benevolent towards one ‘William Shakeshafte’ in Alexander Hoghton’s will (Holden 53). Therefore, Holden leaves the readers to draw their own conclusions.

Holden is quite aware of the multitude of the existing Shakespeare biographies among which he is adding a new work: ‘The long-suffering son of Stratford is meanwhile being picked apart by historicists, feminists, Marxists, new historicists, post-feminists, deconstructionists, anti-deconstructionists, post-modernists, cultural imperialists and post-colonialists. Perhaps it is time someone tried to put him back together again’ (Holden 1999, 1).

Holden uses Shakespeare’s works to reflect upon the playwright’s character, but he does not read things into every detail. He believes in a middle way between seeing the works as autobiographical and not incorporating Shakespeare’s works at all (see Introduction pp 4-5).

Reviewer John Mortimer calls Holden’s biography ‘Lively, readable and lit with a real enthusiasm for the plays and poetry. It should reach a wide audience, who will be fascinated with the riddles which make up Shakespeare’s life story’. Whether these riddles are the truth is not the point, it is the possible scenarios the reader is interested in.

James Shapiro

James Shapiro is a thorough researcher. In an interview with Michael Jensen, Shapiro explains ‘I remain deeply committed to writing about important moments in an artist's creative life (rather than a cradle-to-grave biography that must invent what's lost or missing)’ (Jensen 2007, 2). In his book 1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare, he sheds a light on this crucial year in Shakespeare’s life. Reviewer James Fenton mentions that ‘It is often asserted that practically nothing is known of Shakespeare's life’, but Shapiro shows us one sense in which this is quite untrue: once you begin to look at
what happened in the London of Shakespeare's day, the events the playwright lived through, the common experiences he would have endured, a great deal can be learned. To demonstrate this over the course of a single year was an act of biographical bravura’ (Fenton).

‘Inevitably, like Greenblatt, when Shapiro writes about an age before newsprint and photographs, there is an air of speculation about his reconstruction. Much as he may want to reach the common reader, Shapiro must also protect his scholarly reputation with here a defensive “perhaps”, there a prudent “maybe” ’ (McCrum).

He writes persuasively nonetheless and he does not push his speculation too far. He also mentions details that many Shakespeare scholars have overlooked or forgotten about, such as the fact that the first Shakespeare editors published his plays out of chronological order. Shapiro turns the popular notion to lift Shakespeare out of time around and places him back in his time. Shapiro extensively describes historical events such as the rebellions in Ireland, the Essex plot and the threat of the Spanish Armada.

By only looking into one year of Shakespeare’s life, Shapiro ends up writing a detailed account of Shakespeare’s living circumstances, combining details previous scholars have described separately. In other words: ‘Books rub shoulders in unexpected ways’ (Taylor 2005). ‘Shapiro's focus on a single year lets him linger on these textured surface details of a life more real and revealing than the grand, breathless fictions that fill out most biographies of Shakespeare’ (Taylor 2005).

Although he claims to write only about the year 1599, Shapiro does go back and forth from time to time when he refers to events before 1599: ‘By the mid-1590s chieftains opposed to English rule managed to put their differences aside…’ (61) and after 1599: ‘Scholars have been able to reconstruct much of this textual history because in 1603…’ (354).
McCrum ends his review of *1599* with the following statement: ‘He has got under the skin of a writer who worked harder than most, while opening the hearts and minds of his audience, to keep a lock on what he told us about himself. *1599* is an unforgettable illumination of a crucial moment in the life of our greatest writer’ (McCrum). In other words, although *1599* is an account of only one year of Shakespeare’s life, it is a valuable asset to the Shakespeare biographical tradition because it offers something new.

**Germaine Greer**

‘Germaine Greer immerses herself and us in a mountain of detail that, for all her clear style, is hard going to assimilate’ (Lewis).

Greer questions the traditional viewpoint was that Shakespeare did not love Anne Hathaway. Scholars tend to believe that because of the fact that Anne was eight years older than Shakespeare and that he was only eighteen when he married her, Anne seduced him and then tricked him into marrying her. Greer suggests that these scholars have jumped to conclusions. Eighteen was a young age for a man to get married, but, as Lewis points out: ‘The average age of marriage then was 26 for women’.

Whereas the traditional point of view is that Shakespeare remained in London for most of his days because he did not love Anne Hathaway, Greer turns this viewpoint around by describing what life was like for a woman like Anne. It is plausible that Anne was glad that her husband was such a successful playwright, since this enabled him to earn a living for himself, for her and for their three children. Another reason that scholars have not been able to find ‘evidence’ of the love between Shakespeare and his wife is that no love notes between Anne and her husband have been found. Many scholars, Greenblatt for one, assume that Anne was illiterate. Greer points out that it is plausible that Anne could read, although she may not have been able to write. If someone else had to write
messages to her husband, it is not surprising that no written expressions of affection from Anne to her husband have been found.

By defending Anne Hathaway, Greer takes on the exact opposite position from Katherine Duncan-Jones and provides the Shakespearian realm with a viewpoint that challenges many others. ‘It is Germaine Greer’s laudable aim in Shakespeare’s Wife to rescue this woman seemingly condemned to the shadows at the edge of her famous husband’s life, to retrieve some kind of individuality for her, and to “re-embed” the story of their marriage “in its social context” ’ (Nicholl 2007).

Peter Ackroyd

In this elaborate book of nearly 600 pages ‘which is given pace by being divided into more than 90 sub-sections’ (Wells), Ackroyd takes on the task of delivering his Shakespeare biography. ‘He tackles all the significant issues, relating them whenever he can to Shakespeare's artistic life’ (Wells).

Ackroyd mentions details that may seem irrelevant, but nonetheless are part of the picture he paints of Shakespeare. In his first chapter, for example, Ackroyd mentions that Shakespeare’s mother was not present at his christening, which was a common Elizabethan convention.

Whereas some biographers take on a clear opinion on debatable issues such as Shakespeare’s sexuality, Ackroyd remains objective. ‘His writing “is quick with sexual meanings”, he “had an understanding of devoted male friendships” and actors “are often possessed by an ambiguous sexuality”, but Ackroyd is guarded about applying evidence derived from the writings to Shakespeare's personal conduct’ (Wells).
Like Holden, Ackroyd believes Shakespeare entered the theatrical world through the Hoghton family in Lancashire. Ackroyd derives this viewpoint from the ‘playclothes’, ‘players’ and the reference to William Shakeshafte in Alexander Hoghton’s will.

Although Ackroyd tends to write in general terms, which is inevitable, he does not get carried away when he writes about Shakespeare’s final days: ‘Writing on Shakespeare’s last days, he surveys the gossip and speculation about his last illness while wisely refusing to commit himself to any of it’ (Wells).

Stephen Greenblatt

According to Robert McCrum, Stephen Greenblatt was ‘Perhaps the first brilliantly to transplant the groves of academe to Hollywood with his bestselling Will in the World.’ Greenblatt was an adviser on the film Shakespeare in Love. This is not surprising, considering that ‘Greenblatt has been the world’s most influential Shakespearian for a quarter of a century because he tells good stories’ (Taylor 2004).

Greenblatt expresses that he is greatly indebted to James Shapiro for his research and insights. Like Shapiro, Greenblatt places Shakespeare in Elizabethan society rather than lifting him above the concept of time.

Although ‘he does not present any new evidence that would alter the scholarly consensus about which texts Shakespeare wrote, when he wrote them, or what his contemporaries thought of them’ (Taylor 2004), Greenblatt does present fresh views upon Shakespeare’s life. An example of this is that Greenblatt imagines Shakespeare among the crowd present at Lopez’ execution. Lopez was Queen Elizabeth’s physician, who was falsely accused of attempting to kill the Queen.

Greenblatt starts each chapter by presenting a documented fact, then moving on to the possible circumstances around this fact. ‘This authoritative trot through the
documented facts, effortlessly buttressed by fresh readings between the lines, is unafraid of the kind of speculation of which scholars usually take a dim view’ (Holden 2004).

Greenblatt sometimes presents the reader with scenarios he admits are unlikely to have taken place, such as Shakespeare meeting the Jesuit Edmund Campion in Lancashire (106-117). He inserts these scenarios anyway, because he values their imaginary power.

In spite of the speculative utterances such as ‘likely’, ‘could have’ and ‘let us imagine’ the book is littered with, fellow Shakespeare scholar Anthony Holden praises Greenblatt: ‘Irritated by his chummy habit of calling his subject “Will”, I found my blue pencil also circling his high index of “may well’s, “could have’s, “no doubt’s and “likely’s - three or four to the average page. This may be an occupational hazard of Shakespeare biography, but there are writerly ways around allowing it to become so intrusive. Such nitpicks apart, this suave book deserves to become a standard work in the scholarly tradition of the Victorian critic Edward Dowden, offering an elegant summation of the current state of an evolving art’ (Holden 2004).

Bill Bryson

Famous for his storytelling, ‘Bryson bounds through all you need to know briefly enough to be absorbed in an entertaining evening’ (Lewis). He knows all kinds of little facts such as the cost and weight of a loaf of bread in 1595. Such details may seem irrelevant, but then ‘Sticking to the point is not his chief concern. He is the master of digression. Without the asides and witty observations about Shakespearean scholarship, there wouldn't be a book. And that would be a pity’ (Arnold).

Bryson immediately admits that one can only guess what Shakespeare was really like: ‘In fact it cannot be emphasized too strenuously that there is nothing – not a scrap, not a mote – that gives any certain insight into Shakespeare’s feelings or beliefs as a
private person. We can know only what came out of his work, never what went into it’ (Bryson 17). He adds that ‘Facts are surprisingly delible things, and in four hundred years a lot of them simply fade away’ (18).

Bryson criticizes other biographers for not being objective: ‘Even the most careful biographers sometimes take a supposition – that Shakespeare was Catholic or happily married or fond of the countryside or kindly disposed towards animals – and convert it within a page or two to something like a certainty’ (Bryson 15). In spite of his criticism towards other biographers, Bryson makes his own assumptions. For instance, he insists that Shakespeare was gay.

With his ‘untrained eye’ (10), it is only natural for Bryson to misjudge things. One example is his misreading the function of the word ‘the’ at the bottom of page 38 of the First Folio. Bryson mistakenly calls it ‘a large and eminently superfluous ‘THE’ (158). The word ‘the’ was printed at the bottom of the page merely because it is the first word on the following page.

Bryson’s book is not a valuable addition to Shakespeare biography. It does not add any new insights and it contains many errors. Bryson is simply making a profit by making it look as though he has earned a place among today’s Shakespeare scholars, when he clearly does not belong there.

Conclusion

Although facts will always play an important part in the art of biography, it is important that when one reads a biography, one does not forget that facts are not meant to be conclusions (Nadel 1984, 4). Nadel argues that although biography is ‘clearly based on fact’, the art of biography is actually about ‘the linguistic
expression, narrative technique and mythical elements’ (Nadel 1984, 151). This is something that has become apparent over the past decade. Biography challenges the reader in its narrative style (Nadel 1984, 3). The biographer presents the reader with a possible scenario. Every biography is unique in its style, tone and point of view. Greer was the first to present Shakespeare from his wife’s point of view, Shapiro and Nicholl chose to highlight a specific period in Shakespeare’s life and Duncan-Jones portrayed Shakespeare’s dark side. The art of biography is all about the insights of a biographer, his or her viewpoint, the way he or she chooses to present the life. The point of a biography is to give the reader the sense of participating in the reconstruction of the life together with the biographer (Nadel 1984, 153). Language is the tool the biographer uses to shape the account. The important thing is that new biographers add a new possible scenario to the existing range of biographies.
The Lost Years 1579-87

Introduction

As Anthony Holden explains, ‘the year 1585, when 21-year-old Shakespeare again vanishes from the public record until his name is first mentioned as a London-based playwright seven years later, has become generally accepted as the starting-date for the so-called ‘lost’ years – when biographers can (and do) let their imaginations run riot’ (51).

He also argues that ‘If Shakespeare stayed at school until the age of fifteen or sixteen, when boys ‘normally went to university’, the ‘lost’ years would in fact seem best defined as the period from 1579 to 1592’ (51). This is the period most scholars stick to. Where Shakespeare spent the time between leaving school and courting and marrying Anne Hathaway in 1585 is something scholars keep guessing at, and they come up with interesting stories.

