

CONTENTS

Dedication	5
Preface	9
Acknowledgments	11
Prologue: Shakespeare: An Introductory Note	13
1. Will the Real Shakespeare Please Stand Up?	15
2. His Father's Will	30
3. The Faith of His Fathers	39
4. Living with Outlaws	55
5. A Rose by Any Other Name	64
6. Love's Labors	79
7. Lost Years	88
8. Murdered Spy	99
9. Martyred Priest	107
10. Playing Safe with the Queen	118
11. Red Herrings and Codpieces	129
12. Friends and Family	135
13. The King's Good Servant	141
14. Last Years	151
15. "He Died a Papist"	164
Prefatory Note to the Appendices	173
Appendix A The Challenge of Shakespeare	174
Appendix B <i>King Lear</i> : Finding the Comedy in the Tragedy	181
Bibliography	201
Index	207

PREFACE

The quest pursued in the following pages is designed to show objectively who Shakespeare was, and what his deepest beliefs were. We will be dealing solely with the facts, and I ask the reader to expect that all suppositions be founded upon, be subject to, and be judged from the perspective of the facts presented. If, in any of the proceeding pages, this is not the case, I will consider myself to blame for a failure in scholarship. I will add, however, that the following work also represents a quest in the subjective as well as in the objective sense. It has been, for the author, a true enlightenment. I began as a skeptic, doubting that there was sufficient biographical evidence to know who Shakespeare was, or what he believed, excepting of course what could be adduced from his work. I was particularly skeptical of those who claimed that Shakespeare was a Catholic, dismissing the arguments of those Catholics who made such claims as mere wishful thinking. I was convinced that the only honest position was one of agnosticism because not enough was known about England's greatest poet to come to any definitive conclusions. Such was my position.

It was only slowly that I came to realize that much more was known about Shakespeare than most of us have been led to believe. One fact followed upon another until a point was reached where I decided to embark upon some serious research myself. Doing so, I became convinced that Shakespeare was indeed a Catholic, at a time when Catholics were subject to a great deal of ruthless persecution, and that this fact has radical consequences with regard to the study of his works.

In chapter 1, and in greater depth in appendix A, I have alluded to, or sketched, what might be termed a philosophy of the creative process that is needed to read Shakespeare or indeed any text objectively. It is rightly called a philosophy as opposed to a literary theory because the *ratio* underpinning it is not a theory but a demonstrable truth. I have not succumbed to the radical relativism, in its various theoretical guises, that has possessed the study of literature in the Academy, but have insisted that literary criticism is a discipline, as opposed to an "art", which needs to subject itself to the objective authority of the Author. I have not

denied nor belittled the transcendent nature of creativity, though I insist that such transcendence is itself inseparable from, and incarnated in, the personhood of the author and needs to be seen as such. This authorialism, for want of a better label, is necessary for the restoration of sanity in the field of Shakespeare studies and in the wider field of literary criticism itself. Needless to say, I have not been able to elucidate this philosophy at any great length within the confines of this particular study, but intend to return to it at greater length when time and opportunity permit. In the interim, I trust and believe that I have demonstrated the philosophy adequately for the purposes of this work.

I am also painfully aware that the quest is not yet completed.

Although this work assembles the considerable body of biographical and historical evidence that points to Shakespeare's Catholicism, the quest will not be completed successfully until the considerable body of textual evidence for his Catholicism is assembled also. This is a much larger undertaking, since it will necessitate a close reading of the plays and poems, in the light of his known Catholicism. It was, however, necessary to complete the biographical and historical aspects of the quest first. If, instead, we had begun with the text, presuming Shakespeare's Catholicism, we could be accused, justifiably, of reading into the works what we want to see. Establishing Shakespeare's *bona fides* enables the scholar to establish his own *bona fides*, rooted in indisputable fact, and thereby allows him to avoid the pitfalls of relativism into which most Shakespeare criticism has fallen.

I hope to embark on the second part of the quest myself in the near future, writing another book examining the textual evidence for the Bard's Catholicism that can be found in the plays and poems. As a foretaste of this later study, I have included an essay on *King Lear* (appendix B) that shows how our knowledge of the playwright's religious faith and philosophy permits us to read the plays through the eyes of the playwright himself. Reading the plays through Shakespeare's eyes is not merely enlightening, but is an adventure in the presence of genius. The second part of the quest promises to be even more thrilling than the first!

PROLOGUE

SHAKESPEARE: AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Shakespeare is perhaps the greatest writer who ever lived. He is certainly one of only three writers to whom such a claim can be made with any real credibility. The others are Homer and Dante. Taken together, this literary trinity straddles the centuries from pagan antiquity to the present day. Homer looms large over the pagan world, overshadowing his illustrious disciple and imitator, Virgil; Dante towers to the heights of Christendom, the literary fruit of the philosophy and theology of his mentor, St. Thomas Aquinas; and Shakespeare strides like a colossus across the modern age, surpassing all others and surprising each new generation with the wisdom that emerges from his work.

