

Shakespeare, Biography, and Anti-Biography

Brian Cummings

Anniversary Professor of English, University of York

A Folger Shakespeare Library podcast

Shakespeare's Birthday Lecture 2014

This lecture also opened the Folger Institute's NEH-funded collaborative research conference on "Shakespeare and the Problem of Biography," part of the Folger's celebration of the 450th anniversary year of Shakespeare's birth.

April 3, 2014

Brian Cummings: Thank you, Kathleen, for that lovely and generous introduction.

"It is a great comfort, to my way of thinking, that so little is known about the poet. It is a fine mystery, and I tremble every day lest something should come out," Charles Dickens wrote.

Dickens turns on its head the cliché that we do not know enough about Shakespeare. I come before you, trembling myself, a couple of weeks early, with a birthday life. It is not much of a 450th birthday present, especially with my ungrateful title of an *Anti-Biography*, portending a conference where we declare his life to be a "problem." Why is his life, outwardly pretty successful, problematic? The simple answer, Dickens says, is we know "so little."

Yet we could also justifiably ask if, even if we knew everything, it would tell us the answer to our real question: how a great writer writes and why writing matters. Many great writers have written about how their own everyday lives are irrelevant to the books they have given us. Perhaps we do not believe them. Yet Shakespeare, by living a life that is largely blank, invites us to test out, for once, that idea in full. Could an empty life free us, Dickens suggests, to explore that greater "mystery," the plays and poems?

I make no apology here for both having my cake and eating it. This is my day in the life, but I will make no bones about the lack of facts. The story of all the stories told about Shakespeare is wonderfully diverting. So is the story of how Shakespeare did not, in fact, write Shakespeare. It is evening; it has been a long winter. An anti-biography is clearly a kind of polemic, but I would also like you to think of it as an anti-masque, like an Athenian satyr play as prelude to the main action of our three-day festival, *The True and Tragical History of the Swan of Stratford*.

However, as in a satyr, I am not excluded from my own critique. I am not going to be saying anything anti-biographical that has not occurred to those speaking both before and after me, biographically. Indeed, I am suggesting instead that the problem might be more interesting than the solution, and that in the process we might have something to say about the art of biography altogether, and certainly about the art of literary biography in particular.

Folger SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY

Advancing knowledge & the arts

I don't mean to indulge in a simple act of debunking. And I'll get out there straightaway my tribute to the writers of brilliant biographies who are going to be here over this weekend: Katherine Duncan-Jones and Stephen Greenblatt and Peter Holland on Shakespeare, and, for that matter, of other writers: Andrew Hadfield on Spenser, Barbara Lewalski on Milton, and dear Ian Donaldson on Ben Jonson, who sadly can't be with us this weekend.

What I want to say is something about the origins of biography as a literary form in the eighteenth century, and the place of Shakespeare in those origins. I will discuss how the huge problems in reconstructing the Shakespearian archive in the nineteenth century relate to the apotheosis of life writing in modernity. I will suggest that the epiphenomenon of the alternative theories of authorship is part of that history.

But the larger energy of my argument concerns the relation of biography to literature, and here my focus is twentieth century modernism—Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges—and the way that the mythology of Shakespeare draws a thread through the weft that connects the modernist novel with the paradoxes of human memory.

It is in the desire to memorialize life through writing, and the simultaneous apprehension that memory is withdrawing from us all the time, such that memory is synonymous with loss, that the oblivion that surrounds Shakespeare comes to have its most painful meaning. We mourn for Shakespeare even as we are surrounded by him; we cannot get rid of him, and yet we have forgotten almost everything about him.

However, I'm going to begin with some more familiar ways of remembering Shakespeare, three monuments that declare his presence apparently still among us. And I'll confess at the onset that I love all of them. But I want to suggest that they offer hazardous, perhaps even wrong, ways of remembering, even what psychologists call "false memory." We remember things not the way they were, but the way we want them to have been.

My first, appropriately for a birthday lecture, is the Birthplace. People have been visiting the house in Henley Street for 250 years. A visitor's book dates back to 1812 and the first two names are, in fact, American. Indeed, two future presidents of the United States, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, had already visited it, twenty-odd years before, in April 1786.

However, since Edmond Malone in the 1790s, doubt has been cast on the building's authenticity. John Shakespeare, Sr., owned two buildings in Henley Street. It's only a supposition that William was born in either. There is a case for saying that this is the wrong house, and also that the other house was knocked down for the purposes of making this one.

Yet even if we lay aside documentary pedantry, we could ask questions about the relationship of a modern building to what existed 450 years ago. The house we see now is an Arcadian idyll, a detached building set back from the street and surrounded by an English country garden:



herbs from Shakespeare's plays, rosemary and woodbine, cottage stocks and dog-roses—it couldn't be more English.

Yet if you look at the photograph when it was bought for the nation in 1847, when Dickens played Justice Swallow in a performance of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in order to raise money for the restoration of the building, it was very different. Perhaps to our surprise, it does not look particularly Elizabethan. It looks like a nondescript house of the early Victorian period, part of a terrace, either side of which was now demolished to make way for it. Over the 300 years since Shakespeare's birth, it had decayed and then been done up, like any real home decays and is done up. It had to be restored in order to look Tudor. Real buildings, especially heritage buildings, are fakes, too, I would say. I am therefore arguing here against too literal and too authentic a sense of how we can understand a life from the past. And yet, however much I mock mock-Tudor mock-Stratford, I know that I am part of the problem. Stratford flirts with me, because it knows what I desire.