Although Charles Nicholl’s focus is on the time Shakespeare lived in Silver Street, in the suburb of Cripplegate (roughly 1603-1605), he does mention Shakespeare’s lost years:

It is not known when Shakespeare first came to the city. The last record of him as a young man in Stratford is the baptism of his twins, Hamnet and Judith, on 2 February 1585 (it is not *per se* a record of him, but one assumes he was there). He was then twenty years old. The first records of him in London date from mid 1592 – the appearance of ‘harey the vi’ (almost certainly the play we now call *Henry VI Part I*) at the Rose theatre; the attack on him in Greene’s *Groatsworth of Wit*. Between these sightings lie the legendary ‘Lost Years’, a documentary desert seven years wide in which the early biographers placed unsubstantiated oases of activity (37).
The gap we now call the lost years offers no documented proof on Shakespeare’s activities or his whereabouts. As ‘Anecdote is actually a fundamental element of biography’s truth-value’ (Nadel 1993, 10), it is interesting to see how biographers map out the lost years. Biographers to come up with interesting suggestions concerning Shakespeare’s lost years. The most popular options are: he was a lawyer’s clerk, he joined the army, he fled Stratford because he had stolen deer from a nearby deer park, he was a teacher in the country, and finally that he came to London with a theater group.

Samuel Schoenbaum

Schoenbaum treats all theories on Shakespeare’s profession, activities and whereabouts during the lost years as mere speculation. There is simply no evidence to get rid of any doubts or to prove anything. He does take John Aubrey’s statement of Shakespeare working as a teacher in the country seriously, but the place where he taught is not necessarily Lancashire and therefore remains a mystery.

Concerning the question of Shakespeare’s profession during the lost years, Schoenbaum mentions several ‘speculations’ (87) of other biographers. He mentions the suggestion that Shakespeare was a lawyer’s clerk. He points out that Edmund Malone, a ‘barrister turned literary scholar’ (87), was the first to make this assumption, and that other scholars soon followed. Schoenbaum argues that, if Shakespeare was a lawyer’s clerk, ‘surely his signature would have appeared on deeds or wills he was called upon to witness; but no such signature has come to light’(87).

The question of Shakespeare joining the army is dismissed too. Schoenbaum mentions one W.J. Thoms, who believed Shakespeare was on military service in the Low Countries. Apparently, he found one William Shakespeare in the army records of 1605 among the names of other hired soldiers within Barlichway Hundred, in the village of Rowington (88).
Schoenbaum insists that Thoms must have confused the poet with another man with the same name, for ‘Rowington had its quota of Shakespeares’ (88).

The deer park incident is something Schoenbaum elaborates on, even though he sees the story of ‘Shakespeare the Deerslayer’ (78) as ‘a picturesque relation deriving, one expects, from local Stratford lore’ (78). Shakespeare is suggested to have left Stratford in a hurry and in fear of prosecution. He had ‘fallen into ill company’ (79) and he got caught stealing deer from a park at Charlecote that belonged to Sir Thomas Lucy. Shakespeare was punished for his act and he apparently got back on Lucy by writing a ballad upon him. Schoenbaum quotes Shakespeare’s first biographer, Nicholas Rowe, who reports that the ballad ‘is said to have been so very bitter, that it redoubled the Prosecution against him to that degree, that he was oblig’ed to leave his Business and Family in Warwickshire, for some time, and shelter himself in London’ (79).

Schoenbaum presents two texts that may be (parts of) Shakespeare’s ballad. One was recorded by eighteenth-century Shakespeare biographer Edmund Malone. A strong indication that Shakespeare may have written this text is a reference to a Sir Thomas and his deer in the poem.

Another text is a ballad one Thomas Jones gave to Thomas Wilkes. The text remained in the family, and Wilkes’ grandson passed it onto an eighteenth-century scholar called Edward Capell. Schoenbaum points out that ‘There may be confusion here’ (82), for Jones cannot be found in the burial records. Either way, this text has a recurring pun on ‘lousy Lucy’ in it, which may be a reference to Sir Thomas Lucy. Whether Shakespeare wrote these texts cannot be determined; they are both lost.

Whereas many scholars elaborately discuss the suggestion of Shakespeare working as a teaching, with the preferred location of Lancashire, Schoenbaum discusses the matter concisely, taking up only half a page. Schoenbaum mentions the source of the suggestion that
Shakespeare had been ‘in his younger yeares a Schoolmaster in the Countrey’ (88). Scholar John Aubrey spoke to William Beeston, son of Shakespeare’s fellow actor Christopher Beeston. Schoenbaum mentions the authenticity of Aubrey’s interview with William Beeston. However, he adds that although both Beeston and Shakespeare belonged to the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1598, it is not known how well Christopher Beeston knew Shakespeare. William Beeston’s suggestion of Shakespeare’s teaching experience may have been a mere assumption. ‘The tradition of Shakespeare the rural pedagogue … cannot be proved, nor should it be casually dismissed’ (88).

Shakespeare may have come to London by joining a traveling theater group. Whereas many biographers suggest various scenarios, Schoenbaum maintains that ‘this is only guesswork’ (90). He does mention ‘a more intriguing possibility’ (90):

One June 13, 1587, two actors of the Queen’s Men, John Towne and William Knell, got into a fight. Towne ended up killing Knell, leaving the theater group one actor short. They were in Thame, Oxfordshire at the time, and were scheduled to perform in Stratford later that year. ‘Before leaving Stratford, had they enlisted Shakespeare, then aged twenty-three, as their latest recruit?’ (90) Schoenbaum leaves the question open.

Schoenbaum sticks to the facts: documents. He does not express his personal opinion. His biography of Shakespeare is a description rather than a story. He is a traditional biographer who adheres to the rule that ‘Biography is fundamentally a showing, not a telling’ (Nadel 1993, 10).

**René Weis**

According to Weis, Shakespeare was not a lawyer’s clerk, a soldier or a teacher in the country. Joining a traveling theater group on its way to London is also out of the question.
Although he does not come up with any evidence, Weis relies on the possibility of Shakespeare fleeing Stratford to escape Sir Thomas Lucy’s prosecution. As far as Weis is concerned, Shakespeare was a glover right up to the point that he entered the theater world in London.

Although Weis mentions Shakespeare’s ‘considerable knowledge of the law’ (88), he does not relate to Shakespeare as a soldier. He does not see Shakespeare working as a teacher in the country either. Although Weis spends a few pages on the prosecution of the Jesuits, he does not mention the possibility of Shakespeare spending time with the Hoghton and Hesketh families in Lancashire and their Catholic roots, not even to dismiss it.

Weis presents Shakespeare as a troublemaker: ‘Until 1586 or 1587 Shakespeare seems to have managed to stay out of trouble’ (78). By suggesting that Shakespeare was going to get into trouble, Weis reveals himself as a subjective narrator. He removes his ‘mislabeled mask of objectivity by the honesty of his narrative presence’ (Nadel 1993, 14).

There is no evidence dismissing the possibility of Shakespeare as a deer poacher, therefore Weis feels entitled to suggest this scenario. He presents Shakespeare according to his own interpretation. Although the biographer’s task is to create ‘A detailed narration without a narrator’ (Nadel 1993, 10), Weis is the narrator in this story. With hardly any factual information, especially on Shakespeare’s lost years, creating such an account is a difficult and ‘paradoxical goal’. (Nadel 1993, 10)

Like Schoenbaum, Weis mentions the two ballads Shakespeare supposedly wrote in retaliation against Lucy’s punishment. He reports that ‘it appears to have survived in two quite different versions, which successive commentators have tried to discredit without producing any hard evidence against their authenticity’ (73). Weis mentions a remarkable detail about the ballad recorded by Edmund Malone: when he presented ‘his’ ballad, Malone admitted that the source from which he took the text was ‘full of forgeries and falsehoods of
various kinds’ (74). Nevertheless, Weis seems convinced that Shakespeare did write this ballad. The reference to a deer and the phrase ‘covetous’, ‘which occurs frequently in Shakespeare’s work, seem to convince Weis of the authenticity of the ballad. The recurring phrases ‘lousy’ and Lucy’ in the other ballad are more plausible arguments for authenticity. The lack of solid evidence leaves one to guess ‘if Shakespeare did pen it’ (75), ‘but there is nowhere a reference to Shakespeare and the Lucys – which is not to rule out the possibility that something may yet come to light’ (79).

Weis mentions the fight between John Towne and William Knell, the two actors of the Queen’s Men, only to dismiss the notion that Shakespeare joined them after Knell’s death: ‘it seems most unlikely that an unknown glover should have been taken on to replace Knell, not least because the Queen’s Men were soon joined by the actor John Symons’ (83). This is a detail the other biographers do not mention. Weis states that upon Shakespeare’s arrival in London, ‘the obvious thing would have been to seek work as a glover’ (91). He says ‘it cannot now be known how the theater and Shakespeare met, but when they did there must have been a coup de foudre, and that was that’ (93).

**Stephen Greenblatt**

Shakespeare was neither a soldier nor a lawyer’s clerk, according to Greenblatt. The deer park incident was a good reason for Shakespeare to leave Stratford. In Greenblatt’s opinion, Shakespeare was a teacher in Lancashire, and he may or may not have gone to London as a member of the Queen’s Men.

Greenblatt only mentions the option of Shakespeare working as a lawyer’s clerk in passing: ‘He may have been…. making a bit of money as a teacher’s or lawyer’s assistant’ (149). He also does not place Shakespeare in the army.
Greenblatt relates that recent biographers are skeptical about the deer park incident, ‘largely because they believe that Shakespeare was not that kind of person and that Lucy was both too powerful and too respectable to be slandered’ (153). He has no proof to support this conclusion, yet Greenblatt presents his perspective as a fact. He believes that ‘The question, then, is not the degree of evidence but rather the imaginative life that the incident has, the access it gives to something important in Shakespeare’s life and work’ (151). These words reflect what Nadel says about the biographical anecdote: ‘anecdotes and their unique narrative expression create structures of memory for us… Regardless of their factity, biographies absorb anecdotes for their narrative power, providing a vertical axis which competes with the horizontal axis of chronology’ (1-2). Greenblatt does not see evidence but the anecdote itself as the relevant issue. He calls the deer park incident ‘a powerful tool for reconstructing the sequence of events that led the young man to leave Stratford’ (151).

Although Greenblatt refers to Aubrey as ‘the seventeenth-century gossip’ (88) he, along with most of the biographers, believes Shakespeare was a teacher. As ‘several of Stratford’s schoolmasters had connections to distant Lancashire’ (103), Stratford schoolmaster John Cottam being one of them, Greenblatt believes it is not an unlikely possibility that Cottam recommended Shakespeare to the Hoghton family and that he ended up as a private tutor in Lancashire. The reference to actors, costumes and the request for his friend Thomas Hesketh to be kind to ‘William Shakeshafte’ in Alexander Hoghton’s will contributes to this possibility.

Greenblatt presents the option of Shakespeare joining the Queen’s Men after the fight between Towne and Knell as ‘the most intriguing option’ (162), which he neither backs up nor dismisses. He adds that ‘assuming that Shakespeare attached himself as a hired man to a playing company, it is not likely that this company headed immediately for London.’
could have learned the ‘tricks of the trade’ on the road and thus made his way to become a famous actor and playwright.

Katherine Duncan-Jones

The only thing that rings true in Duncan-Jones’ opinion concerning the lost years is Shakespeare joining a theater group on the road. All other considerations are nonsense, as far as she is concerned.

When she discusses the possibility of Shakespeare working as a lawyer’s clerk, Duncan-Jones refers to Malone, who, strongly supported by Fripp, claims that Shakespeare worked as a lawyer’s clerk in Stratford. Duncan-Jones argues that if Shakespeare had been a lawyer’s clerk, ‘he would quite often have been called upon to witness deeds or wills, yet much diligent search in the abundant local records has uncovered no such signatures’ (23).

Duncan-Jones mentions that, although Shakespeare working as a lawyer’s clerk is an ‘attractive’ suggestion, ‘Shakespeare’s deep familiarity with legal terminology may derive, rather, from his own practical determination to master this subject, which in this period was of vital importance for anyone who wished to make his way in the world’ (24). This is one of the few occasions Duncan-Jones compliments Shakespeare.

Shakespeare joining the army or stealing deer from Lucy’s park are no options as far as Duncan-Jones is concerned: she mentions neither of these suggestions. She does not believe in the idea of Shakespeare as a teacher. She does not mention the Hoghton family in Lancashire. She says that ‘We may, if we believe Aubrey, imagine that ‘he had been in his younger years a schoolmaster in the country’ (23). She argues that ‘had it amounted to much’, it would ‘probably have left a trace in the records’ (23).

