

SHAKESPEARE'S ANECDOTAL CHARACTER

MARGRETA DE GRAZIA

The Character of the Man is best seen in his Writing.
(Nicholas Rowe)

Why is the Shakespeare of the anecdotes at such variance with the Shakespeare of the biographies? The biographical narrative gives us a Shakespeare of increasing worldly success: more property, more literary acclaim, a coat of arms and a posthumous monument in stone as well as in print. The anecdotal Shakespeare, however, is quite notorious: he violates decorum, breaks laws and even commits sacrilege. Stephen Greenblatt has noted that the biographical Shakespeare left a clean record behind, especially for a man of the theatre: 'The fact that there are no police reports, no privy council orders, indictments, or post-mortem inquests'.¹ This, he maintains, 'tells us something significant about Shakespeare's life – he possessed a gift for staying out of trouble'. But anecdotal Shakespeare repeatedly, almost consistently, *is* in trouble, one might even say *asks* for trouble. Why do these two forms of life-writing deliver such antithetical Shakespeares: the one delinquent and the other respectable?

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The first biography of Shakespeare is generally considered to be *Some Account of the Life &c.* by Nicholas Rowe, prefixed to his 1709 edition, *The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare*.² The edition ushered Shakespeare into the eighteenth century in a brand new format. It divided into six volumes the monolithic folio volume in which the works

had been reproduced four times in the course of the seventeenth century (1623, 1632, 1663–64, 1685). But it also broke from the folio tradition by replacing its elegiac front matter with a forty-page biography. The folio dedication, address and verses responding to Shakespeare's death were discarded and replaced in 1709 with an account of his life, from his birth in Stratford to his grave and monument there. That life performed the same unifying function as had the folio's elegiac preliminaries.³ Prefacing the works of a modern author with a life was something of a novelty. Its value was not self-evident as were those of 'the great Men of Antiquity' – 'their Families, the common Accidents of their Lives, and even their Shape, Make and Features' (i). And indeed the idea of featuring a life was not Rowe's but that of his publisher. It was Jacob Tonson's intent to publish Shakespeare in a bibliographic and typographic format modelled on that accorded to translations of the ancients. As

¹ Stephen Greenblatt, 'The Traces of Shakespeare's Life', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge, 2010), p. 4.

² *The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare*, 6 vols., ed. Nicholas Rowe (London, 1709) 1, pp. i–xl. Subsequent citations to Rowe's *Some Account* will appear parenthetically hereafter. For Alexander Pope's substantial revision of Rowe's *Some Account*, published in his 1725 edition and reprinted throughout the eighteenth century, see S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford, 1991), p. 91.

³ On Shakespeare's decease as the unifying postulate of the First Folio, see Margreta de Grazia, 'Shakespeare's Timeline', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 65 (2014), 379–98.

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1. Gerard van der Gucht: Frontispiece to *The Works of Mr. William Shakspear*, ed. Nicholas Rowe (London, 1709).

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the works of Homer and Virgil, for example, had appeared in multi-volumed format with a prefatory Life, so too would Shakespeare's.⁴

The classicizing intent of Rowe's edition is apparent in its frontispiece (Illustration 1).

Its subject is clear: Shakespeare is being crowned by Comedy and Tragedy, with winged Fame aloft, triumphantly trumpeting Shakespeare's glory, and dark Ignorance quelled under Comedy's foot. The engraved frame is studiously antiquated, with its voluminously draped figures, laurel wreaths and branches, thespian masks and instruments, raised pedestal, and arched recess of classicized pilasters. But the figure honoured by the classical trappings is altogether modern: in period doublet with loose shirt-ties. Even the medium of his likeness is modern: a painted portrait rather than a stone bust, taken from the early seventeenth-century Chandos portrait. The clashing temporalities of frame and enframed are intended to jar. In a witty inversion, the classical world is paying homage to the modern author, instead of the other way around.

Yet anyone who had read the earlier notices about Shakespeare (in Thomas Fuller, William Winstanley, Edward Phillips or Gerard Langbaine) or the critical commentaries on him (by Ben Jonson, John Dryden or Thomas Rymer) might have been surprised to see him so honoured. From the time of his death and throughout the seventeenth century, Shakespeare was known for his lack of learning, particularly his unfamiliarity with the ancients. Born and bred in Stratford, with no formal education beyond grammar school, how could it be otherwise? The engraving foregrounds a problem that dogged Shakespeare until well into the eighteenth century: how could a poet who had neglected the classics be himself a classic? Indeed what Rowe terms his 'Ignorance of the Ancients' (iii) might link him more to the sad figure underfoot than the one laureated by the classical genres. One might also question whether Shakespeare deserved the double crown from Comedy and Tragedy; as Rowe will point out, the majority of Shakespeare's plays were too generically mixed to qualify as either (xvii). And there is something else anomalous: a painting

does not belong on a stone pedestal. Precariously propped up against Comedy's elongated forearm, the portrait would topple, were she to move.

In fact, the frame was designed not for Shakespeare, but for Pierre Corneille. It was lifted for Rowe's edition from the engraving appearing on the frontispiece of several early collections of his works.⁵ In the original engraving, a bust of Corneille sits securely on the stone plinth (Illustration 2). As Stuart Sillars points out in discussing the two engravings, the honorific statuary is perfectly appropriate to the author who is 'arguably the most complete adherent to Aristotelian principles as reinvented by French academic critics'.⁶ But how could the poet indifferent to the classical authorities be elevated to the status of classic? If there were an English counterpart to Corneille, it would have been the poet who, as we shall see, influentially defined himself against Shakespeare – Ben Jonson. As John Dryden would conclude in comparing the two dramatists, it was Jonson who wrote correct plays and who also laid down in his *Timber or Discoveries*,

⁴ On Jacob Tonson's deployment of features associated with translations of the classics (a prefatory life, octavo size, typefaces and print ornaments, quality of paper, and engraved portraits and illustrations) in Rowe's edition of Shakespeare, see Robert B. Hamm Jr., 'Rowe's Shakespeare (1709) and the Tonson House Style', *College Literature*, 31 (2004), 179–205. Paulina Kewes also discusses Tonson's commissioning of Rowe, 'Shakespeare's Lives in Print, 1662–1821', in Robin Myers, ed., *Lives in Print: Biography and the Book Trade from the Middle Ages to the 21st Century* (New Castle, DE, and London, 2002), 55–82.

