Shakespeare

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DAVID BEVINGTON

SHAKESPEARE

The Seven Ages of Human Experience

Second Edition

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For
Laura, Peter, Sylvia, and Zeke

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To the Reader

By design, this book moves around quite a bit from play to play, from prose to poetry, from early to late, in order to pursue themes and topics that seem to have fascinated Shakespeare and that certainly fascinate me. I hope they will interest you as well. One result is that discussions touch on only certain aspects of a given play or poem in a particular chapter. I keep coming back to some plays especially, such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*, from different directions. If you find yourself wondering, for example, why a particular discussion of *King Lear* seems to centre on Edmund and his family without saying much about King Lear or Cordelia, just wait. I'll be back later in the book.

I did not realize how much I wanted to write this book until Andrew McNeillie pointed the way. I owe him my special thanks. I am eternally grateful also to the many friends and writers about Shakespeare whose ideas I have not directly acknowledged in this generally unfootnoted book and whose innovative ideas about Shakespeare I have so mingled with my own that I am not always sure which are whose. Among those to whom I am most consciously indebted are Janet Adelman, Richard Wheeler, Arthur Kirsch, Robert G. Hunter, Fredson Bowers, Alfred Harbage, Northrop Frye, A. C. Bradley, Lynda Boose, Frank Kermode, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner, David Kastan, Patricia Parker, Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, C. L. Barber, Coppélia Kahn, Meredith Skura, Robert Watson, Stephen Orgel, James Calderwood, John Velz, Inga-Stina Ewbank, Sigurd Burckhardt, Linda Charnes, Norman Rabkin, Alvin Kernan, and Juliet Dusinberre. These people have changed my life in some way, often through a single, focused, seminal idea. My list here is of course

very incomplete. In addition, I owe more than I can say to the many superb students at Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Chicago who have challenged and sharpened what I have tried to teach with their questions and often surprising observations. It has been a privilege to be invited to think out loud about Shakespeare with them on a continuing journey of discovery. This little book represents, in distilled form, something of where I have gotten to at present.

I am grateful to Blackwell Publishing for a chance to bring out a second edition. In it I have corrected a number of errors and infelicities of style that escaped me on first passage. I have tried to say more about fathers and sons than in the first edition, about the perils of courtship, about the circumstances of Shakespeare's own life that may bear on his written work, about performance history of his plays on stage and screen, about his delicate representation of gender relations in all their ambiguous uncertainties, about his sources, and still more. Two inserted passages, on *Romeo and Juliet* and on fathers and sons, are of substantial length. In a new final chapter on 'Shakespeare Today', I look at the remarkable diversity of interpretations in modern criticism and performance of Shakespeare as a key to his malleability, his 'infinite variety', his ability to adapt to a changing world. Other changes deal with particular paragraphs. The book is a little longer than the earlier version, but develops the same idea of a life cycle that never ceases to fascinate me in Shakespeare.

David Bevington

CHAPTER ONE

All the World's a Stage

Poetry and Theatre

This whole creation is essentially subjective, and the dream is the theater where the dreamer is at once scene, actor, prompter, stage manager, author, audience, and critic.
Carl Jung, General Aspects of Dream Psychology *(1928)*

What makes Shakespeare so great? Everyone wonders about that. Is he simply a cultural icon, a great name, the study of whose works has become entrenched in high school and college curricula out of inertia? Are students being obliged to make their way through the difficulties of Elizabethan English and the thickets of early modern politics simply because their elders have done so? Is the study of Shakespeare an elaborate hazing ritual? How can he speak to the twenty-first century, given his experience in a culture that was monarchist, patriarchal, pre-industrial, and unacquainted for the most part with any peoples that were not Anglo-Saxon native-born English? In our day, when dead European white males are being expunged from the curriculum, why still read Shakespeare? He is unquestionably dead, European, white, and male. In what way, if at all, does he deserve to be celebrated as the greatest English writer, perhaps the greatest writer of all time?

