Preface: impersonal Shakespeare

In his *Essays on Goethe* (1828) Thomas Carlyle concluded, 'In every man's writings the character of the writer must lie recorded ... his opinions, character, personality ... are and must be decipherable in his writings.'¹ But four lines later Carlyle confessed he found William Shakespeare stubbornly enigmatic: 'Who knows or can figure what the Man Shakespeare was, by the first, by the twentieth perusal of his works?' Eighty years later in *The Impersonal Aspect of Shakespeare's Art*, Sidney Lee dismissed any 'critical test whereby we can distinguish Shakespeare's private utterances and opinions ... Where is the critical chemistry which will disentangle, precipitate, isolate his personal views and sentiments?'² Robert Browning, speaking as Shakespeare, sneered, 'Which of you did I enable Once to slip into my breast There to catalogue and label What I like least, what love best?'³ Citing a multitude of such commentators, in 1991 Samuel Schoenbaum cautioned: 'if we try to get at Shakespeare's opinions by arbitrarily tearing passages from their context, we court hopeless perplexity'. Schoenbaum dubbed those foolhardy enough to try 'personalists' who 'ignore Shakespeare's dependence on written sources, rather than private experiences, for the material of his plays'.⁴

Despite Schoenbaum's warning, the twenty-first century has seen a remarkable run of intrusive biographies which attribute Shakespeare's opacity to crypto-Catholicism, wariness of tetchy censors, or a calculated self-distancing from the intrigues that roiled Tudor-Stuart England. These range from aggressive (Richard Wilson) to artful (Stephen Greenblatt) to measured (James Shapiro) to bizarre (Clare Asquith).⁵

The present book is not an attempt at biography. It proceeds from the modest assumption that Shakespeare's plays are more

personal than we have recognized, that numerous characters and events he depicts were drawn from life, and that some of these may be recoverable.

I intend to explore aspects of William Shakespeare's plays and sonnets which scholars have overlooked or misinterpreted, thereby better to understand the plays and the man. I will sift for clues to his relationships with people who mattered: family, friends, colleagues, patrons, lovers, enemies. Sieving for these traces – in effect reading Shakespeare's mind – can be risky business; it is neither pure literary criticism nor objective historiography, though it must respect the rubrics of both. Rather, my investigations rely on a fundamental tenet of criticism: no author, his milieu and his times, are entirely separable from his works. Every *oeuvre* constitutes an autobiography of the writer – and in the case of a great writer, of an age.

In riddling his texts for the personal Shakespeare, of necessity I will engage with several cruces long believed inscrutable. Early readers have cautioned that some of my inferences may be received as doubtful and some of my interpretations exceptional. Not every reader will accept my solution to Malvolio's *M.O.A.I.* conundrum in *Twelfth Night*, or agree that 'Quinapalus' is an anagram of 'Aquinas' and 'Paul'. Opinion may bridle at the suggestion that Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It* to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the death of Christopher Marlowe and created the character of Jaques in the dead man's image. Readers reluctant to entertain Emilia Bassano Lanier as the 'Dark Lady' of the sonnets may find it difficult to accept her religious heritage and flawed marriage as the inspiration for Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*. Even those who accept Gabriel Harvey as the model for Malvolio may balk at acknowledging Thomas Nashe behind the mask of Feste (and that of Touchstone) – just as some may shrug off my explanation for the vengeance-seeking steward filing suit against Viola's loyal Captain.

I am keenly aware that each of my inferences will admit three interpretations:

1. The parallels are merely coincidental, and any relationship between Shakespeare's text and actual persons living or dead is imaginary.
2. Shakespeare had the referent on his mind and it seeped into his text via subconscious activity.

3. Shakespeare intentionally created the connection, though he knew that only a handful of auditors would recognize it.

I will vigorously maintain the latter, that is, there are numerous passages in the plays which Shakespeare intended to be opaque to the mass audience but transparent to a coterie with specialized knowledge or personal connections.

This is *not* to suggest Shakespeare wrote in some arcane code decipherable only by fellow Rosicrucians, Freemasons, or anti-Petrarchanists. I am merely suggesting that events in a writer's life can and do inspire his choice of material and shape his language, sometimes in ways that only his intimates can recognize. This is hardly a radical notion. But I intend to press its boundaries. Those who seek affirmation of my views in current (or past) scholarly editions will not find reassurance; this book does not rehearse received wisdom but attempts to peer beyond it. Readers willing to restrain the impulse to pedanticism – that hobgoblin of progressive scholarship – may find that the solutions to Shakespeare's enigmas offered here are the best we have.

I owe sincere thanks to Professor Lisa Hopkins for encouraging my research on Christopher Marlowe and *As You Like It*, and to Ms Jocelyn Medawar, who gave me new insight into the play. As well, I owe an inestimable debt to my teachers, the late Dennis Kay, John Pitcher, Bill Carroll, the late Tony Nuttall, Gordon Kipling, and particularly Barbara Everett and the late Emrys Jones for instruction and inspiration.

Steve Sohmer
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Notes

- 1 Thomas Carlyle, *Essays on Goethe* (London: Cassell, 1905), 78.
- 2 Sidney Lee, *The Impersonal Aspect of Shakespeare's Art*, address before the English Association, London, 11 June 1909 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), 7.
- 3 Robert Browning, 'At the "Mermaid"' (1876), in *The Works of Robert Browning*, Riverside Edition, 6 vols (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin), V.333.
- 4 Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 360–1. Schoenbaum apparently never wrote a play.

- 5 Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (New York: Norton, 2004); James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Clare Asquith, *Shadowplay* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

N.B. While this book was in production, the *New York Times* for 24 October 2016 reported: “The New Oxford Shakespeare edition of the playwright’s works ... lists Christopher Marlowe as Shakespeare’s co-author on the three *Henry VI* plays, parts 1, 2 and 3. It’s the first time that a major edition of Shakespeare’s works has listed Shakespeare’s colleague and rival as a co-author on these works, the volume’s general editor, Gary Taylor, said in a phone interview.” Professor Taylor’s announcement lends conviction to my suggestion below that young Shakespeare had closer relations with Marlowe than we have imagined. In chapter 2, ‘Marlowe’s ghost in *As You Like It*’, I suggest the men had a mentoring and perhaps intimate relationship, and that Shakespeare wrote his pastoral comedy in 1600 as a seven years’ memorial to his “dead shepherd” who died in 1593.