⁵ For details on the French original and English adaptation, see T. S. R. Boase, 'Illustrations of Shakespeare's Plays in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 10 (1947), p. 86. Though the signature beneath the engraving reads 'M: V dr. Gucht sculp' (Michael van der Gucht), a Flemish engraver employed by Tonson, Boase attributes the engraving to his son, Gerard van der Gucht.

⁶ Stuart Sillars, *The Illustrated Shakespeare, 1709–1875* (Cambridge, 2008), 35. Sillars misidentifies the source of Shakespeare's portrait in the roundel as 'a replica of the Droeshout portrait'. On Corneille's classicism or *régulier*, see John D. Lyons, 'Regularity: Articulating the Aesthetic', in *Kingdom of Disorder: The Theory of Tragedy in Classical France* (West Lafayette, Ind., 1999), pp. 1–42, esp. pp. 1–9.

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2. Guillaume Vallet, after Antoine Paillet: Frontispiece to *Oeuvres de Pierre Corneille* (Rouen, 1664).

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'as many and profitable Rules for perfecting the Stage, as any wherewith the *French* can furnish us'.⁷

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As Rowe maintains at the very start of his *Some Account*, Shakespeare's education was limited. He was educated in Stratford, 'for some time in a Free-school, where 'tis probable he acquir'd that little *Latin* he was Master of' (ii). Nor was his provincial grammar school education ever completed. According to Rowe, his father, Mr John Shakespear, a wool-dealer with ten children, under straitened circumstances, 'was forc'd to withdraw him from thence, and unhappily prevented his further Proficiency in that Language' (iii). Because he needed his eldest son to help with his own trade, the boy's schooling continued in his father's workshop: 'he could give him no better education than his own employment' (ii).

After the account of Shakespeare's aborted education, Rowe moves on to his forced departure from Stratford: 'an Extravagance that he was guilty of, forc'd him both out of his Country and that way of Living which he had taken up' (v). He poached deer from Sir Thomas Lucy's park, 'more than once', is prosecuted, and then protests so bitterly that Sir Thomas redoubles his prosecution, compelling Shakespeare to flee to London, an outlaw. Rowe has named his offence carefully: it is an 'extravagance', a word that maintained close connection to its Latin roots (*extra*, beyond + *vagari*, to wander) into the eighteenth century; in John Kersey's 1702 *A New English Dictionary*, 'extravagant' is defined as 'wandering beyond the due bounds', and is synonymous with 'disordinate', 'irregular', 'wild', 'savage', 'furious' and 'hair-brain'd'. By 'robbing a park', Shakespeare both trespasses on another man's land and seizes his property.⁸ And he offends 'more than once'. When made accountable, he strikes back with another injury, this time against Lucy's reputation, with a libellous ballad. And his vindictiveness does not stop when he flees Stratford: in London, many years after the trespass, as Rowe relates, it is still

rankling when he satirizes his old prosecutor in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (xviii).

As his career began in Stratford with offence and injury, so too does it end there, 'some Years before his Death' (xxv), and in another instance of going too far. In retirement, by virtue of his 'pleasurable Wit, and good Nature', he spends time 'in pleasant conversation' with various of his neighbours; 'Amongst them . . . he had a particular Intimacy with Mr. *Combe*, an old Gentleman noted thereabouts for his Wealth and Usury' (xxxvi). On the assumption that Shakespeare would outlive him, Mr. *Combe* 'in a laughing manner' asks the poet to write his epitaph. Shakespeare 'immediately' obliges, but hardly in the jocular spirit of the request. His epitaph first reduces *Combe's* chances of salvation to ten per cent, the interest rate he has been charging, '*Ten in the Hundred lies here ingrav'd / 'Tis a Hundred to Ten, his Soul is not sav'd*', before envisioning his outright damnation: '*If any Man ask, Who lies in this Tomb? / Oh! ho! quoth the Devil, 'tis my John-a-Combe*'. Thus a genial request produces a hostile response, '[T]he Sharpness of the Satyr is said to have stung the Man so severely, that he never forgave it.' Rowe says no more, but this is the anecdote that later Shakespearians are most keen to repudiate, as repelled by Shakespeare's maleficence here as they are by Hamlet's desire to kill Claudius at his prayers.⁹ Both forms of malice, by targeting the afterlife of the soul, overstep divine prerogative.

Thus upon both leaving Stratford and returning to it, in his first piece of writing as well as his last, Shakespeare acts in violation of laws and norms. He ends up exiled from his native town at the

⁷ *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, ed. Samuel Holt Monk (Berkeley, 1971), vol. 17, p. 58, in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, H. T. Swedenberg Jr. and Vinton A. Dearing, 20 vols. (Berkeley, 1956–2000).