Duncan-Jones does believe in the notion of Shakespeare joining a theater group. She mentions the fight between Towne and Knell. She argues that the Queen’s Men were not one
but two actors short after Knell’s death. Towne, pardoned by the Queen because he had acted in self-defense, was ‘presumably not allowed to perform again until the inquest had sat’ (30). A scholar named Eccles suggested that the Queen’s Men recruited Shakespeare in Stratford soon after the incident, but Duncan-Jones argues that theater groups only selected experienced actors from existing theater groups. If Shakespeare was recruited, he could only have taken on a small part. When the Queen’s Men were established in 1583, three of its twelve members were taken from Leicester’s Men. Perhaps Shakespeare was part of them by 1587 and then recruited from them by the Queen’s Men. Judging from his extensive knowledge of the Queen’s Men’s plays, many of which he re-wrote\(^\text{17}\) later on, this seems like a plausible notion.

**Anthony Holden**

Holden does not mention the possibility of Shakespeare working as a lawyer’s clerk. He does not believe in the possibility of Shakespeare as a soldier either. He also dismisses the notion of Shakespeare stealing deer from Lucy’s park. Shakespeare teaching with the two Lancashire families and then traveling to London as one of the Queen’s Men are the only two credible options, according to Holden.

Holden briefly mentions Duff Cooper’s assumption that Shakespeare was in the army in 1585. Cooper assumes this from a letter Sir Philip Sidney wrote on 24 March 1586 while he was on military service in Utrecht, the Netherlands. In this letter to his father-in-law, Sir Francis Walsingham, Sidney mentions ‘I wrote to you a letter by Will, my Lord of Leicester’s jesting player...’ (51) This William could have been anyone with the same name, and Holden believes that Cooper is ‘grasping at straws’ (51). Furthermore, Holden dismisses the possibility of Shakespeare being ‘on active service in the Low Countries’ (51) in early 1586,

\(^{17}\) King Leir, for example (Duncan-Jones 31).
simply because Anne gave birth to their twins at that time. Shakespeare surely would not want to miss the baptism, which is recorded in the Stratford records on 2 February of that year.

The story of Shakespeare stealing deer from Sir Thomas Lucy’s deer park at Charlecote seems unconvincing in Holden’s eyes. He mentions that ‘the tale took root as early as 1709’ (45), and that it gained credibility in the eighteenth century (47). Holden states that ‘Young Will the deer-poacher is part of the Shakespeare story that his biographers want to believe almost as much as their readers; and there is plenty of encouraging evidence’ (45). However, no documentation of charges made against Shakespeare exists. Holden only refers to the two texts Schoenbaum and Weis also mention.

Like Greenblatt, Holden sees Shakespeare as a teacher with the Hoghton and Hesketh families in Lancashire. According to Holden, ‘Shakespeare would have been at Hoghton Tower for at least a year, more like two, by the time he moved on to Hesketh’s employment ten miles south-east at Rufford Old Hall in the latter part of 1581’ (59). The Heskeths regularly received traveling groups of actors, including ‘such leading groups as the Earl of Derby’s Players, later those of his son and heir Fernando, Lord Strange, and eventually a source of recruitment for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men’ (60).

Holden suggests Shakespeare did not stay with the Heskeths for long but quickly found a more suitable position in the employment of the Earl of Derby ‘a close friend of the Queen with his own troupe of players’ (61) and subsequently into the service of Lord Strange and ‘into the London theatrical world’ (62). Other scholars claim Shakespeare traveled from Stratford to Lancashire with the Lord Strange’s Men in early 1579. According to the Stratford records, the theater group was paid for a performance in Stratford on 11 February 1579 (Holden 60).
became famous in London. ‘Even the most imaginative biographers have yet to suggest that
Shakespeare was not the father of his own children’ (51).

Holden mentions that biographer John Aubrey insists Shakespeare left for London in
1582, soon after his marriage (74). Holden himself suggests

If it is possible, as we shall see, that Shakespeare fled Stratford in the immediate wake
of his marriage, pleading the need to seek his fortune in London, with the reassurance
that he would return regularly as a travelling player; more likely, he spent two more
years leading a reluctantly humdrum life in Stratford, playing the dutiful husband and
father in town while getting up to no good (and gathering more of the natural poet’s
raw material) in the Warwickshire countryside which permeates his work, whatever its
apparent setting (72).

Holden believes the most likely way Shakespeare came to London is with the Queen’s Men,
who visited Stratford in June 1587, after the fight between Towne and Knell. Since this option
makes sense chronologically, Holden sees it as ‘the most convincing available scenario’ (76).

Peter Ackroyd
Shakespeare was neither a lawyer’s clerk nor a soldier, according to Ackroyd. He did not steel
deer either. Ackroyd believes the only two viable options are Shakespeare taking on a
teaching job in Lancashire and subsequently joining the Queen’s Men to London.

Although Shakespeare’s works are ‘striated with legal terminology’ (80), Ackroyd
points out that ‘The law was an inevitable part of ordinary social life’ (80). ‘It need only be
said that it is a mark of his ‘all-comprehending’ imagination that the language of law comes to
him as effortlessly and as instinctively as the language of nature. He also says that ‘his
extraordinary capacity for entry into imagined worlds has misled many scholars’ (67). As an example, Ackroyd mentions that ‘His apparent knowledge of the technical terms of seamanship – even to the details of dry ship-biscuits – has, for example, convinced some that he served in the English navy’ (67-68).

‘In the absence of certainty, there have emerged many legends concerning Shakespeare’s early years. The most famous of these is his aptitude for poaching’ (68). Ackroyd mentions the two ballads and their references to deer and hunting. Although ‘no other Elizabethan dramatist is so acquainted with all the details of the hunt’ (70), Ackroyd’s view of the deer poaching incident is that ‘there are difficulties with the story as it stands’ (68). There is no evidence to support the legend, therefore Ackroyd dismisses the deer poaching scenario.

Because ‘There are so many references to school masters and school curricula in his plays, far more than in those of any contemporary’ (73), Ackroyd sees Shakespeare as a teacher as a plausible option, and because of Alexander Hoghton’s reference to William Shakeshafte in his will, Lancashire seems to be the plausible location. To support this theory, Ackroyd gives some additional information the other biographers do not mention. He points out that Hoghton’s will includes a statement that he left William Shakeshafte 40 shillings a year. ‘He is named among forty other household servants, but the bequest does suggest some form of special recognition’ (74). Another piece of research other biographers do not mention is that in the 1950s, a heavily annotated copy of Hall’s *Chronicles* that belonged to the Hoghtons and the Heskeths has been discovered (77). The annotator might have been Shakespeare. Because of the reference in the will and the annotated book that might have been annotated by Shakespeare and the fact that no evidence suggests otherwise lead Ackroyd to believe that Shakespeare was indeed a teacher in Lancashire.

Ackroyd hesitantly sums up the possible ways Shakespeare started his acting career:
It has been surmised that he joined a company of traveling players, perhaps when they were passing through Stratford. It has been suggested that he journeyed to London in the hope or expectation of joining one of the companies already performing there (96).

Ackroyd believes Shakespeare’s career as a professional actor started with the Queen’s Men, although he only briefly refers to the fight between Towne and Knell: ‘Five years later one member of the company killed another in a brawl’ (99). Ackroyd does not mention how or when he believes Shakespeare joined the Queen’s Men, he only points out what other scholars have surmised:

Their name has been associated with that of William Shakespeare because of the remarkable coincidence of the plays that they performed, plays that still have a distinctly familiar ring. They include The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth, King Leir, The Troublesome Reign of King John and The True Tragedy of Richard III. The supposition has been, therefore, that Shakespeare somehow joined himself with the Queen’s Men in 1587, when they came to Stratford, and that these plays are his early versions of ones that he subsequently revised (99).

**Park Honan**

Honan does not believe Shakespeare was a lawyer’s clerk, a soldier or a deer-poacher. He is open to the suggestion of Shakespeare teaching in Lancashire. Honan hints at Shakespeare joining the Lord Strange’s Men, but he does not suggest that he traveled to London with them or the Queen’s Men.
‘It is reasonable to think that at about the age of 15 or 16 Shakespeare helped his father, and that for an interlude he even found alternative employment’ (60). Honan does not mention the possibilities of Shakespeare working as a lawyer’s clerk or a soldier, simply because there is no evidence supporting these theories. Like Schoenbaum, Honan is a traditional biographer: he prefers to stick to the facts.

Although Honan mentions deer-poaching (57-58), he does not speak of Shakespeare’s alleged deer-poaching from Sir Thomas Lucy’s deer park.

‘The ‘Schoolmaster’ report is not particularly surprising, unlikely, or merely gossipy.’ Honan says the reference in Alexander Hoghton’s will ‘of course does not prove the case, but it does leave open the possibility that Shakespeare spent some months in the north of England’ (62). Although ‘We still lack a note in the hand of Hoghton, Cottom, or anyone else to show that he went north’ (64), Honan believes that ‘there is a good possibility that he went to Hoghton’ (65). He also believes that Shakespeare went to the Heskeths after Alexander Hoghton’s death. Hesketh, in turn, may also have played an important part in fuelling Shakespeare’s acting career:

Sir Thomas Hesketh was in a position to recommend him to Lord Strange, in a decade when Strange’s Men were on the way to becoming the premier playing troupe in London. Again, it may be a coincidence that Shakespeare’s early plays, and knowledge of his unpublished sonnets, can be linked with people in the circle of Hoghton, Hesketh, and Strange: but the associations are factual enough (70).

How Shakespeare ended up in London remains a mystery Honan does not attempt to unravel. He does not mention the fight in which Towne killed Knell and he does not elaborate on how Shakespeare might have come to London with the Lord Strange’s Men either.
Conclusion

All the intriguing accounts of where Shakespeare was and what he was doing during the lost years are mere speculation, because so little has been documented. ‘All we know for sure about that decade is that he married and fathered three children. The rest was, and will always remain, fertile territory for the literary gumshoe’ (Holden 43). With so little factual information to go on, what choice do biographers have but to present various possible scenarios and interpretations? Documentary evidence represents facts but it lacks the appealing imaginative power of narrative that makes biographies so popular. Chronicles and annals, mere sequences of facts, have no narrative element. The lack of documentation from Shakespeare’s lifetime leaves biographers with no other choice than to both focus on the little evidence that exists and to elaborate on that, and to try to fill in the gaps and therefore to reconstruct Shakespeare’s life, to show the reader what may have been. Considering this, one should bear in mind that ‘factual reconstruction can never be the raison d’être of biography because it is impossible to achieve’ (Nadel 1993, 14).
Marriage

Introduction

Concerning Shakespeare’s marriage, Schoenbaum explains that

The episode has given rise to strange reveries of biography – romantic, sentimental, misogynistic – resembling nothing so much as ‘those laborious webbes of Learning’ which, according to Francis Bacon, the scholastic philosophers spun out of ‘no great quantitie of matter, and ‘infinite agitation of wit’ (62).

In Schoenbaum’s opinion, biographers have let their imagination take over, which has led to unrealistic representations. He believes ‘The task of the responsible biographer is to clear away the cobwebs, and sift, as disinterestedly as he may, the facts that chance and industry have brought to light’ (62).

Schoenbaum opposes Nadel’s point of view that ‘biography can exist only as a verbal artifact divorced from history and reality’ (Nadel 1993, 11). Schoenbaum is number one among the traditional biographers Nadel speaks of when he says

Traditional critics and biographers react in horror to these claims, arguing that to shatter the distinction between the referential and the self-affirming is to destroy the historically accurate and factual basis of the language of biography (Nadel 1993, 11).

Anecdotes add to the narrative power of the biography. Fictional anecdotes do not serve as mere lies, they are tools to make the reader consider things in an objective way. Even Schoenbaum has to admit that fictional anecdotes are valuable, especially when we know so little of someone’s personal life as is the case with Shakespeare.

Samuel Schoenbaum

Although he presents Shakespeare’s life in a factual way, even Schoenbaum cannot help but romanticize by dwelling on the setting and wonder who made the first move:

During the long summer twilights of 1582 he must more than once have found his way along the narrow footpath that led west from his home, through green fields, to a clump of farmhouses called Shottery, a mile distant, where the large Hathaway family dwelt. Shakespeare wooed and bedded the farmer’s eldest daughter – or did she seduce her boy lover? – and in November they married (61).

Like the traditional biographer he is, Schoenbaum uses documents to piece together his account of Shakespeare’s marriage. Two important documents concerning Shakespeare’s marriage have survived: the marriage bond and the entry of license. Schoenbaum states that ‘These answer some questions and pose others’ (63). The marriage bond in particular has been viewed by biographers as something exceptional and scandalous, but Schoenbaum relates that these marriage bonds were ‘not at all uncommon’ (62).19

The marriage bond was secured by two friends of Anne’s father’s. Schoenbaum emphasizes that ‘At that time it was the custom for the bondsmen to be friends or kinsmen of the bride, for an unmarried heiress – not her suitor – stood most in need of the law’s

19 In 1582 the Worcester court granted 98 marriage bonds (Schoenbaum 62).
protection against fortune-hunters’ (65). This is something other biographers have not considered.