My second example is in London, the theater that calls itself "Shakespeare's Globe." It is not, of course, *Shakespeare's* Globe. It is a facsimile. Nonetheless, my heart misses a beat whenever I see it. It is one of the wonders of the modern city. It was brought into being by the miraculous persistence of an American actor, Sam Wanamaker. And now, it stands like a specter. It should not be there: caught between the commuter railway hub of London Bridge Station and Tate Modern, it looks tiny and vulnerable, as if someone has forgotten to demolish it, rather than lovingly rebuilt it.

Like Shakespeare's Birthplace, it looks too good to be true because it is too good to be true. Its sheer white walls, interrupted by wooden beams, are what we want old buildings to look like, to make us feel the past as present. My children were shocked when I first told them that it is not genuine. Now, I'm not knocking it against a standard of authenticity, which it fails, however; the object of my attack is the idea of authenticity itself. If we are prepared to go to the new Globe not as a simulacrum or video replay of the original, paradoxically, it has the chance of becoming real, through distance or alienation from the past.

My third example, you may be guessing, is the Folger Shakespeare Library itself. So what kind of monument is that to Shakespeare? Now I'm going to say—partly, of course, because I have very generous hosts here—that I think this is the closest of the three to the memory of the author.

Not because of the Elizabethan Theatre, although I am as much a sucker for this example of Elizabethan kitsch as I am for the other two. It's in the way that this building lays its foundations on the First Folio. More than one-third of the surviving copies are now in this library. And in the 35 years between 1893 and 1928, Henry Folger bought more than 80 copies. Charlton Hinman examined on a minute scale 55 of them, using a machine he designed especially for the purpose. We know more about the composition of this book than perhaps any other, and we know considerably more about this book than we do about Shakespeare's actual life.

The First Folio outgrew its author. It is the First Folio that now best represents the life. Indeed, in an important sense, the life of Shakespeare is posthumous. As an act of homage and mourning, his friends turned him into a book, and the book still lives among us. My argument, in brief, is that we respect this fragmentariness of historical memory, and also return to the literary, return to the book itself.

And so I begin. Once upon a time, William Shakespeare, the author, was born, in late November or early December 1623. In truth, it is in fact the anniversary of 2023—I'm sorry, guys, you've got another one coming—that I'm most looking forward to. Shakespeare's "life" began only after he died, as people interested in his book began to gather any remaining facts about him. But they were already too late.

Of Shakespeare the man, the First Folio gives only the briefest glimpse of Shakespeare's everyday habits. Who was he?

Who, as he was a happy imitator of nature, was a most gentle expresser of it: his mind and hand went together; and what he thought, he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received of him a blot in his papers.

In fact, that is virtually the only memory that survives of Shakespeare doing the thing that he's actually famous for—in other words, writing.

Thomas Fuller, the ecclesiastical historian who included Shakespeare among the *Worthies* of Warwickshire, was the first to create a biographical pen portrait in 1662, or least it was published in 1662, just after he died. Yet his picture of Shakespeare is distant and literary. He describes him as a compound of classical writers, bawdy Martial, Ovid, and Plautus. Fuller praises Shakespeare for his comic genius. The largest part of Fuller's narrative is a comparison of Shakespeare with Jonson; Jonson was more solid and substantial, but Shakespeare, with his quick wit, was like an English man-of-war, able to turn with the tide and tack in any direction.

In the last decades of Shakespeare's century, John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* describes in manuscript our author as an exceedingly nice fellow. I'm glad we're all agreed about that. "He was a handsome, well shap't man: very good company, and of a very readie and pleasant smooth Witt."

The most significant aspect of these embryonic lives of Shakespeare, then, is not any accuracy of character reference, and still less the preservation of archival memory. All periods are nostalgic, perhaps, but the Restoration turned nostalgia into an art form and a political culture, and Shakespeare came into being as part of a cult of the past. After the return of the Stuarts in 1660, William Davenant shared with Thomas Killigrew a monopoly of the restored theater and put Shakespeare back on stage.

In this sense, Shakespeare's life has always been a construction after the fact. The lack of substantial evidence has increased his usefulness to a mythology of Englishness. Each new age has reinvented him according to its predilections, without any serious possibility of being contradicted by the facts. He can be a national poet or a rebel talisman, a romantic or a conservative. Just as significantly, he is a figure for memory itself, for an ambiguous relationship to the past as both familiar and unknowable. Our memorialization of him is the condition of his existence.

1709 marks a new beginning with the first independent *Life*, but this is not due to any change in the status of knowledge of the author, but instead a desire for a preface to a new edition. Nicholas Rowe, himself a leading dramatist, produced the first edition after the four Folios, modernizing the punctuation and spelling to the practice of his day and dividing the plays into acts and scenes. His life opened the first volume of six.

It is, in fact, a curious and salutary truth that Rowe's *Some Account of the Life, etc. of Mr. William Shakespear*, the first serious life of the poet, is little different in outline from one penned now, 300 years later. The poet has a brief education, a troubled youth, a hurried marriage, an escape to London, an acting career which develops into a writing one, an intimate association with the Earl of Southampton, a fame that reaches Queen Elizabeth and King James, and an elegiac postlude in his beloved Stratford. From aubade to envoy, it is a ballad that can be written as Rowe did, in uncluttered and mostly sober prose, in a few pages.

Where did the information come from? Rowe, like Fuller before him, has the entries from the parish registry of Shakespeare's baptism and burial, and also the verse on the tomb. He gives the name of the wife as Hathaway. The names of Shakespeare's daughters and their husbands are faithfully recorded, and his son, as is the end of Shakespeare's direct line. There is not much else.