One can begin to answer these questions by simply observing the factual evidence of a genuine popularity that is continuing and even growing today. In an era when college enrolments in most older authors – Chaucer, Milton, Spenser, Jonson, Marlowe, Pope, etc., not to mention Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, and Dante – are on the decline, Shakespeare courses are thriving. The film industry has discovered anew that

Shakespeare can be good box-office. Postmodern criticism, after declaring its own liberation from canonical authors, turns again and again to Shakespeare to test its most acute theoretical problems about genre, sexuality, language, and politics. Ask Shakespeare a question about anything and he is likely to come back with an amazing answer, or, more importantly, a still more puzzling question. As a character in George Bernard Shaw's *Misalliance* declares in wonderment (when a thief has just quoted Shakespeare to him), 'Good. Read Shakespeare: he has a word for every occasion'. One proof of Shakespeare's sturdy endurability is that, in these days when the curriculum has been liberated, teachers and critics and students turn to him by choice. He is a central text for feminists, deconstructionists, Marxists, traditional close readers, Christian interpreters, students of cultural studies, you name it. Despite his chronological antiquity, he speaks today to the condition of each of these methodologies.

Shakespeare is cited by more modern writers than any other writer in the canon, other than the Bible. This, presumably, is because he has become a by-word for situations we encounter daily. 'It's Greek to me', we say, when something is obscure, not realizing perhaps that we are paraphrasing Casca in *Julius Caesar*; having reported to Cassius that Cicero spoke 'in Greek' on the occasion of Caesar's refusing the crown, and asked 'to what effect' Cicero spoke, Casca answers that he couldn't follow the speech: 'it was Greek to me'.

Hamlet is full of lines that we appropriate to our daily lives. We see something 'in [the] mind's eye'. We agree with Polonius that one has a duty 'to thine own self' to 'be true'. We acknowledge his worldly wisdom that 'the apparel oft proclaims the man' and that it is best 'Neither a borrower nor a lender' to be. We concur with Hamlet that drinking or any other injurious overindulgence 'is a custom / More honoured in the breach than the observance'. We exclaim, with Hamlet, 'What a piece of work is a man!' When a speech or sample of writing is too long, 'It shall to the barber's with your beard'. If a speech is overacted 'It out-Herods Herod'. We know too well that 'conscience does make cowards of us all'. We nod in assent to the proposition that art must 'hold . . . the mirror up to nature'. When we wish to speak cuttingly, we 'speak daggers'. We resonate to the proposition that 'There are more things in heaven and earth . . . Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' and that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will'. Most of all, perhaps, we ponder what it means 'To be or not to be', and celebrate Shakespeare's theatre with the splendid truism that 'The play's the thing'.

These are all remarkably memorable lines that have made their way into the language. They have done so because they eloquently address issues that we deeply care about: the nature of humanity, the purposes of art, the role of divinity in our lives, the puzzling temptations of suicide, and much more.

The argument of this book, indeed, is that Shakespeare lives among us today with such vitality because he speaks, with unrivalled eloquence and grace of language, to just about any human condition one can think of: infancy and childhood, early schooling, friendships, rivalry among siblings, courtship, the competitive way in which sons must learn to become their fathers' heirs, career choices and ambitions, sceptical disillusionment and loss of traditional faith, marriage, jealousy, midlife crisis, fathers' worries about the marriages of their daughters, old age, retirement, and the approach of death.

Shakespeare has immortalized for us the parabolic shape of this life cycle in the so-called 'Seven Ages of Man' speech delivered by Jaques in *As You Like It*, act 2, scene 7.[1] Jaques is prompted to his reflection on human existence by spectacles of suffering and injustice: the banishment of Duke Senior and his followers from the envious court of the usurping Duke Frederick, and the near-death by starvation of Orlando and his faithful servant Adam, now rescued from extremity by the charity of the forest dwellers. In his response to this situation, Duke Senior introduces the idea of our lives as a kind of theatre:

> Thou see'st we are not all alone unhappy.
> This wide and universal theatre
> Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
> Wherein we play in.
>
> (2.7.135–8)[2]

Jaques elaborates on this wonderful commonplace in an extended theatrical metaphor:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players.
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
> Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
> Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel

And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange, eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.
(2.7.138–65)

