

**Some Further Account of the Life &c. of
Mr. William Shakespear, with Corrections Made to the First and
Second Editions, and with the Supplementation of New Matter
Acquir'd from Diligent Researches in the Publick Records, and
from Conversations Mr. Betterton had with the people of
Stratford-upon-Avon (1715)**

Edited by Graham Holderness¹

IT seems to be a kind of Respect due to the Memory of Excellent Men, especially of those whom their Wit and Learning have made Famous, to deliver some Account of themselves, as well as their Works, to Posterity. For this Reason, how fond do we see some People of discovering any little Personal Story of the great Men of Antiquity, their Families, the common Accidents of their Lives, and even their Shape, Make and Features have been the Subject of critical Enquiries. How trifling soever this Curiosity may seem to be, it is certainly very Natural; and we are hardly satisfy'd with an Account of any remarkable Person, 'till we have heard him describ'd even to the very Cloaths he wears. As for what relates to Men of Letters, the knowledge of an Author may sometimes conduce to the better understanding his Book.

He was the Son of Mr. *John Shakespear*, and was Born at *Stratford upon Avon*, in *Warwickshire*, in *April* 1564. His Family were of good Figure and Fashion there, and are mention'd as Gentlemen. By his own father's Estate, *John Shakespear* was a husbandman, but the son

being possess'd of that Resourcefulness that can make a Marchaunt of a Farmer, grew to be a substantial Dealer and Tradesman of the town. Husbandry being his originall Calling, John dealt in the Carkasses of beasts, and was by the Record of one who knew the Town and its inhabitants well, a Butcher. Finding that the Cloathing of sheep and cattle afforded more Profitable and respectable Employment than the butchering of their Edible parts, he became a *whyttawer*, a species of Tanner, engaged in the Whitening and Softening of Leather, the better to adapt its substance to the Manufacture of Shoes, Belts, Purses, Satchels, Sword-hangers and Gloves, and a considerable Dealer in Wool. In this noisome and noxious Trade, the poet's Father found his Craft and refined his Art, for from the Leather cured and prepar'd in his Workshop, he fell to fashioning Fine Gloves, and soon began to prosper at the Trade. It is without Controversie that Mr. *Shakespear* is recorded and remembered as a Glover of *Stratford*. His name is subscribed as Glover in the Register and Publick Writings relating to that Town, and Archdeacon *Plume* of *Rochester* had it of *Sir John Mennis*² that he well remembered *Mr. Shakespear* in his glover's shop, a merry-cheeked old Man who spoke well tho' boldly of his Celebrated son. My Will, he said, is an Honest fellow, with a place at Court, but never too Lofty to crack a Jest with his old Dad.

John Shakespear's dwelling-place in *Stratford* was long known as the Woolshop, tho' 'tis now partly an Inn, and partly a Butcher's shop in which is continued *John Shakespear's* native trade. This same inn lies under the Sign of the Swan and Maidenhead, which Emblem

remembers both our Illustrious poet, and his more Glorious patroness the Queene, of whom more Herafter. A gentleman of my Acquaintance had it from the Landlord that beneath the Boards of the parlour Floor, when rais'd, were found the Remnants of Wool, and the Refuse of Wool-combing embedded with the Earth. I am told of a record in the Court of Common Pleas that has Mr. *Shakespear* suing one *John Walford*, a clothier, for negligence in payment of £21 for 21 tods of Wool, tho' I know not if't be true. True it is that in another Court *John Shakespeare* brought Action against *Henry Field* a tanner for the price of some Barley. The Difference they must have Mended, for *Shakespeare* was an Executor to *Field's* will.³ This *Field* was father to *Richard*, who was Prentic'd to a London stationer, and afterwards a Printer, and who succeeded on his Master's death to both his Wife, a comely French woman, and his Business. 'Twas from *Richard's* press came our poet's *Venus and Adonis*, in which Poem there is also some little Difference of Years between the Lady and her young Man. These two School-fellows of Stratford worked each in his father's Trade, and many are of the opinion that the sons of Tanners and Butchers have so little access to Learning, that 'tis a wonder any one of them should do Well. Yet *Field* was preferr'd to a London Printer, and *Shakespeare* was advanced to the foremost Theatre of the City. It is my Conjecture that both their Fathers were wont to Supply, of their Workshops, to the London Stationers and Printers, fine Parchments and Vellums made from the skins of their Sheep, Goats and Calves. And this, tho' I own 'tis but my Belief, is how these

country boys wrote their Names in History, by first writing them on Parchments made in their fathers' Shops. 'Is not parchment', asks Hamlet, 'made of sheep-skins?' Horatio replies, 'Ay, my Lord. And calf-skins too'. That Speech of High style made by *Shakespear* in the killing of a Calf, as mentioned below, he may have committed to Writing on vellum made from the same Creature's skin. Certain it is that his Plays abound with knowledge of these Crafts: of Hides, of Calf-skins, Sheep-skins, Lamb-skins, Fox-skins; of Dog-skins, Deer-skins and Cheveril; of Neat's-leather shoes, and Sheeps'-leather bridles; of Horse-hair and Calves' guts, Aprons, Bottles and Jerkins of leather, Greasy fells and White fleeces.