At the end of the seventeenth century, a series of pilgrims made their way to Stratford to see what traces of the master were still to be found. In Stratford, they came across William Castle, sexton in the church. He put on theatrical tours of the chancel house, which he assured his gullible visitors (including Charles Gildon, a collector of theatrical anecdote) was where the poet wrote the ghost scene in *Hamlet* (at dead of night, naturally). But even if Castle was as old as he said he was, and he probably wasn't, he was barely old enough to have been a baby in 1616.

The famous deer poaching incident is no more authentic: its first appearance came in some notes written by Richard Davies, who was rector of Sapperton near Cirencester in Gloucestershire from 1696 to 1708. He also recorded that Shakespeare "died a papist," something that we've been hearing about more in the last decade.

John Dennis, attempting to bolster sales of his own adaptation, *The Comical Gallant: Or, The Amours of Sir John Falstaffe* (1702), coined the story of Queen Elizabeth commanding

Shakespeare to write a sequel to the *Henry IV* plays, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which he dashed off, we're told, in fourteen days. The queen, "one of the greatest" that ever lived, Dennis says, was notable not only "for her knowledge of polite learning," but "her nice taste of the drama." Eat your heart out, Judi Dench.

Rowe embellished this with the beautiful detail that Elizabeth asked the playwright to "show Falstaff in love." Rowe also claimed to have commissioned Thomas Betterton, the actor, to make new researches in Stratford. Betterton provided what we might call a kind of apostolic succession. He learned how to play Hamlet from Davenant, who had seen it performed at Blackfriars by Mr. Taylor, who was instructed in the role by the bard. No matter that Davenant was twelve years old at the bard's death, and that Mr. Taylor only joined the King's Company in 1619. Rowe also reported Shakespeare's acting talents out of nowhere: "The top of his Performance was the Ghost in his own *Hamlet*."

Later, the antiquarian William Oldys noted that one of Shakespeare's brothers, surviving to be lionized by Restoration actors, remembered seeing his elder sibling "act a part in one of his comedies ... a decrepit old man ... at which he was seated among some good company, who were eating, and one of them sung a song." The reference to old Adam in *As You Like It*, under the greenwood tree in Arden Forest, is unmistakable, and almost as irresistible as the part of Hamlet's ghostly father.

These are among the most repeated anecdotes of all concerning the dramatist. And yet none of Shakespeare's three brothers lived to see the Restoration, and no document survives of an early cast of *Hamlet*.

We might assume, following the principles of modern biography, that the origins of the narrative life follow the delineaments of the surviving archive. But the truth is the other way around. The template that Rowe followed was determined by the genre of the literary preface. He needed the author to have a life with, guess what, a beginning, a middle, and an end. He gives it a symmetry by having the poet go from country to city, back to the country again. Lacking any knowledge of the last years, he has Shakespeare enjoying a pastoral idyll: "The latter Part of his Life was spent, as all Men of good Sense will wish theirs to be, in Ease, Retirement, and the Conversation of his Friends." However, the largest lacuna of all is the mystery of how Shakespeare ever got to be a writer in the first place. Somehow, Rowe has to get Shakespeare from Stratford to London. Having nothing more to go on than the venison anecdote, the young man drops everything and ends up in the big smoke, as if by magic.

In fact, the crucial event is compressed into empty space between paragraphs. So, in one paragraph he's still in Stratford and there's some venison around, and the next he's already got pen in hand and he's in London. "It is at this Time, and upon this Accident, that he is said to have made his first Acquaintance in the Play-house. He was receiv'd into the Company then in being, at first in a very mean Rank; But his admirable Wit, and the natural Turn of it to the Stage, soon distinguish'd him, if not as an extraordinary Actor, yet as an excellent Writer."

Rowe is conventionally described as the first biographer of Shakespeare. But in an important sense, I want to argue that this is untrue. For his *Life* is not really a biography, but an introduction to the works. A good deal of it is given over to descriptions of poetic style, and in this respect, Rowe's *Account* is, in most essentials, the Shakespeare of Restoration criticism, and especially of John Dryden and Thomas Rymer, minus the negatives.

Rowe does not recognize the word "biography" himself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first use to Dryden in 1683, in a description of the works of Plutarch. As a term for a written life of an individual, the *Dictionary* takes us a little later, to 1726. As an art form, we could say literary biography was born twenty years after that, with Dr. Johnson's *Life of Savage* in 1744.

As such, biography arrived 200 years too late for Shakespeare. Shakespeare, of course, was not included in the *Lives of the most eminent English Poets*, Johnson's last masterpiece, published in March 1781. He had been planning them at least since May 1777, we know from a letter to James Boswell; the first selection came out in 1779, and were originally titled *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical to the Works of the English Poets*. So we can see in that passage between the two editions how we move from literary preface to literary biography. But even though Shakespeare is not there, his absence seems like a massive presence in the book, and perhaps in Johnson's biographical project altogether. Johnson, in an essay in *The Rambler* in 1750, wrote, "The incidents which give excellence to biography are of a volatile and evanescent kind." Is he thinking there of Shakespeare?

Already in 1744, Johnson in his *Life of Richard Savage* seems to be haunted by the fact that he is not writing about Shakespeare, just as Savage is, by not quite being Shakespeare: "This interval of prosperity furnished him with opportunities of enlarging his knowledge of human nature by contemplating life from its highest gradations to its lowest; and, had he afterwards applied to dramattick poetry, he would perhaps not have had many superiors."

That's a description of Savage, but it's echoing the language of thinking about Shakespeare. And in giving voice to Savage's literary sensibility, Johnson anticipates the next 100 years of Shakespearian literary criticism: "he was present to every object, and regardful of the most trifling occurrences. He had the art of escaping from his own reflections, and accommodating himself to every new scene."

