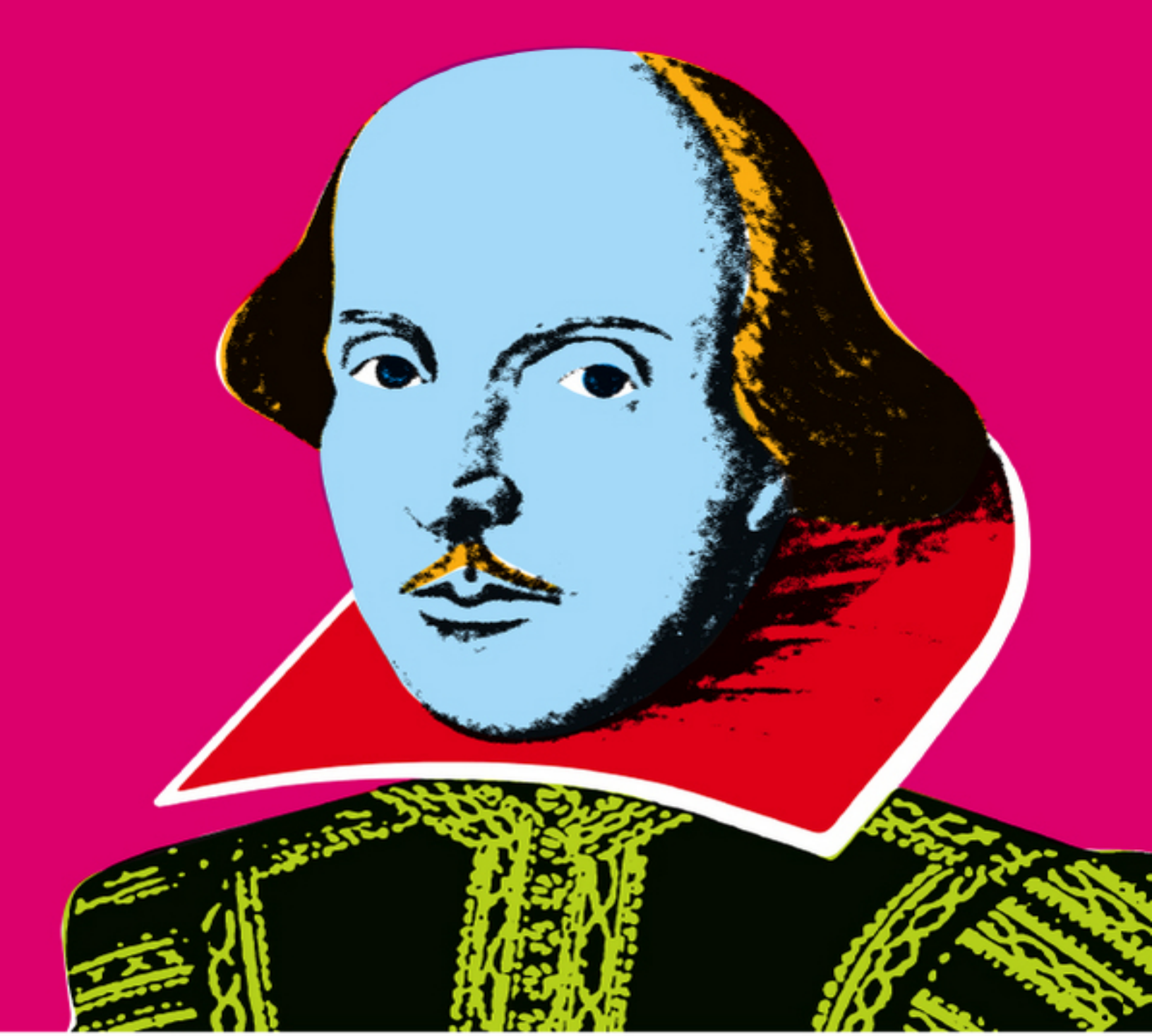

30 GREAT MYTHS ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

Laurie E. Maguire and Emma Smith

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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For Katherine Duncan-Jones

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This memorial monument in the garden of the church of St. Mary the Virgin, Aldermanbury, London, is actually a double tribute. It commemorates Shakespeare and the two editors who collected his plays in the posthumous memorial volume of *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (1623).

