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Shakespeare et ses contemporains

Shakespeare's London Contemporaries

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S H A K E S P E A R E
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Textes réunis et présentés par
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SHAKESPEARE'S LONDON CONTEMPORARIES

In this short paper I want to take a look at a few of the people living in London whom Shakespeare either certainly or probably came across, or who must have come across him, other than those primarily associated with his theatre career. My hope in doing so is to gain a sense of the social circles in which he moved and perhaps of the influence that these circles may, however indefinably, have exerted on his work.

There is a popular perception, witnessed to by the film *Shakespeare in Love*, that the dramatist based his plays on real life and wrote them in between energetic bursts of love-making with Gwyneth Paltrow in the rafters of the Rose Theatre. Not long ago a journalist asked me why Shakespeare set the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona, as if the playwright had dreamed up the story entirely out of his own imagination. Scholars, of course, know better. That's what we are for. Over the past fifty years or so, studies of Shakespeare's written sources have demonstrated that he read widely and deeply in both popular and learned literature, and that his reading is the prime influence on his work. His plays' general remoteness of setting, in both time and place, contrasts with the topicality and immediacy of, for instance, Middleton and Jonson. Searching in Shakespeare's plays for reflections of his direct, personal experience such as characterizes Caroline Spurgeon's work on imagery is now unfashionable and usually unprofitable.

Still, the circles in which Shakespeare moved must have provided him with some of the raw material for his plays. Our knowledge of them is both slight and patchy, and some of it is inferential, but we can point to definite and relevant facts¹. He was, we know, the grammar-school educated son of a provincial burgess, he did not attend university, and he married early into a class similar to his own. Though Stratford society during his youth was not as circumscribed as the anti-Stratfordians would have us believe, the town did not offer the social opportunities that would have opened up on his arrival in London through his contacts with aristocratically patronized play companies and with a literary world in which university graduates were prominent and in which aristocratic patronage, as in the theatre, played an important part. In London he was able to meet and to seek the patronage of some of the greatest men in the land. The dedications of his narrative poems in 1593 and 1594 bear witness to his rising social status, and indeed suggest, in the difference of tone between the first and the second, a dramatic leap within a year in his familiarity with one of the leading courtiers of his time, Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, then a handsome, cultivated and immensely accomplished nineteen-year old. The relationship between poet and patron was not necessarily close, and the terms of the earlier dedication, to *Venus and Adonis*, are relatively formal. It is sometimes suggested that Shakespeare's choice and treatment of his narrative material relate directly to his choice of dedicatee, implying that he knew Southampton before writing the poem; but probably we should not read too much into the fact that, just as in the poem the young Adonis repels Venus's steamy advances, so Southampton, at the age of 17, had declined to marry Lady Elizabeth Vere, grand-daughter of Lord Burleigh, whose ward he was, and had forfeited the enormous sum of £5,000 as a result. In any case the usual procedure seems to have been to write the work before seeking a patron. The earlier dedication may have been merely formal, but the warmth of the later — «What I have done is yours, what I have to do is yours, being part in all I have, devoted yours» — suggests at least that Southampton had become a friend as well as a patron. The precise extent of his patronage is not known. Interest in Southampton's relationships with Shakespeare centres understandably on the possibility that he is the young man — or should we say one of the young men? — central to Shakespeare's sonnets, but even if this is not so it is clear that Shakespeare knew him. And Southampton was a great theatregoer: in 1599, during the months between his and Essex's return from the abortive Irish expedition,

he and his friend the Earl of Rutland — for whom fifteen years later Shakespeare was to design an impresa — «pass[ed] away the time in London merely in going to plays every day»². Friendship with the Earl would have given Shakespeare the entrée to the family's London home, Southampton House, a centre of literary and intellectual patronage, and he may well have had access to the Earl's library. In 1709 Nicholas Rowe reported that Southampton gave Shakespeare a present of £1,000. The Earl was inordinately extravagant, but this is ridiculous.

