

Peter Razzell: Shakespeare's Biography: A Conundrum Resolved.

Shakespeare's early life has remained something of a conundrum despite extensive research into his background. His writing is universally recognized as the outstanding contribution to the history of literature, yet he was the son of a provincial artisan of limited literacy. His father John Shakespeare was a Stratford glover and unable to provide his son with a full education. This has led to the description of Shakespeare as 'the Stratford boor'¹, accounting for why many scholars are unable to accept that he was the author of his plays. His work has been attributed to an extensive range of people of high social and elite status, including among others, Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, and Christopher Marlow.² More recently Lena Cowen has suggested that 'we must picture Shakespeare participating in the intellectual culture of Oxford ... Shakespeare is nearly certain to have taken in lectures and sermons in college chapels.'³ Again, this is pure speculation without any convincing evidence to support it.

The problem is that scholars are unable to accept that the son of a provincial artisan with limited education could have been the author of the plays, and most have invented classical sources to address this conundrum. But as Ben Jonson argued, Shakespeare 'had little Latin and less Greek', and did not adhere to classical rules in writing his plays. However, he showed a unique understanding of vernacular language in creating both his comedies and tragedies.

There is also the conundrum of where Shakespeare went after he fathered three children in Stratford before appearing in London, which has been designated as the "lost years". Some have speculated that he spent this period on the continent of Europe or other places enabling him to acquire the sophisticated culture necessary for the writing of the plays.⁴ None of these ideas have any credible evidence to support them but there is evidence in plain sight to resolve these difficulties.

According to Nicholas Rowe, Shakespeare worked for his father after he left school at an early age: 'Upon his leaving School, he seems to have given intirely into the way of Living which his Father propos'd to him ... tho' he was his eldest Son, he could give him no better Education than his own Employment ...'⁵ What other biographers have not realized is that John Shakespeare was not just a glover but was a private trader involving participation in a highly sophisticated and metropolitan community.

Four legal cases involving John Shakespeare came to light in the Exchequer court, chronicled by D.L. Thomas and N.E. Evans in their article 'John Shakespeare in the Exchequer'. They reveal that the Stratford glover was engaged in subsidiary wool dealings and money-lending transactions, which indicated that John Shakespeare was a dealer in wool on a large scale.⁶ An informer revealed that in 1572 John "Shaxspere" of "Stretford super Haven" and John Lockesley of the same place had illegally bought 200 tods (i.e. 5,600 pounds) of wool, and later that year John Shakespeare was accused of buying 100 tods of wool.⁷

¹ S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 1992, p. viii.

² *Ibid*, pp. 385-451.

³ L. C. Orlin, *The Private Life of William Shakespeare*, 2021, p. 248.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 441.

⁵ C. Nicholl (ed), *Nicholas Rowe the Life of Shakespeare*, 2009, pp. 26, 28.

⁶ D.L. Thomas and N.E. Evans, 'John Shakespeare in the Exchequer', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35 (1984), pp. 315-18; P. E. Razzell, *William Shakespeare: The Anatomy of an Enigma*, 1990, pp.17-18.

⁷ Thomas and Evans, 'John Shakespeare'; Razzell, *William Shakespeare*, p. 17, 18.

At an earlier date on the 4th November 1568 John Shakespeare alleged that he had sold John Walford twenty-one tods of wool at Stratford, and that £21 owing in cash had never been paid.⁸ Nicholas Rowe's described John Shakespeare as a "considerable dealer in wool", and it is likely that John Shakespeare traded wool on other occasions, which did not result in prosecutions.⁹

John Shakespeare was prosecuted for illegal money lending, and this probably occurred elsewhere. He also traded in a variety of other products: according to Lee, 'he soon set up as a trader in all manner of agricultural produce. Corn, wool, malt, meat, skins, and leather were among the commodities in which he dealt.'¹⁰ He had dealings with people living in London, Worcestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Coventry, Nottingham and Stoke in Staffordshire.¹¹