Photo: Col. Peter J. Durrant MBE.


EVERY DEED
EVERY DEED MERITED
THE GRATITUDE OF MANKIND

Introduction

This book attempts to interrogate the things we think we know about Shakespeare, and we have called this body of knowledge “myths.” Why “myths”? We were drawn to this term for the Shakespeare content in each of our chapters because “myth” foregrounds the act of storytelling; because it underlines the cultural work these stories do rather than their accuracy; because it is not about a specific point of origin but about accepted beliefs; because it is about the people who accept or invent or need these stories as much as it is about the stories themselves. Not all of our myths are untrue: in calling these beliefs “myths” we are less interested in stigmatizing them as foolish or unsubstantiated than we are concerned to understand how they become ossified and block, rather than enable, our interpretation of Shakespeare's works.

Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth* (2005) offers some pithy observations. Myths are dynamic: they change over time, they adapt themselves to cultural and historical developments, they have accretions and deletions, they iron out—or accumulate—contradictions. Myths are not historically accurate: they do not work by being factual; they are interested in what an event meant, not in what actually happened; they are designed to be effective, not true. Myths provide explanations for something we might not otherwise be able to make sense of; they give us comfort. Myths serve different purposes at different times, being factored into a culture's national or religious or political history. And, she argues, humans are myth-seeking creatures.[1] That is to say, we are creatures drawn to stories. Myth, from the Greek *muthos*, means something that is told,

a speech, a narrative, a fiction, a plot. From here it comes to mean a set of beliefs (personal or collective).

Myths abound about Shakespeare in part because of half-remembered or out-of-date scholarship from schooldays, because Shakespeare the man is such an elusive and charismatic cultural property, and because interventions in Shakespeare studies, particularly biographical and theatrical ones, make headline news: witness the “authorship question” (Myth 30) or speculation about Shakespeare's beliefs or sexuality (Myths 7 and 18). Put simply, myths are told and retold about Shakespeare because no other writer matters as much to the world: nineteenth-century Germany had a flourishing academic Shakespeare criticism before England did; India had a Shakespeare Society before England; Shakespeare is regularly performed at amateur and professional levels, in translation, worldwide. Shakespeare is not just English (as Germany's “unser [our] Shakespeare” attests). Thus myths about Shakespeare go some way toward telling us stories about ourselves.

As Armstrong details, myths can be fictional and erroneous —and many, but not all, of these Shakespeare myths are— but more often they turn out, in important and revealing ways, to follow two related definitions of the word “myth” from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first is

> A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.

While Shakespeare is not quite a “supernatural” being, many of the myths we discuss explain or justify widely held, often unexamined, beliefs about art, authorship, and cultural value. The second relevant definition of myth is “a popular conception of a person or thing which exaggerates or idealizes the truth.” Many of our myths are just that:

popular, often reiterated ideas which may have a basis in fact, but which over-emphasize the available evidence or speculate to fill in gaps in the documentary record. Often the honest answer to our questions about Shakespeare has to be that we are unsure: in place of that uncertainty, myths provide comforting and positive “truths” about the subject. In this book we try to peel our collective fingers from this comfort blanket, even though sometimes the unsettling outcome is that we know less than we thought we did.

This book arose from our interest in a related book in a different field: *Fifty Great Myths of Popular Psychology* (2009). The book includes such familiar propositions as: opposites attract; we use only 10 percent of our brain power; playing Mozart to babies boosts their intelligence; it's better to express anger than to hold it in. These are myths that have become traditional truths; in fact, they have attained proverbial status, as the epigrammatic chapter headings show. The book's subtitle, *Shattering Widespread Misconceptions about Human Behavior*, indicates its purpose: it is a demythologizing book. The authors explain: “In this book, we'll help you to distinguish fact from fiction in popular psychology, and provide you with a set of myth-busting skills for evaluating psychological claims scientifically.”[2] What, we wondered, were the equivalent myths that populate popular understanding of Shakespeare?