In the following pages we will embark upon the quest for Shakespeare, seeking to make his words flesh by adding factual flesh to the bare bones of his life. It might be helpful, however, to begin with the bare bones. Let's look at the basic facts of Shakespeare's life, those documented events that are beyond dispute and are accepted by all Shakespeare scholars, in order to lay the foundations upon which the rest of what follows will be built. When we have done so, we will be better able to fill in the gaps and to get to know the real Shakespeare, who is the object of our quest.

William Shakespeare was born in April 1664 in Stratford-upon-Avon in the English county of Warwickshire, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. His family was relatively wealthy, owning a good deal of land in the local area, and his father was, at the time of William's birth, Chamberlain of the Stratford Corporation. It is likely that he was educated at the local grammar school, probably beginning in 1571 and ending in 1579 or thereabouts. Little is known of Shakespeare's whereabouts from 1579 until his marriage to Anne Hathaway in 1582, and it has been conjectured that this was a period in which he served as a tutor to a wealthy Catholic family in the north of England. Shakespeare's first child, Susanna, was born in 1583, and his twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585. The Shakespeares would have no further children, and it seems that Shakespeare left Stratford for London soon after the

birth of the twins. The reason for Shakespeare's sudden departure, and the nature of his marriage to Anne, continue to excite the discussion and debate of Shakespeare scholars. It is known, however, that he kept in touch with his family, returning to Stratford regularly, and that he continued to provide financially for their needs.

The period between Shakespeare's departure from Stratford-upon-Avon in the mid-1580s until the time he reemerges as a rising playwright in the early 1590s has become known as the "lost years", because so little is known of his actions or his whereabouts during this time. From the early 1590s onwards, however, he became the most popular and most respected playwright in England, writing more than thirty plays before his retirement twenty or so years later.

Shakespeare spent the last years of his life in his hometown of Stratford, reunited with his wife and family. He died on St. George's Day in 1616 and is buried in the chancel of the local Holy Trinity church.

These, then, are the bare bones. What follows will bring the bones to life and will introduce us to the real William Shakespeare.

I

WILL THE REAL SHAKESPEARE PLEASE STAND UP?

Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides.

—Cordelia (*King Lear*, 1.1.282)

The quest for the real William Shakespeare is akin to a detective story in which the Shakespearian biographer is cast in the role of a literary sleuth, pursuing his quarry like a latter-day Sherlock Holmes. In fact, since the object of the chase is not to elicit the confession of a crime but the confession of a creed, it could be said that Chesterton's clerical detective, Father Brown, might be better suited to the task than Conan Doyle's coldly logical Holmes. Chesterton certainly believed that the evidence pointed toward Shakespeare's Catholicism, stating that the "convergent common sense" that led to the belief that the Bard was a Catholic was "supported by the few external and political facts we know".¹ One presumes from this assertion that Chesterton was familiar with Henry Sebastian Bowden's *The Religion of Shakespeare*, published in 1899, in which Father Bowden assembled the considerable historical and textual evidence for Shakespeare's Catholicism that had been gathered by the Shakespearian scholar Richard Simpson.

Throughout the twentieth century a good deal of solid historical detective work was done, adding significantly to the "few external and political facts" known by Simpson and Chesterton. In consequence, the claims made by Carol Curt Enos in *Shakespeare and the Catholic Religion*, published almost exactly a century after Bowden's volume, were more self-confidently emphatic: "When many of the extant pieces of the puzzle of Shakespeare's life are assembled, it is very difficult to deny his

¹G.K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (1932); republished in G.K. Chesterton: *The Collected Works*, vol. 18 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 333.

Catholicism.”² Every piece of the puzzle, placed painstakingly where it belongs, brings us closer to an objectively verifiable picture. As more and more of the facts of Shakespeare’s life and times emerge from the fogs of history (to switch metaphors), the more clearly are those fogs lifted and the more clearly does Shakespeare emerge from the centuries-laden gloom that has surrounded him.

Even as the solid work of historians brings the real Shakespeare to life, the vultures of literary criticism continue to pick over the bones of the corpse of their unreal Shakespearian chimera. It is for this reason that Anthony Holden, on the opening page of his biography of Shakespeare, complained that “the long-suffering son of Stratford is . . . being picked apart by historicists, feminists, Marxists, new historicists, post-feminists, deconstructionists, anti-deconstructionists, post-modernists, cultural imperialists and post-colonialists”. “Perhaps,” Holden added, “it is time someone tried putting him back together again.”³

Whereas the imagery of carrion-critics picking over the bones of a corpse, killed by the poison of their theories, is a powerful one, the implicit allusion to “putting Humpty together again” is less so. Unlike Humpty Dumpty, Shakespeare has never had a great fall and, therefore, unlike Humpty, does not need putting together. It is not Shakespeare who has fallen. He is as he always was. It is all the king’s men who have had the fall, and it is they who cannot be put together again. The historicists, new historicists, feminists, postfeminists, deconstructionists, et cetera ad nauseam, are lying broken at the feet of the unbroken Shakespeare, picking over the pieces of their own theories, arguing over the meaning of the monsters of their own monstrous musings, missing the point and impaling themselves on the point of their own pointlessness. This is where we shall leave them, arguing amongst themselves, whilst we begin to look at the real William Shakespeare.