Whatever grand connexions Shakespeare may have had, our knowledge, slender though it is, of where he lived when he was in London suggests only modest expenditure and contrasts starkly with the often underestimated splendour of his Stratford presence. In Warwickshire he was, quite early in life, a major landowner and possessor of one of the grandest establishments in town. In London, however, he seems to have been no more than a lodger in other people's houses. In 1597 — the year he bought New Place — he is listed in records for the parish of Saint Helen's Bishopsgate — reasonably convenient of access to the Theatre and the Curtain — among those who are «dead, departed, or gone out of the said ward». No precise address is given. The occasion of this negative piece of evidence was a tax assessment. Government required payment of a tax on possessions of one shilling in the pound. In October of the previous year his goods had been assessed at the value of five pounds, and by November of the following year he had moved away. So he owed, and does not appear to have paid, five shillings. The highest assessment in the ward was three hundred pounds. Methods of assessment may have been rough and ready, but the low valuation of his possessions in Bishopsgate does not suggest that he was living at anything other than a modest rate, or that he had put down any roots.

While living in Bishopsgate he would have been most likely to worship at St Helen's Church. This still stands, much restored, having survived two IRA attacks during the 1990s. Its exterior is unprepossessing, but the interior is light and airy with many fine monuments which give an impression of the sort of people that Shakespeare may have known and from whom he could have picked up useful information beyond that which he could glean from books. One memorial, for instance, bearing a representation of a galleon, commemorates Alderman Richard Staper, who died in 1608, as «the greatest merchant in his time, the chiefest actor in discovery of the trades of Turkey and East India, a man humble in prosperity»³. He seems to have been a bit of a Puritan, judging by the fact

that he left orders that at his burial «I will have no drinking made before the going to the Church as is now used». Shakespeare might surely have had fascinating conversations with Staper about his travels.

Another monument in the same church commemorates the life and achievements of Martin Bond, citizen and haberdasher. His father, William, had hired out to Francis Drake the ship, later known as *The Golden Hind*, in which Drake was to circumnavigate the globe, and Martin himself was a signatory to the second Charter of Virginia. His monument is surmounted by a fine bas-relief showing him in his tent guarded by sentries and with a groom holding his horse. The inscription tells us that Bond «was captain in the year 1588 at the camp at Tilbury» — where of course Elizabeth delivered her famous speech declaring «I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman ; but I have the heart and stomach of a king». (How many of those present could have heard it, I wonder). Afterwards, says the inscription, he «remained captain of the trained bands of this city until his death. He was a Merchant Adventurer and free of the company of haberdashers. He lived to the age of 85 and died in May 1643». This means that he was only six years older than Shakespeare, with whom he may well have swapped many an anecdote.

Shortly after James's accession, in 1603, Shakespeare was involved in a series of events which provide our only sustained glimpse into his domestic life in London, along with the most substantial and accurate report of words that he actually spoke. Regrettably, they lack the eloquence displayed by even the least of his dramatic characters. But details of the case suggest something of the domestic environment in which he lived, and show him very much as a man among other men, embroiled in the materialities of everyday life at a pretty basic level, and called upon for neighbourly assistance by people with whom his initial association was, presumably, of a purely business nature. Our information comes retrospectively, from the *Belott \ Mountjoy* case of 1612⁴. On 7 May of that year Shakespeare was summoned to give evidence in a suit brought in the Court of Requests, London, by Stephen Belott against his father-in-law, Christopher Mountjoy. Shakespeare bore witness four days later, which suggests that he did not have to travel specially from Warwickshire, but we know nothing of where he was living in London at this time of the court case. Mountjoy, a Huguenot refugee who, with his wife and daughter Marie, made ladies' wigs and head-dresses, lived and worked in a double house on the corner of Silver and Monkwell Streets, a respectable locality in the most northerly part of the City. The house, destroyed in the Great

Fire of 1666, is identifiable on a detailed map showing the capital as it appeared in the 1550s, which seems to show the penthouse roof which would have protected goods on display in the groundfloor shop. Either Mountjoy was not the only man of his trade in this area, or he is indirectly referred to in Ben Jonson's play *Epicene*, acted in 1609, when a character says of his wife «All her teeth were made in the Blackfriars, both her eyebrows in the Strand, and her hair in Silver Street»⁵.