A book exploring this question already exists: Stanley Wells' *Is it True What They Say about Shakespeare*?[3] Wells' encyclopedic Shakespeare knowledge is here put to the service of eighty-nine myths about Shakespeare's life and authorship. He considers whether Shakespeare “had a shotgun wedding,” “was gay,” “died of syphilis,” “wrote a play called *Cardenio*,” “portrayed himself as Prospero,” or “uses an exceptionally large vocabulary.” Like *Fifty Great Myths of Popular Psychology*, Wells' is a myth-busting book.

Wells interrogates the categories with invigorating briskness, and ends each chapter with a verdict: “unlikely,” “maybe,” “I remain sceptical.” Although we investigate many of the same categories as Wells, it is not because we disagree with his conclusions but because we are interested in different things. When we consider the question of whether “Shakespeare was the most popular writer of his day,” for instance, we are interested in the daunting question of how one would even *begin* to evaluate such a proposition, where one might go for evidence to support or refute it, in fact, what constitutes “evidence” (print runs? reprints? references to Shakespeare? audience attendance?); we are not interested in reaching a Yes or No conclusion.

The number of essays in this book—thirty to the eighty-nine of Wells' book or the fifty of the *Psychology* book—illustrates our different focus. Many of Wells' myths are summarized in one paragraph or, memorably, even one sentence. We have given ourselves 2,000–2,500 words for each of our myths. It is no coincidence that this is the length of the standard undergraduate essay (or newspaper article). As academics we are accustomed to writing in chapter-chunks of 8,000-12,000 words. Here we are interested in seeing just how much one can do in the shorter essay format, how much information a 2,000-word essay can develop, how many turns of an argument it can make; in short, how it can pursue evidence without getting too bogged down in detail. We have learned a lot from this exercise; and it is our hope that students may learn from reading our examples of the format in which they conduct all their arguments.

This is not to say that we have written this as a composition textbook. We hope, equally, that the general Shakespeare reader and lover will find much of interest in the material we cover, and will find a path from well-known

and often-repeated ideas into plays, approaches, and angles with which he or she is less familiar. In each chapter we aim to give authoritative, up-to-date, and even-handed treatments of controversies and scholarly disagreements. Our approach is interrogative, not prescriptive. We are interested in assessing the evidence for both sides of a dispute and seeing how cases can be or are made. We are interested in the historical moments at which tentative speculations ossify into self-evident truths. More importantly, we also try to understand the appeal of the myths and their power to attract passionately partisan proponents. The book evaluates evidence for and against myths to show not just how historical material—and the lack of it—can be interpreted and misinterpreted, but what these processes reveal about our own personal investment in the stories we tell about our national (and international) poet. Nor do we even attempt to hover, omniscient, above these stories: we are as implicated as all of Shakespeare's readers in presupposition, and in trying to understand these myths we may well have promulgated some others. We are grateful to Wiley-Blackwell's anonymous reader who pointed out a number of these contradictory moments, and forced us to acknowledge more directly our own positions.

The temptation for a book of this sort is to focus on Shakespeare's biography. Shakespeare biography is a fruitful field for myths, from the youthful deer-poaching episode (described by Nicholas Rowe at the beginning of the eighteenth century) to the technicalities of the marriage (attested by the record books) to the missing years (documented nowhere). Inevitably, we have included some of these examples but we have tried, wherever we can, to move the discussion on to the plays and poems themselves. Whereas most of our myths involve layers of interpretative accretion between us and the Elizabethan period, reading Shakespeare's works themselves can shortcut some of this

narrative padding. But in the analysis of Shakespeare's words, too, there are few certainties. We can never know how realistic Shakespeare's acting company was in performance, for instance, because “realism” is a relative concept. Nor can we say what was the experience of watching *Twelfth Night* in 1601, but we can suggest ways that more recent, and attestable, productions give us access to some of its performance possibilities. In resituating Shakespeare's works, rather than his personal beliefs or his private life, as the most fruitful and provocative territory for multiple interpretations, we try to suggest some of the ways that an openness to different meanings meets these complicated texts on their own terms.

