

## Preface to the New Edition of *William Shakespeare: the Anatomy of an Enigma*, 2014.

Since the original edition of this book, not a great deal of new biographical information on Shakespeare has become available, except for research by Jayne Archer and colleagues published in 2014. In their book on food and the literary imagination, they discussed Shakespeare's hoarding of grain and his other business activities, summarized as follows:

During a period of dearth... for those with ready cash, it was a time of opportunity. William Shakespeare, a gifted recycler of plots, saw his chance. ... over a 15-year period, Shakespeare purchased food-producing land and stored grain, malt and barley for resale (most likely at inflated prices) to neighbours and local tradesmen. In February 1598 he was prosecuted for holding 80 bushels of malt or corn during a period of shortage – an act similar to the charge levelled against the patricians in *Coriolanus*, who keep 'their storehouses crammed with grain' while allowing the citizens to 'famish'. He pursued those who could not (or would not) pay him in full for these staples and used the profits to further his own money-lending activities ... Combining legal and illegal activities – and grain hoarding during a period of shortage was regarded with particular opprobrium – Shakespeare was able to retire in 1613, at the age of 49, as one of the largest property owners in his own town.<sup>1</sup>

A lecture by Jayne Archer at the *Telegraph Hay Festival* on the 23 May 2013, presented the above findings, which attracted world-wide media attention, much of it of a sensational nature.<sup>2</sup> According to the *Sunday Times*, Dr Archer stated that "there was another side to Shakespeare besides the brilliant playwright – as a ruthless businessman who did all he could to avoid taxes, maximize profits at others' expense and exploit the vulnerable – while writing plays about their plight to entertain them."<sup>3</sup>

While it is true that Shakespeare did hoard grain in 1598 – as discussed later in this book – he did so in the company of virtually all of the wealthy men living in and around Stratford at the time. This included all four local magistrates who were meant to enforce the legislation against the forestalling and hoarding of grain.<sup>4</sup> This activity was commonplace among the wealthy, including Shakespeare's father, who had a long history of money lending and illegal speculation in a range of commodities, including grain and other foodstuffs.

In 1588, John Shakespeare claimed in a legal dispute that by losing 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 acquired to the loss of thirty pounds."<sup>5</sup> He had included his son William in this legal submission, and Shakespeare was probably involved with his father in his trading activities.<sup>6</sup> The historian, Alan Everitt has

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<sup>1</sup> Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Richard Marggraf Turley and Howard Thomas, *Food and the Literary Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 82, 83.

<sup>2</sup> There were for example the following publications: 'Shakespeare was tax-evading food hoarder', *The Telegraph*, 13 March 2013; 'Study sheds light on Bard as a food hoarder', BBC News, 1 April 2013; 'Shakespeare was a ruthless profiteer and tax dodger' *Los Angeles Times*, 1 April 2013; 'Bad Bard? Shakespeare profited from famine by hoarding grains.' *USA Today*, 2 April 2013; 'New study finds that Shakespeare was tax-evading, grain-hoarding asshole', AV Club Newswire, 1 April 2013; 'Knowing Shakespeare fiddled his taxes tells us nothing', *Independent*, 3 April 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *Sunday Times*, 31 March 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See pages 140-142.

<sup>5</sup> See page 21.

<sup>6</sup> See page 23.

described the lifestyle of 'individual traders' in the late sixteenth century, who were willing to 'buy and bargain' any commodity that would make a profit:

[They often] operated through a network of neighbours, friends and relatives. Sons, fathers, cousins ... all were drawn into the circle ... In consequence of this network of kinship and acquaintance ... they had developed into a distinct and self-conscious community of their own: a kind of society of wayfarers ... Much of the dealing in which travelling merchants engaged took place in ... the provincial inn ... 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.<sup>7</sup>

In the Elizabethan period, before the development of professional theatres, inns were frequently used for staging plays.<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare and his father were probably intimately familiar with Elizabethan drama through John Shakespeare's wayfaring life style, particularly when centred on provincial and metropolitan inns.