Belott, Mountjoy's apprentice, had married Marie on 19 November 1604, and Shakespeare good-naturedly assisted in the marriage negotiations. According to some of the witnesses he «persuaded» Stephen to marry his master's daughter Marie, and it sounds as if Shakespeare may even have officiated at a ceremony of handfasting: a witness named Daniel Nicholas stated that the lovers «were made sure by Master Shakespeare by giving their consent, and agreed to marry, and did marry». In the original document these words are followed by the deleted words «giving each other's hand to the hand». Shakespeare had already shown his familiarity with the practices of handfasting and *de praesenti* marriage in *As You Like It* and *Measure for Measure*. It is not clear why the direct reference to it was deleted. Dr Robert Bearman, Senior Archivist of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, suggests that perhaps Nicholas thought twice about saying that Shakespeare actually oversaw any physical manifestation of a betrothal — such as exchange of rings or gifts — and that the pact was just a verbal one.

At first the couple continued to live with Marie's parents, but relations deteriorated, especially after her mother died in 1606, and there were quarrels over money matters. Eventually Belott went to law over a claim that Mountjoy had broken promises to pay a marriage portion of £60 and to leave Marie £200 in his will. All the witnesses were asked an identical set of questions somewhat loaded on Belott's behalf — for example, «what parcels of goods or household stuff» Mountjoy had promised, and whether what he actually gave included «one old feather bed, one old feather bolster, a flock bolster, a thin green rug... a dozen of napkins of coarse diaper, two short tablecloths, six short towels and one long one... two pairs of little scissors», and so on. Joan Johnson, a basket-maker's wife of Ealing who had worked as a servant to Mountjoy, testified that her employer had asked «one Mr Shakespeare that lay in the house» to act as go-between in the marriage negotiations. In his deposition, «William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon», described as «of the age of 48 years or thereabouts», declared that he had known Belott and Mountjoy «for the

space of ten years or thereabouts», which suggests that he had «lain» in the house — whether continuously or sporadically — for two years before the marriage — «or thereabouts» is probably a mere legal catchphrase. He had known Belott when the young man was working for Mountjoy, regarding him as «a very good and industrious servant». Mountjoy had shown the young man «great good will and affection» and had «made a motion» to him of marriage with his daughter. Mrs Mountjoy «did solicit and entreat» Shakespeare to «move and persuade» Belott «to effect the said marriage», and Shakespeare had complied.

On money matters Shakespeare is studiously non-committal. Though Mountjoy had promised to give Belott «a portion», Shakespeare could not remember exactly how much nor when it was to be paid, nor did he know that Mountjoy had promised to leave the couple £200. He knew nothing about the «implements and necessaries of household stuff» that Mountjoy had handed over. But he affirmed that Belott had been living in the house and that they had «had amongst themselves many conferences» — conversations — «about their marriage which afterwards was consummated and solemnized». (Whether in that order is not clear). In the end the case was referred to the elders of the French church in London. They found in favour of Belott but awarded him only twenty nobles — £6. 13. 4d, roughly the value of the goods he had taken out of the house — which Mountjoy, who was leading a dissolute life, had not paid a year later.

From this case it is apparent that Shakespeare was a trusted friend of the Mountjoy family. It's sometimes suggested that the knowledge of French that he displays in *Henry V* is a result of his stay with them, and certainly Mountjoy is the title of the Herald in that play, but the name is in Holinshed, and there is no evidence that Shakespeare knew the Mountjoys by 1599, when he wrote the play. On the other hand there is reason to believe that in composing the French scenes of *Henry V* he consulted a book — John Eliot's *Orthoepia Gallica, or Eliot's Fruits for the French* (1593).

The Mountjoy household interconnects with Shakespeare's life at several points. A witness in the lawsuit was George Wilkins, described as a victualler, or innkeeper⁶. He was also a playwright, certainly known to Shakespeare since his accomplished and successful play, *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, had been acted by the King's Men by 1607, when it was published. In recent years the case that he collaborated with Shakespeare in *Pericles*, performed at the Globe around the end of 1607,

has been growing in strength, and MacDonald P. Jackson tells me that he has almost completed a study which he believes will demonstrate this beyond conjecture. Wilkins also wrote the book of that play, a derivative novel called *The Painful Adventures of Pericles Prince of Tyre*, published in 1608. It may well have been his connections with the Mountjoy family that brought him to Shakespeare's attention as a possible collaborator. When the Belotts first set themselves up independently, probably after a row with Mountjoy the year after they were married, they lodged with Wilkins, who deposed that he would not have given more than five pounds for the goods they brought with them. A colourful character, Wilkins often appeared in court in his own right, as it were; his inn was a riotous establishment which doubled as a brothel. Only three months before giving evidence in the Mountjoy case he had «outrageously beaten one Judith Walton and stamped upon her so that she was carried home in a chair». Wilkins could certainly have added to Shakespeare's knowledge of the seamier side of life, whether or not he or Shakespeare was primarily responsible for the brothel scenes of *Pericles*.