The second best bed is all Shakespeare left his wife. Since the eighteenth century,²⁰ ‘This provision has stimulated endless, mostly unprofitable, controversy’ (247). Schoenbaum objectively points out that documents cannot reveal all. He explanation of the different viewpoints concerning Shakespeare leaving his wife only the second best bed hits the nail on the head:

‘The problem, as regards the provision in Shakespeare’s will, is that the scant attention paid to the spouse is unusual, and what is said is unaccompanied by any expression of testamentary emotion… but Shakespeare includes no endearing references to other members of his family either, and perhaps his lawyer did not encourage, or permit, such embellishments. Hence our choice between cynicism and sentiment. The latter is surely the more attractive option, but this is a matter that can be no more than inferentially resolved’ (248).

In the end, Schoenbaum remains objective: ‘His wife did not go with him hand in hand, but neither did he turn his back permanently on the Eden, if such it was, of his youth’ (76).

Schoenbaum’s biography is the most inconclusive one. He tries to stick to the facts, the documents, but this way he also limits himself in his narrative. By refusing to interpret Shakespeare’s actions and key events in his life, he takes away the reader’s

---

²⁰ Schoenbaum points out eighteenth-century Shakespeare scholar Edmund Malone as the one who started all the negative attention that has been paid to Shakespeare giving Anne only his second best bed (248). Malone remarked that ‘he so recollected her, as more strongly to mark how little he esteemed her’ (qtd. 248). Other scholars opposed Malone’s opinion: ‘Another school, however, conscious of dower right, holds that the Shakespeares must have reserved their best bed for overnight guests at New Place and that the less valuable bed was the one rich in tender matrimonial associations’ (248).
opportunity to wonder what might have been, which in biography is just as important as pointing out what actually happened.

Park Honan

As befits a true storyteller, Honan starts his account on the Shakespeare courtship and marriage with a harvest metaphor: ‘The summer of 1582 had favoured lovers and crops’ (72). This observation has nothing to do with the context of Shakespeare’s marriage. Honan takes it even further when he fantasizes about what may have been on Shakespeare’s mind when he found out Anne was pregnant: ‘A young man in the ‘May of youth and bloom of lustihood’ might, of course, sow his wild oats, but he was likely to hear from the vicar’s apparitor and have to explain his fornication and apologize for it’ (72). There is no way to find out what Shakespeare was thinking at the time, all one can do is speculate.

About Anne’s age and her position on the marriage market, Honan says ‘It is a modern myth that she was ‘on the shelf’, or older than many women of the Tudor yeomanry at marriage, but William was legally a minor’ (73). He has not come across any proof that Anne was old for marriage. He emphasizes that William was younger than Anne, saying ‘William can hardly have acquired a maturity of outlook that years would have given Anne’ (80). This is all very factual, but Honan also romanticizes matters. For instance, he suggests that ‘she would have been of use to her father and brother, and after losing them she had found this rather elegant young man of Henley Street, a son of her father’s friend, ardent in his need for her’ (80).

Honan claims William’s main motive to woo and marry Anne was to gain experience: ‘After his school years, he had married quickly and sired children as if to absorb such emotional nourishment and experience as he could’ (91). When William
started seeing Anne, ‘as he became more self-confident, he enriched his sense of life’ (73). Whether the marriage was a happy one or not is something Honan does not decide on. He does let on that he believes Shakespeare was not content living in Stratford with Anne

Ambitious, dissatisfied and restless as he undoubtedly was with no outlet for the energy of his talents at Henley Street, he was not to behave as a man ensnared by an unsuitable woman; his apparently regular visits to Stratford, his investments and care to establish himself there, do not suggest he found Anne immaterial to his welfare’ (87).

To further emphasize his point of Shakespeare being unhappy in his marriage, Honan confirms that Shakespeare spent a lot of time in London and was in no hurry to return to Stratford (383). He suggests that the reasons Shakespeare spent most of his time in London were the excitement of the city and the fact that the city provided him with what he so loved to do and earned a living with: playwriting and acting (383).

Katherine Duncan-Jones

Most scholars agree that the name ‘Whateley’ in the marriage register is supposed to be ‘Hathaway’. This is about the only thing Duncan-Jones agrees on with recent scholars. Everything Duncan-Jones discusses she sets up in a way that strongly suggests Anne was an unsuspecting maiden about to be ravished by a manipulative Shakespeare. She simply refers to Anne as a ‘young woman’ (17).

Duncan-Jones is convinced that Shakespeare was unhappy in his marriage. The fact that he only left her the second best bed, as far as Duncan-Jones is concerned, is yet
another clue that Shakespeare did not love his wife. The only happiness he felt was in the first weeks of his affair with Anne, when he probably wrote Sonnet 145.

Like Honan, Duncan-Jones sees experience as Shakespeare’s reason to woo and marry Anne: ‘In the sticky hot August of 1582 Shakespeare was probably changing from boy into man, and experiencing the uncontrollable surges of testosterone accompanying that stage of development’ (17). She takes it a step further when she says ‘meanwhile Stratford’s most talented son was sowing wild oats, with little or no thought to the lifelong problems he would reap’ (17). Again, her words reflect those of Honan’s, but hers have an unmistakably negative undertone.

Anthony Holden

Holden’s famous question on the relationship between Anne and William and how it started is ‘Was it a careless roll in the hay of a summer evening?’ (63)

Although he pretends to ponder over the question of whether Shakespeare was ‘trapped into a reluctant marriage by a desperate woman eight years his senior, scared of being left on the shelf in a home no longer her own? Or was this a genuine love-match?’ (64), he has already drawn his conclusion. Holden digresses and wanders off the path that is the search of evidence of the love between Shakespeare and his wife. From time to time he shows some sympathy and he seems to almost believe that Shakespeare loved his wife. He does this when he disagrees with scholars who see Shakespeare giving Anne his second-best bed as a sign that he clearly did not love her. Holden explains he does not jump to the conclusion that Shakespeare deliberately left her this bed as a statement to

21 Duncan-Jones relishes in the fact that ‘Scholars have made ingenious excuses for the late interlinear insertion into the will of the celebrated clause ‘Item, I give unto my wife my second best bed with the furniture’ (272). Duncan-Jones believes Shakespeare hated his wife and as he was contemplating things on his deathbed, which was probably the master bed, ‘He was determined that Anne should never occupy it, even after his death’ (272). Only the second best bed was good enough for her.
illustrate that her only purpose in his life was to give him children. Holden does not see
the second-best bed as a symbol for Shakespeare’s dislike of his wife. He says that it has
‘long been interpreted as an insult, since it was first so read by an outraged Malone’ (322).
Holden is convinced the second-best bed is not a reversed declaration of love and he
suggests that the best bed would actually have been reserved for guests, and the second
best bed was actually the marital bed.22

Although he defends Anne’s honor and Shakespeare’s good intentions in the second-best
bed situation, Holden has his scenario figured out. He firmly believes in ‘William’s
apparent reluctance to marry a woman eight years his senior’ (69), that he ‘carelessly
impregnated’ Anne (289) and that he spent a lot of time avoiding her (69).

At the end of his life, Shakespeare may have regretted not being there for his wife
and not loving her. He may have tried to ‘atone for his own inadequacies as husband and
father’ (280), but he did not love his wife. All of Holden’s digressions lead to this
conclusion.

Bill Bryson

Like a factual biographer, Bryson starts his section on Shakespeare’s marriage by
summing up the details of the marriage bond. He does this in a concise and
straightforward manner (40).

Why Anne and William were in such a hurry to get married is something that
puzzles Bryson. The fact that Anne was pregnant could not have been a catalyst to speed

22 ‘The “second-best” bed Shakespeare so famously specified in his will was, therefore, the marital bed he had
shared with Anne – on and off, to put it mildly – for more than thirty years (and perhaps her own parents’ before
that). Far from signifying the rottenness of their marriage, the bequest suggests a specific (and rather touching)
vote of thanks from a grateful husband, aware of his own shortcomings, for the long-suffering, dogged loyalty of
a partner who had for years put up with a long-distance marriage, single-handedly brought up his children in his
absence, and overlooked his own all-too-evident lapses when he did choose to put in the occasional appearance
at home (Holden 322).
up the marriage, according to Bryson. He says that ‘Up to 40 per cent of brides were in that state, according to one calculation, so why the extravagant haste here is a matter that can only be guessed at’ (40). This ‘one calculation’ seems to be sufficient evidence for Bryson. Bryson does the same thing when he states that Shakespeare was an unusually young groom, claiming the average age for a man was in his mid- to late twenties, and for women a little sooner. He contradicts himself by immediately adding ‘But these figures were extremely variable’ (41). He does not look into any local records, neither does he document his source. This way, nobody can accuse him of giving the wrong information. It also confirms that he is not an expert on Elizabethan society.

Bryson does not only draw on written sources. Although he may not be a Shakespeare expert himself, to add credibility he makes it known that he has interviewed one of today’s most famous Shakespeare scholars: ‘Stanley Wells, the renowned Shakespeare authority’ (136). The fact that Bryson spoke to Shakespeare expert Stanley Wells resembles the way scholars refer to other scholars in their works, but it is actually quite different. Whereas scholars quote other scholars to back up their arguments, Bryson uses scholars’ names to create the illusion that he himself is a Shakespeare scholar, when in truth he is not.

Although he believes that it was Shakespeare who seduced Anne and not the other way around, Bryson establishes that Shakespeare was gay. He bases this conclusion on his assumption that many of the sonnets were ‘arrestingly homoerotic, with references to ‘my lovely boy’, the ‘master mistress of my passion’, ‘Lord of my love’, ‘thou mine, I thine’ and other such bold and dangerously unorthodox declarations’ (140). He hereby takes the sonnets out of their original context and adds his own meaning to them. His

---

23 ‘The extraordinary fact is that Shakespeare, creator of the tenderest and most moving scenes of heterosexual affection in play after play, became with the sonnets English literary history’s sublimest gay poet’ (Bryson 139-140).
conclusion is far-fetched and does not add to Bryson’s credibility as a Shakespeare scholar.

Bryson initially remains highly speculative about their marriage and repeatedly says that we do not know anything about their relationship,\(^{24}\) but he does not seem to believe in a loving marriage between Shakespeare and his wife, thus going directly against what Stanley Wells told him about Shakespeare possibly frequently taking time off to return to Stratford (136). Moreover, for no valid reasons, Bryson believes Shakespeare was gay. Apparently, he was only ‘in courting mode’ (142) in the very early stage of the relationship and things went downhill from there.

**Germaine Greer**

Germaine Greer is the first Shakespeare scholar to take up the bold task of describing a woman like Anne Hathaway, and, furthermore, defending her. Whereas Katherine Duncan-Jones presents an unsympathetic account of both Shakespeare and Anne, Greer is more compassionate. Ruthless as she is in her criticism on established male Shakespeare scholars, Greer presents the reader with an elaborate account that is in no way inferior to Duncan-Jones’.

Greer interweaves her account of Anne Hathaway and William Shakespeare’s life with waterfalls of detailed information on Elizabethan conventions and rituals. On the wedding day itself, for instance, she comments that

\(^{24}\) *We know nothing about the couple’s relationship – whether they bickered constantly or were eternally doting. We don’t know if she ever accompanied him to London, saw any of his plays, or even took an interest in them. We have no indication of any warmth between them – but then we have no indication of warmth between William Shakespeare and any other human being. It is tempting to suppose that they had some sort of real bond for at least the first years of their marriage – they had children together on two occasions, after all – but it may actually be, for all we know, that they were very loving indeed and enjoyed a continuing (if presumably often long-distance) affection throughout their marriage. Two of the few certainties of Shakespeare’s life are that his marriage lasted till his death and that he sent much of his wealth back to Stratford as soon as he was able, which may not be conclusive proof of attachment, but hardly argues against it (Bryson 42).*
Traditionally, the wedding celebrations took a whole summer’s day, beginning with the waking of the bride by her maids and ending after sunset. At sun-up the village girls would form a procession and walk to the bride’s house, singing as they went… (96)

The quote above seems out of place, because William and Anne got married in winter. Therefore, their wedding could not have taken the time of an entire summer’s day. Later on, Greer comes to the same conclusion:

November days are short. Ann and Will would not have had to wait out an endless twilight as the couples have to do in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* before they could be bedded (102).