Johnson did not think that he could write a proper life of Shakespeare, because his idea of biography is fundamentally different, I think, from ours. He does not affect to write from cradle to grave: his lives are incomplete and fragmentary, built around anecdotes and what he called "character": building an image of a person through illuminating incidents and stories. A majority of the *Lives* are writers in his own lifetime.

Indeed, Johnson's sense of Shakespeare's life is that it is out of conscious reach, outside of it. Shakespeare is the missing life in Johnson's sense of his life's work, in that sense. The long

projected edition of Shakespeare, years in the making, is haunted by this sense of loss, of distance from the writer he wishes to be closest to. Indeed, he comes to reflect in the preface to the *Works of Shakespeare* in 1765, which he noted is not a "life," that it is this very quality that now justifies thinking of Shakespeare as a classic, as, like one of the ancients, "he has long outlived his century, the term fixed as the test of literary merit." So I'll read from here:

Whatever advantages he might once derive from personal allusions, local customs, or temporary opinions, have for many years been lost; and every topic of merriment, or motive of sorrow, which the modes of artificial life afforded him, now only obscure the scenes which they once illuminated.

Shakespeare's words can no longer be understood within the context of the opinion, faction, interest, or passion of the times in which he lived, Johnson says; they "are read without any other reason than the desire of pleasure."

Interestingly, and this is a point that I want to come back to, Johnson's view of Shakespeare comes close to describing him as beyond historicism. But the more important point for the moment is that he is decidedly beyond biography. Biography for Johnson is a species of life writing and not of historiography, as we might think of it.

Even as he was finishing his edition of Shakespeare, James Boswell was beginning the journals that would eventually end, of course, in *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, in 1791. Boswell's *Johnson* is now regarded as the father of the genre of biography, if you like. But he writes an antitype of that genre, I would say. I might even dare to say, an anti-biography. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is what Jackson Bate has called "a life in scenes": a collage taken from what Boswell called "the vast treasure of his conversations at different times" with Johnson, recorded in his journals. Famously, he leaves out large swaths of Johnson's life that he has no conversational record for.

Boswell therefore puts into extreme form the ambition that Johnson showed in brief in the *Lives of the Poets*. "I love anecdotes," Johnson is recorded as saying by Boswell in *A Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. "I fancy mankind may come, in time, to write all aphoristically, except in narrative; grow weary of preparation, and connection, and illustration, and all those arts by which a big book is made." In that sense, the project of modern biography is the antithesis of Johnson's imagination. The modern biography is nothing if not "a big book," I think we can agree, a myth of completion of life in its entirety, nothing left out, a fully organic system of the archive. Yet Johnson regards anecdote as the very opposite of system, and anecdote is the stuff of his life writing.

Johnson's unwritten and unwritable life of Shakespeare is, I suggest, the point of origin of the two great leviathans of the twentieth century study of literature in English: The unfinished quest of the literary biography, on the one hand, and the unfinishable study of the works of Shakespeare, on the other.

Folger SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY

Advancing knowledge & the arts

The beginnings of "Shakespeare Studies" in the eighteenth century has been brilliantly told by many of the people at this conference, of whom I might make special mention of Margreta de Grazia and Jack Lynch. But I want to pay specific attention here to the place in this, not only of Shakespearean editing and scholarship from Edmond Malone onwards, but to the absent presence, or present absence, of Shakespeare's life.

The *annus mirabilis* in this sense is the Shakespeare bicentenary of 1764—the first Shakespeare anniversary ever to be celebrated. It was also the year that Malone met Dr. Johnson. This was the most important meeting of his life. It is no accident that Malone later proofread and helped revise Boswell's *Life*, annotating four of the later editions. More immediately, Johnson was just finishing off his edition of Shakespeare. And Malone came in time to assist George Steevens in taking up Johnson's mantle and, in 1790, publishing his own great edition.

As a dire warning who to those of us now employed almost full-time in Shakespeare anniversaries, it is worth recalling that the bicentenary was famously botched, and despite the patronage of the great actor David Garrick as master of the revels, did not even take place until 1769. I left making this point until I arrived at the Folger and I knew that I would find stuff in the Folger that would do the trick for me. I could not believe that I found George Garrick's ticket from the bicentenary, and I really would enjoin you to look at Georgianna Ziegler's wonderfully curated exhibits around the bicentenary, they're the ones that gave me most pleasure—that temple of books.

The celebration also gave renewed attention to the idea of the life. Edward Capell prophesied the result in 1767 when he lamented, "How much is it to be wish'd that something ... worthy to be intitl'd a Life of Shakespeare could accompany... new editions?" That is, in direct contrast to what we might think of as the spur to life writing, the life explaining the works, it is the desire to talk about the works that gives rise to a life.

We could call this, I'm going to be a bit scientific here, the first of the three laws of motion in Shakespearean biography. And in addition to this law of reverse motivation, we can add the other two: second, that the sum of life knowledge ascertained is in inverse proportion to the fame of the writer, and third, what we might call the quantum rule, that the smaller the piece of information (or alternatively, the less likely it is to be true) the more importance accrues to it in the long history of scholarship.

Malone, himself, however did not write a new life in the sense of a continuous narrative. He began, in fact, in 1778, with what is the first attempt to create a reliable chronology for dating Shakespeare's works. He followed this with *A Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the English Stage*. He hoped to complete a life, but kept finding new material or revisiting old opinions and undoing forgeries, as again is beautifully shown in the exhibition, and spent much of his lifetime scotching these speculations of others.