Though Shakespeare is real, he is also elusive, defying our efforts to define him. Try as we might to pin him down, he always seems to get away. We don’t even know for certain what he looked like. The various paintings claiming to be portraits of him are most probably of someone else. The painting that seems to have the greatest claim to authenticity,

² Carol Curt Enos, *Shakespeare and the Catholic Religion* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance Publishing, 2000), p. 45.

³ Anthony Holden, *William Shakespeare: The Man Behind the Genius* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1999), p. 1.

the famous Chandos portrait, looks at us with the enigmatic suggestiveness of the Mona Lisa. As with Leonardo's famous portrait, the Chandos Shakespeare seduces us with its aura of mystery, its unanswered questions. Who is this man who looks at us knowingly from the canvas? What secrets does he conceal? The questions are asked, but there's no hint of an answer. Its eyes meet ours, teasing us with evasive promptings of we know not what. It remains silent, keeping its secret.

"We ask and ask: Thou smilest and art still, / Out-topping knowledge." Thus wrote Matthew Arnold in his sonnet to Shakespeare. Today, almost four hundred years after Shakespeare's death and more than a century after Arnold's sonnet, we are still asking. We ask and ask and are still met with the same beguiling silence, the same suggestion of a smile. Perhaps, on one level at least, this is as it should be. On the level of metaphor, the Chandos portrait serves as a representation of Shakespeare himself. The man who looks at us knowingly from the canvas is the man who looks at us knowingly through the plays. He knows us, even if we don't know him. He shows us to ourselves, even if he conceals himself while he does so. As with the picture of Dorian Gray, the portrait is a mirror. And if the mirror shows us ourselves does it really matter that we can't see the mysterious man who is holding it? This seems to have been the question on Matthew Arnold's mind when he composed his sonnet and, as the conclusion of the sonnet testifies, the great Victorian believed that the identity of his elusive Elizabethan forbear was not particularly important.

And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,
 Self-school'd, self-scanned, self-honour'd, self-secure,
 Didst walk on earth unguess'd at. Better so!
 All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
 All weakness that impairs, all griefs that bow,
 Find their sole voice in that victorious brow.

Arnold appears to be saying that since Shakespeare shows us ourselves so well, it doesn't really matter that he fails to show us himself. There is, however, a serious problem with such a conclusion, a problem that is so serious that it amounts to a fatal flaw in the reading of Shakespeare's works and a consequent blindness to the truths that emerge from them. It is this. What if the image of ourselves that we see in the mirror is distorted by our lack of knowledge of the one who holds the

mirror? What if our understanding of Shakespeare is essential to our understanding of ourselves as reflected by Shakespeare? What if we misunderstand and misconstrue what he is showing us if we misunderstand and misconstrue what he *means* to show us? What if Shakespeare is not simply holding the mirror? What if he *is* the mirror? What if the plays are, in some mystical or immanent way, an artistic incarnation of the playwright? What if the words only become flesh if we understand the personhood and philosophy of the flesh that gave birth to the words?

Pace Matthew Arnold, it is clear that knowing Shakespeare increases our knowledge of the plays. It is equally clear that a misunderstanding of Shakespeare will invariably lead to a misunderstanding of the plays. Misread the man and you misread the work. This being so, it is evident that the quest for the *real* William Shakespeare is at the heart of Shakespearean literature. The quest for the author of the plays and sonnets is a quest for the authority needed to read them properly.

In some ways the quest for the real Shakespeare can be likened to the quest for the Holy Grail. Some refuse to join the quest on the basis that the Grail is unimportant. These are the postmoderns and deconstructionists who believe that they are as capable of understanding the plays as was the playwright himself, and that they do not need his help to do so, or else they believe that the plays have no meaning anyway and that, therefore, there is nothing to understand. For these hollow men, slaves of the zeitgeist, there is little hope. With a yawn of tedious ennui, and a sigh of slothful hubris, they close the book and wander wearily into the vestibule of the Futile, perhaps en route to somewhere worse. Then there are those critics who join the quest for the Grail but discover that it was not, in fact, holy; it was merely a cup, like any other, or, at any rate, a cup remarkably like a graven image of the critics themselves. For these critics, Shakespeare emerges, in spite of the abundance of evidence for his Catholicism, as a progenitor of modern secularism, as a man who, ahead of his time, turned his back on the faith of his fathers and embraced the agnosticism of the future. "The safest and most likely conclusion", wrote Peter Ackroyd in his life of the Bard, "... must be that despite his manifold Catholic connections Shakespeare professed no particular faith. The church bells did not summon him to worship. They reminded him of decay and time past. Just as he was a man without opinions, so he was a man without beliefs. He subdued his nature to whatever in the drama confronted him. He was, in that sense, above