Greer uses her extensive knowledge of the era as she speculates about Anne as she would have been according to Elizabethan customs. In spite of the fact that she herself does nothing but speculate, Greer is ruthless on other scholars’ speculation:

There is nothing, it seems, that ignorance and prejudice will not suggest when it comes to the marriage of Ann Hathaway. Holden’s nonsense is derived from the nonsense of the great Sir Sidney Lee, who did not scruple to invent what he did not know about the law governing marriage in the sixteenth century (75).

She is commenting on Holden’s suggestion that Shakespeare possibly married Anne without the consent of his parents. Greer insists that this was impossible, ‘For anyone
under age to marry without parental consent was considered a heinous sin, to which the
Consistory Court could never have made itself a party' (76). Just because something is
looked down upon does not mean that it never occurred. Speculation is necessary in order
to present things in a different light and allow the readers to open their minds to different
perspectives. The biographer’s interpretation is a reconstruction of what could have
happened, which is more interesting that a mere series of facts.

Like Schoenbaum, Greer mentions that ‘applications for special licenses were
relatively common’ (72). As for Ann’s part in the request of the marriage bond, Greer
allows the reader to step back and view the matter in a different way than traditional
Shakespeare scholarship has done so far. In contrast to the traditional point of view, Greer
relates that ‘Ann did not need to argue her case to anyone; she was a spinster and at her
own disposal, but only misogyny would assume on the available evidence that she was
pushing for the marriage and Will was resisting’ (73).

Greer continues her bold, non-traditional account of the Shakespeare-Hathaway
marriage by insisting Anne was the ‘typical early modern bride’ (111). She argues that

It is her husband who is the exception to the rule, being himself a minor, with a
mother who has a two-year-old child and could still produce more. The presence
of another breeding woman in the house would have been unusual, if not
positively indecorous (111).

In Greer’s eyes, Anne was not older than most women to get married. She claims the
average age to get married in Elizabethan England was high, because ‘married people
were expected to set up housekeeping on their own’ (110). This is a perception other
scholars have not yet considered. Greer’s apparent knowledge of the Elizabethan age
gives her a credible status as a biographer and she may very well convince her readers that she is right.

Greer’s interpretation of Shakespeare and his wife is that Anne was an experienced lady and that young Shakespeare must have worked hard to seduce her. To emphasize his youth, Greer, author of *The Beautiful Boy*, refers to Shakespeare with terms such as ‘the boy’ (71), ‘boy genius’ (74) and ‘boy husband’ (114). She also states that Ann probably thought he was too young and that ‘he may have taken it upon himself to prove to her that he was not’ (72).

Greer again harshly comments on fellow Shakespeare scholar Anthony Holden: ‘The assertion by the likes of Anthony Holden that Ann’s pregnancy was the result of a single ‘roll in the hay’ is more revealing of their own attitudes than of the social context of Ann’s pregnancy’ (93). Greer feels that Anne and William had definitely formed an emotional attachment.

Another scholar Greer strongly disagrees with is Greenblatt. He seems to think that the bad marriages portrayed in Shakespeare’s plays indicate that ‘there is something seriously wrong with his marriage…’ (qtd. Greer 115). Greer argues that

There is almost no literature in any language known to me in which we are shown around a functional marriage. Though marriage is the happy ending of most works with happy endings, we are not invited to hang about and watch the spouses interacting. We get inside marriages only when they are dysfunctional (115).

---

25 In her 2003 book *The Beautiful Boy*, Greer presents boys in the early stages of manhood as a source of pleasure for women.
26 According to Greer, one tool Shakespeare certainly used in wooing Anne is poetry: Poetry was almost certainly part of Shakespeare’s armamentarium as a lover, and he would surely have deployed it as part of his courtship of Ann Hathaway (70). Greer believes Shakespeare wrote *Sonnet 145* in the early stages of their courtship (58, 257-258).
27 ‘The likelihood is that Ann Hathaway and young Shakespeare were known to be courting months before her father’s friends applied for a special license for them to marry’ (Greer 94).
This makes sense, since reading about a perfectly harmonious marriage would be quite a bore.

Just like other scholars, Greer shows the reader what may have happened. At times her arguments are far-fetched or too romantic to be credible, but she also comes up with interesting details that make the reader look at certain events in a different and often new light. Creating an entirely factual account is something no Shakespeare biographer can accomplish, but this is not what the reader wants. It is the anecdotes to fill the gaps that do the trick, and this is what Greer does, combining her knowledge of Elizabethan society and her feminist approach.

Stephen Greenblatt

Like many scholars, Greenblatt presents topics from Shakespeare’s works as evidence to support his point of view. The subject of Shakespeare’s marriage is probably the most interesting topic related to his plays. Greenblatt explains

Lovemaking, not in the sense of sexual intercourse but in the older sense of intense courting and pleading and longing, was one of his abiding preoccupations, one of the things he understood and expressed more profoundly than almost anyone in the world. That understanding may not have had anything to do with the woman he married, of course, and theoretically at least, it need not have had anything to do with his lived experience at all. But the whole impulse to explore Shakespeare’s life arises from the powerful conviction that his plays and poems spring not only from other plays and poems but from things he knew firsthand, in his body and soul (119).
Although he admits that the plays and poems are not necessarily autobiographical, Greenblatt believes that Shakespeare drew from his own experiences. How Shakespeare experienced his marriage, and how he got to making this commitment is something scholars can only guess at. This is exactly what Greenblatt does. He entertains the idea that ‘Perhaps the optimists are right and their relationship, notwithstanding the long years apart, was a good one’ (126), but this contemplation is short-lived and Greenblatt quickly moves in for the kill.

Although he realizes there are few happy marriages in all of literature (133) and that the plays may not represent actual experiences from Shakespeare’s life (119), Greenblatt emphasizes the bad marriages in Shakespeare’s plays.28 He points out the bad marriages depicted in the plays, full of ‘mutual loathing’ (127), ‘estrangement’ (127) and mutual isolation (128) and uses his observations to support his conviction that Shakespeare’s marriage was a bad match. From The Winter’s Tale,29 Greenblatt concludes that Shakespeare must have believed that there was ‘something seriously wrong with his marriage’ (126). To further emphasize this point, Greenblatt repeatedly refers to Shakespeare’s departure from his wife as an ‘escape’,30 which suggests he did not love her and returned to his hometown for another reason than to spend time with her.

Any possibility of tenderness in Shakespeare’s choice of leaving his wife the second-best bed is dismissed as ‘absurd wishful thinking’ (146). According to Greenblatt, Shakespeare did not love his wife: ‘So much for the dream of love. When Shakespeare lay dying, he tried to forget his wife and then remembered her with the second-best bed’ (147).

28 In the plays, ‘There is no end of longing, flirtation, and pursuit, but strikingly little long-term promise of mutual understanding’ (Greenblatt 136).
29 The Winter’s Tale, one of Shakespeare’s final plays, presents ‘the moving reconciliation of a husband and a wife who had seemed lost to one another forever. Perhaps this was indeed Shakespeare’s fantasy for his own life, but if so the fantasy does not seem to correspond to what actually happened” (Greenblatt 144).
30 Examples of this are: ‘… he turned his back on his wife and children and made his way to London. A piece of personal good fortune may have come his way, making the escape possible’ (Greenblatt 161), and ‘… his escape from Stratford and his arrival in London’ (Greenblatt 209).
Greenblatt states that Shakespeare only retired to Stratford at the end of his life to be with his daughter Susanna and her family (389-390), because three of his last plays revolve around the father-daughter relationship. Greenblatt even goes so far as to say that the father-daughter relationships in these plays are ‘deeply anxious about incestuous desires’ (389-390). Immediately after, though, in the very next sentence, he explains: ‘What Shakespeare wanted was only what he could have in the most ordinary and natural way: the pleasure of living near his daughter and her husband and their child’ (390). Greenblatt’s conclusion is that Shakespeare did not love Anne, he wanted to get away from her. Although he admits that it is not realistic to set up the plays as a parallel to Shakespeare’s private life, this is exactly what Greenblatt does. The bad marriages portrayed in the plays by no means represent Shakespeare’s own marriage and the suggestion is a poor one that seriously lacks evidence.

**Peter Ackroyd**

Shakespeare’s marriage does not seem to interest Peter Ackroyd much. He does not linger on the marriage bond or the entry in the marriage register but chooses to focus on assumptions and anecdotes of what things might have been like. He does not provide the reader with evidence to back up these assumptions.

Ackroyd admits that we do not know all the details concerning the marriage ceremony (88), and he uses this as an excuse come up with speculations he has no proof for. For example, he claims ‘The favoured day was Sunday’ (89). Supposing this is true, this does not mean that William and Anne got married on a Sunday.

Another of Ackroyd’s assumptions is that ‘in a period of shorter life expectancy, the disparity in age would have seemed greater than now’ (89). This may ring true in

---

31 ‘The woman who most intensely appealed to Shakespeare in his life was twenty years younger than he: his daughter Susanna’ (Greenblatt 389).
32 *Pericles, The Winter’s Tale,* and *The Tempest* are all about father-daughter relationships (Greenblatt 389).
retrospect, form a modern point of view, but things may have been very different in Tudor England. It is dangerous and often erroneous to conclude something by comparing such a detail to the modern point of view. Ackroyd makes assumptions this way many times. Another example is his argument that ‘It was an unusual arrangement, since in the sixteenth century it was customary for the man to marry a younger woman’ (84). This is yet another assumption based on modern conventions. To surmise this way makes Ackroyd look unprofessional. It seems he has not done his research and simply surmises things from a modern point of view, which is something one does not expect from an established scholar.

Surprisingly, when one considers the above, Ackroyd opposes the popular belief of the spinster seducing the young boy. He thinks ‘it might, on the contrary, suggest sexual self-confidence on Shakespeare’s part’ (84). He is also the first (before the release of Greer’s biography) to remark that ‘It is also an insult to Anne Hathaway who, like many of the silent wives of famous men, has endured much obloquy’ (84). This recognition may very well be what saved him from Germaine Greer’s merciless criticism.

Although he admits that there is no evidence that Shakespeare was trapped in a loveless marriage, he is convinced that Shakespeare was not completely happy:

Some have suggested that he was fleeing from a bad or forced marriage. There is no evidence for this. Nevertheless he can hardly have been part of a completely successful or happy marriage, for the very good reason that he would not then have considered leaving it. What contented husband would have left his wife and children for an unknown future in an unknown city? It is the merest common sense, then, to imagine him in some respect restless or dissatisfied (103).
The picture Ackroyd paints of Shakespeare’s marriage is one filled with conjecture based on modern conventions and assumptions he cannot back up with credible arguments.

**René Weis**

As far as the marriage is concerned, René Weis likes to beat around the bush. He lingers on details that he presents as facts but are really conventions and therefore probabilities. These details sometimes hardly have anything to do with Shakespeare’s marriage.

When he does discuss the romantic relationship between William and Anne, Weis does not come up with possible scenarios, he merely speculates on daily matters and conventions such as the house they lived in (60) and which bedroom was theirs (61). Weis presents these matters as facts, and he claims the evidence can be found in Shakespeare’s plays: ‘That the newly-wed couple needed a bedroom and some privacy is self-evident, and it is interesting to imagine it, based on the available evidence and clues’ (61).

The matter Weis is discussing is the marital bed, a mere object in which the reader may not be that interested. Nevertheless, Weis continues enthusiastically: ‘Their bed, like Kate’s in *The Taming of the Shrew*, would have had pillows, bolsters, coverlets, and sheets’ (61). The reader may be more interested in how Shakespeare and his wife may have felt during the start of their marriage than in their bedcovers.

Weis continually brings up matters that are most likely of no interest to the reader, for example the mentioning of a toilet: ‘At the back of the house there was undoubtedly a privy or jakes – a ‘place of easement’, as polite Londoners called it’ (61). A restroom is not something the reader expects to come across when reading the chapter ‘Enter Wife and Daughter’ (51-69).

---

33 Another example of a detail Weis mentions that has nothing to do with Shakespeare’s marriage is that Shakespeare’s plays cannot tell us anything about how he felt about being a parent, but they do contain ‘some wonderful portrayals of children’ (66).
Although there is nothing wrong with mentioning details that seem irrelevant when they illustrate the biographer’s point of view, it might have been more interesting if Weis had focused on details related to Shakespeare’s marriage, the actual topic of the chapter.

