

Epilogue: personal Shakespeare

This book ends where it began: with echoes of Nashe and Johnson railing against close readers – those ‘mice-eyed decipherers’ who ‘profess to have a Key for the decyphering of every thing’ in a book or play. These and other shrill disclaimers tell us Elizabethans and Jacobeans read and listened to their authors as closely as modern scholars do. And those early auditors had a stupendous advantage over even the best-informed of us: they breathed in the same milieu as Shakespeare and were alert to the same events, trends, personalities, conflicts, scandals, rumours, slang, parlour games, capers, larks, and jokes. What wouldn’t a modern scholar give to attend the Bankside Globe one drizzly May afternoon in 1600 to hear *As You Like It* as one of Harvey’s ‘wiser sort’ did, with ears and eyes tuned to catch every nuance, intimation, allusion, and innuendo of London life? Shakespeare’s auditors came to the theatre and thumbed his quartos with an awareness we can’t share. Clearly, their efforts at deciphering were not disappointed.

What I have suggested throughout this book is that Shakespeare wrote into his plays certain passages and characters imbued with intensely personal significance, and that these were perceptible only to a few among the many; for that reason, their subtexts have eluded Shakespeare’s commentators. It is also true that after four hundred years of study by legions of mice-eyed scholars, ‘Eureka!’ moments have become few and far between. But new opportunities for deeper understanding of Shakespeare’s works (and the man) are still there if only we approach his texts with informed particularity, but also in a comprehensive way. It’s not the presence of passionate shepherd Silvius or Jaques’ impious ‘*duc dame*’ or his spying on Audrey and Touchstone or even Phebe’s citation from *Hero and Leander* that suddenly illuminates Marlowe behind the mask of Jaques. It’s the

accumulation, the accretion of Shakespeare's allusions, hints, clues, winks, and intimations that gradually reveals the face in the mosaic and the workman's technique; once the portrait is seen full-length, how much richer and deeper the colours.

King John has long been recognized as a difficult and unsatisfying play. But with Carey taking the role of Faulconbridge – and the wrong successor, an unknown Prince Henry, suddenly appearing out of nowhere to fill John's vacant throne in 5.7 – how much more pensive and politically relevant the work now seems. If Shakespeare's hopes for resurrection and reunion with his lost son Hamnet, the passing of Nashe, and the anniversary of his twins' baptism on Candlemas underlie the text of *Twelfth Night*, then his motive for ending on a note of melancholia becomes clear and appropriate for the first time.

Throughout this book I have taken one precept as a given: every fiction writer's works – whether stories, novels, poems, or plays – grow out of, are stirred by, and then are saturated with that writer's personal experience and immediate world. A play might be set in stormy Britain before the founding of Rome or in Alexandria in 30 BC or on a balcony in Verona in 1582. But whether a leading character is named Lear or Cleopatra, Cyrano or Willy Loman, Juliet or Jaques, the writer has chosen to tell this story because it illuminates his own life and times. A playwright who devotes himself to writing about, say, Napoleon isn't so much writing about Napoleon as exploiting the Emperor to interrogate a question-issue-event that is dogging his writer's mind. There are persons who write about Napoleon for Napoleon's sake. They are historians.

Simply put, Shakespeare's plays are more personal than we have recognized. He has populated them with his friends, lovers, enemies. I have cited only a handful: Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nashe, Emilia Bassano Lanier, Gabriel Harvey, William Brooke, the Careys, and Hamnet Shakespeare. But the personal associations in Shakespeare's plays remain a dimension less than well understood. Perhaps that was why the playwright remained inscrutable to Thomas Carlyle, and why Sidney Lee found his art '*Impersonal*'. But once Henry Carey's likeness is called to our attention we recognize how much of that royal bastard is in Philip Faulconbridge just as we may now perceive how much of Thom Nashe invests Feste. We waited 378 years for a commentator to recognize Gabriel Harvey in Malvolio. And for decades we may go on quibbling over

whether Emilia Lanier is the one-and-only dark lady of the sonnets. (But isn't she an impeccable model for Jessica?) And what about Marlowe as Jaques? Perhaps we're not yet ready to swallow that whole. But aren't we a bit more hesitant to push the dish aside? As for *Twelfth Night*, this book has presented it as what it really was: a play into which Shakespeare poured friends, enemies, his most bitter loss, and his hopes for heaven.

At the outset I cautioned that not every reader will be satisfied with the inferences I draw, or with my solutions to Shakespeare's cruces. Yet I hope the reader will recognize that those presented here are the best we have. Fifty years ago in his preface to *Shakespeare's Meanings* Sigurd Burckhardt wrote:

I believe that when we read Shakespeare, we are – ultimately – reading his mind; the question is only how well or badly, how scrupulously or wilfully we go about reading. Shakespeare not only abides our questions, he tells us which questions to ask; he took infinite pains to be precisely understood. I am convinced that he can be understood much more truly than he has been.¹

I hope we now better understand Shakespeare's best-known, best-loved comedy as a more personal play – and Shakespeare as a more personal writer – than we have imagined.

Note

- 1 Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespeare's Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), vii.