faith.”⁴ One cannot resist a riposte to such arrant nonsense. The fact is that there is no such thing as “a man without opinions” or “a man without beliefs”. Indeed, “a man without beliefs” is simply beyond belief. Agnosticism is a belief, atheism is a belief, nihilism is a belief; and these beliefs obviously inform our opinions. Shakespeare may or may not have been a believing Catholic, but he clearly could not have been “without beliefs”. Such men do not exist.

Perhaps Ackroyd was trying to say, and saying badly, what the philosopher George Santayana had said much better more than a century earlier. “Shakespeare is remarkable among the poets”, Santayana claimed, “for being without a philosophy and without a religion”, adding that “the absence of religion in Shakespeare was a sign of his good sense”. With unrelenting logic, Santayana concluded that the absence of religion in Shakespeare’s plays, as he perceived it, led inevitably to the implied triumph of nihilism: “For Shakespeare, in the matter of religion, the choice lay between Christianity and nothing. He chose nothing; he chose to leave his heroes and himself in the presence of life and of death with no other philosophy than that which the profane world can suggest and understand.”⁵

Against this “profane” interpretation of Shakespeare’s works, there is a long tradition of belief that Shakespeare’s plays betray an element of Catholicism. In 1801 the French writer François René de Chateaubriand asserted that “if Shakespeare was anything at all, he was a Catholic”.⁶ Thomas Carlyle wrote that the “Elizabethan era with its Shakespeare, as the outcome and flowerage of all which had preceded it, is itself attributable to the Catholicism of the Middle Ages”.⁷ Carlyle’s great Victorian contemporary John Henry Newman was even more emphatic about the Catholic dimension, stating that Shakespeare “has so little of a Protestant about him that Catholics have been able, without

⁴Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2005), p. 474.

⁵George Santayana, “Absence of Religion in Shakespeare”; originally published in 1896, and collected in George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), pp. 152, 161, 163. Although Santayana’s words can be taken to imply an element of nihilism in Shakespeare, I am not implying, of course, that Santayana was himself a nihilist in the strict sense of the word.

⁶Quoted in H. Mutschmann and K. Wentersdorf, *Shakespeare and Catholicism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. vi.

⁷Quoted in Ackroyd, *Shakespeare*, p. 472.

extravagance, to claim him as their own".⁸ Hilaire Belloc, echoing the verdict of Newman, insisted that "the plays of Shakespeare were written by a man plainly Catholic in habit of mind".⁹ G. K. Chesterton stated his own belief in Shakespeare's Catholicism in his book on Chaucer, published in 1932: "That Shakespeare was a Catholic is a thing that every Catholic feels by every sort of convergent common sense to be true."¹⁰ Years earlier, in 1907, Chesterton had compared the chasm that separated Shakespeare the Catholic from Milton the Protestant:

Nearly all Englishmen are either Shakespearians or Miltonians. I do not mean that they admire one more than the other; because everyone in his senses must admire both of them infinitely. I mean that each represents something in the make-up of England; and that the two things are so antagonistic that it is really impossible not to be secretly on one side or the other. . . . Shakespeare represents the Catholic, Milton the Protestant. . . . Whenever Milton speaks of religion, it is Milton's religion: the religion that Milton has made. Whenever Shakespeare speaks of religion (which is only seldom), it is of a religion that has made him.¹¹

Not surprisingly perhaps, Chesterton was asked to clarify the rationale behind his assertion of Shakespeare's Catholicism:

A correspondent has written to me asking me what I meant by saying that Shakespeare was a Catholic and Milton a Protestant. That Milton was a Protestant, I suppose, he will not dispute. . . . But the point about the religion of Shakespeare is certainly less obvious, though I think not less true. . . . These impressions are hard to explain. . . . But here, at least, is one way of putting the difference between the religions of Shakespeare and Milton. Milton is possessed with what is, I suppose, the first and finest idea of Protestantism—the idea of the individual soul actually testing and tasting all the truth there is, and calling that truth which it has not tested or tasted truth of a less valuable and vivid kind. But Shakespeare is possessed through and through with the feeling which is the first and finest idea of Catholicism that truth exists whether we like it or not, and that it is for us to accommodate ourselves to it. . . . But I really do

⁸ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1873); quoted in Peter Milward, *Shakespeare the Papist* (Naples, Fla.: Sapientia Press, 2005), p. x.

⁹ Hilaire Belloc, *Europe and the Faith* (1920); quoted in Velma Richmond, *Shakespeare, Catholicism, and Romance* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 16.

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (1932); republished in *Chesterton: The Collected Works*, vol. 18, p. 333.