⁸ See entry for 'extravagant', *Lexicons of Early Modern English*, leme.library.utoronto.ca/

⁹ On the unsettling possibility that this epitaph, rather than *The Tempest*, might be Shakespeare's last non-collaborative work, see Alfred Corn, 'Shakespeare's Epitaph', *Hudson Review*, 64:2 (2011), 295–303, p. 295.

start of his career and alienating his companions at its close. Two pieces of injurious writing frame his career: a libellous ballad and a scathing epitaph, both in excess of their respective occasions, the one felonious, the other bad-mannered. It could be said that extravagance characterizes his behaviour from start to finish.

And not only his behaviour. When Rowe remarks on the 'beautiful Extravagance, which we admire in *Shakespear*' (iii), it is not law or manners that Shakespeare has exceeded, but the rules of art. Shakespeare's abbreviated grammar school education accounts for an undisputed fact: 'It is without Controversie, that he had no knowledge of the Writings of the Antient Poets' (iii). This can be inferred 'from his Works themselves, where we find no traces of anything that looks like an Imitation of [the Ancients] . . . so that his not copying at least something from them, may be an Argument of his never having read 'em'. The plays do reveal some learning: 'Some *Latin* without question he did know, and one may see up and down in his Plays how far his Reading that way went.' Rowe supposes it went about as far as that of Chiron, 'one of the *Gothick* princes' in *Titus Andronicus* who recognizes 'a Verse in Horace' from his school-boy Latin, 'Which, I suppose, was the Author's Case' (iv). Rowe is puzzled by how Shakespeare could have based *The Comedy of Errors* on Plautus's *Menaechmi*, doubting he was 'Master of *Latin* enough to read it in the Original' (xv) and knowing of no contemporary translation. Yet while Shakespeare's unfamiliarity with the Ancients is blamed for his incorrect and irregular writing, it might also be credited with his explosive vitality: 'For tho' the knowledge of [the Ancients] might have made him more Correct, yet it is not improbable but that the Regularity and Deference for them . . . might have restrain'd some of that Fire, Impetuosity, and even beautiful Extravagance, which we admire in *Shakespear*' (iii).

The irregularity of Shakespeare's plots is so well known that Rowe hardly comments on it, except to complain that the plot in *The Merchant of Venice* turns on 'that extravagant and unusual kind of Bond' (xxi) in which a loan of 3000 ducats can

be quit with a pound of flesh. *The Tempest* is the exception, singled out for its respect of the unities: 'the Unities are kept here with an Exactness uncommon to the Liberties of his Writing' (xxiii). In general, however, the 'Liberties of his Writing' prevail, without attention to generic decorum or the dramatic unities.

While irregularity mars plots (held primary by the Ancients), it makes for Shakespeare's most applauded characters. There is the 'extravagant Character of Caliban . . . a wonderful Invention in the Author, who could strike out such a particular wild image . . . one of the finest and most uncommon Grotesques that was ever seen' (xxiv). The melancholy of Jaques in *As You Like It* is 'as singular and odd as it is diverting' (xx). Petruchio is an 'uncommon piece of Humour' (xviii). Grinning and cross-gartered, 'the fantastical Steward *Malvolio*' is another favorite: 'there is something singularly Ridiculous and Pleasant' in him (xix). Also singled out for admiration is the 'irregular Greatness of mind in *M. Antony*', the Roman general who 'o'erflows the measure' (xxx).

By consensus, Shakespeare's greatest character is the fat knight who admits to living 'out of all order, out of all compass': '*Falstaff* is allow'd by every body to be a Master-piece' (xvii). His extravagances are multiple: 'theft, lying, cowardice, vain-glory: and in short, every kind of viciousness' (xviii). If there is any fault in his characterization, it is that Shakespeare 'has given him so much Wit as to make him almost too agreeable'; audiences, therefore, regret his banishment in *2 Henry IV*. Wit is the faculty Shakespeare also possesses in abundance; Rowe notes 'the advantages of his Wit' (viii), 'the Reputation of his Wit' (ix), 'the power of his Wit' (x). He and Falstaff have something else in common: 'Amongst other Extravagances, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, [Shakespeare] has made [Falstaff] a Dear-stealer', and made Falstaff's prosecutor a Warwickshire justice who possesses a coat of arms 'very near' that of Shakespeare's prosecutor, Sir Thomas Lucy. It is not Hamlet or Prospero who bears a special affinity to Shakespeare, but Falstaff. So, too, do his other singular characters: their excesses reflect

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his unruly anecdotal character as well as the irregularity of his style.

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For the middle period of Shakespeare's life, Rowe has no records, other than the plays themselves. The reference to the vestal virgin in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is 'plainly' a compliment to Queen Elizabeth (viii), who admired and encouraged Shakespeare: 'Queen Elizabeth had several of his Plays Acted before her, and without doubt gave him many gracious Marks of her Favour.' Yet she is not so pleased when in his history plays he provocatively named his fat rogue after the Protestant martyr Sir John Oldcastle. She commanded Shakespeare to change the name, and he does alter it, but not without offending the descendants of another Sir John, a Knight of the Garter and war hero: 'The [first] Offence was indeed avoided; but I don't know whether the Author may not have been somewhat to blame in his second Choice' (ix). (Anecdotal Shakespeare specializes in writing that offends the living and the dead: a libellous ballad, a scathing epitaph and a defamatory impersonation.) The Queen seems less concerned to protect noble reputations in her next command: she 'commanded [Shakespeare] to continue [him] for one Play more, and to shew him in Love' (viii–ix). The possibility of Falstaff's making a comeback may have come at the suggestion of the Epilogue at the end of 2 *Henry IV* who allows for a sequel in which 'Falstaff shall die of a sweat', though not in the fashion of his original namesake, who was hanged and burned: 'For Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man'. While the Epilogue's promise is never realized in *Henry V*, the Queen's command resulted in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and '[h]ow well she was obey'd, the Play it self is an admirable Proof'. The play, it must be said, admirably proves no such thing. Hiding in a dirty laundry basket and pilloried in the guise of 'the fat woman of Brentford', 'the greasy knight' comes closer to the Epilogue's dying of a sweat than Elizabeth's being 'in Love'. Rowe praises the '*Billet-doux*' Falstaff sends to Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, but with qualification: they are 'very good Expressions of Love

in their Way' (xix). 'In their Way' seems to imply the unusual status of Falstaff's love letters, mass-produced with mercenary intent. Shakespeare, it would seem, either neglected the royal command or indeed flouted it.

