

Shakespeare's business acumen must have been quite exceptional. In the course of time, as he prospered, he took on new responsibilities, with four distinct roles in his company: (1) 'sharer', one of ten or so owners of the company's assets (play-books, play clothes, properties); (2) 'householder', one of the owners or lease-holders of the Globe and Blackfriars theatres; (3) dramatist; (4) actor. Other dramatists were paid from £6 to £12 per play, prices that were clearly negotiable. Shakespeare must have known that his plays were his company's most precious asset, and might have demanded much more than others. He seems to have written, on average, two plays a year until 1602 or so, and thereafter one a year, and this could have been his major contribution.

Dramatists rehearsed their plays with the actors; we hear that Shakespeare 'instructed' them, and Jonson may have glanced at this practice in his memorial poem:

Shine forth, thou star of poets, and with rage
Or influence chide or cheer the drooping stage. (77-8)

Hamlet cheers the players when they arrive in Elsinore (2.2.405 ff.) and later warns them against overacting (3.2.1 ff.). The voice of Shakespeare himself?

He 'did act exceedingly well', according to Aubrey. James Wright (1699) heard otherwise—he was 'a much better poet than player'. 'The top of his performance', said Rowe, 'was the ghost in his own *Hamlet*.' He is also believed to have played Adam in *As You Like It*. It seems likely that he took supporting roles; after 1603 he dropped out of his company's actor-lists, and perhaps felt that he could use his time more profitably in other ways. I imagine that by 1603 he was in a position to do more or less as he wished in his company. He remained with the Chamberlain's Men (known as the King's Men from 1603) for the rest of his working life, writing all told more than three dozen plays.

The order in which he wrote the plays is now pretty well agreed. Yet 'internal' or stylistic evidence and 'external' evidence (references to plays in dateable documents, or references in plays to historical events) give us very few firm dates for individual plays. For example, the allusion to the War of the Theatres in *Hamlet* (2.2.326 ff.) could have been a later insertion in the Folio text or a cut in the second quarto; if *The Troublesome Reign of King John* was a derivative play based on *King John* and not the source of Shakespeare's play, the dates of most of the early plays would have to be changed. Fortunately Francis Meres published, in 1598, a list of twelve of Shakespeare's plays (including one called *Love's Labour's Won*), an important event for two reasons. He supplied the date by which these plays must have been written, and he named their author. Only some of the twelve had been published before 1598, and they had been issued anonymously.

Until at least 1603 Shakespeare devoted most of his time to the theatre. Nevertheless he had begun to invest heavily in property in Stratford. In 1597 he bought a three-storey house called New Place, the second largest in the town; in 1602 he added 107 acres (43 ha) of arable land and 20 acres (8 ha) of pasture in Old Stratford, paying £320 in cash, an even bigger purchase, and, later in the same year, he bought the copyhold title to a cottage and garden facing the garden of New Place; in 1605 he paid £440 for a lease of tithes in neighbouring villages (this alone yielded an income of £60 p.a.). And he had other business interests: in 1597 he was possessed of 80 bushels of corn and malt (as a speculation?); some years later he sued Philip Rogers for a debt of 20 bushels of malt; in 1608 he sued John Addenbrooke, gent., for a debt of £6. In 1598 a Stratford man, Richard Quiney, wrote to Shakespeare to ask for a loan of £30. The tone of the letter and its financial implications are interesting.

Loving countryman, I am bold of you as of a friend, craving your help with £30 upon Mr Bushell's and my security or Mr Mitton's with me . . . You shall friend me much in helping me out of all the debts I owe in London, I thank God, and much quiet my mind . . . You shall neither lose credit nor money by me, the Lord willing . . . and if we bargain farther you shall be the paymaster yourself . . . The Lord be with you and with us all, amen. [Addressed] Haste. To my loving good friend and countryman, Mr Wm. 'Shackespere' deliver these.

The tone is civilized and gentlemanly; the financial implications are spelt out in a letter from Abraham Sturley to Quiney, recommending caution. Sturley had heard 'that our countryman, Mr Wm. Shak., would procure us money, which I will like of as I shall hear when and where and how'. He warned that the conditions of the loan would be crucial, implying that 'Mr Wm. Shak.' might drive a hard bargain. Like his father, John, who had lent large sums (£80, £100) at the illegal rate of 20 per cent, William seems to have had a sideline as a money-lender, while at the same time Shylock thrilled audiences in London. (The financial manager of a rival acting company, the Admiral's Men, kept a thriving pawnshop; his accounts have survived.)

How much was Shakespeare helped as a businessman by his parents? It has recently emerged that his father was not only capable of raising very large sums before he experienced those mysterious difficulties in the 1570s and 1580s, he was also accused of illegal wool-dealing (buying 200 tods of wool, or 5,600 pounds, with another purchaser and 100 tods on his own). It is sometimes said that William must have helped to finance his father's application for a coat of arms in 1596 (for which there is no evidence whatsoever. On the contrary: the heralds had noted that John 'hath lands and tenements of good wealth, and substance £500'). Is it perhaps more significant that William began to invest large sums in 1602, eight months after his father died, amounting to something not far removed from £500? I think it quite possible that his parents helped him financially at the start of his career, and even that his mother acted as his business manager in Stratford after 1601, and that her illness and death (in 1608) compelled him to spend more time at home, at least for a while.

Shakespeare's last known investment, the purchase of the Blackfriars Gatehouse in London in 1613 (for £140) has been described as a 'speculation rather than for use as a dwelling. He had by then retired to Stratford'—yet in the same year he helped to write two or three plays (*Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the lost *Cardenio*), so he did not think of himself as retired. The Gatehouse, close to the Blackfriars theatre, would have been a convenient London home; aged 49, he could not know that he had only three more years to live.

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