Whereas Weis does not seem interested in whether the marriage was a happy one, he is concerned with Shakespeare’s sexuality, on which he speculates wildly. Weis does not rule out the possibility of Shakespeare being gay. He also notes that Shakespeare did some ‘successful womanizing’ and he suggests ‘That Shakespeare committed adultery while he was in London is scarcely in doubt’ 35. Weis also discusses the possibility of Anne cheating on him too. Drawing a parallel to Hamlet, Weis entertains the idea that Anne had an affair with one of Shakespeare’s brothers. He eventually dismisses this notion because the house was ‘not big enough for any untoward relationship to remain hidden’.

By lingering on irrelevant details Weis makes the reader eager to get to the conclusion and simultaneously bores the reader. It may be disappointing for the curious reader to find that Weis does not reveal much about Shakespeare’s marriage, as the title of his biography may suggest. To no avail, he tries to spice his account up with the far-fetched suggestion of both Shakespeares cheating on one another. The account on the will (which Weis ironically calls boring) is the most interesting part concerning Shakespeare’s relationship with his wife. It seems as though Weis has so little to say on the marriage between Shakespeare and his wife that he loses himself in trivial details.

---

34 ‘If Shakespeare slipped into homosexual practices, it was likely to have been among the acting community in Shoreditch’ (Weis 389).
35 Weis suggests Shakespeare may have had an affair with a woman called Jane Davenant (281) and he was possibly the father of her child (294). See pp 63-64 of my chapter The Plays.
Conclusion

A biography is not just a chronological series of facts. Although writing a biography means that the author has to present factual information, presenting different options or how the author believes certain events came to pass is an essential element in biography. Particularly when so little is known about someone’s personal life, like Shakespeare’s, fictional anecdotes are necessary. One has to bear in mind that fictional reconstructions of events are possible scenarios and therefore could be true. These scenarios are the authors’ hypothetical reconstructions and they allow the reader to ‘observe the subject in an unguarded state’ (Nadel 1993, 10). The author is the narrator that takes the reader through a sequence of events as they may have taken place. It is by no means useless to speculate, it opens the reader up to certain possibilities they might not have been aware of otherwise.

Biographers use different approaches. They do not always do as they promise or set out to do. Traditional biographer Schoenbaum, for example, does not always limit himself to facts as he attempts to. Weis, whose work promises a revealing reconstruction according to its title, provides the reader with a detached account that hardly reveals anything about Shakespeare’s marriage. Extreme viewpoints such as Duncan-Jones’ resentful one may come across as too harsh to be true, but they do what they are supposed to do: they urge the reader to think and draw their own conclusions on the matters presented by the biographer.
The Plays

Introduction
Practically all biographers relate factual information about Shakespeare’s plays, for instance when they were written or when they were performed in public theaters or at court. The biographers also like to use quotes from the plays to reflect the themes they discuss and therefore involve the reader in their approach. A quote from Shakespeare himself seems to bring the reader closer to what Shakespeare was thinking when he wrote the plays. It is tempting to take events from the plays and compare them to what may have happened to or near Shakespeare at the time he wrote the plays, and a number of biographers do this. By finding common ground between the events and characters in the plays and those in Shakespeare’s life, a lot can be said and possibly explained about Shakespeare. This is not to say that everything can be explained and that all explanations are correct, but it does offer an intriguing series of possible explanations. As Nadel explains, factual reconstruction can never be achieved, therefore it can never be the reason a biography is created (Nadel 1993, 14). Biographies are meant to explore possibilities and to inspire. They should, however, create realistic pictures, or ‘cultural realities’ (Nadel 1993, 14), as Nadel calls them.

René Weis
If there is one Shakespeare biographer who uses the plays to their full extent, it is René Weis. Right from the start, Weis makes it clear that he reads a lot into Shakespeare’s plays: ‘the plays and poems contain important clues not only to Shakespeare’s inner life but also about real, tangible, external events’ (2). His intentions are clear: he uses the plays like a mirror, to reflect on events, feelings and
other experiences from Shakespeare’s own life. Although he knows the plays cannot be completely autobiographical, Weis is convinced that ‘To try to detach the plays and poems from the life of their author is as counter-intuitive as it would be to seek to separate him from the national history of his era’ (3). Weis quotes John Keats to add credibility to his approach.  

At times Weis draws conclusions that ring true. For example, when Shakespeare refers to the different stages in a man’s life in Jaques’ ‘All the world’s a stage’ speech in As You Like It, including that of a schoolboy (19-20), Weis believes that Shakespeare was undoubtedly looking back on his own schooldays. But then again, this was ‘just like anyone else’ (20). Weis argues that Shakespeare may not be describing his personal experiences, but ‘It is more tempting to think that he must be writing about himself here, of little Will with his satchel making his way to school while wishing himself home again with his parents’ (20). It is an option. 

There are occasions when Weis takes the most minuscule and apparently insignificant detail from a play and attempts to connect it to Shakespeare’s own life. This occurs, for example, when Weis discusses the use of the word ‘godson’ in King Lear (302). This is the only play in which the word ‘godson’ is used. Grasping for straws, Weis links the use of the word ‘godson’ in the play to Shakespeare’s personal situation. Shakespeare wrote King Lear around the time William Davenant was born. Weis believes ‘various clues’ suggest that Shakespeare was William Davenant’s godfather, and maybe even his biological father (303). This is a far-fetched conclusion, and Weis does not explicitly mention the clues he is convinced there are.

---

36 Keats, ‘one of Shakespeare’s most assiduous and intelligent readers’ (2), stated that: ‘Shakespeare led a life of Allegory: his works are the comments on it’ (qtd. 2-3). Weis seems confident that the reader will believe anything he says now that he has made it known that Keats is on his side.

37 ‘If the parallels between Shakespeare’s life and the play are as intimate as the various clues appear to suggest’ (Weis 303).
Weis has an active imagination. He justifies this by stating that ‘For Shakespeare his art was ever an extension of his life’ (392). There may be some truth in this. The plays could have helped Shakespeare deal with the losses he experienced throughout his life. Other plays could be seen as celebrations of life and love. To what extent the events and characters in the plays represent real ones from Shakespeare’s personal life is to be guessed at, and this is something Weis does very well. He comes up with interesting suggestions but it is highly unlikely that they contain the truth.

Stephen Greenblatt

Greenblatt presents Shakespeare as a man who was obsessed by language. He emphasizes this by inserting part of a nursery rhyme echoed in the words of a madman in King Lear. This sets the tone of Greenblatt’s biography. For just like Shakespeare, this master storyteller is all about language.

Both Weis and Greenblatt believe that Shakespeare put a lot of his personal experiences into his plays. Greenblatt feels that this is reason enough to refer to the plays constantly. He constantly compares Shakespeare’s plays to possible occurrences in his private life, simply because ‘This artist was unusually open to the world and discovered the means to allow this world into his works’ (14).

Like Weis, Greenblatt picks certain details to visualize Shakespeare’s life, for example the leather trade. As a glover’s son, Shakespeare had a lot to do with leather. This is a minor detail, but Greenblatt feels it is important enough to elaborate on. He mentions different occasions in which leather occurs in the plays38 because it creates a vivid image of Shakespeare. Leather and its trade were part of Shakespeare’s

---

38 Some examples of Shakespeare mentioning leather are when Romeo says he longs to be a glove on Juliet’s hand, Hamlet asking Horatio if parchment is made of sheepskins and the cobbler in Julius Caesar who resoles shoes made of leather (Weis 55).
upbringing. Greenblatt uses these references in the plays to illustrate a theme: Shakespeare’s childhood and teen years. The leather trade had a certain impact on Shakespeare, it gave him knowledge which he used in his plays.

Another realistic parallel Greenblatt draws between Shakespeare’s plays and his private life is ‘the air of a farewell… a retirement’ (373) in one of Shakespeare’s final plays, The Tempest. It is about giving up power,\(^\text{39}\) which is exactly what Shakespeare did at the time he wrote this play. Retiring to Stratford meant no longer writing and performing in London. In the epilogue of The Tempest, Prospero, whom the reader can see as Shakespeare’s alter ego, steps forward once more to say he has renounced his powers and he asks for mercy and forgiveness for the things he has done wrong.\(^\text{40}\) Greenblatt implies that at this point in his life Shakespeare felt guilty and wanted to redeem himself. This is exactly the kind of anecdote that, according to Nadel, ‘satisfies the need for the reader to observe the subject in an unguarded state’ (Nadel 1993, 10). It allows the reader to consider certain character traits that the subject may have possessed, such as the longing for redemption.

**Peter Ackroyd**

Although he relies heavily on speculation, the way Ackroyd uses the plays presents the reader with intriguing material. He makes use of the plays according to the subsequent themes in his chapters, such as getting married or performing before the Queen at court. He has carefully structured his biography, and he uses details from the plays along the way. To point out that Shakespeare incorporated personal experiences in his plays and to get to the next chapter in which he speculates about why Anne and William did not have any more children, Ackroyd mentions

\(^{39}\) ‘But this rough magic I here abjure’ (The Tempest V.1.50-51).

\(^{40}\) Now my charms are all o’erthrown, and what strength I have’s mine own, which is most faint’ (The Tempest, Epilogue 1-3).
Shakespeare writing about twins. Since Shakespeare had twins himself, it is no surprise that he wrote about twins in his plays *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* (95).

Occasionally, Ackroyd takes one sentence from a play to put his own thoughts into Shakespeare’s words, virtually establishing a link between the two of them. Ackroyd tries to make it look as though he knows what was on Shakespeare’s mind. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, Antony says that the morning resembles ‘the spirit of a youth that meanes to be of note’ (IV.4.40-41). Ackroyd links this passage to Shakespeare’s own possible wish for fame. It is mere speculation, of course, and Ackroyd clearly uses the quote to increase credibility and to feel closer to Shakespeare’s thoughts and actions. Nevertheless, it may very well be true that Shakespeare entertained the thought of becoming famous. It is an interesting resemblance between the thoughts of one of Shakespeare’s characters and himself.

Another intriguing parallel between a detail from a play that resembles one from Shakespeare’s life is the ghost in *Hamlet* ‘lamenting that he is ‘Cut off euen in the blossomes of my sinne’ (qtd. 23). This quote closely resembles the Catholic testament found in the attic of the Henley Street house, which contains a line that states ‘I may be possibly cut off even in the blossomes of my sinne’ (qtd. 23). The testament was signed by Shakespeare’s father and kept hidden, which suggests he was secretly a Catholic. This is yet another possible truth. However, this is a possible detail about Shakespeare’s father and not the playwright himself. What the reader longs for most is of course a reconstruction of Shakespeare himself.

*Katherine Duncan-Jones*
Duncan-Jones explains that since her account is ‘thematic rather than narrative’ (x), she addresses some of the plays, and only when they contain the themes she discusses. 41 This is the same approach most other biographers implement.

Like Ackroyd, Duncan-Jones links a Shakespearian character’s wish for fame with Shakespeare’s own. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist shows his talent in theatrical directing, dramatic writing and revision. He admits he dreams of ‘a fellowship in a cry of players’ (III.2.271-272): he would like to make a living as a playwright. Shakespeare must have had the same ambition at a certain point. The link is an interesting and realistic one which creates the illusion of Duncan-Jones’ intention to display Shakespeare’s talents and positive characteristics.

Duncan-Jones makes a habit of turning phrases from the plays into titles of her chapters, and she often puts quotes directly beneath the titles. Whereas other biographers quote Shakespeare and pun his name with the purpose of honoring Shakespeare, Duncan-Jones does the opposite. She turns Shakespeare’s own words against him and uses wordplay for negative purposes. For example, by calling her fourth chapter ‘Spear-shaking Shakespeare’, Duncan-Jones ridicules Shakespeare’s name. Directly beneath the title, she inserts the quote ‘if it be a sin to covet honour I am the most offending soul alive’, from *Henry V* (IV.3.28-29). In Duncan-Jones’ book, Shakespeare is definitely not someone to look up to.

Duncan-Jones appears to make use of the plays befitting the themes she addresses, but in most of these occurrences she ends up using Shakespeare’s words to his disadvantage. It is clear that Duncan-Jones cannot ignore Shakespeare’s talent, but she does everything she can to diminish his character in real life.

---

41 ‘Because of the constraints of my ‘thematic’ approach, I have not even touched on all of Shakespeare’s writings… they did not offer material that I could connect with the biographical theme under discussion’ (Duncan-Jones xii).
Charles Nicholl

Although Nicholl focuses on the period Shakespeare lived with the Mountjoys (1603-1605), he does not neglect to mention Shakespeare’s works. Like Duncan-Jones, he uses quotes at the beginnings of some chapters to illustrate (part of) what is about to be discussed in the chapter. Of the plays written in the period Nicholl discusses, he points out resemblances to Shakespeare’s own life at the time.

