

Shakespeare and Jonson perhaps tipped together in taverns, and had a relationship of sorts for many years. Jonson repeatedly criticized Shakespeare and his plays, and on at least one occasion gentle Shakespeare may have retaliated. In the third Cambridge Parnassus play (1601?) Will Kempe says 'O that Ben Jonson is a pestilent fellow, he brought up Horace giving the poets a pill [in *Poetaster*], but our fellow Shakespeare hath given him a purge that made him beray [foul] his credit [i.e. shit himself].' Jonson was Shakespeare's only major and persistent critic. He was jealous, and could not bear to praise the 'sweet swan of Avon' until after his great rival's death.

In the present century we have learned much about his friends and associates, less about Shakespeare. An American, C. W. Wallace, discovered law-suits that give us vivid pictures of Richard Burbage and his father and, even more important, the Belott–Mountjoy suit of 1612. Stephen Belott had served as apprentice to Mountjoy, a French Huguenot, and had married his master's daughter in 1604. Shakespeare, then a lodger in Mountjoy's house, deposed that he had known the parties for ten years or so, and that he was asked to persuade Belott to marry Mary Mountjoy. He recalled that Mountjoy promised to give a 'portion' with Mary, 'but what certain portion he remembereth not'. A diplomatic loss of memory? He signed his deposition, one of only six surviving signatures. It is sometimes transliterated as 'Willm Shakp' but, as C. J. Sisson pointed out to me almost fifty years ago, it ends with a penman's flourish and should read 'Wilm Shak.'

The discoveries of Leslie Hotson, a Canadian, match Wallace's in importance. After *The Death of Christopher Marlowe* (1925) he published, in *Shakespeare versus Shallow* (1931), documents involving various persons close to the theatrical world. Francis Langley, the owner of the Swan theatre, claimed 'sureties of the peace' (i.e. the protection of the law) against William Gardiner, a Southwark JP, and William Wayte; Wayte then claimed 'sureties' against William 'Shakspere', Langley, Dorothy Soer, and Anne Lee (1596). Hotson argued that Gardiner and Wayte were lampooned as Justice Shallow and Slender in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. His most exciting detective-work followed in *I, William Shakespeare* (1937), an account of Thomas Russell, Esq., a friend named as overseer (assistant to the executors) in Shakespeare's will. Russell owned an estate at Alderminster, four miles from Stratford, and was the stepfather of Sir Dudley and Leonard Digges. Sir Dudley probably gave Shakespeare access to William Strachey's unpublished letter to the Council of the Virginia Company, describing a shipwreck in the Bermudas: this suggested details for *The Tempest*. Leonard Digges, born in 1588, young enough to be Shakespeare's son, contributed verses to the First Folio and a longer memorial poem printed later (1640). He revered Shakespeare the man and the 'fire and feeling' of his plays.

Be sure, our Shakespeare, thou canst never die,
But, crowned with laurel, live eternally.

Again, *our* Shakespeare!

Many stories circulated in Shakespeare's lifetime and after his death from less well-informed sources—the 'Shakespeare mythos'. They portrayed him as a poacher, a hard drinker, a lover, and of course a master at repartee. There may well be some truth in some of these anecdotes, or are they too good to be true? John Manningham recorded one in his diary in 1602. When Burbage played Richard III, a woman in the audience made an assignation with him

to come that night unto her by the name of [i.e. using as password] Richard the Third. Shakespeare, overhearing their conclusion [arrangement], went before, was entertained and at his game ere Burbage came. Then message being brought that Richard the Third was at the door. Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third.

A story more in character with the ethos of the plays, though not of the Sonnets, we owe to Sir Nicholas L'Estrange (mid-seventeenth century).

Shakespeare was godfather to one of Ben Jonson's children, and after the christening, being in a deep study, Jonson came to cheer him up and asked him why he was so melancholy. 'No, faith, Ben,' says he, 'not I. But I have been considering a great while what should be the fittest gift for me to bestow upon my godchild, and I have resolved at last.' 'I prythee what?' says he. 'I'faith, Ben, I'll e'en give him a dozen good latten spoons, and thou shalt translate them.'

Notice two puns. Translate could mean 'transform'; godfathers usually gave silver spoons, latten being a cheap alloy. Here Shakespeare appears to smile at Jonson's condescending view of his rival's small Latin and less Greek.

Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616, his widow on 6 August 1623. Their daughters outlived them—Susanna till July 1649, Judith till February 1662. Judith's three sons died without issue; Susanna's only child, Elizabeth, was married twice, first to Thomas Nash, and after his death to John (later Sir John) Bernard. Elizabeth died childless: with her death in 1670 the descent from Shakespeare became extinct.

'He was indeed honest', Jonson summed up after Shakespeare's death, 'and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fancy, brave notions and gentle expressions.' Like so many other allusions, this one needs to be translated into modern English. Jonson probably meant 'He was indeed an honourable man, and of an unreserved and spontaneous nature; had an excelling imagination, fine ideas and admirable ways of expressing himself.'

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