¹¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News* (May 18, 1907).

not know how this indescribable matter can be better described than by simply saying this; that Milton's religion was Milton's religion, and that Shakespeare's religion was not Shakespeare's.¹²

Chesterton's comparison of Shakespeare with Milton is intriguing, indicating that, in Chesterton's judgment, the former belonged to the old England of Catholicism whereas the latter belonged to the new England of Protestantism. He is saying that Shakespeare, living during the crucible of religious change, was rooted in the Old Faith, whereas Milton, as a genuine modern, had embraced post-Catholicism, with the implicit relativism of a custom-built or personalized faith, in much the same way as his successors would embrace "post-Christianity", with the explicit relativism of faithless individualism. Milton is the missing-link between the Christian past and the "post-Christian" future; Shakespeare, on the other hand, is a remnant of the Christian past in defiance of the very same emergent and embryonic "post-Christianity". Milton is "early modern" in the sense that he was the herald of much that was to follow; Shakespeare is only "early modern" in the sense that he was responding to, and reacting against, the emergence of the modern "enlightened" mind.

The fact that Shakespeare has much more in common with the mediaeval past than with the postmodern present has been stressed by modern Shakespearian scholars, such as Gene Fendt, who states that the "Renaissance and medieval are arguably closer to each other than, for example, we (post)moderns are to either of them". As such, he continues, "it is more licit to read Shakespeare next to Aquinas than next to Freud, Jung, Lacan, Foucault, et al."¹³ Taken to its logical conclusion this means that all (post)modern readings of Shakespeare are inevitably, and by definition, awry.

Heinrich Mutschmann and Karl Wentersdorf, in their comprehensive study *Shakespeare and Catholicism*, documented the numerous "references to Catholic dogmas, ideas and customs" in Shakespeare's works and concluded that "we are in every respect justified in accepting these as irrefutable testimony of the poet's personal views, views which are quite clearly pro-Catholic."¹⁴ Take, for example, Shakespeare's condemnation of each

¹² Ibid. (June 8, 1907).

¹³ Gene Fendt, *Is Hamlet a Religious Drama? An Essay on a Question in Kierkegaard* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), p. 93. Fendt is referring specifically to notions of "ecstasy" in *Hamlet*, but his conclusions are nonetheless applicable in a much wider sense.

¹⁴ Mutschmann and Wentersdorf, *Shakespeare and Catholicism*, p. 212.

of the seven deadly sins. Pride: "Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye."¹⁵ Envy: "I sin in envying his nobility."¹⁶ Sloth: "Hereditary sloth instructs me."¹⁷ Gluttony: "Let him be damned like the glutton."¹⁸ Avarice or covetousness: "My desire of having is the sin of covetousness."¹⁹ Anger: "It hath pleased the devil of drunkenness to give place to the devil of wrath."²⁰ Lust: "My blood is mingled with the crime of lust."²¹

Shakespeare did not merely condemn each of the seven deadly sins; he ordered them in conformity to the teaching of the Catholic Church, as reflected in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas and as echoed by Dante in his Thomistic masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*. In league with his great mediaeval forebears, Shakespeare condemns the sin of pride, i.e., the sin of Satan and the sin of Adam, as the most grievous of all the sins: "Self-love, which is the most inhibited sin in the canon."²² And he describes lust or "unchastity" as the least grievous: "Of the deadly seven it is the least."²³ Yet even the "least deadly" of the mortal sins is still deadly, a fact that Shakespeare is at pains to illustrate. When, for example, Claudio, in *Measure for Measure*, makes the crucial error of suggesting that unchastity, as the least grievous of the deadly sins, is perhaps not a sin at all, Shakespeare exposes his flawed logic. He does so in the wisdom of the profoundly orthodox words of Claudio's sister, Isabella, uttered in the previous act:

Better it were a brother died at once
Than that a sister, by redeeming him,
Should die for ever.²⁴

The virtuous Isabella knows that actions have eternal consequences and that it would be better for her brother to lose his earthly life than that she should suffer eternal punishment for committing a mortal sin, i.e., a sin that kills the soul and condemns the sinner to "die for ever". She

¹⁵ Sonnet 62.

¹⁶ *Coriolanus*, 1.1.230.

¹⁷ *The Tempest*, 2.1.223.

¹⁸ *2 Henry IV*, 1.2.34.

¹⁹ *Twelfth Night*, 5.1.47.

²⁰ *Othello*, 2.3.296-97.

²¹ *Comedy of Errors*, 2.2.141.

²² *All's Well That Ends Well*, 1.1.144-45.

²³ *Measure for Measure*, 3.1.110.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.4.107.

knows that it would be wrong to “redeem” her brother temporarily, i.e., to save him from the sentence of death with which he is condemned, if, by doing so, she was condemning her own soul to eternal punishment.