So, it was only after his death, in 1821, that James Boswell the younger, son of the biographer, created in a kind of variorum version of Malone's edition, now extended to 21 volumes—it's beginning to get big enough now—a composite life of Shakespeare. This was 700 pages long. Even so, "I cannot but lament," Boswell added in one of the great understatements of all time, "that much has unquestionably been lost."

The taste for biography spread like wildfire. The novelty of the form was initially charming, and the possibilities seemed endless of recreating the lives of the past: in 1803 Walter Scott called biography "the most interesting perhaps of every species of composition." Yet with enormous success came eventually a kind of satiety: in 1874, it was said wearily that biography had been "carried to a wasteful and ridiculous excess." It's no accident that this later comment comes in the preface to a life of Shakespeare by its greatest nineteenth-century exponent, James Orchard Halliwell, later Halliwell-Phillipps—and actually, the "wasteful and ridiculous excess" is a quotation from *King John*; it's not an independent statement at that point. The biography of Shakespeare in the Halliwell-Phillipps version lies at the heart of the biographical phenomenon altogether, in its enthusiastic origins, its mammoth ambition, its imaginative creativity, and, eventually, in its self-gorging decadence and overkill.

I wish I had a whole lecture for Halliwell, that kleptomaniac of facts. He is, of course, the prototype Shakespeare scholar: book thief, cad, and hopeless romantic. He wrote a first Shakespeare bio in his 20s, another in his 50s in 1874, and in 1881, that's this one here, completed *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* in two vast tomes totaling 848 pages. The record keeps on getting broken, it's like with the Olympics.

He consumed the archives voraciously for further gobbets of information. In the will towards comprehensive knowledge, he greatly expanded the field of observation. No longer content with new direct references to the poet (which had become by now almost impossible to find), he looked through the records of Shakespeare's relatives or even alternative branches of the family. The Hathaways and Ardens were mercilessly tracked. Every small piece of business done by John Shakespeare in the officialdom of Stratford was laid bare. The relentless investigator went through the records of every local parish, just in case. When an old well was found, full of garbage, he had the contents rifled four times. If you want to know what proportion of the Stratford corn crop Shakespeare received profits for in 1598, Halliwell tells us.

But it is never enough. Charles William Wallace, from Hopkins, Missouri, spent ten years with his wife dredging through the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane in search of the Holy Grail, something that they called "The Big One"—wait for it—an actual anecdote of Shakespeare's life. In 1909, they found, uncataloged, Shakespeare's signed deposition in the Belott-Mountjoy dispute. Here was the best preserved of Shakespeare's six surviving signatures. Far more wondrous, here, at last, after all the fights over small change and the proceeds of conveyancing of property and the managing of tithes, was a recognizable human story with Shakespeare at its center; a story of love—failed love, of course.

Folger SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY

Advancing knowledge & the arts

It was the Shakespeare discovery of the century. Yet, even as they found it, Wallace confided to his diary his massive sense of disappointment. He looked up from the document to meet his wife's eyes, and her look confirmed his, as much as to say, "Is this all there is?" Wallace's disenchantment at the clinching moment of his scholarly career is telling for several reasons. It shows how much longing there is to discover Shakespeare's identity and yet, how whatever we find cannot live up to expectations.

Shakespeare's life exists as a kind of black hole of antimatter in relation to the vast nebula of his fame. Like his most famous character, we search for a ghost on the ramparts or a body under the stairs in the cellarage. We long for his presence to explain himself and thus, to give us meaning in return. Could it even be that his fame has grown through this very lack of identity to pin a more ordinary life to, so that he is the perfect container for our desire and creative empathy? It is tempting to think this. Certainly, Shakespeare's fame grew enormously in the late eighteenth century, and the lack of evidence made theories about him and his writing less deniable. He is the most difficult of writers to historicize.

It was at this period that ideas of his universality began to be given serious credentials, as in Coleridge's "Our myriad-minded Shakespeare." This was also the period of the idea of Shakespeare's impersonality, beginning in Germany with August Wilhelm Schlegel in 1796. "Men of Genius have not any individuality, any determined Character," Keats said in 1818. "He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were," William Hazlitt, later the same month.

In the opposite direction, the other law of unintended consequences of the Shakespearean archive was that the life as we have it is insufficient to explain the genius of the writing. Some other genius must have written it. It is customary for academics to pour scorn on the anti-Stratfordian thesis or rather, theses, and also to create an absolute divide between one kind of archival drive and the other. I prefer to see both phenomena as part of the same relentless forensic mania. Delia Bacon of Ohio, with her theory that her namesake, Sir Francis, wrote the works instead, emerged at exactly the same time as the advanced forms of the traditional life--that is, the 1850s. And, actually, the story, you know, goes back further than that, to the late eighteenth century and you can trace it through, as Jim Shapiro has done, and you can see a kind of correspondence to the two things alongside each other.

I'm going to leave the cryptographic evidence that Delia Bacon used to Bill Sherman, but she needs defending from the aspersion that she is a crank. Writing at the same time as the higher criticism of the Bible was extending new ideas of authorship of great texts, she felt that the philosophical sophistication of the plays needed a better explanation than that provided by the life story as then told, consisting as it did of a preponderance of mortgage dealings and other financial trivia, whether of Shakespeare's second house or the commercial theater. William only cared for plays, Delia said, "precisely as a tradesman would."



In another direction, these speculations gave rise to literary imaginativeness. In *Ulysses* in 1922, under Freud's influence, James Joyce fictionalized the thought that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* thinking of his son, Hamnet. In a wonderful parody of the processes of mixing life and work, fact and fiction, he gets in the anti-Stratfordian theory via a portmanteau pseudonym for the composite and now almost entirely fictional name of the poet.