We have imagined each myth as a self-contained story, even as we have attempted to keep repetition to a minimum. Conscious that overwrought academic prose often obscures as well as illuminates, we have tried to do justice to the material in a readable style, and not to get snagged in a web of references. We offer extensive, guided reading suggestions at the end of the book for readers to investigate further. We hope that, cumulatively, these essays offer the set of “myth-busting skills” we found such an attractive model in the psychology book, and that readers will turn these skills to critique our own blindspots and assumptions.

We have used the Oxford edition, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) for all quotations from Shakespeare. Where the Oxford edition prints two texts of *King Lear* (*The History of King Lear* and *The Tragedy of King Lear*), we have quoted from the *Tragedy* unless otherwise indicated. For unedited quotations from Shakespeare quartos we have used the facsimiles at http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/homepage.html. Spelling from other Renaissance texts has been modernized.

This book is dedicated to one of the most accomplished interrogators of Shakespeare myths, Katherine Duncan-Jones. We do not expect her to agree with all of our discussions in this book but we wish to acknowledge how much our thinking here, as elsewhere, has been stimulated and shaped by conversation with her over many years.

Laurie Maguire
Emma Smith
Oxford, 2012

Notes

1 Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005).

2 Scott Lilienfield, Steven Lynn, John Ruscio, and Barry Beyerstein, *Fifty Great Myths of Popular Psychology: Shattering Widespread Misconceptions about Human Behavior* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 3.

3 Stanley Wells, *Is It True What They Say about Shakespeare?* (Ebrington, Glos.: Long Barn Books, no date).

Myth 1

Shakespeare was the most popular writer of his time

One popular website in which users ask and answer each other's questions poses this question: “Was Shakespeare popular in his day?” The entire answer posted by a reader states “Yes he was Shakespeare!”[1] It's a fair summary of general assumptions: how could Shakespeare *be* Shakespeare—read and performed 400 years after his death and translated across languages, media, and hemispheres—had he not been popular in his own time? But the question of how we define popularity and whether the evidence about Shakespeare confirms this myth need a little more probing, and we need also to separate popularity in the theater from popularity in print.

First, to the theater. From 1594 onwards, when he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men as both sharer (part-owner) and resident playwright, Shakespeare's own popularity is intrinsically related to that of the company. Thus, while the development of the Chamberlain's Men and the company's increasing dominance in the London theater economy cannot be solely attributed to Shakespeare's plays, nor can it be separated from them. The Globe theater on Bankside, built by the Chamberlain's Men in 1599, could take over 3,000 spectators; in 1608 the company opened an additional indoor theater, Blackfriars, for winter performances. In 1603 it received the patronage of the new king, James, becoming the King's Men and performing regularly at court. Shakespeare's own wealth also grew over

this period: in 1596 his family acquired a coat of arms and with it the right to be styled “gentlemen”; a year later he bought a large five-gabled house in Stratford-upon-Avon, New Place, reputedly the town's second-largest. All these economic and prestige indicators suggest that the company and its house dramatist were thriving, and this in turn suggests that Shakespeare's works, like the plays the company performed by other dramatists including Thomas Middleton and Ben Jonson, were popular.

It is, however, harder to be more specific. Almost no one who went to the theater at this time wrote about what they had gone to see. John Manningham, a legal student who saw *Twelfth Night* at Middle Temple in February 1602 is a rare exception, noting that it was “a good practice in it to make the steward believe his lady-widow was in love with him, by counterfeiting a letter as from his lady, in general term telling him what she liked best in him and prescribing his gesture in smiling, his apparel, etc. and then, when he came to practice, making him believe they took him for mad.”[2] Manningham enjoys the situational humor of the trick on Malvolio, but frustratingly has nothing to say about Viola's male disguise as Cesario or the representation of fraternal twins: the glimpse of what was memorable, or popular, about the play is fleeing. Something similar could be said of the Jacobean accounts of performances of *The Winter's Tale*, *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline* by the astrologist/doctor Simon Forman (see Myth 13). The only sustained details we have about the economics of the Elizabethan theater come from the rival company the Admiral's Men, and from papers associated with their entrepreneurial manager Philip Henslowe. These papers suggest that Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, with its dynamic and amoral central character Barabas, was among the most frequently performed plays, with a schedule including ten performances in six months, far in excess of records for any