We might observe several things about this remarkable speech. First, it is masculine in its point of view. This is the story of a male child growing up to be a man and then circling back to second childhood (another common phrase for which we are indebted to Shakespeare). The occupations here are male: courtship of women, soldiership, profession, respectability of a judicial appointment, ownership of property. Is there such a thing as the Seven Ages of Woman? Well, in fact the Folger Library in Washington DC has a poem called *Seven Ages of Woman*, by Agnes Strickland (London, 1827), that traces the lifespan of women from childhood to maturity to old age, and guess what? Their only discernible occupation is childbearing and tending the family. The pattern is precisely that of a sixteenth-century German woodcut illustrating the same subject, in which, as the seven partly undraped female figures mature, their breasts become enlarged and attractive; as they age, the breasts droop until they are unsightly dugs hanging to the waist. The posture too goes from erect gracefulness to arthritic stooping. The contrast with Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man could not be more instructive. Moreover, discussion of the Seven Ages of Woman is rare; Shakespeare's generation did not think con-

sciously about women's careers as it did about men's, and not until the nineteenth century did a woman writer venture to suggest that Shakespeare's often-cited paradigm was in need of a feminist corrective. Shakespeare's portrayal of the life cycle is male, and he himself was a male. We will want to explore ways in which, thoughtfully and even anxiously, he seems to have confronted the problem of understanding the profound differences in gender that separate men and women, but we should begin by acknowledging that his point of view was inescapably that of the man.

Another point about Jaques' speech is that it is ironic. The individual portraits are uniformly wry in tone: the infant 'mewling and puking in the nurse's arms', the boy manifesting his unwillingness to go to school, the lover making a fool of himself over some young woman whom he insists on idolizing, the soldier pursuing illusory reputation and honour 'Even in the cannon's mouth', the justice complacent with worldly success, the old man covetous of possessions that will soon say goodbye to him, the dying man a child again. Life is indeed a cycle. What does it amount to? In Jaques' mordant view, it all comes to 'mere oblivion', without teeth to chew one's food, or eyesight, or taste, or anything at all.

This sounds remarkably like the plaintive chant in T. S. Eliot's 'A Fragment of an Agon': 'Birth, and copulation, and death. / That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all, / Birth, and copulation, and death.' One thinks too of Hamlet's meditations on death and oblivion in the graveyard where Yorick and so many others lie buried. Why might not the dusty remains of Emperor Alexander the Great be subject to the same kinds of indignity that Yorick's skull suffers at the hands of the gravedigger? 'As thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?' Or, earlier in the play, 'What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.'

The ironies in Jaques' speech remind us of other passages in Shakespeare as well. The description of the infant 'mewling and puking' brings to mind King Lear, when he laments that 'We came crying hither' into this world. 'Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air / We wawl and cry' when we are come 'To this great stage of fools'. Falstaff's wry disquisition on honour in *1 Henry IV* ('Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday') reads like a comment on Jaques' soldier 'Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth'. Touchstone's amusement at the clichéd verse that Orlando hangs on the trees of the forest in

As You Like It in praise of his Rosalind ('I'll rhyme you so eight years together, dinners and suppers and sleeping hours excepted', says Touchstone) is an amusing instance of Jaques' lover 'Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress' eyebrow'. The aged justices, Shallow and Silence, in *2 Henry IV* ('We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow', says Falstaff to one of them) seem to march right out of Jaques' vignette on 'the lean and slippered pantaloon'. Jaques' Seven Ages of Man reads like a blueprint for Shakespeare's dramatic portraiture of the crazy, funny, sad life of mortals on this earth.

This is not to say that Shakespeare is only, or even chiefly, an ironist, a satirical observer in the vein of Voltaire or Swift or Aristophanes. Instead, the Seven Ages of Man speech helps us to see that Shakespeare is an unsurpassed observer of *la comédie humaine*, along with Leo Tolstoi, Jane Austen, William Faulkner, E. M. Forster, and Honoré de Balzac. Shakespeare's observations of human folly are both acute and compassionate. Jaques' speech, to be fully understood, must be read in the context of a scene in which human charity and forgiveness do much to atone for Jaques' witty indictment of the existential meaninglessness of human existence. The present book, using Jaques' speech as a kind of outline, hopes to explore the ways in which Shakespeare sought to balance ironic and satiric observation with charity and compassion. It is in this balance that we find what is so deeply humane in him.