—Well: if the father who has not a son be not a father can the son who has not a father be a son? When Rutlandbaconsouthamptonshakespeare or another poet of the same name in the comedy of errors wrote Hamlet he was not the father of his own son merely but, being no more a son, he was and felt himself the father of all his race.... Hamlet, the black prince, is Hamnet Shakespeare...

—The plot thickens.

However, the idea that the life of Stratford William is either a blank or exceptionally caught in tedium, also needs scotching. Of all the myths of the life, the most persistent is of The Lost Years. It is held to be a central mystery that nothing happens to him between the birth of his twins in 1585 and the first records in the London theaters in 1592.

I will make a genuflection to Lawrence Goldman here, and confess I did some work in my early career for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. And if you worked on the sixteenth century, you quickly knew that to have only seven lost years is really remarkably good going. In one of my cases, there were only about seven Found Weeks to go on.

The truth is, Shakespeare had no lost years. There is rather, a lost archive, as there is for virtually all Elizabethan men and women. That the archive is even as large as it is, is tribute not to the intrinsic interest of Shakespeare's life, so much as to the lives of amateur and professional scholars that have been devoted to tracing it and retelling it and finding, in fact, too much. It's not a question of not enough: we know too much in a certain sense, in terms of the kind of evidence that we have. Nor is Shakespeare's life unusually menial or venial. The records you are likely to have in Tudor England are, believe it or not, legal or financial. Other stuff did not get written down.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman first became famous for the idea of the availability heuristic—the notion that if something can be recalled, it must be important. What distinguishes Shakespeare's life is not some special mystery, but the availability heuristic gone mad. It is a classic case of what the philosophy of science calls underdetermination.

My favorite example is poor Mrs. Shakespeare. Much is made of the "fact" that Anne was eight years older than William at the time of the wedding. Yet this is, at depth, a conjecture. There were many Hathaways in Warwickshire and still more farther afield in Gloucestershire. There were quite a few in the parish of Stratford itself. It's only guesswork that Anne is the same as Agnes, the daughter of Richard, born in 1556, and not even guesswork that she ever lived in

"Anne Hathaway's cottage," which is just a house that was owned by the descendants of Richard in 1746.

It is interesting to reflect that in one version of the philosophy of skepticism in relation to scientific observation, all the available observational evidence for entities that are not directly observable, such as electrons, underdetermines the claims of a scientific theory about such entities. Nonetheless, electrons are held to exist in reality. By analogy, we could say that there is no evidence for believing what biographical theories say about entities, such as Shakespeare, that are not directly observable. Nonetheless, it follows that if Shakespeare did not exist, we would indeed have had to invent him.

I began this lecture with the conventional question, Who was Shakespeare? And I've finally given an answer in hopelessly unsatisfactory form, a counterfactual pluperfect subjunctive. Everybody who writes or reads a life of Shakespeare complains about the "would've, could've, should've" of narrative history. My favorite biographers of Shakespeare, in the end, are therefore the skeptics: Malone, E.K. Chambers, and the great Sam Schoenbaum.

Yet, we can at least say this: we need Shakespeare. Even the anti-Stratfordians agree that if not Shakespeare, we need somebody, perhaps anybody, to act as the writer for us, yet, behind this question of who, is another suppressed question: What do we want a writer for?

In the remainder of this lecture, I want to try to answer that question in three intersecting ways. I will stop knocking biography and instead suggest why it matters, in terms of how we think about history, about criticism, and about literature itself. But only, I plead, if we refuse to think that biography is a kind of reconstruction or facsimile of a life, or that motivation is the key to literary meaning.

My first issue is how biography relates to historicism. Here, oddly, an intriguing witness is Delia Bacon, who, asked what she was looking for in the author of the plays, gave a kind of argument for historicism: "ONE, with learning broad enough, and deep enough and subtle enough, and comprehensive enough, one with nobility of aim and philosophic and poetic genius enough, to be able to claim his own immortal progeny." That word "enough" again. This is the puzzle of Shakespeare life studies; not the lack of documents, but the lack of access to a context that those documents might supply.

For other seventeenth century playwrights, this knowledge is dense and profound. Pierre Corneille is the French Shakespeare (or rather, Voltaire called Shakespeare the English Corneille). We know when *Le Cid* was performed, and when it was published, in 1637. We know the reactions it provoked, the pamphlet wars that ensued, the quarrels that broke out in the Académie Française about how it had been composed. It's the same for Joost van den Vondel, the "Dutch Shakespeare."

Not knowing what Shakespeare was doing when Elizabeth I gave her Tilbury speech on the second of August, 1588, is one thing. I like to imagine him smoking a pipe and eating a poetic potato salad, of course. It's quite another to consider what we don't know about the plays and their contexts. For instance, almost every date of almost every play is a matter of some kind of conjecture. Indeed, until Malone, nobody had any idea about this subject. He placed *The Winter's Tale* in 1594 and *Twelfth Night* in 1614. By means of a *terminus ante quem*, that latter proposition can be ruled out. But it's much harder to be sure about a *terminus post quem* for *The Winter's Tale*. Without preempting Margreta's paper at this conference, a document is surely not unimaginable, which could completely revise our thinking. This rules out the basic first steps in contextualization which take place with Corneille or with Vondel.

To broaden the discussion, in Vondel's case, we know that he was born a Mennonite but converted to Catholicism in 1641. In between times, he sympathized politically with the Arminians. This, I think, is the real reason why the Catholic Shakespeare question became so exciting in the last decade. It's because it gives him a personal identity of any kind: it's a form of proxy authorship debate, in other words.

