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IN THE  
WORLD

HOW SHAKESPEARE  
BECAME SHAKESPEARE

STEPHEN GREENBLATT





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# Will in the World

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HOW SHAKESPEARE BECAME SHAKESPEARE

**Stephen Greenblatt**

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TO JOSH AND AARON, ONCE AGAIN,  
AND NOW TO HARRY

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## Preface

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A YOUNG MAN from a small provincial town—a man without independent wealth, without powerful family connections, and without a university education—moves to London in the late 1580s and, in a remarkably short time, becomes the greatest playwright not of his age alone but of all time. His work appeal to the learned and the unlettered, to urban sophisticates and provincial first-time theatergoers. He makes his audiences laugh and cry; he turns politics into poetry; he recklessly mingles vulgar clowning and philosophical subtlety. He grasps with equal penetration the intimate lives of kings and of beggars; he seems at one moment to have studied law, at another theology, at another ancient history, while at the same time he effortlessly mimes the accents of country bumpkins and takes delight in old wives' tales. How is an achievement of this magnitude to be explained? How did Shakespeare become Shakespeare?

Theater, in Shakespeare's time as in our own, is a highly social art form, not a game of bloodless abstractions. There was a type of drama in the age of Elizabeth and James that did not show its face in public; known as closet dramas, these were plays never meant to be performed or even printed. They were for silent reading in the privacy of small, preferably windowless rooms. But Shakespeare's plays were always decisively out of the closet: they were, and are, in the world and of the world. Not only did Shakespeare write and act for a cutthroat commercial entertainment industry; he also wrote scripts that were intensely alert to the social and political realities of their times. He could scarcely have done otherwise: to stay afloat, the theater company in which he was a shareholder had to draw some 1,500 to 2,000 paying customers a day into the round wooden walls of the playhouse, and competition from rival companies was fierce. The key was not so much topicality—with government censorship and with repertory companies often successfully recycling the same scripts for years, it would have been risky to be too topical—as it was intensity of interest. Shakespeare had to engage with the deepest desires and fears of his audience, and his unusual success in his own time suggests that he succeeded brilliantly in doing so. Virtually all his rival playwrights found themselves on the straight road to starvation; Shakespeare, by contrast, made enough money to buy one of the best houses in the hometown to which he retired in his early fifties, a self-made man.

This is a book, then, about an amazing success story that has resisted explanation: it aims to discover the actual person who wrote the most important body of imaginative literature of the last thousand years. Or rather, since the actual person is a matter of well-documented public record, it aims to tread the shadowy paths that lead from the life he lived into the literature he created.

Apart from the poems and plays themselves, the surviving traces of Shakespeare's life are abundant but thin. Dogged archival labor over many generations has turned up contemporary allusion to him, along with a reasonable number of the playwright's property transactions, a marriage license bond, christening records, cast lists in which he is named as a performer, tax bills, petty legal affidavits, payments for services, and an interesting last will and testament, but no immediately obvious clues to unravel the great mystery of such immense creative power.

The known facts have been rehearsed again and again for several centuries. Already in the nineteenth century there were fine, richly detailed, and well-documented biographies, and each year

brings a fresh crop of them, sometimes enhanced with a hard-won crumb or two of new archival findings. After examining even the best of them and patiently sifting through most of the available traces, readers rarely feel closer to understanding how the playwright's achievements came about. If anything, Shakespeare often seems a drabber, duller person, and the inward springs of his art seem more obscure than ever. Those springs would be difficult enough to glimpse if biographers could draw upon letters and diaries, contemporary memoirs and interviews, books with revealing marginalia, notes and first drafts. Nothing of the kind survives, nothing that provides a clear link between the timeless work with its universal appeal and a particular life that left its many scratches in the humdrum bureaucratic records of the age. The work is so astonishing, so luminous, that it seems to have come from a god and not a mortal, let alone a mortal of provincial origins and modest education.

