

Shakespeare himself

Are level now with men. The odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon.

But to Sander he entrusted the words:

Ah, soldier!

Shakespeare's greatness is so universally acknowledged and his popularity so entrenched that some people think he's almost too good to be true. Hence the emergence of some ludicrous theories that the plays must have been written by somebody else: theories that betray a woeful ignorance of history and theatrical practice. 'One person cannot have written so many masterpieces,' some exclaim. In fact, Shakespeare's output, compared to that of many artists, is reasonably small. The difference is that nearly *all* of his works are regularly studied and performed, whereas only three or four of those of a playwright as prolific as George Bernard Shaw have survived the test of time.

How to explain the phenomenon of Shakespeare? It's relatively simple. To begin with, we have to accept the fact of his genius, just as we accept the genius of Mozart, Leonardo, Einstein and a few dozen others. But genius in itself is no guarantee of success, as we know:

Many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air . . .

The conditions have to be right, and in Shakespeare's case, they could hardly have been more so.

He was born in just the right place at the right time. Elizabethan England was a sturdy mercantile nation with a powerful navy, a thriving middle class, widespread literacy and a strong sense of identity that expressed itself in a bellicose adventurism. Its formidable queen enjoyed

an iconic status that rubbed off on many of her acolytes: Raleigh, Drake, Sidney, Leicester and Essex. The New World was being colonised, the French and Dutch held at bay and the Spanish treasure fleets routinely plundered. Having thrown off the yoke of Rome, England had its own national Church headed by its own Blessed Virgin, Elizabeth. Despite the spectres of espionage, trial by torture and repression of religious freedom, it was considered a glorious time to be an Englishman, especially after the defeat of the great Spanish Armada. National pride and patriotic fervour knew no bounds and people eagerly sought expression for them in song, poetry and drama.

The English language, too, was at last coming into its own, despite the efforts of classicists like Francis Bacon to curtail it. The court now spoke English instead of French (though Elizabeth herself was proficient in seven languages, including Hebrew). The Bible had at last been wrenched from the hands of the clergy and translated from Latin, encouraging not only universal readership but personal interpretation. There were rules of grammar to be sure, but as yet no dictionary, so the precise meaning of words was variable, as was their pronunciation. What a word meant, how you spelled it and how you pronounced it depended on where you came from.

Shakespeare spoke and spelled with a Warwickshire accent and uses many words, phrases and references peculiar to his native Stratford. Queen Elizabeth and many of her court spoke with a cockney twang and the actors on the stage of the Globe spoke in a wide variety of dialects; there was no one ‘correct’ standard accent.

New words were coined with an intoxicating profligacy, Shakespeare himself one of the prime contributors. Public speaking, oratory and preaching were among the most prized and important of a man’s attributes, and little wonder: in an age before newspapers, radio or television, the words of town criers and public proclamations could be a matter of life and death. And as for sermons—why, your immortal soul depended on them.

It was a highly litigious age, and boys like Shakespeare were taught at grammar school to argue all sides of an argument—in Latin! Shakespeare was quite a litigant himself (though no more so than most of his contemporaries) and had a shrewd working knowledge of the law. There is some evidence that he may have worked for a short time as a lawyer's clerk, but his familiarity with the law was that of the average Londoner. A good proportion of his audience was made up of lawyers and students of the Inns of the Court, hence the presence of so many legal jokes and references. *Twelfth Night* was performed in the hall of the Middle Temple in 1602 and *The Comedy of Errors* at Gray's Inn in 1594. There was no doubt a chorus of cheers and catcalls from the audience during *Henry VI: Part 2* when Dick the rebel suggests: 'First thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers!'

London was a strident, tough and energetic city. Of its population of one hundred and seventy thousand, half were under the age of twenty. High-spirited apprentices made up ten per cent.

Provincial audiences as well as Londoners had a thirst for pageantry, display and performances, and literacy was widespread enough for everyone to play a part. The honest artisans of Athens put on a play for the Duke's wedding just as the rustics of *Love's Labour's Lost* devise a pageant to entertain the nobility.

All of this amounted to fertile ground for theatre. Now that the Reformation had done away with the Mystery and Miracle plays on biblical themes, theatre turned for its source material to the history chronicles, myths, legends, folktales and depictions of contemporary life. Theatres began to spring up all over London to cater to the hunger for entertainment—and Shakespeare arrived in London just as all this was happening! If he'd come fifty years earlier, he'd have had no theatre to write for, no company of actors to employ him. And some forty years after he died the theatres were all pulled down and theatre disappeared completely during the Ice Age of the puritan Commonwealth. For Shakespeare, as with many a successful career, timing was everything.

The genie was out of the bottle: bawdy, violent, iconoclastic, irreverent, subversive, wildly popular plays were attracting all of London. Courtiers like Essex and Southampton spent most of their leisure time at the theatre, and the Queen herself had her own troupe of players. Rail against it they might, but the Puritan preachers could not check the popularity and proliferation of the theatre. Aristocrats rivalled each other to see who could employ the most popular troupe of actors. Seeing this, the Queen's spymaster Walsingham decided to put the new phenomenon to good use: acting companies were to be used as a propaganda tool; travelling the provinces they would perform plays that celebrated English history and Protestant values that legitimised the Tudor succession and added to the lustre of Gloriana. Besides, having troupes of actors performing in the great country houses could be a very useful source of information. A canny actor could chat up the servants, observe the audience and report back to Walsingham and Secretary Cecil any hints of disloyalty or Catholic sympathies.