In a court case against the Lambert family in 1587 and 1588, John Shakespeare claimed for a missing twenty pounds he had 'totally lost and failed to acquire the whole gain, advantage and profit which he by buying and bargaining with the aforesaid twenty pounds have had and acquired, to the loss of thirty pounds.'¹² This is the credo – 'buying and bargaining' – of the middleman, a group whose activities Everitt has designated as, 'the free trading between individuals', defined as the 'type of bargaining which was mostly "free", or emancipated from official control: to dealing between individual traders and manufacturers in private.'¹³

Private trading was ubiquitous in Stratford in the late sixteenth century.¹⁴ Everitt has shown that this type of trading grew rapidly in the sixteenth century, particularly after about 1570. He studied it through the records of disputes between traders in the Court of Chancery and Requests, which provide a detailed picture of John Shakespeare's economic and cultural world.

All transactions were conducted on a credit basis, for which legal bonds were drawn up by a lawyer or scrivener.¹⁵ According to Everitt, because of the absence of banks, traders necessarily had to rely on their credit in the local community, and this often 'operated through a network of neighbours, friends, and relatives. Sons, fathers, brothers, cousins, wives, uncles, mothers, brother-in-law: all were drawn into the circle.'¹⁶

Everitt has described the culture which grew up amongst individual traders:

In consequence of this network of kinship and acquaintance, the packmen, carriers, woolmen, and factors who engaged in the private agricultural market were not simply unconnected individuals ... Much of the dealing in which travelling merchants engaged took place in farmhouses. Some took place in barns, and some in warehouses and corn-chambers. Perhaps the most characteristic meeting place of

⁸ Razzell, *William Shakespeare*, p. 19.

⁹ There is some evidence that Shakespeare was familiar with wool dealing. In the *Winter's Tale*, the CLOWN makes the following speech: 'Let me see, Every 'leven wether tods, every tod, yields pound and odd shilling. Fifteen hundred shorn, what comes the wool to? ... I cannot do't without counters. Let me see, what am I to buy for our sheep-shearing feast?' *Act 4.3*.

¹⁰ S. Lee, *Life of Shakespeare*, 1898, C.U.P. Edition 2012, p. 4.

¹¹ Razzell, *William Shakespeare*, p. 20.

¹² B. Rowland Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, Volume 1, 1940, p. 139.

¹³ J. Chartres (ed), *Agricultural Markets and Trade, 1500-1750: Chapters from the Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 1990, p. 92.

¹⁴ For example, 120 of the leading townsmen in Stratford – including Shakespeare – illegally hoarded grain in 1598. Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, p. 284.

¹⁵ Chartres, *Agricultural Markets*, p. 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 106.

the wayfaring community, however, was the provincial inn. The Elizabethan inn has no exact counterpart in the modern world. It was the hotel, the bank, the warehouse, the exchange, the scrivener's office, and the marketplace of many of a trader.¹⁷

Everitt has elaborated on the role of the innkeeper in trading activities:

The Tudor and Stuart innkeeper was thus in a powerful position to influence the course of private trading. Many a publican provided cellars or outbuildings for the storage of his client's goods. Some converted their halls or parlours into private auction rooms ... Agreement between prospective dealers was rarely reached without a lengthy series of "speeches" and "communications", and the company often sat far into the night before the transaction was concluded. Sometimes an unscrupulous innkeeper would allow some hapless yeoman (well plied with ale) to be "cozened of his money" by the "glozing terms ... smooth words, and fair speeches" of the other party concerned ... When the bargain was agreed, the local scrivener (sometimes himself one of the guests) was called upon to draw up one of the bonds, and the deed was read out to the assembled company ... not infrequently one of the signatories later confessed himself unable to read it ...¹⁸

The problem arose because of the poor educational system. 'Many marketing disputes arose through the illiteracy of one or other of the parties concerned.'¹⁹ Many of the traders were helped by assistants, who 'undertook the writings of his order books, notes, and letters ...'²⁰ Because of the writing involved in trading transactions, the aid of his son William would have been invaluable to the semi-literate John Shakespeare. As Lena Orlin has argued