Shakespeare play. When Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess*, a sharp satire on Anglo-Spanish relations, hit the Globe in 1624, it was such a sensation that it played for nine consecutive performances: no play of Shakespeare can claim anything like that box-office success. While our iconic reference point for classical literary drama is probably the image of Hamlet holding the skull of the jester Yorick (see Myth 27), for the early modern period the most instantly recognizable drama was not Shakespeare, but the bloody revenge tragedy by Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (written around 1590). Kyd's play spawned a prequel, a ballad version, was reworked by later playwrights to extend its stage life, and was quoted, parodied, and generally riffed upon by writers up to the closing of the theaters. There is no contemporary evidence that any of Shakespeare's plays had this reach, although we do know that other writers copied and reworked his plays: for example *Hamlet* echoes are evident in two almost contemporary plays, John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and Henry Chettle's *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, and early in the seventeenth century John Fletcher wrote *The Woman's Prize*, a sequel to Shakespeare's battle-of-the-sexes comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*.

There is one particular aspect of Shakespeare's dramatic work where we can see significant contemporary popularity: the characterization of the disreputable, lovable, and obese knight Sir John Falstaff. Falstaff first appears in a play apparently called *Henry IV*, where he is a distinctly unheroic and satiric counterpart to the play's depiction of noblemen fighting in the aftermath of the deposition of King Richard II. As the companion of King Henry's eldest and rather prodigal son, Prince Hal, Falstaff offers an alternative world of tricks and taverns which draws both the heir to the throne and the play's audience away from the play's political content. Falstaff's popularity seems to have been immediate. A sequel was written—*Henry IV Part II*—and Falstaff was also

transplanted into a quite different locale, the bourgeois town of Windsor, in the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (see Myth 28). There is evidence in letters from the period that his name had become a popular type. As the index to the classic collection of contemporary references to the plays, *The Shakspere Allusion-Book*, notes, "for the purposes of this index, Falstaff is treated as a work," and references to Falstaff far outnumber allusions to any other aspect or play. Among the entries are comments in plays by Massinger, Middleton, and Suckling, as well as private references including the Countess of Southampton's gossipy postscript to a letter to her husband: "All the news I can send you that I think will make you merry is that Sir John Falstaff is by his Mrs Dame Pintpot made father of a goodly miller's thumb."[3] Falstaff can also be said to have inaugurated Shakespeare scholarship: debates over his characterization developed into one of the earliest books on Shakespeare, Maurice Morgann's 1777 defense, *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff*.

Some of the plays we know to have been popular in the theater are lost because they were apparently never printed: *The Wise Man of West Chester*, for example, had repeated performances over a long period in 1594–7.[4] The question of how Shakespeare's plays came to be printed is discussed in detail in Myth 4. In trying to use the evidence from Shakespeare in print to pin down his contemporary popularity, it is interesting to note that only half of his plays were published during his lifetime: there was no market for, say, a quarto of *Macbeth*, but this fact might be explained by saying the play was not popular (no one wanted to buy it) or that it was (the theater company therefore did not want to sell it). Lukas Erne has argued that in 1600, the year in which Shakespeare was most visible in the print marketplace, his works account for about 4 percent of that year's published output across all genres. Erne identifies

forty-five separate editions of Shakespeare's plays in print during his lifetime, more than for any other contemporary playwright: particularly popular in terms of the number of editions were the early history plays *Richard II* (six editions before 1616), *Richard III* (five) and, thanks to Falstaff, *Henry IV* (like many sequels, *Part II* does not seem to have been such a success).[5] For comparative purposes, *The Spanish Tragedy* also had six print editions over the same period; the bestselling play by reprints is the anonymous pastoral romance *Mucedorus* (first published 1598) which has more than a dozen editions over three decades. The attribution in print to Shakespeare or, more allusively, to “W.S.,” of plays not now generally thought to be Shakespearean, including the mythical story of the founding of London *Locrine* (1595), the city comedy *The London Prodigal* (1605), and the true-crime murder story *The Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), may point to the fact that Shakespeare's name sells.