It is fitting, of course, to invoke the magic of an immensely strong imagination, a human endowment that does not depend upon an "interesting" life. Scholars have long and fruitfully studied the transforming work of that imagination on the books that, from evidence within the plays themselves, Shakespeare must certainly have read. As a writer he rarely started with a blank slate; he characteristically took materials that had already been in circulation and infused them with his supreme creative energies. On occasion, the reworking is so precise and detailed that he must have had the book from which he was deftly borrowing directly on his writing table as his quill pen raced across the paper. But no one who responds intensely to Shakespeare's art can believe that the plays and poems came exclusively from his reading. At least as much as the books he read, the central problem he grappled with as a young man—What should I do with my life? In what can I have faith? Whom do I love?—served throughout his career to shape his art.

One of the prime characteristics of Shakespeare's art is the touch of the real. As with any other writer whose voice has long ago fallen silent and whose body has moldered away, all that is left are words on a page, but even before a gifted actor makes Shakespeare's words come alive, those words contain the vivid presence of actual, lived experience. The poet who noticed that the hunted, trembling hare was "dew-bedabbled" or who likened his stained reputation to the "dyer's hand," the playwright who has a husband tell his wife that there is a purse "in the desk / That's covered o'er with Turkish tapestry" or who has a prince remember that his poor companion owns only two pairs of silk stockings, one of them peach-colored—this artist was unusually open to the world and discovered the means to allow this world into his works. To understand how he did this so effectively, it is important to look carefully at his verbal artistry—his command of rhetoric, his uncanny ventriloquism, his virtual obsession with language. To understand who Shakespeare was, it is important to follow the verbal traces he left behind back into the life he lived and into the world to which he was so open. And to understand how Shakespeare used his imagination to transform his life into his art, it is important to use our own imagination.



## Acknowledgments

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IT IS A TOKEN of the special delight Shakespeare bestows on everything that even the many debts I have incurred in writing this book give me deep pleasure to acknowledge. My remarkably gifted colleagues and students at Harvard University have been an unfailing source of intellectual stimulation and challenge, and the university's fabled resources—above all, its celebrated libraries and their accomplished staff—have enabled me to pursue even the most arcane questions. The Mellon Foundation gave me the precious gift of time, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin provided the perfect setting to complete the writing of this book. I am grateful for the opportunities I had to try out my ideas at the Shakespeare Association of America, the Bath Shakespeare Festival, New York University, the Lionel Trilling Seminar at Columbia University, the Leo Lowenthal Memorial Conference, Boston College, Wellesley College, Hendrix College, the Einstein Forum, and, on multiple occasions, Marlboro College and the Marlboro Music Festival.

The idea of *Will in the World* originated years ago during conversations I had with Marc Norman, who was then in the early stages of writing a film script about Shakespeare's life. The script was the germ of a celebrated movie, *Shakespeare in Love*, but my own project lay dormant until my wife, Ramie Targoff, gave me the sustained encouragement, intellectual and emotional, to pursue it. Crucial advice and assistance came from Jill Kneerim, and my friends Homi Bhabha, Jeffrey Knapp, Joseph Koerner, Charles Mee, and Robert Pinsky each gave me more of their time, learning, and wisdom than I can ever hope to repay. I have benefited too from the help and probing questions of many other friends, including Marcella Anderson, Leonard Barkan, Frank Bidart, Robert Brustein, Thomas Laqueur, Adam Phillips, Regula Rapp, Moshe Safdie, James Shapiro, Debora Shuger, and the late Bernard Williams. Beatrice Kitzinger, Emily Peterson, Kate Pilson, Holger Schott, Gustavo Secchi, and Phillip Schwyzer have been tireless and resourceful assistants. With exemplary patience and insight, my editor, Alane Mason, continued to work on the manuscript of my book through the course of her pregnancy, and, by something of a miracle, she somehow managed to finish on her due date.