Nicholl likes to be as realistic as possible. He highlights issues Shakespeare addresses in his plays. One of these issues is the political situation in Shakespeare’s time. Nicholl points out that Shakespeare’s political awareness is clearly present in Measure for Measure, in which ‘the city’s ills lie less in the visible squalor of its prisons and brothels than in the concealed corruption of those in government’ (28). Corruption is certainly something that Shakespeare noticed and wrote about.

Nicholl does not idolize Shakespeare, he presents him as the human being he was. And like any human being, Shakespeare did not only surround himself with people to look up to. Considering the proximity of brothels to playhouses, ‘the association between the playhouse and prostitution is perennial’ (214). Nicholl makes a realistic assumption when he claims that real-life characters such as George Wilkins, the playwright who ran a brothel (212-216), may very well have inspired Shakespearian characters in the ‘brothel business’ (217). Nicholl does not claim anything highly speculative, such as Shakespeare cheating on his wife, but he does touch upon this subject in his appropriately titled section ‘Sex & the City’ (197-248).

Overall, Nicholl addresses issues in Shakespeare’s plays that can also be applied to his daily life while he stayed with the Mountjoys. The picture he paints is realistic, because the issues and quotes Nicholl takes from the plays closely resemble
events that took place or thoughts he likely had in this particular period. His factual approach adds to his credible status as a Shakespeare biographer.

**Anthony Holden**

Holden is the man who, as he states in his prologue, wants to find a way between separating Shakespeare from his works and comparing his life to his works (3).

Like many other Shakespeare biographers, Holden takes certain details from Shakespeare’s life and points out the resemblances in his plays. One example is that as his father was a glover, it is likely that Shakespeare was familiar with the ‘bloody slaughterhouse’, to which references can be found in *King John* and *II Henry VI*, among others (41). In his works, Shakespeare ‘displays a detailed technical knowledge of butchery, and the properties of its prime consequence, blood’ (41). There are quite a few bloody scenes in *Titus Andronicus, Julius Caesar, Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, always posing a challenge for the stage.

Holden eloquently describes the end of Shakespeare’s career: ‘Shipwrecks, riddles, resurrections: Shakespeare is palpably excited to have found a brave new imaginary world to explore, new themes consonant with his altered mood, mellow, reflective, forgiving’. He was coming to ‘the natural end of the long intellectual road he had travelled. It marks the start of a clear course towards his farewell and retirement, laying the foundations of the great triptych which would draw all his work together towards a logical, contemplative, serene conclusion’ (264).

Holden points out some contradictions between Shakespeare’s own life and what he writes in his plays, something many of his fellow Shakespeare biographers fail to do. In *Twelfth Night*, the Duke of Illyria advises Cesario to choose a lover younger than himself (64), when this is clearly something Shakespeare did not do.
Perhaps Shakespeare meant to warn men against marrying older women, but there is no way to determine whether Shakespeare was deliberately sending his audience such a message or not. Holden merely brings the scenario up, allowing the reader to reflect on the possibilities. Holden indicates that surely Shakespeare drew from personal experiences, but one should not see the plays as autobiographical. This paradox illustrates the way in between Holden has set out to find.

**James Shapiro**

As Shapiro himself explains, ‘Those committed to discovering the adult Shakespeare’s personality in his formative experiences end up hunting for hints in the plays which they then read back into what little can be surmised about his early years (and since the plays contain almost every kind of relationship and experience imaginable, this is not as hard to do as it sounds)’ (xviii-xix). It is clear that Shapiro does not believe in using Shakespeare’s plays as a mirror and therefore a tool to reconstruct the playwright’s personal life.

Since Shapiro’s book spans the period of a year, it makes sense that it is divided into four parts: ‘Winter’, ‘Spring’, ‘Summer’ and ‘Autumn’. The plays come along thematically. He could have quoted many plays, but Shapiro deliberately chose not to do this. Whereas other biographers tend to use many quotes from Shakespeare’s plays to figure out what was on Shakespeare’s mind, Shapiro hardly ever does this. He inserts fewer quotes than his fellow biographers, there is hardly any conjecture in the way he uses quotes to demonstrate things.

Shapiro makes it clear that he uses quotes from the plays to highlight realistic similarities between the plays and Shakespeare’s world. Like Nicholl, Shapiro points out Shakespeare’s political awareness. Shakespeare often drew parallels between
contemporary rulers and historical kings and emperors. In *Julius Caesar*, for example, Caesar goes back to Rome intending to return the Republic to an monarchy under his rule. ‘Scratch the surface and the analogy to Essex’ forecast return “with rebellion broached on his sword” is no less troubling… Essex, like Caesar, was a military hero feared by rivals, who sought his overthrow because they believed he would be king’ (102). By indicating the resemblance between Caesar and Essex, Shapiro shows that Shakespeare was concerned with the political situation at the time. By writing about the past, he could address issues one could not freely speak about.

Even though his account is on the year 1599 only, strictly speaking, Shapiro has a lot to say about the plays, and he mentions things other biographers tend to overlook. For example, Shapiro discusses the importance of music in the plays (252), and he also offers several possible interpretations of speeches from the plays (152). This book offers a great amount of useful information on the plays and refreshingly little speculation.

**Germaine Greer**

Considering the fact that she is more concerned with Anne Hathaway than Shakespeare himself, it comes as no surprise that Greer does not nearly quote Shakespeare’s plays as much as the majority of her fellow Shakespeare scholars do. The passages from the plays she does quote involve both Shakespeare and his wife.

One of the topics Greer is bound to address is wooing. Greer picks scenes from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona, As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* to portray women teaching men how to woo them (50-51). Greer quotes utterances from foolish, sleepless and gambling lovers from *Love’s Labours Lost, The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It* to linger on infatuation a little longer before moving to the more
serious marriage proposals from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, interluding the next chapter, which is about marriage.

Like most Shakespeare biographers, Greer tries to guess Shakespeare’s thoughts on certain matters from what he wrote in his plays. ‘Shakespeare’s feelings about premarital pregnancy can perhaps be deduced from his treatment of Jaquenetta’s pregnancy in *Love’s Labours Lost*’ (124). As Armado, Jaquenetta’s lover, is the one who wooed her with ‘letters dotted with Latin tags, with songs and sonnets’ (124), she is not to blame and Armado must make an honest woman of her.

Greer points out some similarities between characters in Shakespeare’s plays and the man himself. She refers to Laertes, Ophelia’s brother in *Hamlet*, who insists on leaving behind his family and hometown to look for work elsewhere (146). In the same passage, Greer points out that Ophelia, like most of the female characters in Shakespeare’s plays, can read and write. Bitterly, Greer states that ‘Shakespeare’s wife is not allowed to have been capable of either’ (146-147).

It is refreshing to see matters from Anne Hathaway’s side for once. Instead of reading about Shakespeare’s activities in London, it is also realistic to consider Anne’s thoughts about her husband. She may, for instance, have been worried about her husband setting foot in one of the nearby brothels.42

**Park Honan**

As if he expects his readers to criticize him for employing the plays, Honan declares in his introduction that

---

42 ‘I saw him enter such a house of sale- Videlicet a brothel…’ (*Hamlet* II.1.60-61, qtd. Greer 151).
Without distortion, I hope, I have ‘used’ the plays to suggest, for example, what is known of Shakespeare’s processes of writing: of his imitativeness or response to rivals, his awareness of a troupe’s needs at particular times, and his self-mockery, limited satire, and topicality (xiii).

Like his fellow Shakespeare scholars, Honan mentions details that hardly seem to matter. For instance, he believes people from Shakespeare’s hometown and his schooldays were great sources of inspiration. Honan suggests Stratford constables must have modelled for Dull, Elbow or Dogberry and the watch in Much Ado about Nothing (41). Supposing this was true, it does not provide the reader with any useful insights.

Another interesting insight Honan comes up with is that Shakespeare presented both his audiences and actors with appealing topics. One of these topics was the political status quo. ‘King John might have suited a weary, if well disciplined, troupe on the road, since it nearly ‘acts’ itself and demands unusual restraint’ (194). The play’s ‘yearning for a blameless, wise ruler in a just commonwealth, set against the realities of viciousness, weakness, and guile in the political world’ (194) was not only inspiring for the people, but for the monarch as well. Shakespeare knew what his audience and actors needed.

Honan points out intriguing and refreshing insights concerning Shakespeare’s plays. He goes out of his way to prove that Shakespeare and his actors were a close group of people. One of Shakespeare’s many strengths was that he had a sense of humor, and he allowed his actors to mock themselves and Shakespeare as a playwright in the numerous plays within plays (206). Honan makes a point of showing that Shakespeare ‘took pains to show how lightly he regarded himself, or at
any rate there are more ‘in-jokes’, theatre references, and self-deprecating allusions in
_A Midsummer Night’s Dream_ or _Hamlet_ than in all the dramas by his rivals’ (206).
This is undoubtedly one of the factors that still make the plays popular and worth seeing today. Honan does not attempt to guess at Shakespeare’s thoughts by dissecting lines from his plays. Instead, he focuses on factual matters such as the talented Shakespeare’s writing process, his sense of humor and his talent for incorporating appealing topics in his plays.

**Samuel Schoenbaum**

The most traditional of Shakespeare biographers uses the plays, but he only touches upon them ‘in the most external fashion’ (xii). Schoenbaum acknowledges that ‘Criticism has lately asked large questions about the relations between the life and the _oeuvre_’ (xii). He argues that these questions ‘concern the critical rather than the documentary biographer, and so I have not gone into them here’ (xii). However, Schoenbaum cannot avoid referring to the plays altogether.

Schoenbaum quotes the plays for useful, factual reasons, for instance to illustrate a source Shakespeare used (The _Bible_, 48), or to indicate the use of Catholic rituals in a play (_Hamlet_, 50). Schoenbaum mentions a reference to the horn-book in _Love’s Labours Lost_ which is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s own schooldays (51), and he quotes couples from _A Midsummer Night’s Dream_ and _Twelfth Night_ who speak of age difference in which the woman is the older one (69). These are all resemblances with Shakespeare’s life. Schoenbaum does not linger on them, he simply points them out and lets the reader ponder on them if they wish to do so.

Schoenbaum joins the rest of the Shakespeare scholars in the tradition of involving the plays in their biography. This is useful, because by making use of
quotes from the plays, various intriguing topics can be illustrated, such as distance between lovers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (72), faithfulness in *Measure for Measure* (73), deer stealing in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (80), and acting in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (89). Schoenbaum quotes these plays while attempting to remain vigilant of ‘selective quotation’ (73). He thus does what he initially intended to avoid, which is inserting quotes as a means to draw parallels between Shakespeare’s plays and his personal life.

Schoenbaum does not add any new information to what we have on Shakespeare; he delivers a reliable account of what one can derive from the available documents. Because he relies on facts and refuses to speculate on what the plays may tell us about Shakespeare’s personal life, there is not the conjecture we find in many other biographers’ work. When he inserts quotes or refers to certain plays, it is only to relate factual matters or situations Shakespeare himself had to deal with in his life. Schoenbaum occasionally points out other biographers’ speculations, but he does not linger on them. The lack of speculation and the depth of his research is what makes Schoenbaum’s account stand out.

**Bill Bryson**

Although Bryson likes to elaborate on trivial details and he often refers to the plays in a general and sometimes irrelevant way, he does not push the limits with the plays. He refers to the plays from time to time, but he mentions most of what he has to say on the plays in the chapter he has devoted to them (95-114). In this chapter, Bryson mostly remains factual in discussing the plays. He does not go into them in depth.

---

43 ‘In a sense William Shakespeare’s greatest achievement in life wasn’t writing *Hamlet* or the sonnets but just surviving his first year’ (Bryson 24).
Bryson would not be Bryson if he did not mention some statistics for the sake of showing off the research he has done. Halfway through the chapter on the plays he relates how long the average Shakespeare play was and how long the shortest and longest are (103).

Bryson is inconsistent in specifying his sources. At times his explanations show that he has done the research but he fails to mention his source, as he does with *The Tempest*. On other occasions he ponders on the meaning of certain passages that have been thoroughly explained in these same scholarly editions, as is the case with a passage from *Love’s Labours Lost*.

Bryson relates that ‘*The Tempest*, notably, was inspired by an account of a shipwreck on Bermuda written by one William Strachey in 1609’ (188). It is typical of Bryson’s popular approach that he does not mention where he got this information.44

When Bryson quotes a passage from *Love’s Labours Lost*, instead of consulting scholarly editions of the play, he only wonders about the meaning of the passage:

> O paradox! Black is the badge of hell,
> The hue of dungeons and the school of night (IV.3.250-251).