Mutschmann and Wentersdorf are very insightful and lucid in their balanced analysis of the invocation of the saints in Shakespeare’s plays:

What traces of the Catholic veneration of saints, condemned in Elizabethan England, are nevertheless to be found in Shakespeare’s works? It would not be wise to attach too much importance to the exclamations such as “by Saint Paul”, “by Saint Anne”, “by’r Lady”, etc., which the poet often puts into the mouths of his characters. The same applies to such expressions as “by the holy rood” or “by the mass”. It must be borne in mind that such and similar asseverations, although Catholic in origin, remained in popular use in England after the schism; it cannot be assumed that they were used in a religious sense, much less that the speakers were aware of their dogmatic significance. And yet it is noticeable that asseverations of this kind are hardly ever used by Protestant writers in their works; where exclamatory phrases are introduced, they are mostly of a neutral character such as “by heaven”, “by God”, or “by the cross”. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that expressions such as “by’r Lady” and “by the mass”, which occur in the old Quartos, i.e., the editions nearest to Shakespeare’s manuscript, were almost entirely expunged in the First Folio edition, which quite clearly demonstrates that they were regarded as “offensive” or even unlawful.²⁵

Mutschmann and Wentersdorf also stress “the highly significant fact that Shakespeare . . . reveals a very exact and detailed knowledge of Catholicism”, and they quote Father Sebastian Bowden’s conclusion that the repeated allusions to Catholic rites and practices “are introduced with a delicacy and fitness possible only for a mind habituated to the Church’s tone of thought”.²⁶ The accuracy of Shakespeare’s depiction of Catholic practices contrasts with the proliferation of errors that emerge in the plays of his contemporaries, such as in the anonymously authored *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (printed in 1591) or in John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612). This woefully inaccurate depiction of Catholicism by non-Catholic writers has continued to plague literature down the centuries, from Schiller’s *Maria Stuart* (1800) and Mary Shelley’s

²⁵ Mutschmann and Wentersdorf, *Shakespeare and Catholicism*, p. 252.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

Frankenstein (1818) to Dan Brown's inanelly ubiquitous *Da Vinci Code*. In contrast, Shakespeare's depictions of, and allusions to, Catholicism are invariably accurate, proving his experience and knowledge of the Catholic Faith. Such textual evidence would suffice to illustrate that Shakespeare had been a practicing Catholic at some stage in his life, if not necessarily that he had always remained one. As we shall see in the following chapters, there is an abundance of solid historical evidence to prove, beyond all reasonable doubt, that Shakespeare was raised a Catholic and that he probably remained a Catholic throughout his life.

Perhaps at this juncture, however, it might be prudent to consider, albeit briefly, those who claim that Shakespeare was not really Shakespeare but that he was really someone else. Nobody denies that the real William Shakespeare existed, but many have claimed that the plays ascribed to him are not really his. These "anti-Stratfordians" have erected fabulously imaginative theories to prove that someone other than Shakespeare wrote the plays. Some have claimed that Francis Bacon was the real author of the plays, others that they were written by the Earl of Oxford, and some even believe that Queen Elizabeth was William Shakespeare! It is difficult to take any of these rival claims very seriously. Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, died in 1604, a year after the death of Queen Elizabeth, and about eight years before the last of Shakespeare's plays was written and performed! Needless to say, the Oxfordians, as they are known, have gone to great lengths, stretching the bounds of credulity to the very limit (and beyond), to explain why the plays were not performed until after their "Shakespeare's" death.

The claims of the Oxfordians might be bizarre, but they are positively pedestrian compared to some of the wackier "Shakespeare" theorists. Other aristocrats who are alleged by some to have been the real Shakespeare include King James I, and the Earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Southampton. Others have claimed that Mr. Shakespeare was really Mrs. Shakespeare, in the sense that the plays were really written by Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, using her husband's name as a *nom de plume*.

The difficulties that the Oxfordians face in trying to explain (or explain away) why many of Shakespeare's finest plays were not performed until after the Earl of Oxford's death are as nothing compared to the difficulties faced by another group of "Shakespeare" theorists. The "Marlovians", as the members of this particular anti-Stratfordian sect are known, are convinced that all of Shakespeare's plays were really written by

Shakespeare's contemporary Christopher Marlowe. The fact that Marlowe was murdered in 1593, when most of Shakespeare's plays had still not been written, does not trouble the ingenious Marlovians. They claim that Marlowe's "murder" was a sham, and that Marlowe had been spirited away to France and Italy by his powerful patron Thomas Walsingham, returning secretly to England where, in hiding, he wrote plays under the pseudonym "William Shakespeare". Faced with such ludicrous conspiracy theories one is reminded of present-day theories about the allegedly staged death of Elvis Presley, as exemplified in the reports in the lower-brow tabloids of Elvis sightings alongside the sightings of UFOs. Yet even the resurrection of the dead, whether it be Marlowe, the Earl of Oxford, or Elvis, seems uncontroversial beside the claims of another bizarre anti-Stratfordian theory that the plays were written by Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. Since Defoe was not born until 1660, almost half a century after the last of Shakespeare's plays had been performed, it seems that we are dealing not only with the raising of the dead but with the raising of the unborn!