Everitt concluded that 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 ... it is not fanciful to trace a connection between the spread of private trading in the early seventeenth century and the rapid rise of Independency. For Independency was not a rural and static religion ... but mobile, virile, and impatient of human institutions, like the wayfaring community itself.<sup>9</sup>

Shakespeare scholars have always been puzzled by Shakespeare's acquisition of the language and sophistication necessary to write cosmopolitan plays of such quality. On the above evidence, he acquired such abilities through his participation in the culture of the wayfaring trading community associated with his father John Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's business activities should not therefore be seen only as a negative example of ruthless trading, but also providing a link to a highly cosmopolitan way of life. Many of his middle and upper class contemporaries were engaged in the same trading activity, and the late sixteenth century was a time of intense capitalist development.<sup>10</sup> This involved growing economic and social inequality, summarized by the historian Lawrence Stone as follows:

As a result of population growth ... the excess supply of labour relative to demand not only increased unemployment, but forced down real wages to an alarming degree ... [there was] a polarization of society into rich and poor: the upper classes became relatively more numerous and their real incomes rose; the poor became more numerous and their real incomes fell.<sup>11</sup>

In his personal life, Shakespeare had traversed a complete range of economic circumstances, from early comfortable family prosperity to dire poverty, and then wealth at the end of his life. It was this range of experience which gave him the understanding and breadth of knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> See pages 22-24.

<sup>8</sup> F.E. Halliday, *A Shakespeare Companion 1564-1964* (1964), p. 243.

<sup>9</sup> See page 24.

<sup>10</sup> See L Neal and J.G. Williamson, *Capitalism: Volume 1: The Rise of Capitalism from Ancient Origins to 1848* (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Razzell, *Mortality, Marriage and Population Growth, 1550-1850* (2016), p. 107.

which enabled him to write plays with such a universal appeal, although with some ambivalence when it came to attitudes towards the poor:

But 'tis common prooffe,/That Lowlynesse is young Ambitions Ladder,/Whereto the Climber upward turns his Face:/But when he once attaines the upmost Round/ He then unto the Ladder turns his Backe,/ Lookes in the Clouds, scorning the base degrees/ By which he did ascend.<sup>12</sup>

However, this ambivalence did not prevent him from expressing sympathy for the plight of the poor. The speech by two citizens in *Coriolanus* reveals considerable understanding of the anger of those suffering from famine when grain was being hoarded by the wealthy:

... they nere car'd for us yet. Suffer us to famish, and their Store-houses cramm'd with Graine ... If they would yeelde but the superfluitie while it were wholesome, wee might guess they releev'd us humanely ... our suffering is a gaine to them. Let us revenge this with our Pikes, ere we become Rakes.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1598 crisis, the poor of Stratford threatened violence against the rich, which no doubt Shakespeare was aware of.<sup>14</sup> The poor had appealed to the local magistrates for enforcement of the protective legislation, without realizing that all four magistrates were grain-hoarders, with strong links to the local townsmen. Shakespeare had become part of the local elite and no doubt felt threatened by the poor, who constituted nearly a half of the total population of Stratford.<sup>15</sup>

There has been a great deal of idealization of Shakespeare because of the outstanding quality of his writing. However, his sonnets indicate that he was tormented by feelings of inadequacy and a sense of alienation, but both the plays and sonnets demonstrate he was also a man of great sympathy and understanding. His business activities show that he was capable of ruthlessness, but this must be understood in the context of his times. He had restored the fortunes of his bankrupt family, at the same time creating the world's greatest literature. There is also evidence that he came to terms at the end of his life with the personal and social tensions reflected in his writings:

Sweet are the uses of adversity, which like a toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head. And this our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.

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<sup>12</sup> See page 143.

<sup>13</sup> See page 144.

<sup>14</sup> See pages 141, 142.

<sup>15</sup> See page 142.