The same paragraph that describes Queen Elizabeth's patronage of Shakespeare tells of the Earl of Southampton's. Evidence for this relationship, too, is located in Shakespeare's works, in this instance, the dedication of *Venus and Adonis* to Southampton.¹⁰ Rowe uses the same epithet to describe Southampton's patronage, as he had Elizabeth's – 'Marks of Favour' – but with suggestive additions: Shakespeare 'had the Honour to meet with many great and uncommon Marks of Favour and Friendship from the Earl of *Southampton*, famous in the Histories of that Time for his Friendship to the unfortunate Earl of *Essex*'. Shakespeare received not only 'Favour' but 'Friendship' from Southampton, who in turn was renowned for his 'Friendship' with the Earl of Essex, who was 'unfortunate' in having led a rebellion against the Queen in which Southampton colluded: both were tried for treason, the former executed, the latter incarcerated. Shakespeare, Rowe had earlier noted, had also been acquainted with Essex, as could be inferred from *Henry V*, which in its final act features 'a Compliment very handsomly turn'd to the Earl of Essex' (vii). Especially after notice of Shakespeare's lax obedience to the Queen's commands, his association with her two adversaries might hint at errant political leanings, another form of extravagance.

Startling to Rowe is the exceptional magnitude of Southampton's patronage, '[a] Bounty very great, and very rare at any time': £1000 (x). To enable his eighteenth-century readers to appreciate the sum's enormity, Rowe gives its current equivalent. £1000 in Shakespeare's day was 'almost equal to that profuse Generosity the present Age has shewn to French Dancers and Italian

¹⁰ Rowe does not mention the dedication to Southampton in *Lucrece*, though he does name *Tarquin* and *Lucrece* among the works by Shakespeare not included in his edition, *Some Account*, p. xxxix.

Eunuchs' (x). Rowe's figures are quite accurate. In 1700, Thomas Betterton, the actor and manager of the Duke's Company whom Rowe credits with the gathering of materials for his *Some Account* (xxxiv), bemoaned the crushing expense of procuring French dancers.¹¹ In 1710, Senesino, a celebrated castrato from Sienna (for whom Handel wrote arias) was offered the vast sum of £2000 a year to perform in London.¹² This adds a peculiar cast to Southampton's generosity: the sum he has given Shakespeare in exchange for his services to literature approximates what theatre impresarios of Rowe's day were willing to pay out to French dancers, known for their sexual availability and technique, and to Italian castrati, whose sexual ambiguity piqued prurient curiosity.¹³ What was there about Shakespeare that drew such outlandish munificence from Southampton? His *Venus and Adonis*? His politics?

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In relating Shakespeare's London encounters, Rowe moves down the social ladder, from queen to earl to 'private' friends: first the courtly Edmund Spenser and then the urban Ben Jonson. While the episodes involving Elizabeth and Southampton derive from Shakespeare's works – the Falstaff plays and the dedication to *Venus and Adonis* respectively – the accounts of these two friendships issue from Spenser's and Jonson's. Rowe quotes three elegiac stanzas from *Tears of the Muses* (1591), 'lamenting [Willy's] Absence with the tenderness of a Friend' (xi). He is confident that Spenser's 'pleasant Willy' is Shakespeare, 'dead of late'. It needn't matter that Shakespeare outlived Spenser by over a decade, for the verses are not intended literally: 'Mr. Spencer does not mean that he was then really Dead'. His absence was the result of his having withdrawn from the stage, 'out of a disgust he had taken at the then ill taste of the Town, and the mean Condition of the Stage' (xii). The identification allows for another variation on Shakespeare's unlicensed behaviour: the crude and coarse state of culture in his time.

Shakespeare's friendship with Ben Jonson also has a textual source, Jonson's heavily Latinate

commonplace book, *Timber or Discoveries* (1641).¹⁴ *Some Account* tapers off by reproducing in full Jonson's entry on Shakespeare. It begins obliquely, as if targeting not Shakespeare, but his fellow players, Heminge and Condell, who in the preliminaries to the First Folio had praised the state of Shakespeare's manuscript papers:

I remember the Players have often mention'd it as an Honour to Shakespear, that in Writing (whatsoever he penn'd) he never blotted out a Line. My Answer hath been, Would he had blotted a thousand, which they thought a malevolent Speech. I had not told Posterity this, but for their Ignorance, who chose that Circumstance to commend their Friend by, wherein he most faulted. (xxxviii)

For Heminge and Condell, clean manuscript pages attest to a direct relation between what Shakespeare wrote and what the Folio printed. Transmission is unmediated, with no contaminating interference from players or printers, allowing for a direct transmission from Shakespeare's mind to his hand to his papers to the Folio printers: 'His mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he uttered with that easinesse, that wee have scarce received from him a blot in his papers.'¹⁵ (The same claim appears on the Folio's title page: 'Published according to the True and Originall Copies'.) But Jonson misconstrues the claim, perhaps intentionally, taking it as not an advertisement of the Folio's proximity to the author, but rather of the author's breezy writing practice. The claim irks Jonson, not

¹¹ See David Roberts, *Thomas Betterton: The Greatest Actor of the Restoration Stage* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 168.