The young Shakespeare, turning up in London some time before 1592 in search of a career, found himself drawn to the theatre and to the writing of poetry. We know rather little about his life prior to that time. He was born in 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, the son of a man who prospered as a manufacturer and salesman of leather goods and who became the equivalent of mayor of the town, though he also seems to have experienced financial difficulties and to have been fined for absence from town meetings – probably as the result of his having overextended himself in his business dealings, though the possibility that he incurred official disfavour for clinging to the Catholic faith of his youth continues to intrigue those who wonder if Shakespeare himself was Catholic in his sympathies. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, came from a good family of well-to-do yeoman farmer's stock. Though the school records have perished owing to the ravages of time, we cannot doubt that the son of the town's leading citizen would have gone to the King's New School there, where, tuition free, he would have received instruction chiefly in Latin, along with some Greek.

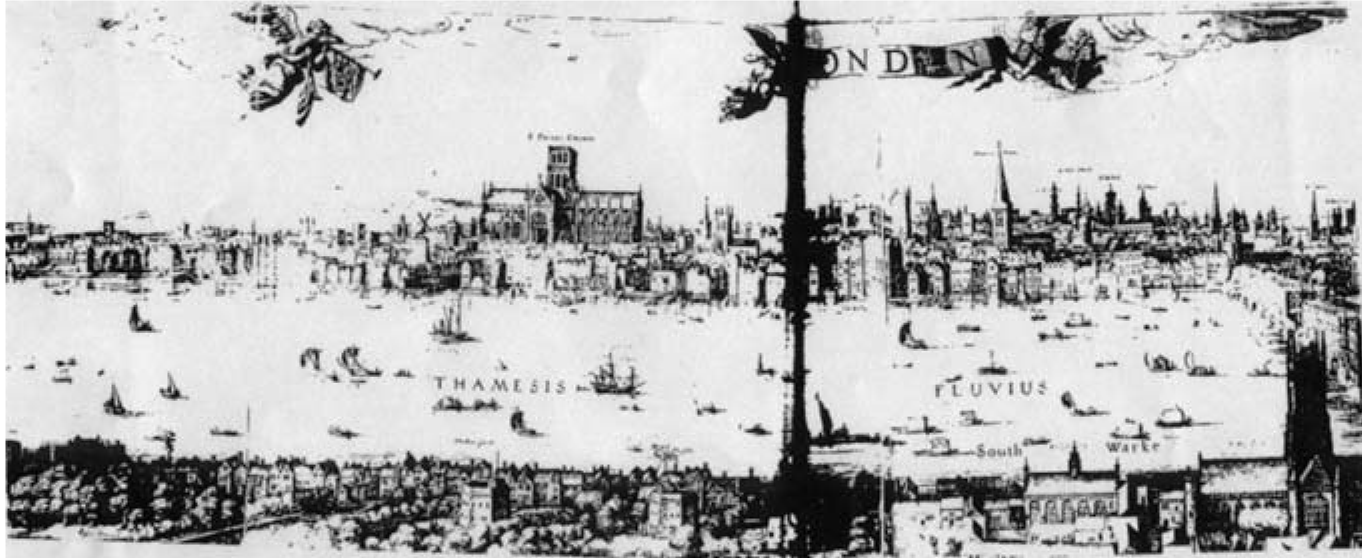

Plate 1 J. C. Visscher's panoramic view of London (detail), 1616 or possibly a little earlier. © copyright The Trustees of the British Museum.

He married, at eighteen, Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior and already some three months pregnant; a special licence had to be obtained to marry quickly, without the customary reading of the 'banns' or announcement of intent to marry that normally proceeded over three successive Sundays. The implications of a 'shotgun' wedding are clear, and is a matter to which we will return. The couple's first child, Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. Two other children, the twins Hamnet and Judith, were born on February 5, 1585. ('Hamnet' was the name of a Stratford neighbor.) These were the last children born to William and Anne. Although the absence of any other children could have been the result of some medical condition, the circumstance may suggest instead that William and Anne did not continue to share a bed. Birth control, rudimentary at best, was essentially non-existent; families tended to be large, though this was by no means uniformly the case. At all events, Shakespeare appears to have left home some time after the birth of the twins. He never brought his family to live with him in London. Once he became prosperous he did acquire property in Stratford in which his wife and children were able to live handsomely, and he must have visited home when not occupied with his work in the big city, but he and his family did live apart much or most of the time.

