

## 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'<sup>1</sup>, 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.'<sup>3</sup> 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. 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 ...'<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 1991, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 385-451.

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

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 441.

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

At an earlier date on the 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Rowe's described John Shakespeare as a "considerable dealer in wool", It is likely that John Shakespeare traded wool on other occasions, which did not result in prosecutions.

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.'<sup>9</sup> He had dealings with people living in London, Worcestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Coventry, Nottingham and Stoke in Staffordshire.<sup>10</sup>

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.'<sup>11</sup> 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.'<sup>12</sup>

Private trading was ubiquitous in Stratford in the late sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup> An example of this is to be found in a letter in 1598 from Adrian Quayney to Richard Sturley:

'Yff yow bargen with Wm Sha ...or receve money therfor, brynge youre money homme that yow maye; and see howe knite stockynges be sold; ther ys gret byinge of them at Aysshome. Edward Wheat and Harrye, youre brother man, were both at Evyshome thys daye senet, and, as I harde, bewtow £20 ther in knyt hosse; wherefore I thynke yow maye doo good, yff yow can have money.'<sup>14</sup>

The activities of leading townsmen in private trading can be further illustrated by the example of Thomas Rogers, Bailiff of the Borough, who in 1595 was a butcher by trade, but was also engaged in extensive illegal buying and selling of corn, malt and cattle.<sup>15</sup> His attitude towards such trading is illustrated by his behaviour. He bought a cartload of barley in order to forestall the market, and when reproached for this, 'doth say that he will *justify it*, and he *careth not a turd for them all*.'<sup>16</sup>

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

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<sup>8</sup> Razzell, *William Shakespeare*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> S. Lee, *Life of Shakespeare*, 1898, C.U.P. Edition 2012, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Razzell, *William Shakespeare*, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> B. Rowland Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, Volume 1, 1940, p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> J. Chartres (ed), *Agricultural Markets and Trade, 1500-1750: Chapters from the Agrarian History of England and Wales*, 1990, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> For example, 120 of the leading townsmen in Stratford – including Shakespeare – illegally hoarded grain in 1598. Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*. p. 284.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 230.

<sup>15</sup> E. Fripp, *Master Richard Quayney*, 1924, p.104.

<sup>16</sup> Razzell, *William Shakespeare*, p. 141.

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.'<sup>18</sup>

He 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 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.<sup>19</sup>

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 ...<sup>20</sup>

The problem arose because of the poor educational system. 'Many marketing disputes arose through the illiteracy of one or other of the parties concerned.'<sup>21</sup> Many of the traders were helped by assistants, who 'undertook the writings of his order books, notes, and letters ...'<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Chartres, *Agricultural Markets*, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 107, 108.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> L. Orlin, *The Private Life*, p. 46.

As Everitt has concluded, ‘with the growth of private dealing some grounding in writing and accounting was imperative.’<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> 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 covenanting the aforesaid premises but also for delivering to the same John Lambert all writings and proofs concerning the same ...’<sup>26</sup>

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. However, this interpretation has been disputed by E.K. Chambers:

This is the only reference to Shakespeare in the litigation conducted by his parent about the property concerned ... William, probably in respect of some right of inheritance, was a party to this, but the negotiation was apparently oral, and would not necessarily entail his presence at Stratford.<sup>27</sup>

There is little evidence that the negotiation was oral<sup>28</sup>, and in any event, William Shakespeare’s involvement appears to be concerned with references to written documents. Also importantly, both parties to the dispute referred to “heirs and assigns” when the inheritance of property was at issue, whereas William Shakespeare is mainly linked to the references to writing. Additionally, I believe Chambers has misread the nature of the dispute: 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, pp. 138, 139.

<sup>27</sup> E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, Volume 2 (1930), p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> John Shakespeare claimed that John Lambert had promised at Stratford to pay £20 for additional evidence for security of title to the Wilmcote property, to be paid in instalments at the manor house of Anthony Ingram in Little Walford. There is evidence that these meetings never took place, as the legal documents reveal that John Lambert already had security of title. See ‘The Shakespeare/Lambert Dispute’ in Razzell, *William Shakespeare* pp.35-45.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> 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’,

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.’<sup>31</sup>

There is evidence that William Shakespeare was very 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.’<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.’<sup>34</sup> This culture provided Shakespeare with both the knowledge and background necessary for his theatrical and business career.

He would also have been exposed to theatres in London and elsewhere as he travelled around the country with his father. Inns were often centres of theatrical productions<sup>35</sup> and he probably encountered them throughout the so-called ‘lost years’, preparing him for both his future work as a playwright and his career as an astute businessman.

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see F.E. Halliday *A Shakespeare Companion*, 1964, pp. 441- 42. 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 the poaching incident which probably occurred in about 1588 and may have been responsible for him leaving Stratford.

<sup>31</sup> Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare’s Lives*, 2006, p. 292.

<sup>32</sup> E. Fripp, *Shakespeare: Man and Artist*, Volume 1, page 138.

<sup>33</sup> Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare’s Lives*, p. 332.

<sup>34</sup> Chartes, *Agricultural Markets*, p. 111.

<sup>35</sup> See S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, 1978, p. 131; M. Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, 2005, p. 134. See the picture of the Green Dragon Inn.