¹² On the 'prix exorbitant' commanded by Senesino, see Jonathan Keates, *Handel: The Man & His Music* (1985, rev. ed. London, 2008), p. 167.

¹³ On the sexually charged body of the castrato, see Roger Freitas, 'The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato', *The Journal of Musicology*, 20 (2003), 196–249.

¹⁴ *Discoveries*, ed. Lorna Hudson, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, gen. ed. Ian Donaldson et al., 7 vols. (Cambridge, 2012), vol. 7, pp. 521–2.

¹⁵ A Folger copy of the First Folio on Early English Books Online; *Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories, & tragedies* (London, 1623), STC22273, sig. A2–A3.

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because he doubts it, but because it applauds what should be censured: in their 'Ignorance', the players 'chose that Circumstance to commend their Friend by, wherein he most faulted'. Lest posterity be deceived, he counters their boast with a blast: 'Would he had blotted a thousand'.

To a printer, papers covered with blots would be a nightmare. To a classically minded stylist, however, they would signal skilled writing. For both Horace and Quintilian, multiple cancellations are the sign of careful and sustained revision.¹⁶ Jonson translates Horace's *Art of Poetry* where he cites Quintilian on the necessity of reworking verses, by blotting or reforging: 'If to Quintillius you recited aught . . . He'd bid blot all, and to the anvil bring / Those ill-turned verses, to new hammering'.¹⁷ Petrarch's manuscripts are exemplary in this respect. His working papers and successive drafts display his many erasures, insertions, transpositions and inversions, all signs of his craftsmanship, skill and rhetorical technique.¹⁸ Blots indicate that verses have been worked and reworked. As in Latin, *opera* presupposes *operare*, so in its Old English cognate, a work implies work. Though Jonson deemed his own plays 'works' when he included them in his 1616 folio, *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson*, it is doubtful that he would have considered Shakespeare's plays 'works'. Shakespeare simply did not work hard enough. He dashed off his poems and plays with no regard to rules and models.

Lest readers think his critique 'Malevolent' (as the players had), Jonson declares parenthetically his affection and esteem for Shakespeare, 'And to justifie mine own Candor, (for I lov'd the Man, and do honour his Memory . . .)'. Then follows a sentence of unusual grammatical and semantic complexity:

He was, indeed, Honest, and of an open and free Nature, had an Excellent Fancy, brave Notions, and gentle Expressions, wherein he flow'd with that Facility, that sometimes it was necessary he should be stopp'd: *Sufflammandus erat*, as Augustus said of Haterius. His Wit was in his own Power, would the Rule of it had been so too.

(xxxviii)

The main clause commends Shakespeare's nature (as 'Honest', 'open' and 'free'); the first subordinate clause extends the praise to his writing ('flow'd with that Facility'); but the second subordinate clause brings the praise up short ('he should be stopp'd'). What begins in commendation ends in condemnation, and definitively, when backed by two quotations from Seneca, the first quoted in Latin, the second in Jonson's translation. In discussing proper style, Seneca gives the negative example of Haterius who spoke so rapidly and impulsively that Emperor Augustus commented that he be braked.¹⁹ So rapid were his outpourings, according to Seneca, 'that he would muddle them, burst into tears, speak ex tempore and become so profuse in his language that he had to be stopped'. What began as praise of Shakespeare's expansive character turns into blame of his free-flowing style – writing that spills out in such facile fluency, that it must be stopped, as Jonson stops the course of his own sentence with ten punctuation marks, including a 'double prick' or colon after 'stopp'd:' before quoting Seneca, the arbiter of style, who is quoting Augustus, the emperor of Rome. As Augustus checked the orator Haterius, so Jonson would bridle Shakespeare. Liberality, in government as in writing, risks licentiousness, unless controlled by laws or rules, what Rowe terms, 'the Regularity of those written Precepts' of the Ancients (xxvi).

Rowe relates how the friendship between Shakespeare and Jonson began. The aspiring Jonson was about to have his work rudely rejected

¹⁶ On the prime importance of revision in Quintilian, see *The Orator's Education*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 2001), vol 4, 10.4; for Horace, see *Satires* I.x. and *Ars Poetica*, lines 72–3.

¹⁷ *Horace his Art of Poetry, Made English by Ben Jonson*, ed. Colin Burrow, in *The Cambridge Jonson*, vol. 7, lines 626–9. Burrow notes that these lines were underlined in Jonson's copy of the Latin, see n. p. 62.

¹⁸ I am grateful to William Kennedy for drawing my attention to the significance of Petrarch's heavily revised working papers as a manifestation of his poetic craft or art.

¹⁹ See Lewis A. Sussman, *The Elder Seneca* (Leyden, 1978), 108–9, 170–1.

by the players when Shakespeare interceded to recommend him: 'After this they were profess'd Friends, tho' I don't know whether the other ever made him an equal return of Gentleness and Sincerity' (xiii). But clearly the 'return' was not 'equal'. While Shakespeare promoted Jonson's career at its start, Jonson detracted from Shakespeare's after his death. Yet Jonson's antipathy was not personal but stylistic: indeed there is no separating the two. What Jonson couldn't abide about Shakespeare's style was its unruliness or irregularity. As Rowe astutely noted, even Jonson's praise for him was tinged with opprobrium: 'And if at times he has affected to commend him, it has always been with some Reserve' (xiii). Jonson was the correct poet, the one who respected the classical genres, translated Horace's *Arts Poetica*, and devised an English Grammar to regularize the vernacular; so dedicated was he to correctness that he proofed his own 1616 folio. Unlike extravagant Shakespeare, he knew when to stop.