It would, of course, be a little unfair to suggest that the relatively sober scholarship of the Baconians or the Oxfordians is as ridiculous as the evident lack of scholarship of those who favor Daniel Defoe as the real Shakespeare. Ultimately, however, all the rival theories can be disproved through the application of solid historical evidence, combined with common sense. Take, for example, the central premise of the Oxfordian or Baconian case that the plays must have been written by an aristocrat or, at least, by one with a university education, on the assumption that Shakespeare, as a commoner without a university education, must have been illiterate, or, at any rate, incapable of writing literature of such sublime quality.

Let's look at the facts.²⁷ Shakespeare's father was not poor but, on the contrary, was relatively wealthy. He was, furthermore, a highly respected and influential member of the Stratford-upon-Avon community. With regard to Shakespeare's education, the historian Michael Wood has shown that the sort of education that Shakespeare would have received at the Stratford Grammar School would have been of exceptionally good quality. On the other hand, the plays and sonnets do not display the great knowledge of classical languages that one might have expected if

²⁷ Full details of the sources for the assertions made in this brief summary are given in subsequent chapters where these summarized facts are treated more fully.

Shakespeare had been an aristocrat or if, like Bacon, he had been to Oxford or Cambridge. Francis Bacon did much of his writing in Latin, whereas Shakespeare, to quote his good friend Ben Jonson, had "little Latin and less Greek" and wrote entirely in the vernacular. The evidence illustrates, therefore, that William Shakespeare would have had a good education but that he might not have been as comfortable with classical languages as he would have been had he been to Oxford or Cambridge. This excellent but non-classical education is reflected in the content of his plays. It should also be noted that Francis Bacon was vehemently anti-Catholic. His mother was a zealous Calvinist and his father an outspoken enemy of the Catholic Church. Such an upbringing would have precluded him from being able to write the profoundly Catholic plays attributed to Shakespeare.

As for the presumption of the Oxfordians and Baconians that Shakespeare's "humble origins" would have precluded him from being able to write the plays, one need only remind these proponents of supercilious elitism that great literature is not the preserve of the rich or the privileged. Christopher Marlowe was a shoemaker's son, and Ben Jonson's stepfather was a bricklayer. Poverty prevented Jonson from pursuing a university education. Since Marlowe and Jonson, along with Shakespeare, are the most important dramatists of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, it is clear that having humble origins did not disqualify a writer from producing great literature; on the contrary, it could be argued from the evidence that such origins were an important ingredient of literary greatness in Shakespeare's day. Furthermore, the importance of humble origins to the pursuit of literary greatness is not confined to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Later generations have also produced an abundance of "humble" greats. Daniel Defoe was the son of a butcher, and Samuel Johnson, arguably the greatest wit and literary figure of the eighteenth century, was also born of poor parents. Poverty would force Johnson to abandon his university education. Charles Dickens, the greatest novelist of the Victorian era, experienced grinding poverty as a child and, when his father was sent to prison for debt, the ten-year-old Dickens was forced to work in a factory. Moving into the twentieth century, G. K. Chesterton, the "Dr. Johnson of his age", was born of middle-class parents and never received a university education. And these are but some of the brightest lights in the humble firmament of literary greatness. Many others could be added to the illustrious list. Perhaps the most applicable parallel to Shakespeare's situation is, however, the appropriately

named Alexander Pope, the son of a draper, who was denied a formal education because his parents were Catholic. Pope's humble origins helped him become perhaps the finest poet of the eighteenth century.

So much for the weakness of the Oxfordian argument about Shakespeare's "humble origins". The other argument often employed by the Oxfordians is that Shakespeare was too young to have written the sonnets and the early plays. Shakespeare was only in his midtwenties when the earliest of the plays was written and was in his late twenties when he wrote the sonnets. There is no way that such a young man could have written such work, whereas the Earl of Oxford, being born in 1550 and therefore fourteen years Shakespeare's senior, would have been sufficiently mature to have written these masterpieces. So the argument runs. Whether the Earl of Oxford, a most violent and volatile individual, was ever "sufficiently mature" to have written the works of Shakespeare is itself highly questionable. Nonetheless, let's look at the crux of the matter, namely, whether a young man is able to write great literature.