I should say something, briefly, about the authorship controversy that has swirled about Shakespeare's head since the mid-nineteenth century. To many non-academics the issue remains unsettled. How could a provincial lad who never attended one of the universities of his day (Oxford and Cambridge) turn out to be the greatest writer in the English language? Why is it that we have no papers of his? How could a country boy depict with such acumen the lives of rulers and courtiers? Surely the work that survives shows the hand of a university-educated wit, like Christopher Marlowe, or an aristocrat, like the Earl of Oxford – who wrote sonnets and whose father-in-law, Lord Burghley, bears a passable resemblance to Polonius. Are there not clues in *Hamlet* and other plays that reveal biographical details more pertinent to the Earl of Oxford than to the boy from Stratford?

The Earl of Oxford is the leading contender currently as the rival author of Shakespeare's works. He is, however, only one of several who have been put forth. The first was Sir Francis Bacon, proposed briefly in the middle of the eighteenth century and then championed in America in 1852 and afterwards by Delia Bacon. Attracted perhaps to the idea by her sharing a last name with Sir Francis, she promoted the thesis that the plays

were not by Shakespeare but by Bacon, Sir Walter Ralegh, and Edmund Spenser as a means of spreading secretly a liberal philosophy. In her estimate, William Shakespeare of Stratford was nothing more than an 'ignorant, low-bred, vulgar country fellow, who had never inhaled in all his life one breath of that social atmosphere that fills his plays'. Although her book in 1857 on the subject was not well received, and although she went on to suffer delusions that she was herself 'the Holy Ghost and surrounded by devils', the movement lived on; an English Bacon Society came into being in 1885, followed by an American counterpart in 1892. Christopher Marlowe has been another candidate; so have others. The very existence of this plethora of candidates is suspicious. So is the fact that the so-called 'anti-Stratfordian' theory did not emerge for two centuries or more after Shakespeare's death, and not with any noticeable following until well into the nineteenth century. Prior to that time, no one doubted that the plays and poems were by William Shakespeare. Mark Twain, himself an anti-Stratfordian, saw the humour of this. The works, he said, are not by Shakespeare but by another person of the same name.[3]

Well, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, as someone once said, but is it true that it doesn't really matter if someone other than Shakespeare wrote these plays? Oxfordian apologists allow that a man called Shakespeare did live and act in the London theatre, but not as a playwright. (Shakespeare is listed at the top of 'the principal comedians' in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, performed by 'the then Lord Chamberlain His Servants' in 1598, and as one of 'the principal tragedians' in Jonson's *Sejanus*, acted in 1603.) The Earl of Oxford, according to this theory, being inspired to write but ashamed to sully his aristocratic name by lending it to a disreputable enterprise like playwriting, needed a front man. Shakespeare, an actor and 'actor-sharer' (that is, company member and part owner) of England's premier acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (renamed the King's Men in 1603), was deemed a suitable candidate. This argument, unprovable by any documentary evidence, rests instead on the assumption that we need to find an author for the plays and poems who was suitably well-born and university educated. It presupposes that the many persons in London who knew Oxford and Shakespeare must have agreed not to talk about the arrangement and thus to keep the 'true' identity of the plays' author a secret. Authors did sometimes use pseudonyms in the Renaissance, but I know of no instance in which an author concealed his identity by adopting as a fictional cover the

name of a theatre professional who was known to have written plays. (Robert Greene, in 1592, had warned his fellow playwrights to watch out for a young 'upstart crow' who was, 'in his own conceit, the only Shake-scene in a country'.) The theory of a widespread conspiracy of silence is also suspect in that it involves a lot of people, and it implicates a man like Ben Jonson, who was notoriously outspoken and undaunted by authority in high places. It implicates John Heminges and Henry Condell, Shakespeare's fellow actors who put together the great Folio edition of his plays in 1623. And why construct such a hypothesis in the first place? Only because of a conviction that a young man not educated at a university would have been unable to observe and describe the rich pageantry of London and court life that we find in the works.