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Rowe is careful to distance himself from Jonson's outright critique. After commenting on Shakespeare's vigour, fire and imagination, he pulls back: 'I would not be thought by this to mean, that [Shakespeare's] Fancy was so loose and extravagant, as to be Independent of the Rule and Government of Judgment' (vii). After all, the success of his edition depended on securing Shakespeare's pre-eminence. Yet the examples he gives of Shakespeare's poetic heights might well have satisfied Jonson's literary standards. While he singled out Shakespeare's extravagant characters for admiration, as we have seen, when it comes to poetry, the passages he applauds and reproduces in full do not demonstrate the 'beautiful extravagance' in which Shakespeare 'gives his Imagination an entire Loose, and raises his Fancy to a flight above Mankind and the Limits of the visible world' (xxiii). They are instead enframed and balanced set-pieces, models of stylistic rule and measure, fully under control, in decorous iambs with mid-line caesuras. Jaques' Seven Ages of Man speech from *As You Like It* is quoted in its entirety (xxi–xxii). Beginning with

a universalization ('All the World's a Stage') and then breaking systematically into seven distinctive parts, the speech is admired because it accomplishes what Horace maintained was so difficult: to speak of the universal specifically, '*Difficile est proprie communia dicere*' (xx). Rowe also holds Shakespeare up to classical precedent when he praises 'The Image of Patience', in Viola's self-referential speech, as a 'Sketch of Statuary'; 'the greatest Masters of Greece and Rome' would have been hard pressed to equal it (xvii):

She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief.

As with Jaques' speech, syntactic parallels dominate: 'She never told her love . . . she pined in Thought . . . She sat like patience'. The compressed lines are nicely fitted to the emotion they suppress.

From the tragedies, Rowe selects a passage from *Hamlet* and, once again, measures it against ancient models, this time finding a close analogue. *Hamlet* and *Electra* are 'founded on much the same Tale' (xxxii). Each of the two princes must take revenge on his father's murderer who in each case has married his mother. Yet Rowe is offended by the 'Manners' Sophocles has given to *Electra's* two children.

Orestes embrues his Hands in the Blood of his own Mother; and that barbarous Action is perform'd, tho' not immediately upon the Stage, yet so near, that the Audience hear *Clytemnestra* crying out to *Aeghystus* for Help, and to her Son for Mercy: While *Electra*, her Daughter, and a Princess . . . stands upon the Stage and encourages her Brother in the Parricide. (xxxii)

In a fine reversal of the contest between the Ancients and the moderns, it is the Ancient Sophocles who violates dramatic decorum, with both character (the high born *Electra* and *Orestes* 'ought to have appear'd with more Decency') and action (the shocking matricide carried out within hearing range of the audience). By contrast, modern Shakespeare restrains the action of his prince. Though his motives for abhorring his

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mother, 'heighten'd by Incest', are greater than those of Orestes, Shakespeare reins him in: 'the Poet restrains [Hamlet] from doing Violence to his Mother' and 'he makes [Hamlet's] Father's Ghost forbid that part of his Vengeance'. Rowe crowns his praise by quoting the Ghost's controlling and controlled injunction to Hamlet to leave Gertrude's punishment to heaven and her own conscience.

But Rowe's classical leanings are most apparent at the close of his essay when he credits Jonson's characterization of Shakespeare: 'As to the Character given of him by *Ben Jonson*, there is a good deal true in it' (xxxix). Character here references not his 'free and open' personality but its stylistic equivalent: his unregulated fluency. To support Jonson's position, Rowe introduces a passage from Jonson's own authority. Horace, in his letter to Augustus, describes the early rustic Roman poets who began to avail themselves of Greek models with some success, but they avoided erasure, thinking it would vitiate their writing.²⁰

—Naturâ sublimis & Acer
Nam spirat Tragicum satis & fœliciter Audet,
Sed turpem putat in Chartis metuitq; Lituram.

In this jaunty idiomatic translation of the passage, the final 'Lituram' is translated with the Folio's notorious monosyllable:

Nay, [Rome] essayed a venture of her own,
And liked to think she'd caught the tragic tone;
And so she has:— the afflatus comes on hot;
But out, alas! she deems it shame to blot.²¹

Like Heminge and Condell, the uncouth early Romans did not know that the shame was not in blotting but in not-blotting, the telltale sign of a poet who just let himself go. In the same Horatian and Quintilian tradition as Jonson, Alexander Pope accuses of insufficient blotting not only Shakespeare but John Dryden, England's first official poet-laureate:

And fluent Shakespeare scarce effac'd a line.
Ev'n copious Dryden, wanted, or forgot,
*The last and greatest Art, the Art to blot.*²²

Shakespeare never mastered 'The art to blot'.

Rowe allows that not all of Jonson's commentary was unfavourable to Shakespeare, 'at times [Jonson] has affected to commend him', but he adds 'it has always been with some Reserve, insinuating his *Uncorrectness*, a careless manner of Writing, and want of Judgment' (xiii). This could be said about Rowe as well: in his *Account*, he, too, as we have seen, has insinuated Shakespeare's '*Uncorrectness*', including in his final quote from Horace. It could also be said of the entire tradition of Shakespeare's reception from the 1623 Folio to well into the eighteenth century.

* * *

However much Shakespeare was praised, the Jonsonian charge that he lacked control is repeated, elaborated and debated for over a century after his death. In his rural ignorance of the Ancients, he was thought to violate all three of the unities; he also offended generic decorum by intermixing tragedy and comedy and concomitantly blurred social distinctions by intermingling high and low characters. Shakespeare's conceits are often deemed excessive, his lines overly enjambed, his figures strained, his puns symptomatic of incontinence. Dryden, in *The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy* (1679), accuses him of doing violence to the language by exceeding the limits of judgement: 'I may venture to maintain, that the fury of his fancy often transported him beyond the bounds of Judgment, either in coyning of new words and phrases, or racking words which were in use, into the violence of a Catachresis.'²³ In the early notices on Shakespeare, the charge that

²⁰ In *De Oratore*, Cicero also notes that the Romans at first thought they could be eloquent on the basis of 'their own native ability and reflection', without 'the rules of art' of their Greek predecessors. *Cicero: On the Ideal Orator*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York and Oxford, 2001), p. 60.