Christopher Marlowe, who was born in the same year as Shakespeare, wrote the first of his produced plays in around 1587, when he was only twenty-three, two or three years younger than Shakespeare is thought to have been when the first of his plays was produced. The first of Marlowe's plays, *Tamburlaine the Great*, is generally considered to be the first of the great Elizabethan tragedies. Since Marlowe was murdered when he was still in his late twenties, the whole of his considerable literary legacy rests on his formidably young shoulders. Ben Jonson's first play, *Every Man in his Humour*, was performed in 1598, with Shakespeare in the cast, when Jonson was only twenty-six years old. Thomas Dekker published the first of his comedies in 1600, when he is thought to have been around thirty years old. Thomas Middleton's first printed plays were published in 1602, when the playwright was about thirty-two, but they were probably first performed a year or two earlier. John Webster published his first plays in 1607, when he was twenty-seven years old, but is known to have made additions to John Marston's *The Malcontent* three years earlier. As for Marston himself he wrote all his plays between 1602 and 1607, between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-one. Looking at his contemporaries, Shakespeare was at exactly the age one would expect him to be when he first started writing plays. The Earl of Oxford, on the other hand, would have been around forty when the first of the plays was performed, making him a positive geriatric by comparison.

So much for the youthfulness of Shakespeare the playwright, but what about the Oxfordian argument that he would have been too young to write the sonnets? Again, let's begin with Shakespeare's contemporaries. Michael Drayton published his first volume of poetry, *The Harmony of the Church*, in 1591, when he was twenty-eight years old, exactly the same age as Shakespeare is thought to have been when he wrote the sonnets. Many of John Donne's finest sonnets were written in the early 1600s when the poet was in his late twenties or early thirties. Many other great Elizabethan poets died at a young age, having already bequeathed a considerable body of work to posterity. Sir Philip Sidney was thirty-two when he died; Robert Southwell was thirty-three; Marlowe, as already noted, was twenty-nine; and Thomas Nashe was thirty-four.

Moving forward in time to the eighteenth century it is worth noting that Samuel Johnson was twenty-eight when he finished his play *Irene* and was only a year older when his poem *London* was published, the latter of which, according to Boswell, was greeted with adulation and the judgment of his contemporaries that "here is an unknown poet, greater even than Pope".²⁸ And as for Pope, he published his first poems at the tender age of twenty-one.

Should these examples fail to convince us that the art of the sonnet is not beyond the reach of the young, we need look no further than the example of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. Byron had reached the ripe old age of thirty-six when he died, Shelley was thirty, and Keats a mere twenty-six years old. As for the precocious talent of the youngest of this youthful trio, Keats is said to have written some of his finest sonnets in as little as fifteen minutes! And Keats never even lived to the age at which Shakespeare is thought to have written his own sonnets.

Before we leave the anti-Stratfordians behind, we should at least address the few remaining remnants of their arguments against "the Stratford man". The fact that Shakespeare's signature is described as being shaky or untidy is used as evidence of his "illiteracy". Although some Oxfordians admit grudgingly that most of the surviving signatures date from the period of Shakespeare's retirement when the infirmity that would eventually lead to his relatively early death might account for the infirmity of the signature, there is still the implicit suggestion that the untidy signature is evidence that Shakespeare could not have written the plays.

²⁸James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: Macmillan, 1912), p. 83.

Perhaps it is necessary to remind these "scholars" that there is absolutely no connection between calligraphy and literature, or that beautiful writing and beautiful handwriting do not necessarily go hand in hand. Many of the greatest writers had bad handwriting, and, no doubt, many of the greatest calligraphers were incapable of putting two literary sentences together. The temptation to produce a further list of great writers, this time itemizing those who had illegible handwriting, will be resisted. Let it suffice to say that any scholar who has pored over the mercilessly illegible handwriting of great writers will know that there is absolutely no connection between legibility and literacy.

In similar vein, anti-Stratfordians point a scornful finger at the lack of literary flourish in Shakespeare's will or the questionable literary merit of the poetic epitaph on his grave. Why, one wonders, should Shakespeare feel inspired to turn his will into a work of literary art? Why, one wonders, should he bother to write his will at all? Why shouldn't he get his lawyer to do it? And why, one wonders, would Shakespeare be the least concerned with writing verse for his own gravestone? How common is it for self-penned epitaphs to adorn the tombs of the dead? Isn't it far more likely that someone else wrote the lines? At any rate, these pieces of "evidence" hardly warrant any serious doubt as to the authorship of the plays.

In the final analysis, there is no convincing argument against Shakespeare's authorship of the plays and, in consequence, no convincing evidence that someone else wrote them. If the very foundations upon which the anti-Stratfordian edifice is built are shown to be fallacious, the rest of the ingenious, if far-fetched, historical arguments for other "Shakespeares" fall to the ground ignominiously. After the dust has settled on the fallen edifices of false scholarship, what is left standing among the ruins? There is no Earl of Oxford, no Francis Bacon, no Queen Elizabeth nor King James, no Christopher Marlowe, no Daniel Defoe, no Elvis. We are left with the reliable, if mundane, reality that William Shakespeare was, in fact, William Shakespeare. We are also left with the equally reliable, if paradoxical, observation of G.K. Chesterton that "Shakespeare is quite himself; it is only some of his critics who have discovered that he was somebody else."²⁹

²⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1939), p. 15.