I want to ask how this affects a general question about historicism. For, of course, it is not the case that the want of contextual information about biography has prevented a historicization of Shakespeare's plays and for that matter, dating, serious dating, of the plays.

Biography, then, is not a necessary condition of historicism. That's my first general argument. There are two contrary ways of thinking about that. Like anyone, I would love to have access to more information. But the relation of information to context in Shakespeare should make us ask questions in the opposite direction. Religion is a case in point. In my other life as a religious historian, we make far too hard and fast assumptions on the basis of biography. When we know the confessional identity of a person, we translate that into a set of assumptions about what that labeling entails. I could give examples of how the historiography of religion is overtaken by the mania for "isms," where the writings might tell a quite different story if we let them. In this way, the lack of certainty with Shakespeare is an instructive opportunity for us to rethink the boundaries of contextualization more generally.

This relates, then, to my second issue of criticism: The danger is that criticism takes its lead from contextualization, whereas often the impulse, in fact, needs to be the other way around. Biography only increases that pressure. In that sense, I appeal to literary biography in its eighteenth century form, working outwards from criticism, rather than its dominant modern form, making the details of a life form the horizon of interpretation, however complexly we understand that life.

The problem is not the biography, then, but biographical determinism. Opposition to this is sometimes taken to be a sign of postmodernism, but the "biographical fallacy" is a term invented by New Criticism, long before 1968. The doctrinal aspects of W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's classic, "The Intentional Fallacy," have, of course, as you know, their own long

history of counter-argument and they've been particularly well countered in Leon Edel's masterly study, *Literary Biography*, written in 1957, by the way: "No critic, I hold, can explicate—the very word implies this—anything without alluding to something else." In other words, "something" outside the work.

But the pendulum has perhaps swung too much the other way. My second thesis, as it were, is that biography is not a necessary condition for criticism, either. This has a larger cultural effect. In bookshops today, commonly we find three different places for literature: classics, fiction, and biography. Only in large stores or specialist college bookshops will we find other categories, called things like "literary criticism" or "literary theory." Publishers are wary of those terms: they feel their public do not largely like them. If that is the case, we need to be more inventive about finding ways to express why we love literature and what it does for us.

However, the deepest question at issue here is not one about criticism, but about how life relates to literature. The age of biography has coincided with the age of paper. The towering literary lives of our times—Edel's *James*, Richard Ellmann's *Joyce* and *Wilde*, Michael Holroyd's *Shaw*, Hermione Lee's *Woolf*—are all products of the apogee of the archive. Before the telephone and the moving image and the email inbox, it seemed for a while that everything that happened could be written down and nothing would ever get thrown away. These megalithic lives, magnificent as they are, provide the model for how a life is written, so that Shakespeare's is reconstructed in the image of the modern writer. But just as the accidents of paper, ink, and storage space produced the conditions in which such a life became writable, maybe they also created the conditions in which such a life became liveable. This is a timely reminder of the gap between Shakespeare's era and our own. It's not just a problem of anachronism; the sense of what it is to live a life has also changed. It is changing even now: in the electronic age of email and Facebook, human relationships and identity are evolving all over again.

So, again, my third thesis would be that narrative biography is not the only way of telling a life. No work expresses the paradox of human memory better than Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, written at the very height, of course, of the age of paper. Every moment of his life, and every page of his novel, become, in some sense, interchangeable. Writing the supernoel of authorial existence consumed and overtook his own life.

Our literary lives aspire to this Proustian image of what it is to live. Yet there are ironies in this, and the trajectories of fiction infiltrate what are supposed to be the factualities of existence. Proust figured himself through Shakespeare's sonnets and plays: he used titles quoting Shakespeare to frame his own creativity. The experience of the novel imitates, but it also alters, life: the chronological timeframe in the one does not quite match the other, so Proust the writer, and the narrator, live parallel but actually not the same lives. Genette described that beautifully.

This is part of the novel: most famously, of course, in his unlocking of the resources of his childhood remembrance through "*le goût du morceau du madeleine*"—"the taste of a piece of a madeleine." The beauty of this gustatory image often conceals for us the philosophical

meditation on memory which precedes and follows from it in *Du côté de chez Swann*. Proust distinguishes here between the memory of the intelligence and the memory of the senses. He calls the former "voluntary" memory—he didn't quite invent the term, but it was a very new term at the time—the remembrance that we call from our minds by an act of will, while the senses bring us access to accidental memories. Voluntary memory, he says—the willed effort of memorial recall in a chronology of the past—itself preserves nothing of the past. However much he tries to remember his childhood, by this means, it remains quite dead for him—*mort pour moi*.

But now, he turns back on that idea to compare, as inferior, his imagination of the remembered garden at Combray in relation to the imagined garden in a book by an author he admires. What do we make of this paradox? Is it a contradiction for him to cast doubt on his own memories? The ambiguity is compounded by the fact that we are reading a novel; although the novel purports to be an autobiography, it is not identical with Proust's own. Combray, for instance, is not even a real place.

There is a lesson here about literary biography. More than any genre, it is based on an idea of voluntary memory. This is the kind of memory invoked by those iconic places with which I began: the birthplace, the Globe, this theater. Proust, no doubt, would have liked Shakespeare's house. He would have liked its mixture of earnestness and tastelessness, its provincial country setting, and maybe, also, the way that the country setting has been fabricated for our benefit.

For just as Combray, the fictional place, is not identical with Illiers, the real village where Proust lived, and just as, in turn, by a curious borrowing of life from art, the modern place of Illiers-Combray has been reinvented (and renamed) to look more like the village of Proust's imagination than it did in the novelist's own day, so Stratford has been remade in Shakespeare's image.