My deepest and most richly pleasurable debts are closest to home: to my wife and my three sons, Josh, Aaron, and Harry. Only the youngest, by virtue of being a toddler, has been spared endless conversations about Shakespeare and has not directly contributed his ideas. But Harry, who came into the world 104 years after the birth of his namesake, my father, has taught me how breathtakingly close we are to lives that at first sight seem so far away.



AROUND 1598, still relatively early in Shakespeare's career, a man named Adam Dyrmonth, about whom next to nothing is known, set out to list the contents of a collection of speeches and letters that he had transcribed. Evidently, his mind began to wander, because he began to scribble idly. Among the jottings that cover the page are the words "Rychard the second" and "Rychard the third," along with half-remembered quotations from *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Above all, the scribbler repeatedly wrote the words "William Shakespeare." He wanted to know, it seems, what it felt like to write that particular name as one's own. Dyrmonth might have been the first to be driven by this curiosity, but he certainly was not the last.

As Dyrmonth's scribblings suggest, Shakespeare was famous in his own lifetime. Only a few years after Shakespeare's death, Ben Jonson celebrated him as "the wonder of our Stage" and the "Star of poets." But at the time such literary celebrity did not ordinarily lead to the writing of biographies, and no contemporary seems to have thought it worthwhile to collect whatever could be found out about Shakespeare while his memory was still green. As it happens, more is known about him than about most professional writers of the time, but this knowledge is largely the consequence of the fact that England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was already a record-keeping society and that many of the records survived, to be subsequently combed over by eager scholars. Even with this relative abundance of information, there are huge gaps in knowledge that make any biographical study of Shakespeare an exercise in speculation.

What matters most are the works, most of which (the poems excepted) were carefully assembled by two of Shakespeare's longtime associates and friends, John Heminges and Henry Condell, who brought out the First Folio in 1623, seven years after the playwright's death. Eighteen of the thirty-six plays in this great volume, including such masterpieces as *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*, had not appeared in print before; without the First Folio they might have vanished forever. The world owes Heminges and Condell an immense debt. But beyond noting that Shakespeare wrote with great facility—"what he thought," they claimed, "he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers"—the editors had little or no interest in furthering biography. They chose to arrange the contents by genre—Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies—and they did not bother to note when and in what order Shakespeare wrote each of his plays. After many decades of ingenious research, scholars have reached a reasonably stable consensus, but even this time line, so crucial for any biography, is inevitably somewhat speculative.

So too are many of the details of the life. The Stratford vicar John Bretchgirdle noted in the parish register the baptism of "Gulielmus filius Johannes Shakspere" on April 26, 1564. Though anything can be called into question, that much seems beyond a reasonable doubt, but the scholars who subsequently fixed Shakespeare's date of birth as April 23—on the assumption that there was ordinarily a three-day interval at the time between birth and baptism—were engaged in speculation.

One further and potentially more consequential example will give readers a sense of the scope of the problem. From 1571 to 1575 the schoolmaster in the Stratford grammar school was Simon Hunt, who had received his B.A. from Oxford in 1568. He would thus have been William Shakespeare's

teacher from the age of seven to eleven. Around July 1575, Simon Hunt matriculated at the University of Douai—the Catholic university in France—and became a Jesuit in 1578. This would seem to indicate that Shakespeare's early teacher was a Catholic, a detail that is consistent with a whole pattern of experiences in his youth. But there is no hard-and-fast proof that Shakespeare attended the Stratford grammar school—the records for that period do not survive. Moreover, another Simon Hunt died in Stratford in or before 1598, and it is at least possible that this second Simon Hunt, rather than the one who became a Jesuit, was the schoolmaster. Shakespeare almost certainly attended the school—where else would he have acquired his education?—and the coincidence of the dates and the larger pattern of experiences make it highly likely that the schoolmaster from 1571 to 1575 was the Catholic Hunt. But in these details, as in so much else from Shakespeare's life, there is no absolute certainty.





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