The most telling argument against Oxford's authorship is that he died in 1604.[4] Centuries of scholarly study, unconcerned with the problem of Oxford's putative authorship, have dated many of Shakespeare's greatest plays – including *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* – well after 1604. Recent scholarship keeps refining the process. Dating is not always easy, and allowance must be made for some uncertainty of a year or two. Those who argue in favour of Oxford's authorship contend that posthumous publication was not unusual, and that the dating of the later plays, all of which remained unpublished after *King Lear* (in quarto, 1608) for the rest of Shakespeare's lifetime, rests on uncertain internal evidence and considerations of style. Among those who teach and write about Shakespeare in today's colleges and universities, nonetheless, the opinion is virtually unanimous that the canon of supposedly late plays does indeed depict an artistic journey that extends well beyond 1604 down to *The Tempest*, first presented at court in late 1611 (for which Shakespeare appears to have made use of accounts of shipwreck written in 1610), and then on to *Henry VIII* (first performed in mid-1613, resulting most unfortunately in the burning down of the Globe Theatre). Stylistically, the late plays display many features of run-on lines, pauses in the midst of a line of verse, feminine endings, and other characteristics that are significantly less identifiable in earlier plays. No less unlikely, in the view of most Shakespeare scholars, is the argument that if some plays were indeed written after 1604, topical references in them could have been covertly added by Oxford's heirs as a way of making them appear timely.

Actually, Shakespeare was just the sort of person who might have written the works we have. The Renaissance was a period of astonishing

literary output, almost all of it by writers who came from social and educational backgrounds similar to Shakespeare's. John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612–14) is arguably as great a play as most in the Shakespeare canon; Webster was a man of ordinary social background about whom we know considerably less than we do about Shakespeare. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (*c.* 1589) is a great and moving tragedy; Marlowe came from a shoemaker's family in Canterbury, whence he was sent to Cambridge on a scholarship. Ben Jonson's stepfather was a bricklayer, and for a time Ben seemed destined to become one as well. Edmund Spenser's family were in sail-making. These men had a motive for writing; they had to earn a living by it, as Oxford certainly did not.

Moreover, university training in England at that time focused predominantly on the study of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew texts, many of them theological treatises chosen to train young men for the Anglican clergy or for administrative positions in government. Our modern notion of higher education as the mark of a liberally-educated person is a misperception when it is applied to Oxford and Cambridge in the late sixteenth century. A would-be writer like Shakespeare was far better off going to London where, like a reporter for a journal or newspaper today, he would pick up gossip about the court in the street and in the tavern. No self-respecting reporter today belongs to the Establishment he writes about; he learns his trade by writing, by talking with people, by reading, and by seeing plays.

Shakespeare's early writings display just the kind of learning that Shakespeare would have obtained at the King's New School in Stratford. The texts he surely read there (as we know from studies of school curricula of the era) are precisely the ones he cites in his plays: Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, and some others. Shakespeare's evident preference for consulting English translations of these classical authors by William Golding and others also seems consistent with the portrait we can construct of Shakespeare as an ambitious young writer. (Golding was Oxford's uncle and may have been one of his tutors, but we needn't see this fact as bolstering the claim for Oxford's authorship of Shakespeare's plays; Golding's verse translation of Ovid was widely available, and Ovid was a staple of the new educational system from which Shakespeare evidently benefitted.) The early works also show us a playwright steeped in the lore and practice of the theatre to which he belonged. London and its theatre were his university.

The lack of any surviving manuscripts by Shakespeare is perfectly natural. Who of us today saves, or even reads, film scripts? Shakespeare's

papers were ephemera. His few signatures are in a shaky and uncertain hand, in part no doubt because he was in terminally poor health when he signed his will. Whether they are indeed his remains a matter of dispute. Variations in spelling were legion in his day.