Additionally, there is evidence of an inverse relationship between the historical survival of texts and their contemporary popularity. Some printed texts do seem to have been read to death. There are, for instance, only two extant copies, neither complete, of the first edition of *Hamlet* (1603), and just one copy of the first, 1593, edition of Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis*: his first entry into print, and the work, along with the tragic narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (first printed in 1594), for which he was probably best known during his lifetime. The majority of contemporary references to Shakespeare are to him as the author of these two popular poems, which went into nine and five further editions respectively before 1616. The dictionary derivation of “popular” is “belonging to the people as a whole”: it's hard to state that any writer in the Elizabethan period was popular in this sense, where, as David Cressy has estimated, literacy rates may have been around 30 percent for men and less than 10 percent for

women in 1600.[6] In addition, no print run of any book in the period was allowed to exceed 1,500 copies (the Globe theater, remember, could take 3,000 spectators). Literary works in any case were only a small part of the print market, which was dominated by religious works—sermons, prayer books, bibles, commentaries, and psalm translations—and by household manuals—conduct books and "how-to" works: within this restricted sphere, however, Shakespeare was certainly a significant player.

Popularity and personal renown or artistic recognition are not necessarily the same thing: if we were looking at bestselling books from our own period we would probably not expect that category to overlap extensively with critically acclaimed or "classic" literary works. There is evidence that Shakespeare's works were valued by contemporaries. Francis Meres, writing in 1598, identifies Shakespeare's predominance:

> As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latins: so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for Comedy, witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love labours lost*, his *Love labours won*, his *Midsummers night dream*, & his *Merchant of Venice*: for Tragedy his *Richard the 2*. *Richard the 3*. *Henry the 4*. *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*.

The identity of "Love labours won" is unclear. Elsewhere in his analysis, though, he seems to identify Shakespeare as on a par with contemporary writers rather than exceeding them in quality or popularity. For example, here is his list of "the best for Comedy amongst us":

> *Edward* Earl of Oxford, Doctor *Gager* of Oxford, Master *Rowley* once a rare Scholar of learned Pembroke Hall in Cambridge, Master *Edwards* one of her Majesty's Chapel, eloquent and witty *John Lyly*, *Lodge*, *Gascoigne*, *Greene*, *Shakespeare*, *Thomas Nashe*, *Thomas Heywood*, *Anthony*

Munday our best plotter, *Chapman*, *Porter*, *Wilson*, *Hathway*, and *Henry Chettle*.[7]

This is a roll-call of theatrical writers of the time, not a selective pantheon. The existence of the posthumously printed edition of Shakespeare's collected dramatic works (1623), in an expensive, high-status folio format more usually associated with bibles and serious works of history or topography, is evidence less for his popularity than for his literary—and financial—value. And even as the Folio's editors address it to “the great variety of readers,” “from the most able, to him that can but spell,” and joke that they wish the readership were weighed rather than numbered, they do so at the head of a volume whose cost pushes it well beyond anything that might be called “popular” in its true sense—“of the people.”

Notes

[1] http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Was_shakespeare_popular_in_his_day

[2] Quoted in Emma Smith (ed.), *Blackwell Guides to Criticism: Shakespeare's Comedies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 1.

[3] F.J. Furnivall, C.M. Ingleby, and L.T. Smith, *The Shakspere Allusion-Book* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), vol. 2, p. 536; vol. 1, p. 88.

[4] http://www.lostplays.org

[5] Lukas Erne, “The Popularity of Shakespeare in Print,” *Shakespeare Survey*, 62 (2009), pp. 12–29 (pp. 13–14).

[6] David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 177.

[7] Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia. Wits Treasury* (London, 1598), pp. 282, 284 (sigs. 2O2^{r}, 2O3^{v}).