Though a substantial Marchaunt and Burgess of the town, John *Shakespear* had so large a Family, not ten (as I wrote in my first edition, as I had the number from Mr. *Betterton*, who has since read the record with a closer scrutiny), but eight, that tho' *William* was his eldest Son, he could give him no better Education than his own Employment. He had bred him, 'tis true, for some time at a Free-School, where 'tis probable he acquir'd that little *Latin* he was Master of: But the narrowness of his Circumstances, and the want of his assistance at Home, forc'd his Father to withdraw him from thence, and unhappily prevented his further Proficiency in that Language. It is certain that the Neighbours of Stratford heretofore told unto Mr. *Aubrey* that Shakespeare, as a boy, Practising his father's trade of Butchery, when he killed a Calf, would do it in a *high style*, and make a Speech. Whence he had these Speeches, I know not, for it is without

Controversie that he had no knowledge of the Writings of the Antient Poets, as in his Works themselves we find no traces of any thing that looks like an Imitation of 'em. Some *Latin* without question he did know, and may have Employed some snatches of Cicero or Caesar, remembered out of his Grammar, in his Calf-killing. Or some fine words out of his Bible may have served as Fitting accompaniment to the Slaughtering, as the words used by Abraham and Aaron, when they served so a Ram, or a fatted Calf. Certain it is that no Regularity and Deference for the ancients restrain'd that Fire, Impetuosity, and even beautiful Extravagance which we admire in *Shakespear*, and which in my Opinion furnished him with ample Eloquence with which to Beautify the Slaughterhouse, and to make a Theatre of a Shambles. See how Piteously he recalls, in his *Second Part of Henry the Sixt*, the Cruelty of the Abbatoir:

And as the butcher takes away the calf,

And binds the wretch, and beats it when it strays, ...

And as the dam runs lowing up and down,

Looking the way her harmless young ones went,

And can do naught but wail her darling's loss ...

Upon his leaving School, he seems to have given intirely into that way of Living which his Father propos'd to him; and in order to settle in the World after a Family manner, he thought fit to marry while he

was yet very Young. His Wife was the Daughter of one *Hathaway*, said to have been a substantial Yeoman in the Neighbourhood of *Stratford*. In this kind of Settlement he continu'd for some time, 'till an Extravagance that he was guilty of, forc'd him both out of his Country and that way of Living which he had taken up. He made a frequent practice of Deer-stealing, robbing a Park that belong'd to *Sir Thomas Lucy* of *Cherlecot*, near *Stratford*. There be some have Question'd this story, as the account of a Misdemeanour alien to the Character of our gentle Poet. But at that time *Sir Thomas* had no Royal licence to keep a park at *Charlecote*, for 'twas some years after this that his fields were Empaled. The free-warren of his land sheltered many Beasts of the chase, as Rabbits and Hares, Pheasants and Deer, and of these the good people of *Stratford* had for many years made their choice, remembering the Rights of the Free-born Englishman, and taking such prey as suited them from under the Keeper's winking eye. It is certain that the young Shakespeare took his Share, for a jolly old Parson of *Oxford* was heard to say that he was much given to Stealing Venison and Rabbits from *Sir Thomas Lucy's* lands. The Flesh of these beasts gave sustenance to his family, and the Pelts furnish'd his father's workshop with skin enough for many a fine pair of Gloves.

Sir Thomas liked this despoiling of his Land by the people so little that he resolv'd to make Example of one, and had his Keepers lie in wait for Shakespeare, one night when Moonlight whitened the Turf. Our Poet, wandering idly in the Greenwood, and Wounding the barks of trees with his Love-sonnets, was easily Caught, and afterwards

Whipped and held for a time in the County gaol. Angered beyond Measure by the Knight's tyrannical Usage, Shakespeare composed a Bitter Ballad, mocking Sir Thomas as a Covetous Cuckold, who needed not to keep Horns in his Park, since his wife bestowed them so liberally on his Head. This Ballad was writ upon a sheet of Parchment made by *Shakespear* himself from the skin of a stolen Sheep, and stuck upon *Sir Thomas's* Park gate. At this *Sir Thomas* was Angry out of all Compass, and would have prosecuted *Shakespear* even more Severely, and so he was Oblig'd to leave his Business and Family in *Warwickshire*, for some time, and shelter himself in *London*. In due time he took further Revenges, for in *The Merry Wives* of Windsor, he has made Falstaff a Deer-stealer, that he might at the same time remember his *Warwickshire* Prosecutor, under the Name of Justice *Shallow*; he has given him very near the same Coat of Arms which *Dugdale*, in his Antiquities of that County describes for a Family there.⁴