Enough. I am an academic; you know where I stand. I don't expect to convert anyone already persuaded of the opposite view. But believe me, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, to the Oxfordian hypothesis. It is the answer to a nonexistent problem. The amazing thing is that anyone could have written the works of Shakespeare. He was obviously a genius; genius is not limited to the upper classes, and is indeed sometimes in short supply there. Let us return to a Shakespeare who lived among the people of whom he wrote.

Soon after he came to London, Shakespeare evidently considered a career as a poet – not a writer of poetic drama, that is, but a writer of lyric verse for publication. Or perhaps he wanted to be a dramatist after all, with lyric poetry as an attractive diversion and sideline. To be a professional poet, at any rate, he needed a sponsor and a publisher. He found both in 1593–4, when the Earl of Southampton befriended him, and a Stratford friend of his father, Richard Field, agreed to publish separately two lengthy poems by Shakespeare. Serious outbreaks of the plague may also have given him the opportunity to write these poems; in such times, the London authorities closed down the theatres as a public health precaution, and Shakespeare may have been underemployed as an actor and playwright.

The poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, reveal in their dedicatory notes a warmth of gratitude for the dedicatee, Southampton. The letter attached to the second poem is especially affectionate: 'The love I dedicate to Your Lordship is without end', and so on. Granted that obsequious flattery was *de rigueur* in such missives, it does seem likely that Southampton provided some financial support, as well as the use of his influential name. One traditional speculation is that Southampton gave Shakespeare the 'stake' he needed to buy into his position as shareholder of the newly-formed Lord Chamberlain's acting company in 1594. Another is that Southampton is the young man addressed in the Sonnets. More about that in a moment. The most interesting speculation is to wonder if Shakespeare aimed at being dependent on such aristocratic patronage for a possible career as a professional poet. John Lyly had been secretary to the Earl of Oxford in the 1580s; Edmund Spenser served as secretary to Lord Grey in the 1590s. Then as now, one could not easily

Plate 2 Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, portrait by Jon de Critz the Elder, 1603. By kind permission of His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensbury. Print supplied by the National Portrait Gallery.

make an independent living as a poet; sponsorship provided the ready answer, if one could find a generous sponsor. We will never know how seriously Shakespeare considered this alternative, since the theatre made it possible for him to be a successful and even wealthy writer. The theatre and its public audience became his sponsor.

Shakespeare's poems give us invaluable insight into his craft as a writer. His two long poems are certainly not among his greatest works, but they do reveal much about his approach to imagery and the rhetorical devices of the trade. *Venus and Adonis* is an amorous poem based primarily on a well-known legend found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* The plot is a slender one: the goddess Venus becomes enamoured of a mortal young man, who proves to be bashful and reluctant. She attempts to steer him away from his avid desire to hunt the boar, but does not prevail. He is mortally wounded by a gash from the boar's tusk in his flank, and is metamorphosed into a purple-and-white anemone. To this slender story Shakespeare adds touches from the legends of Hermaphroditus and Narcissus, both of them self-infatuated young men who are put off by erotic heterosexual love. These are themes well calculated to the tastes of Southampton, and they re-emerge in the Sonnets.

What interests us most in this early poem is its approach to poetic craftsmanship. The poem is written in six-line stanzas and is organized as a narrative. Much time is spent in erotic contemplation of Venus's physical charms and her unsuccessful blandishments. In the following sample, Venus has cornered her unwilling partner, enfolding him in her arms and refusing to let him go:

> 'Fondling', she saith, 'since I have hemmed thee here
> Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
> I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer.
> Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
>   Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry,
>   Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.
>
> 'Within this limit is relief enough,
> Sweet bottom grass and high delightful plain,
> Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
> To shelter thee from tempest and from rain.
>   Then be my deer, since I am such a park;
>   No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark.'
>
> (229–40)