²¹ *The Satires, Epistles and the Art of Poetry of Horace*, trans. John Conington (London, 1904), *Epistles*, Bk. 2.1, lines 214–17.

²² Alexander Pope, *The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated: To Augustus*, lines 279–81.

²³ *The Works of John Dryden: Preface, Troilus and Cressida or, Truth Found too Late*, ed. George R. Guffey (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1984), XIII, p. 244.

Shakespeare wanted art occurs repeatedly: Thomas Fuller in his *Worthies of Warwickshire* (1662) and William Winstanley who copied him in his *The Lives of the Most Famous English Poets* (1687) regard Shakespeare as ‘an eminent instance of the truth of that Rule, *Poeta non fit, sed nascitur*, one is not made, but born a Poet. Indeed his Learning was very little . . . so nature it self was all the art which was used upon him.’²⁴ Shakespeare’s natural wit was thought to substitute for the learning he lacked, but it never quite offset that lack. As Edward Phillips (1675) explained, ‘where the polishments of art are wanting, as probably [Shakespeare’s] learning was not extraordinary, he pleaseth with a certain wild and native elegance’.²⁵ He is paraphrasing his uncle, John Milton, who in his commendatory sonnet in the Second Folio (1632) ascribed to Shakespeare the facility of flowing ‘easy numbers’ in contrast to the strain of ‘slow-endeavouring Art’.²⁶ In his *L’Allegro*, the contrast with Jonson is explicit: the studied drama of Jonson’s ‘learnèd sock’ is pitted against the spontaneous outpouring of ‘Shakespeare fancy’s child, / Warble his native wood-notes wild’.²⁷ The notorious Thomas Rymer outdoes his critical cohort in hostility: ‘In Tragedy he appears quite out of his Element; his Brains are turn’d, he raves and rambles, without any coherence, any spark of reason, or any rule to controul him, or set bounds to his phrenzy.’²⁸

But even those who are in the business of promoting Shakespeare insinuate his incorrectness: Rowe’s successors, all Tonson editors, however much they exalt Shakespeare, take occasion to comment on his defects. Alexander Pope concludes the Preface to his edition by admitting that Shakespeare, ‘in comparison of those [authors] that are more finished and regular’, has parts that are ‘childish, ill-plac’d, and unequal’; in contrast to their stately neoclassical edifices, his are Gothic, with ‘dark, odd, and uncouth passages’.²⁹ The editor Theobald maintains, ‘We have scarce any Book in the English Tongue more fertile of Errors, than the Plays of SHAKESPEARE’, and it was not only the blunders of compositors that accounted for the fact that no author was ‘more various from himself’.³⁰ Samuel Johnson termed Shakespeare

‘an author not systematick and consequential, but desultory and vagrant’, and blamed his stylistic impetuosity on a tendency ‘to oversupply his phrases . . . and to rush precipitously from one thought to another’.³¹ Other poets displayed crafted cabinets of precious rarities – finished, wrought, and polished – whereas Shakespeare’s mine of gold and diamonds is ‘clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities, and mingled with a mass of meaner minerals’.³² Even as late as Thomas Warton’s monumental three-volume *History of English Poetry* (1781), considered England’s first modern literary history, Shakespeare’s extravagance remains salient: ‘We behold him breaking the barriers of imaginary method.’³³

And as a result of Shakespeare’s defects, the skills of others – scholars, playwrights, critics – are needed to bring his work up to the neoclassical standards of what he was being raised to become: an English classic. The intellectual labours that emerge during this period presuppose his need of regulation. Editing goes about correcting, perfecting and rectifying his texts as well as evening out his meter, distinguishing prose from verse, ordering acts and scenes, elucidating obscure passages. Adaptations seek to better his drama by recasting it to observe the unities, generic decorum, smoother and more balanced syntax and meter. According to

²⁴ Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, ed. P. Austin Nuttall, 3 vols. (New York, 1965), III, pp. 284–5.

²⁵ Edward Phillips, *Theatrum Poetarum* (1675), in Brian Vickers, ed., *William Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage 1623–1801*, 6 vols. (London, 1974–81), vol. 1, p. 13.

²⁶ ‘On Shakespeare’ (lines 9–10), in *John Milton*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford, 1991), p. 20.

²⁷ *L’Allegro* (lines 132–3), in *John Milton*, ed. Orgel and Goldberg, p. 25.

²⁸ Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), in Vickers, *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 58.

²⁹ Alexander Pope, Preface, *The Works of Shakespeare* (1725), in Vickers, *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 415.

³⁰ Lewis Theobald, *Shakespeare Restor’d* (London, 1726), I; Vickers, *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 476.

³¹ Samuel Johnson, Preface, *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765), in Vickers, *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 5, p. 39.

³² Vickers, *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 476.

³³ Thomas Warton, *The History of the English Language*, 3 vols. (London, 1781), p. 499.