Another link between Shakespeare and the Mountjoy household is the even more picturesque figure of Simon Forman, the astrologer, magician and physician whose voluminous notebooks — still not adequately investigated, in spite of two recently published books — offer astonishingly intimate glimpses into his own life and that of many of his contemporaries⁷. Shakespeare must have known of him, if only through his fame as one of the most picturesque figures of London in his time — he is mentioned in Ben Jonson's play *The Silent Woman*, and twice in *The Devil is an Ass* — and though there is no certain evidence that Shakespeare actually met him, he had links with the Mountjoys that make this very likely. Confidentially consulted by thousands of men and (especially) women of all walks of life, including theatre people, about their health, things they had lost, anxieties about what might happen to friends and relatives, and for insight into the future, he noted their medical symptoms and their horoscopes, recorded the advice that he gave them, chronicled innumerable sexual encounters, many of them with his patients, and even recounted his dreams — including one in which the Queen propositioned him. Mrs Mountjoy consulted him first in 1597, when she was thirty, in the hope that he could tell her how to recover jewels and money lost from her purse. Ten days later she returned, with symptoms that Forman diagnosed as signs of pregnancy; he predicted a miscarriage. There are hints too that she was conducting an illicit affair with a

Mr Wood, who lived close by and whose wife asked whether she would be well advised to keep shop with her.

Forman's most valuable contribution to knowledge of Shakespeare comes in his accounts of visits to the Globe in his notebook *The Book of Plays and Notes thereof per Formans for Common Policy* — I don't share Katherine Duncan-Jones's scepticism, aired in her recent biography, about the authenticity of these papers⁸. Forman's notes on performances of *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*, inadequate though in some respects they are, are by far the fullest contemporary accounts of performance of plays by Shakespeare. Mostly he summarizes the plots, but in *Macbeth*, which he saw on 20 April 1611, he was deeply impressed by the emotional impact of the episode following Duncan's murder and of the banquet scene, in which Macbeth «fell into a great passion of fear and fury» on seeing Banquo's ghost. As a medical man, he took a particular interest in the sleepwalking: «Observe also how Macbeth's queen did rise in the night in her sleep, and walked and talked and confessed all. And the doctor noted her words». From the antics of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, which he saw on 15 May, he drew the moral «Beware of trusting feigned beggars or fawning fellows». Perhaps it says something about the attitude of audiences to performers that he always uses the names of characters, not of the actors playing them. Nor does Forman identify the author of the plays he saw.

Forman's papers give a remarkable insight into the sexual goings-on of Shakespeare's time. Anyone reading them would inevitably form the impression that London then was (as I suppose it always has been and, *mutatis mutandis*, still is) a hotbed of illicit sexual activity such as Shakespeare himself portrays, transposed to a foreign setting, in the brothel scenes of *Measure for Measure*, written almost certainly while he was lodging with the Mountjoys, *Pericles*, in which he had the collaboration of a brothel-keeper, and, more gently but closer to home, the Eastcheap scenes of Parts One and Two of *Henry IV*. This may well be true. In some people's minds prostitution and the theatre were closely linked. According to Philip Stubbes — admittedly a Puritan opponent of theatre — sexual pleasure was an invariable sequel to playgoing: «these goodly pageants being ended, every mate sorts to his mate, everyone brings another homeward of their way very friendly, and in their secret conclaves covertly they play the sodomites or worse»⁹. Sodomy, of course, could be used of any form of sexual activity. Philip Henslowe and Edward

Alleyn ran brothels as well as playhouses, watermen ferried across the Thames clients of the prostitutes as well as of the Southwark theatres.