Proust recalls how it was in reading books as a child that he felt most alive; how the characters in books seemed to him superior, from the point of view of mental reflection, to the characters of real life. The best piece of writing on "The Birthplace," I think, is Henry James's brilliant story of that name, published in 1903. Although it never mentions Shakespeare, it is a satire on the Shakespeare industry of his time and of the time to come. Morris Gedge and his wife apply for the position of custodians of the birthplace of a famous figure from the Midlands.

The figure is never named, but his fame and the reverence in which he is held makes him sound like Shakespeare, in fact makes him sound like Jesus: "The more we *know* Him," Gedge reflected, "the more we shall love Him. We don't as yet, you see, know Him so very tremendously." The Gedges experience a classic nineteenth century crisis of faith. The location of the moment of crisis is the "birthroom" itself, a place of mystical sanctity, for once, with none of the bricolage of souvenir tat to adorn it. It is an empty tomb, in short, and now the Gedges come to the terrible conclusion that not only is nothing there, but nothing, especially not the birth of the master, ever happened there.

The lesson of James is not, I think, a negative one. Gedge is not a fool, any more than we are for loving his author. He is tragically caught up in the paradox of reading, of sharing at once the astonishing proximity with the writer that reading brings, and yet with it also the haunting sense of absence. The birthroom is an empty shell, yet it is also the place where Gedge's imagination is brought to life. Sitting with his eyes closed, this is the one place where his mind is free and most full, he says.

We have created a life of Shakespeare because a modern author is felt to be incomplete without one, and being the biggest author, he had better have the biggest life. I don't think I'm giving away any ODNB secrets by repeating Patrick Collinson's story that there was an editorial meeting right at the start, who was going to have the biggest life? Queen Elizabeth had her supporters, Winston Churchill was a good alternative, but it was finally decided that Shakespeare would have the most words, so poor Peter Holland had a bigger job to do than anybody else.

We have constructed a biography, in short, of Shakespeare not so much to explain him, as to explain our relationship to him, his relationship to us. But following the dictates of the genre, we have had to allow the accidental survival of the remaining documents as if they helped to explain something quite different, that is, the creative mind at work.

It's irresistible to recall here the short fictions of Borges, "La Memoria de Shakespeare," especially, with its mythological creation of Hermann Sörgel. Sörgel was actually a utopian architect of the mid-twentieth century; he wanted to close off the Mediterranean Sea and create a massive hydroelectric dam, which might have worked. We might have solved all of the world's problems in advance if the other Sörgel had done what he meant to do.

Sörgel, in the story, has this offer. He is offered the memory of Shakespeare intact, and wow, he's a great scholar, this will solve everything for him, but when the memory is delivered to him, the trouble is it doesn't come in the right order. It doesn't come in an order from cradle to grave. It comes as a series of improvisatory and completely accidental little shots into his head, just like our own memories do, in other words. So, the mythological creation of a replica of the entire contents of Shakespeare's memory turns out to create such a superfluity of evidence that Sörgel has a kind of nervous breakdown and passes on the memory to another person.

Or, let's look at "Borges y Yo," where the writer reflects on the split consciousness between the Borges who writes and the other Borges who lives an everyday, mundane life in coffee shops, reading newspapers. "The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to," he says. The biographical Shakespeare is like that other Borges.

Borges's parable of 1960, "Everything and Nothing" (the title is in English in the Spanish original), describes Shakespeare as a cipher or an Everyman. In about 600 words, he retells a life of the poet in miniature. Yet, in every act of his life, Shakespeare discovers that there is

Folger SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY

Advancing knowledge & the arts

nobody there. First, he thinks that everybody has the same problem, but when he confesses his sense of emptiness of personality to a friend, he finds from his friend's blank incomprehension that he is, in fact, alone. He attempts to make up for it. He loses himself, like we all do in this library, in books. Only on the stage does he find his *métier*: "he plays at being another before a gathering of people who play at taking him for that other person."

In truth, Shakespeare's nonentity is an exaggeration. Does he fail to exist any more than you or I do? When Borges concluded that "there was no one in him," in so doing, he revealed something perhaps about himself. The child of a father who was half English, Borges (he speculates that the name is perhaps a Hispanicization of Burroughs or Burgess) read Shakespeare from childhood in order to find his own self.

"My God, how does one write a Biography?" Virginia Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West in 1938. Is there an answer? Perhaps we should follow in the footsteps here of Jean-Yves Tadié and his monumental *Marcel Proust* of 1996. In the case of Proust, there are myriad surviving letters and records, and a whole tradition of lurid speculation into his personality and most, of course, into his sex life. Tadié discreetly reverses the trend. He writes not so much a biography of the man as a biography of writing. He opposes the idea of personality: even, in a sense, the idea of Proust as an individual. He wants instead to find out what kind of writer he was.

When Samuel Beckett, in his twenties still, and long before the height of his own literary fame, wrote a short book on Proust, he is rigorous in this declaration: "There is no allusion in this book to the legendary life and death of Marcel Proust." Instead, his book called *Proust*, of 1931, attends only to Proust's book. Proust, Beckett says in a wonderful phrase, "had a bad memory." This is the source of his creativity. Indeed, Beckett says, it is only because Proust is so forgetful that he has to make such efforts of remembrance.

I find in Borges's phrase about Shakespeare the best way of remembering him, in that it figures a way of living that we can live, like the one of mimesis: "he plays at being another before a gathering of people who play at taking him for that other person." We cannot write like Proust or Beckett or Borges. But perhaps the reading of a writer creates a life form of its own, somewhere between writer and reader, in the mystery that constitutes the act of literature, and what we could call, not the life of the writer, but the life of writing.

Thank you very much.