For property transactions, wholesale operations, and other aspirational ventures, records and documents were vital. At Stratford's grammar school, William Shakespeare developed skills that were useful to an upwardly mobile family. By the time he was 10, he may have thought of himself as his father's partner.²¹

As Everitt has concluded, 'with the growth of private dealing some grounding in writing and accounting was imperative.'²²

There is some independent evidence to support Rowe's statement about Shakespeare working with his father, and it involves the dispute about the purchase of land in Wilmcote that John Shakespeare had with his brother-in-law Edmund Lambert and his son John.²³ The following is an extract from the court proceedings relevant to the evidence of William Shakespeare's part and status in the dispute.

On the first day of March [1587] ... he [Edmund Lambert] died ... after whose death ... [the land] descended to the aforesaid John Lambert, as son and heir of the said Edmund ... the said John Shakespeare his wife Mary together with William Shakespeare their son, when claim had been made upon them, covenanted the said [land] ... to said John Lambert and ... delivered all writings and proofs concerning the said premises ... besides that, he, the same John Shakespeare, and Mary his wife, at the same time with William Shakespeare their son, have always been ready hitherto not only for

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 107, 108.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 110.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 115.

²⁰ Ibid, P. 104.

²¹ L. Orlin, *The Private Life*, p. 46.

²² Chartres, *Agricultural Markets*, p. 116.

²³ The dispute is highly complex, and it is discussed in detail in my book on Shakespeare. See 'The Shakespeare/Lambert dispute' in Razzell, *William Shakespeare*, pp. 35-45.

covenanting the aforesaid premises but also for delivering to the same John Lambert all writings and proofs concerning the same ...²⁴

This is evidence that Shakespeare was still working with his father in 1588, helping his father who lacked full literacy. His role appears to have been mainly helping with the delivery and working on written records, invaluable assistance to his father at this time. John Shakespeare was not attempting to reclaim the land but was trying to extract extra money from John Lambert who had only recently inherited the property.²⁵ In effect, he was trying to cheat John Lambert out of £20, at a time when John Shakespeare appears to have been poverty stricken and looking for extra sources of income.²⁶

Having his son helping with writing would have been invaluable to John Shakespeare. As Schoenbaum has written: 'From all the documentary evidence, John Shakespeare was not fully literate. Invariably the documents ... [he] signed either with his mark or with a pictogram ... The fully literate – even those who had become infirm or senile – tended to make a simple scrawl for their signatures rather than crosses.'²⁷ There is evidence that William Shakespeare was familiar with legal terminology. Fripp argued that he showed 'extraordinary knowledge, and large accurate usage, in his writings from the beginning, of legal terminology and procedure.'²⁸ The suggestion made by Malone – who was a barrister – that the dramatist spent some years as a lawyer's clerk, was also supported by other lawyers.²⁹ It is probable that Shakespeare acquired his legal knowledge working for his father in drafting legal documents in trading transactions.

Also, it makes it much more comprehensible as to how Shakespeare acquired the linguistic and cultural knowledge to write plays of such universal and general appeal. It has always puzzled historians how he acquired the knowledge to write such plays. His participation in meetings in inns in London and elsewhere on trading expeditions, with a 'lengthy series of "speeches" and "communications" far into the night, and "smooth words, and fair speeches" ', helps to resolve this conundrum. Everitt makes it clear that these traders were highly cosmopolitan: 'the wayfaring community developed an ethos of its own dissimilar to that of the settled society of town and village. Its spirit of speculation and adventure ran counter to the stable traditions of the English peasantry.'³⁰ This culture provided Shakespeare with both the knowledge and background necessary for his theatrical and business career.