The imagery here is designed to titillate the reader with the prospect of Venus's body as a landscape, complete with hills (breasts), bottom grass (pubic hair), a high plain (the Mons Veneris), hillocks (the buttocks), obscure brakes (the hair-covered sexual entrance to her body), and so on. She offers her body as a cave for Adonis to enter and shelter himself from the ravages of this world. The conventional wordplay on deer/dear reinforces the amorous double meaning of the passage. The language titillates, even while it also offers itself as an exercise in wit: poet and reader alike are invited to work out the details of the analogy, allowing the mind to picture a sexual topography in as vivid detail as is desired. The wit is comic, ironic, distancing; we are permitted to see what is risible in the situation of a very nubile and well-built goddess vamping a narcissistic young man. The male reader, especially, is given the opportunity to wonder what it would be like for him to feed on Venus's plenteous and willingly proffered body. It is a sexual fantasy, controlled as such by the counter-impulse for the young male to discipline himself instead to the art of hunting. The verbal devices in this passage fit the occasion: the pleasing alternative rhyme (abab) leading to the final couplet (cc) of each stanza, the delight in antithesis (mountain/dale, upper body/lower body, hills/fountains, bottom grass/high plain), the use of recurrent sound effects to reinforce these antitheses (round rising/rough), and still more.

Such were the arts of rhetoric that would-be poets studied to perfect their craft in Shakespeare's day. Manuals of rhetoric by George Puttenham (*The Art of English Poesie*, 1589) and others were plentifully available, like how-to books. Poetry was seen as a branch of rhetoric; one learned to make one's ideas more persuasive and affective by adorning those ideas with images, extended metaphors, and 'conceits' (as they were called). The art of *Venus and Adonis* is the art of rhetoric, here being practised by an eager apprentice.

The Rape of Lucrece (1594) is more lugubrious and tragic. It chooses as its narrative a well-known account (as told in Ovid's *Fasti*) of the wife of a Roman nobleman who takes her own life after she has been raped by the son and heir of Tarquin the Proud, tyrant of the early Roman state. Lucretia, or Lucrece, chooses to die rather than live to bring shame on her husband's name; though blameless, she is now polluted and unchaste. Lucrece is thus presented as the model of innocent, dutiful, and victimized wifehood. The poem does not question her motives or her moral view of right and wrong in choosing to die. The poem thus envisages a subservient role for women, placing an extraordinary premium on chastity

and the husband's right to possess his wife to the exclusion of other men. At the same time it presents a dark view of male sexual importunity. The rape is described in painful detail: Tarquin's guilty turning of the latch as he steals into her chamber at night, her radiant beauty as she lies asleep (revealing, demurely, 'Her breasts like ivory globes circled with blue'), Tarquin's unavailing struggles with his conscience, his rude hand advancing on her breasts ('round turrets') made pale and destitute by this outrage, her imploring him to remember his knightly oaths, his obduracy, his suppressing her piteous clamours by wrapping her night-linen around her head, and, in the aftermath, remorse, self-loathing, and disgrace. Like *Venus and Adonis*, this poem invites the male reader to participate vicariously in a sexual encounter, but it does so in such a way as to make male sexuality seem dirty and violent.

The poetic method relies again on extended metaphor applied as ornament. Here is a description of Tarquin as he first stands over the sleeping Lucrece in her bed:

> As the grim lion fawneth o'er his prey,
> Sharp hunger by the conquest satisfied,
> So o'er this sleeping soul doth Tarquin stay,
> His rage of lust by gazing qualified –
> Slaked, not suppressed, for, standing by her side,
>   His eye, which late this mutiny restrains,
>   Unto a greater uproar tempts his veins.
> (421–7)

The conventional image of a lion menacing its prey is linked in the poem to other such metaphors of assault drawn from the world of nature: a falcon towering in the skies over its victim, a black-faced cloud obscuring the sun, a 'foul night-waking cat' playing sadistically with a poor little mouse, weeds that overgrow the corn, frosts threatening the spring, a cockatrice or basilisk stalking a white female deer, a vulture, and so on. These images crowd into the poem at the moment of the atrocity to heighten the effects of pity and terror. The seven-line stanza (ababbcc) is the so-called rhyme royal, used to splendid effect by Chaucer in his *Troilus and Criseyde*, and is appropriate here to a serious subject.

As in *Venus and Adonis*, part of the aesthetic pleasure for the reader lies in the analogy; one is asked to picture the scene by imagining at once a brutal man standing over a sleeping woman and a lion slaking its hunger