Bryson argues that ‘sometimes it is just not possible to know quite what he meant’ (103), and that what Shakespeare meant by ‘school of night’ ‘is ‘anyone’s guess’ (104). Luckily, many have guessed. Bryson could have bothered to look this up. W.Schrickx declares that the passage above ‘has been taken by many critics as a

reference to a group of men who chiefly indulged in astronomical and atheistical speculations’. Richard David, editor of the 1951 Arden Shakespeare edition of *Love’s Labours Lost* refers to Arthur Acheson, who in his 1903 book *Shakespeare and the Rival Poet* suggested ‘that there was a real ‘Schoole of Night’ at this time, and that it was synonymous with the ‘Schoole of Atheism’ of which Sir Walter Ralegh was reputed by contemporaries to be the chief patron’ (qtd. David 109).

Bryson’s account is a brief one of only 195 pages. Other scholars have speculated enough about the question of how autobiographical Shakespeare’s plays are. Bryson thankfully enough does not bother to look into this. He takes the predictable road of summing up dates, venues and some theatrical details Shakespeare had to deal with. On the occasions that Bryson does go into the plays, he unfortunately does not bother to make use of the available sources consistently.

**Conclusion**

Katherine Duncan-Jones argues that ‘The authentic Shakespeare, for those who had known him well, was to be found in his writings’ (280). This is of little help, since nobody who knew Shakespeare personally recorded an in-depth account of the man, much less of any autobiographical signals in his plays. This has not stopped many scholars from pondering on Shakespeare’s lines and linking them to his personal life. Shapiro warns the biographers against the autobiographical interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays. He insists

> The plays are not two-way mirrors: while Shakespeare perfectly renders what it feels like to be in love, betrayed or crushingly disappointed, it doesn’t

---

necessarily follow, as one nineteenth-century critic put it, that he “must have loved unhappily like Romeo, and like Hamlet not have known for a time what to get on with next” (xix).

Some biographers have tried to find a way in between interpreting and not involving the plays at all. This method may sometimes serve as a cover-up, enabling the author to speculate freely yet not firmly concluding anything, but one must not forget that speculation allows the reader to be open to suggestions which may at some point in the future turn out to be true, in the unlikely case that more documentary evidence will come to light. Moreover, what happened is something we partially know. What could have happened is at least as important.

---

Conclusion

All of the Shakespeare biographers I have discussed present facts intermingled with possible scenarios from their personal convictions. Each of them has their own style which reveals itself in the language they use to express their points of view. This is at the heart of the biographer’s task. The biographer does not solve any mysteries, he or she merely comes up with possible scenarios. Some biographers present the reader with plausible scenarios, others clearly grasp at straws. As ‘objective biography is logically and artistically impossible’ (Nadel 1984, 10), it makes sense that only a few of the biographers I have discussed remain close to the facts and do not wander into the great unknown. The most famous of these is of course Schoenbaum, with Nicholl and Shapiro’s factual accounts following his trace. Honan also attempts to present a factual account of Shakespeare, but he cannot help but romanticize and linger on speculations from time to time.

Bringing Shakespeare down is, as she willingly admits (x), Duncan-Jones’ focus. It is a universal truth that the works are to be viewed separately from the character of the author, and Duncan-Jones takes great liberties in her interpretation of Shakespeare the man. She bends each imaginable detail into her own premeditated shape, with only a few exceptions. Shakespeare’s wooing of Anne Hathaway, for example, is something Duncan-Jones presents as something that did not involve anything that even remotely resembled devotion or love. ‘A combination of boredom with the sexual curiosity natural to his years led to Shakespeare’s dalliance with her, and to what was probably his first experience of sex’ (17). Duncan-Jones concludes that Shakespeare was incapable of loving a woman. He was a depraved man up to no good.

Duncan-Jones’ approach is unique. No other Shakespeare biographer presents the reader with such a ruthlessly condemning account as hers. Admitting to have gone against
the advice of renowned Shakespeare authorities (xiv), Duncan-Jones calls her approach ‘the road less travelled’ (ix). Critic Leslie Thomson points out that if in areas of such great interest as Shakespeare’s life a road is considered less travelled, there is usually a good reason for this. Duncan-Jones’ confidence in her own judgments is clear throughout her account, but ‘conjecture is often stated as fact’ (Thomson). Her conclusions are often not only different but also less credible than those of her fellow Shakespeare scholars. She cannot criticize Shakespeare’s work, but Duncan-Jones is clearly out to destroy the man’s reputation from the onset. Her approach, in turn, is condemned by critics. Thomson’s final phrase in her review of *Ungentle Shakespeare* says it all: ‘This book reduces the products of genius to something more like episodes in a soap opera’.

Duncan-Jones and Greer are the only two female Shakespeare biographers I have discussed. Interestingly, they present Shakespeare in completely opposite ways. Whereas Duncan-Jones presents Shakespeare as a wicked man, Greer presents him in a much milder light. She does not see him as an immoral man. Although her account is mostly on Shakespeare’s wife, she does discuss the man himself. She does not see Shakespeare as a man who took advantage of Anne Hathaway, and she refuses to see Anne as anything else but Shakespeare’s ‘oldest, truest love’ (324).

Charles Nicholl points out that ‘The best way to learn more about Ann Shakespeare would be actually to discover something new about her - a formidable task which Greer does not attempt’. This may be true, but from her female perspective Greer does come up with information other biographers have neglected to mention. For instance, she points out that there were no pregnancy tests in 1582. Whereas other biographers make a fuss about the ‘forced marriage’ between William and Anne because she was pregnant, Greer points out that ‘Ann’s pregnancy, especially behind the wooden busk that women then wore, would not have been evident’ (119-20).
Greer points out that Anne Hathaway has had ‘unjustifiably bad press’ (Wells), and she presents a different perspective from ‘other scholars’ accepted vilification of Shakespeare’s wife’ (Lewis). She comes up with interesting details on the lifestyle of Elizabethan country women and contemplates what life may have been like for Shakespeare’s wife. Inevitably, Greer’s account is based speculation. In spite of Nicholl’s dismissal, I believe Greer has added a valuable book to the ever growing stack of Shakespeare biographies.

Weis is known for his belief that Shakespeare’s plays and his private life are inextricably connected to one another. He is convinced there are clues in Shakespeare’s plays that bring the reader closer to who he was. Although he is well aware of the fact that the plays cannot be interpreted as autobiographical records, he feels it is worth the efforts of scrutinizing the plays and presenting possible links between events and characters in the plays and Shakespeare’s personal life. He explains ‘It may be dangerous to draw close analogies between reality and fiction, but when there is reason to suspect their existence, it is at the very least interesting to acknowledge them, and ponder their implications’ (289). He has a point here, but occasionally Weis takes his interpretations too far. One of these instances is when Weis suggests that Shakespeare was a cripple. Just because Shakespeare mentioned cripples in his plays does not mean that he was a cripple himself. He presents some interesting similarities between events and characters from the plays and Shakespeare’s life, but he has to bear in mind that the life and works are two separate things. When ‘Considering the relations between a man’s character and circumstances, and what he produces, we can … hardly know too much as to the personality of a great writer’ (qtd. Nadel 1984, 37). Weis tends to overlook this from time to time.

Stephen Greenblatt is considered a master storyteller, and this influences his critics’ professional opinion. Critics seem to believe that ‘Will in the World tells a better
story than other Shakespeare biographies’ (Taylor 2004, 1). Because of his reputation as a
great storyteller, Greenblatt can get away with a lot of speculation other biographers may
be condemned for. For instance, Greenblatt believes ‘it is likely that in the eyes of John
and Mary Shakespeare, Will was not making a great match’ (121). He even insists that
Shakespeare himself was unwilling to marry Anne, although he can neither prove it nor explain why he believes it.

An excellent example of Greenblatt’s way with words is his deer poaching
metaphor. Greenblatt uses the deer poaching story to compare the act of deer poaching,
which he admits cannot be presented as a fact, to illustrate Shakespeare’s ability to
challenge his audience and to push things to the limit. Greenblatt relates that Shakespeare
knew all about ‘the pleasures of stealth and trickery, about knowing how far to go, about
contriving to get away with something’ (152). In this respect, Greenblatt’s genius
resembles Shakespeare’s skills as an author. In spite of Greenblatt’s occasionally far-
fetched speculation, it seems that ‘What matters is not the true story, but a good story’
(Taylor 2004).

Ackroyd is an enthusiastic author who tries to stick to facts. He avoids speculation
when he can, and as a result ‘He writes in generalized terms, with little attempt at close
analysis and with surprisingly little quotation’ (Wells). He does not bother speculating on
topics that have been discussed by many of his predecessors. For instance, Ackroyd does

---

48 - ‘The young bridegroom and father-to-be may have been grateful for this handsome assistance, but it is far
more likely that he was a reluctant, perhaps highly reluctant, beneficiary’ (Greenblatt 123).
- ‘Between his wedding license and his last will and testament, Shakespeare left no direct, personal trace of his
relationship with his wife – or none, in any case, that survives. From this supremely eloquent man, there have
been found no love letters to Anne, no signs of shared joy or grief, no words of advice, not even any financial
transactions’ (Greenblatt 125).

49 ‘Most scholars imagine that Will was in some measure willing. But the state of his feelings at the time of his
wedding is not known, and his attitude towards his wife during the subsequent thirty-two years of marriage can
only be surmised’ (Greenblatt 125).
not present the reader with his surmised version of why Shakespeare only left his wife the second-best bed. Ackroyd simply states that since ‘Anne Shakespeare would have been automatically entitled to one-third of his estate; there was no reason to mention her in an official document’ (483).

Although Ackroyd says that there is no evidence that Shakespeare wanted to get away to London to escape a bad marriage, he also considers the possibility that Shakespeare was not entirely happy in his marriage (103). He does not draw conclusions on matters when he cannot present any evidence. Some readers appreciate his honesty, others may wish that he had made greater use of his imagination.

Holden challenges the reader by asking a lot of questions about Shakespeare, allowing the reader to reflect on matters before proceeding his account. On the matter of William Shakespeare, the minor, and Anne, the older woman, and the question of whether they truly loved one another, for instance, he asks: ‘Or did the local farmer’s 26-year-old daughter, only a month after her father’s death, set out to catch herself a much younger husband by seducing him?’ (64)

Holden allows himself to read things into the plays occasionally; he feels it is ‘relatively safe (and quite legitimate)’ to do this every now and then (3). He has set out to maintain a balance between deriving and dismissing information from the plays, and overall he has managed to stick to this plan.

Coming up with interesting but mostly irrelevant details is the strategy ‘Breezy Bill Bryson’ (Lewis) employs. His account stands out because it is interesting at times, but it cannot be taken seriously because Bryson has made quite a few mistakes a true Shakespeare scholar would have prevented from being published. Moreover, Bryson occasionally fails to specify his sources and he does not always take the trouble to do in-depth research.
Presenting the reader with an interesting and plausible account is what the biographer is supposed to do. The question biographers should ask themselves is ‘Do they provide reliable narratives and thoughtful interpretations, or are they merely works of admiration or attack based too closely on fictional methods?’ (Nadel 1984, 150) The biographer has the right to surmise things, but some biographers come up with far-fetched accounts that are interesting to dwell upon but remain invalid. The trick is to balance between the fictional and the plausible and still come up with an intriguing account. All Shakespeare biographers I have discussed have proven to be worth reading, even if only to reflect upon their points of view. The biographer’s task is to challenge the audience, to present their material from their own point of view. The task of filling the gaps is an experiment. When one does not know all about someone’s life, all one can do is guess. ‘A critical biography is a contradiction in terms. The beauty of what a biographer does resides in his insights: we discern the complexities of being, without pretending that life’s riddles have been answered’ (qtd. in Nadel 1984, 153). Because the biographer does not know all about the subject, the reader should not be too critical of the biographer. The biographer has to be critical and use his or her sources carefully, but not too carefully. ‘Not facts, but the presentation of those facts establish the value of biographical writing’ (Nadel 1984, 9). The biographer has to remain critical and objective, but not too much so. All biographers relate possible scenarios. They are free to speculate on what kind of person Shakespeare was. They make use of the few facts that exist and they fill in the gaps as they see fit. They tell their stories from their own points of view, as if to say ‘There is a kind of character in thy life that to the observer doth thy history fully unfold’ (Measure for Measure I.1.27-29).
Works cited


McCrum, Robert. ‘To Hold a Mirror up to His Nature.’ *The Observer*, 5 June 2005.


Rowe, Nicholas. *Some Account of the Life of Mr. William Shakespear*. 1709.


Shapiro, James. *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. Faber and Faber.