There is also evidence that Shakespeare may have encountered theatre companies directly during his working life with his father. Michael Wood has documented a case where wool-dealing and a theatrical production coincided in 1587:

In mid-June 1587 ... the Queen's Men were on tour in Oxfordshire, rolling their wagon of props and costumes into the wool town of Thame ... at the time of the sheep clip in June the place was full of

²⁴ Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, pp. 138, 139.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ In 1578 John Shakespeare was allowed by Stratford Corporation to pay a reduced contribution for the maintenance of the local militia. Additionally in the same year, he was exempted from contributing towards the weekly maintenance of the poor. See Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, pp. 65-67. For his 'years of adversity' see F.E. Halliday, *A Shakespeare Companion*, 1964, pp. 441-442. This period of poverty culminated in 1592 when he avoided church because of a 'feare of process for debte'. This period of poverty partly explains Shakespeare's involvement in a poaching incident which probably occurred in about 1588 and may have been responsible for him leaving Stratford.

²⁷ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 2006, p. 292.

²⁸ E. Fripp, *Shakespeare: Man and Artist*, Volume 1, page 138.

²⁹ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, p. 332.

³⁰ Chartres, *Agricultural Markets*, p. 111.

wool buyers and others; it was a good time to play, and it was visited by many travelling companies ... There were inns for travellers at the east end ... Here the Queen's Men played on 13 June ... in the yard of an inn called the White Hand.'³¹

It is likely that Shakespeare encountered the Queen's Men in different inns as he and his father travelled the country on wool buying expeditions. Inns were widely used for theatrical productions during this period,³² and it was during sheep shearing in June and other times that travelling players gravitated to these locations to maximise revenue. As Keenan has written

Inns were important as staging places 'for the multitude of carriers'; growing numbers of merchants and traders held meetings and made bargains at inns ... To play at inns was to perform in one of the spaces at 'the heart of the social world' of most early modern English communities ... At the same time, local and visiting inn customers provided a ready and potentially generous audience, most inn customers being drawn 'from the landed, mercantile and professional classes.'³³

In his letter to Edward Alleyn dated 28 September 1593, the theatre impresario Philip Henslowe recorded that the Earl of Pembroke's Men had not made sufficient money on the road and had been forced to sell their costumes and theatrical gear to cover their debts ...³⁴ This explains why theatrical companies were so keen to locate their travelling productions during sheep fairs and times of wool shearing, such as that at Thame. Shakespeare probably encountered The Queen's Men in inns and other venues, which might explain why four of the company's plays were forerunners to Shakespeare's later writing. According to Pauline Montague, these plays were '*The Troublesome Regn of King John, The True Tragedy of Richard III, The Famous Victories of Henery V, The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan and Cordelia.*' She concluded that 'these plays ... are actually among the repertoire of the Queen's Men and Shakespeare's own plays show such an intimate knowledge of these and other of their repertoire, in some cases even before they were published, that several biographers believe that Shakespeare may have been a member of the Queen's Men early in his career.'³⁵

The above arguments are consistent with known evidence and explain how during the so-called 'lost years', Shakespeare was equipped by his experience for both his future writing and his career as an astute businessman. It provides a hypothesis which will enable future research to focus on the background that provided him with the knowledge and vernacular culture for his work as a playwright.

³¹ Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, 2005, p. 112. See also p. 143 for a picture of such a provincial inn.

³² Siobhan Keenan, *Provincial Playing Places and Performances in Early Modern England*, D.Phil., University of Warwick, 1999, p. 434. Inns continued to be used in provincial areas for the staging of Shakespeare's plays well into the nineteenth century. See for example 'Snape's Theatre White Lion Inn, Sheep Fair, Rugeley', Advertising Playbill 1847, The British Library, *Online*.

³³ Oliver Jones, *The Queen's Men on Tour: Provincial Performance in Vernacular Spaces In Early Modern England* PhD, University of York, 2012, pp. 43, 56.

³⁴ Pauline Montagna, 'William Shakespeare and The Queen's Men', *Shakespeare and His World/The Elizabeth Theatre*, 2022, *Online*.