For the investors in the new phenomenon, people like James Burbage and Philip Henslowe, building playhouses meant a big risk but huge potential gain. To cover themselves, most theatre proprietors had other investments—they maintained brothels, inns and troupes of bears and other animals for the arena. Eventually most of them became wealthy men. Shakespeare certainly did, as did his friends Heminges and Condell. For Will it sure beat the hell out of glove-making or being a lawyer's clerk or country schoolteacher. This was big money.

And the Elizabethan theatre was exactly the right *kind* of theatre for a man of Shakespeare's particular genius. It was a *writer's* theatre, a theatre of the imagination—an empty space that could become anything you wished through the sheer power of words and images. There was no clutter, no distraction, no smart technology, no directorial spin. It was all up to the writer and his band of actors. And here too Shakespeare had it all pretty much his own way. As a sharer in the Globe, one of its

owner-managers, he could use the actors of his choice, mould them into an ensemble and write roles according to their particular talents. That is how great drama is born. Brecht had a similar opportunity and so did Chekhov. But not many playwrights are lucky enough to get their own theatre and permanent company of actors.

He was born into the right family. Had Will Shakespeare been born into a family of farmers, he might never have got his lucky break. Life was not easy for those on the lower rungs of Elizabethan society and the pressure would have been intense for him to become apprenticed to his father's trade or take up a job on the land as soon as he was able. He probably would have gone to 'petty school' along with his sisters, but not on to grammar school. A farmer or artisan would have no use for Ovid and Seneca, Latin, Greek and rhetoric. As long as he could read his Bible and do his sums, that would be education enough. And if he had been born into the aristocracy he would have been destined for the army, the Church or the life of a courtier. He'd have been well taught in the arts of arms and hunting and had private tuition in the classics, but he'd never have known the hurly-burly of the schoolyard or the life of the classroom Shakespeare depicts so accurately in *Merry Wives of Windsor*. He'd never have met a country schoolmaster like Sir Hugh Evans or Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Indeed, he'd never have met a Nym, Bardolph, Pistol or Falstaff, a Quince, Bottom, Flute or Starveling. These are the people Shakespeare saw in the streets and shops of Stratford, the pubs and brothels of Cheapside. He might have been an aristocratic poet like Philip Sidney or he might have dabbled in a little entertainment for his fellow courtiers, but he could never have become a playwright.

And that's what Shakespeare was—a hard-working, ambitious professional actor and playwright who toiled hard at his craft day after day, year after year, as Ben Jonson witnessed. As he pushed the boundaries of his craft and skill, his plays became more complex, more demanding for both actors and audience. We travel a long way from the knockabout

farce of *The Comedy of Errors* to the bleak and bitter satire of *Troilus and Cressida*, whose thought and language are at times so complex as to be almost indecipherable on first hearing. Shakespeare expected a lot from his audience and he wasn't going to make it easy for them.

He met the right people. Shakespeare was extremely fortunate in his friendship with the Burbage family. There were Burbages in Stratford, but it was James Burbage, of the Queen's Men, who helped to change Shakespeare's life. They met when Shakespeare was an adolescent and the Queen's Men paid regular visits to Stratford. There they were welcomed by the town's Bailiff, John Shakespeare, and gave private performances for him and his family besides their public shows in the Guild Hall. When Shakespeare joined the Queen's Men in his early twenties he renewed his acquaintance with James and his sons Richard and Cuthbert. This was timely. James was now an important entrepreneur, having built London's first custom-made playhouse, The Theatre, and Richard was on the way to becoming the greatest actor of his day. He and Shakespeare inspired each other and Shakespeare wrote some of his greatest roles for him. Without the assurance of Burbage's talent Shakespeare might never have created Richard III, Hamlet, Othello or Lear.

He also maintained his friendship with his schoolmate Richard Field, who had gone to London some years earlier and established a successful publishing business. It was he who published two of Shakespeare's major successes, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

Shakespeare seems to have forged close ties with most of his fellow players, especially John Heminges and Henry Condell, who rendered him the greatest service of all by collating and publishing his complete works. Even his testy rival Ben Jonson 'loved the man' and paid generous tribute to him. He made a big impression on aristocratic patrons—the Pembrokes and Henry Wroithsley, Earl of Southampton—and courted their favours. Perhaps most importantly, he earned the approval of Queen Elizabeth

and her successor King James, who adopted Shakespeare's company and made them the King's Men as well as Grooms of the Chamber.

He was fortunate in being one of a number of talented writers. Competitive and ambitious in himself, he was nevertheless willing to learn, and gained a great deal by acting in the plays of Marlowe, Kyd, Greene and Jonson. He had great raw material to work with: loads of popular old plays, like *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, *The Troublesome Reign of King John* and *The True History of King Leir*. These were due for an overhaul and the works of Ovid, Seneca and Plutarch were all waiting to be plundered.

He made the most of his opportunities. Having absorbed the classics at school he put them to good use. He had an inquisitive mind and a prodigious memory (developed by rote-learning and his craft as an actor). Thus he was able to recall and quote plays he had seen as a child, including the old Mystery Plays at Coventry. When an opportunity arose to join an acting company he left home and went to London, leaving his wife to bring up their young family. But many a soldier or sailor had to do the same, and he had no future in Stratford. He seems to have made regular visits home and certainly provided for his family very well financially.

He mixed with the right crowd, cultivated the right patrons and learned from his peers and rivals, finally outstripping them. He was a shrewd investor in the theatre business as well as in rural properties.

In short, he was no idealistic poet languishing in an ivory tower but a hands-on, energetic theatre practitioner with a good nose for business and a shrewd eye for the caprices of a fickle and shifting audience.