Myth 2

Shakespeare was not well educated

The idea of the untutored genius or the self-made man or woman is irresistibly attractive. For Milton, Shakespeare was “Fancy's child, / Warbl[ing] his native wood-notes wild” (*L'Allegro*); the concept of the inspired rustic held sway to the Romantics and beyond. At the other end of the spectrum sits Shakespeare's contemporary Ben Jonson, who noted Shakespeare's “small Latin and less Greek.” Out of context it is easy to interpret Jonson's phrase as meaning “almost no classical knowledge” and, by extension, “uneducated.” In fact, the phrase is part of an extended compliment to Shakespeare who, Jonson says, eclipses not only his contemporaries but the ancients. Shakespeare outshines Lyly, Kyd, Marlowe, and, “though [he had] small Latin and less Greek” he stands “alone” in comparison for comedy and tragedy with “all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome / Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.” (Call you this railing?) And we must note a further context: Jonson himself. Most authors have small Latin and less Greek when compared with Jonson's prodigious classical learning. Nonetheless Jonson's remark is constantly quoted out of context and so the myth of the poorly educated Shakespeare continues.

There are many ways of testing such a myth. First, let us think about the sixteenth-century humanist educational atmosphere into which Shakespeare was born. “Humanism” is the name we give to the post-medieval scholarly drive

that recovered ancient texts. But humanism was ambitiously multi-layered. It was ethical, aiming to marry the highest ideals of pagan classical thinking to a Christian universe. It was stylistic: humanists studied the ancients not just for what they said but for how they said it; they thought about what a vernacular English literature might look and sound like; they experimented with the English language, importing words from Greek and Latin (see Myth 21). It was pedagogical: humanists wrote textbooks and founded schools and colleges, passing their ideals to the coming generations. It was scholarly: humanists translated texts, edited them, indexed them, made dictionaries. And it was positively secular, not rejecting a theocentric world view but placing man and his potential at the center of it with questions about government, nobility, court, the commonwealth, kings, and tyrants. (Humanist texts often foreground an individual in their title: Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governor*, Castiglione's *The Courtier*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*.) The invention of the printing press—the internet of its day—enabled humanist ideas and values to spread with enormous speed.

This is a simplified summary, but the essential point is that humanism had practical effects, not least on the Elizabethan educational system and the development of the grammar school. A sixteenth-century schoolboy (only very few girls, such as Margaret, daughter of Henry VIII's lord chancellor, Thomas More, were formally educated, and then at home rather than in school) was the beneficiary of a new nationwide system of education—a national curriculum. Although Ben Jonson was educated at Westminster, where he studied under the antiquarian and historian William Camden, and Thomas Kyd was educated at Merchant Taylor's school under educationalist and writer Richard Mulcaster, their education would not have been substantially different from Shakespeare's in Stratford-upon-

Avon. We don't have any records showing that Shakespeare attended the local grammar school—they are missing for that period—but it would be odd if he hadn't.

Grammar schools were so called because what they taught was grammar. The grammar taught was Latin. (The standard grammar book was William Lyly's—this is the book William Page is studying, not very well, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.) School started at 6 a.m. and continued until 6 p.m., followed by homework, and, as the boys moved into the higher forms, the language in which they conversed and in which they were instructed was Latin. It is often said, without exaggeration, that by the time a grammar-school boy left school he had as much classical education as a university student of Classics today.

But grammar meant much more than just the parsing of sentences. Grammar was a part of rhetoric; and rhetoric had many branches, all rooted in stylistic awareness. Exercises ranged from *copia* (saying the same thing in various ways) and *imitatio* (trying to emulate the style of a revered author) to double translation—from Latin to English then back again to Latin, to see if one's own composition in Latin could approach the elegance of the original (see Myth 15). These exercises were designed to prepare boys for professions that required rhetorical skills: the church or the law or local government. They were also ideal training for a writer, fostering in Shakespeare a love of language, of stylistic variation, of the sounds of words—precisely the qualities we value in his writing today.

So Shakespeare left school well equipped. But education does not stop with formal schooling (although belief in this myth seems to imply that it does). Although Shakespeare did not attend university (neither did Thomas Kyd or Ben Jonson), he did not stop reading. The sources of his plays show that Shakespeare read medieval poetry (Chaucer, Gower), Italian fiction (Boccaccio, Cinthio), contemporary