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Brian Vickers, 'There is no comparable instance of the work of a major artist being altered in such a sweeping fashion.'³⁴ Even actors needed to set limits. Francis Gentleman notes an affinity between David Garrick's style of acting and Shakespeare's style of writing: 'they both appear regardless of rules and mechanism: The beautiful wildnesses of nature seem to have attracted both, and in different stiles they appear to have pursued the same track.'³⁵ And yet there is a difference: 'Mr. Garrick is never so entirely luxuriant, nor so trifling. . . ' Critics attempted to cultivate taste and judgement by setting Shakespeare's stylistic faults or vices apart from his beauties or virtues. His works were fertile ground for criticism because they abounded in both, as Pope noted: 'as he has certainly written better, so he has perhaps written worse'.³⁶ It is because Shakespeare never blotted that there is need for editorial rectification, dramatic adaptation and literary criticism.

There is also a need for anecdotes, for they give life to the breaches of rule that all these practices attempt to eliminate by correcting, adapting, critiquing. Anecdotal Shakespeare's bad-mannered, uncouth and offensive behaviour is the fictive correlate of his critical standing as an irregular and unlearned poet. Other anecdotes are collected after Rowe, first by George Steevens in his 1778 edition, where Rowe's *Some Account* is followed by an appendix of 'Additional Anecdotes'.³⁷ In one of them, the stylistic opposition between Shakespeare and Jonson is put into narrative form. Shakespeare decides on a christening gift for his godson, Jonson's son: a dozen latten christening spoons with Latin inscriptions, which he must rely on Jonson to translate, rather pathetically since such mottos tended to be quite simple, at the level of *Fides* or *Deo Gratias*. Another anecdote marks the beginning of his writing career earlier than in the deer-poaching episode. As a boy in his father's butcher's shop, Shakespeare declaims in high tragic style while slaughtering a calf. The combination of carnage and oratory recalls Caesar's slaughter at the Capitol in *Julius Caesar*, which Brutus hopes will be seen as sacrifice, not butchery; 'It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a

calf there' (3.2.101), quips Hamlet, likening Caesar and Polonius (who once played the part of Caesar) to that sacrificed or butchered calf.³⁸ Lofty oratory doesn't belong in the butcher's shop any more than, by classical rule, a bloodbath does on stage. Other anecdotes place him in the London theatre. Having pre-empted Richard Burbage's nighttime tryst with an infatuated admirer, Shakespeare when 'caught at his game' by Burbage justifies his usurpation by appealing to the order of regal succession: 'William the Conqueror was before Rich. the 3'. Another illicit liaison is reported with the Oxford inn-keeper's wife en route to London, one that produces William Davenant, who was not only William Shakespeare's namesake, godchild and 'poetical child', but, as the anecdote intimates, his biological child as well, begotten by the stealth of nature rather than by law.

* * *

The anecdotes, both of Rowe's *Some Account* and those collected subsequently, register the same problem as the criticism, adaptation and editing: how to manage Shakespeare's stylistic licence while raising him to the status of an English classic. The anecdotes compress and fictionalize that licence into 'little personal stories' of Shakespeare's extravagance, featuring a character named Shakespeare who typically surpasses limits: stealing deer, ignoring the Queen, pre-empting his colleague's tryst, begetting children out of wedlock, pushing

³⁴ Vickers, *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 6.

³⁵ Francis Gentleman, *Life of Shakespeare*, in *Bell's Edition of Shakespeare's Plays*, 8 vols. (London, 1774), p. 26.

³⁶ Pope, in Vickers, *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2.

³⁷ *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. George Steevens, 10 vols. (London, 1778), vol. 1, p. 203.

³⁸ Katherine Duncan-Jones conjectures that Shakespeare might have seen or perhaps participated in a mumming play or Whitsun 'pastime' in which the slaying of a calf was staged, and considers it early preparation for the 'high-style slaughter of innocents' in his own plays, of Prince Edward in *3 Henry VI* and of Macduff's children in *Macbeth*: see *Shakespeare: An Ungentle Life* (London, 2001), pp. 17–18. For Duncan-Jones and Shakespeare's biographers in general, the plays originate in Shakespeare's experience. But for anecdotal Shakespeare it is just the reverse: his experience originates in the plays.

a *jeu d'esprit* too far, and never blotting. But that character is not the man who lived from 1564 to 1616. It is another kind of character altogether, one that, like the word 'character', is akin to letters and therefore to writing itself. Rowe's pronouncement, this article's epigraph, is thus perfectly tautological: 'The Character of the Man is best seen in his Writing' (xxxvii).

The anecdotes are less a form of biography than of literary criticism: they record not the life Shakespeare lived between 1564 and 1616 but the impression his works made after his death. The anecdotes, then, have been misclassified as early biography, proto-biography, biography manqué, aspiring towards the accuracy of documentary facts and the coherence of linear narrative, but falling far short. It was his works that mattered: not how he lived but how he wrote – or how he was thought to have written at a time before he is elevated above all other writers, so that the poet who followed no models becomes himself the model.

To return to this article's opening question: why is the Shakespeare of the modern biographies at such variance with the Shakespeare of the

seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century anecdotes: the one wayward, the other upright? Quite simply, the subject of the anecdotes is not the subject of biography. The anecdotes are not about the man but about the writing that goes by the same name. This will change, of course. Romanticism will take the previous generation's stylistic vagaries and recast them as genius. Shakespeare will then no longer exist beyond the critical pale.³⁹ Shakespeare, then, is no longer beyond the pale. Indeed he is at the very centre of the English canon, or, in Harold Bloom's oracular pronouncement, of the literary canon at large: 'Shakespeare is the Canon. He sets the standard and the limits of literature.'⁴⁰ And his character will shape up accordingly.

³⁹ Michael Dobson notes a shift in how Shakespeare's provincial origins are perceived in the nineteenth century: as the source not of his small learning in a provincial grammar school but of his sublime inspiration from idyllic nature, particularly the banks of the Avon. 'A Boy from Stratford', in Zachary Leader, ed., *On Life-Writing* (forthcoming).

⁴⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, 1994), p. 47.