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, as a Servitude, for what was he at this time, for all his Promise, but a Butcher's Prentice run away from his master? When he came to London, he was without Money and Friends, being a Stranger he knew not by what means to support Himself. At that time as Gentlemen were accustomed to ride to the Playhouse, Shakespeare, driven to the last Necessity, went to the Playhouse door, and pick'd up a little Money

by holding the Horses of those who had no Servants, that they might be ready again after the Performance. If this sounds too Menial an occupation for our greatest Man of Letters, then heed the witness of another, who records that *Shakespear* took good Care of the Gentlemen's Horses who came to the Play. Who better to bestow such Care on Animals, than one whose family Depended on 'em, and who from his apprenticeship knew well how to Soothe a fearful Nag, or quiet a restless Jade? Though some speak scornfully of this Tale, and cannot bide the thought of their *Shakespear* splashing in those Manured Precincts, it was no mean Craft that he assumed, there at the Theatre door, and soon became Eminent in that Profession. But his admirable Wit, and the natural Turn of it to the Stage, soon distinguished him, if not as an extraordinary Actor, yet as an excellent Writer. For he knew as well, remarked one clever Fellow, the inside of a beast as he knew the Outside, and could draw you out a sheet of Vellum as handily as he could hold your Horse for the length of a Play. And did not Shakespeare himself speak of 'a wit of cheveril, that stretches from an inch narrow to an ell broad', as if to him the Stretching of Imagination, and the Pulling into shape of fine Leather, were actions Comparable, and not utterly Distinct? Being come of a simple and industrious Kind, neither arrogant nor froward in their Manners, besides the advantages of his Wit, he was in himself a good-natur'd Man, of great sweetness, and a most agreeable Companion; so that it is no wonder if with so many good Qualities he made himself acquainted with the best Conversations of those Times. Queen

Elizabeth had several of his Plays Acted before her, and without doubt gave him many gracious Marks of her Favour. She used frequently to appear upon the Stage before the audience, or to sit delighted behind the Scenes. Once when Shakespeare was personating the part of a King, she crossed the Stage when he was Performing, but he did not Notice it! Accordingly, as he was about to make his Exit, she Stepped before him, dropped her Glove, and re-crossed the Stage, which *Shakespear* noticing, immediately presented the Glove to the Queen. Her Majesty, being perhaps a little Displeas'd that the actor had paid more Attention to his audience than to his Sovereign, or rather loving (as she did) a cruel Jest even more than she loved her Poet-favourite, was heard to say: 'Gramercy, good Master Shakespeare, of the glove. Tell me, *is it one that you made yourself?*' Which shaft of Wit, glancing thus upon his Humble origins, so deeply distressed him that he left the Stage, and never again return'd.⁵

The latter Part of his Life was spent at his native *Stratford*, as all Men of good Sense will wish theirs may be, in Ease, Retirement, and the Conversation of his Friends, the Shopkeepers and Merchants, the Tradesmen and Craftsmen, the Butcher, the Baker, &c. He had the good Fortune to gather an Estate equal to his Occasion, and, in that, to his Wish. His pleasurable Wit, and good Nature, engag'd him in the Acquaintance, and entitled him to the Friendship of the Gentlemen of the Neighbourhood.

He Dy'd in the 53d Year of his Age, and was bury'd on the North side of the Chancel, in the Great Church at Stratford, where a Monument is plac'd in the Wall. How apt a Likeness this is, I know not, though many Condemn it as unworthy its great Subject. One Gentleman, visiting the Church, was heard to say, intending to the Disparagement of the Sculptor, that to his eye it looked not so much like a Poet, as like a self-satisfied Pork Butcher. But how indeed should our *Shakespear* look, this Butcher's boy become the world's greatest Poet, if not, at least a little, like a Butcher? and if not, at least a little, satisfied with himself?

¹ In my opinion this document is a manifest forgery, since it contains material of which Rowe in his first edition shows no knowledge, and incorporates anecdotes not available at the time of its supposed publication . – Ed.

² Sir John had a remarkable memory, as he was two years old when John Shakespeare died. – Ed.

³ Not quite: he helped to appraise Field's goods after his death. – Ed.

⁴ Sir William Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire. Illustrated from Records, Leiger-Books, Manuscripts, Charters, Evidences, Tombes, and Armes. Beautified with maps, prospects, and portraictures* (1656).

⁵ The incorporation of this tradition gives a *terminus a quo* for the forgery, which cannot have been undertaken any earlier than 1825. The story was published in Richard Ryan's *Dramatic Table Talk; or Scenes, Situations & Adventures, Serious & Comic, in Theatrical History & Biography* (London: John Knight & Henry Lacy, 1825) vol 2, pp. 156-7. Ryan's version of

the anecdote ends quite differently, with the Queen ‘greatly pleased with his [Shakespeare’s] behaviour’. – Ed.