At a less professional level, one of Forman's patients, Emilia Lanier, was mistress of Lord Hunsdon, patron of Shakespeare's company, and mother of Hunsdon's illegitimate son. She was also, in a paradox characteristic of the period, a religious poet of some talent, author of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, of 1611. A.L. Rowse proclaimed his belief that she was Shakespeare's as well as Hunsdon's mistress, the Dark Lady of the Sonnets. That hypothesis has not been substantiated, but her connections with both Forman and Hunsdon make it likely that Shakespeare knew her. And of course there are reasons to suppose that Shakespeare, whoever his mistress or mistresses may have been, had extra-marital affairs, presumably in London. Indeed, he seems to have taken pride in this if we believe Sonnet 31, where he speaks of «the trophies of my lovers gone». Unfortunately the closest we can come to identifying any of his lovers comes in John Manningham's well-known anecdote of March 1601, which suggests that Shakespeare had a reputation in London society as both a lecher and a wit. Manningham had picked up a story according to which Shakespeare had made an assignation with a woman described as a «citizen», that is, a citizen's wife.

Upon a time when [Richard] Burbage played Richard III there was a citizen grew so far in liking with him that before she went from the play she appointed him to come that night unto her by the name of Richard the Third. Shakespeare, overhearing their conclusion, went before, was entertained, and at his game ere Burbage came. Then message being brought that Richard III was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard III.

The anecdote must have been well known, because Manningham's is not the only version to have survived ; it is told also, in more elaborate but less authentic detail, in a book published in 1759, Thomas Wilkes's *General View of the Stage*¹⁰. Wilkes must have got it from a different source, since Manningham's notebooks were not known in his time. It sounds, perhaps, too neat to be true, but the fact that it could be told at all indicates that it had at least a surface plausibility. And it's interesting that a year or two later Shakespeare was to write two plays — *All's Well that Ends Well* and

Measure for Measure — in both of which one man substitutes for another in a woman's bed. (Admittedly this was a common narrative device).

It would be possible to extend investigations into Shakespeare's London acquaintances and friends more widely, especially if one took into account the domestic lives of his theatrical colleagues : the wills of fellow actors such as Heminges and Condell, and Augustine Phillips, valuably printed by Susan Brock and Ernst Honigmann in their collection of actors' wills", yield interesting information about everyday life. But overall it seems fair to suggest that when Shakespeare was in London he lived modestly, that he put down no roots there but lived simply and in other people's houses, mingling much with tradesmen such as Mountjoy, talented rogues such as Wilkins, and no doubt with fellow-parishioners, some of them men of distinction, at his compulsory church-going. Though his profession would have taken him to Elizabeth's and James's court, there is little evidence that he consorted as a matter of course with the nobility, and even the gentry. In Stratford, on the other hand, he was an acknowledged «gentleman», in the technical sense of the word, one of the wealthiest men in the community, a considerable householder and landowner, a man of property and of influence who, like Dogberry, had «everything handsome about him». All of which makes me question the received belief that he spent little time in Stratford during his working years. I should be surprised if New Place did not contain a study well furnished with books to which he retreated not simply at the end of his life, but throughout his working years when he was of more use to his colleagues as a writer than as an actor.

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NOTES

¹Basic biographical information in this essay can be found in S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, revised edition, 1987.

²G.P.V. Akrigg, *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1968, p. 96.

³A photograph of the monument is reproduced in my *Shakespeare: For All Time*, Macmillan, 2002, Plate 31.

⁴Documents in the case are reproduced by E.K. Chambers in his *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1930, II. 90-5.

⁵Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays*, ed. Gordon Campbell, World's Classics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, IV.2.83-5.

⁶Wilkins's chequered career is described in «The Life of George Wilkins», by Roger Prior, *Shakespeare Survey*, n°25, 1972, p. 137-52.

⁷A.L. Rowse's book *Simon Forman: Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974, characteristically slapdash and opinionated, is nevertheless an interesting pioneer study. More scholarly, though inclined to concentrate on Forman's medical interests, is Barbara Howard Traister's *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2001. An excellent selective study is S.P. Cerasano's «Philip Henslowe, Simon Forman and the Theatrical Community of the 1590s», *Shakespeare Quarterly*, n°44, 1993, p. 145-58.

⁸Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare*, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 2001, p. xii-xiii.

⁹Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomy of Abuses*, first published in 1583. The word «sodomite» could be used of any kind of sexual activity.

¹⁰The tale is discussed by Jonathan Bate in his *The Genius of Shakespeare*, London, Picador, 1997, p. 24-5.

¹¹*Playhouse Wills 1558-1642*, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann and Susan Brock, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993.