

The Routledge Guide to William Shakespeare

Robert Shaughnessy

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William Shakespeare is one of the most widely studied and culturally significant writers of all time, and his language and thought remain interwoven through popular reference and imaginings of the Western canon.

In this concise, structured guide, Robert Shaughnessy:

- introduces Shakespeare's life and works in context, providing crucial historical background
- introduces each of Shakespeare's plays in turn, considering issues of historical context, contemporary criticism and performance history
- provides a detailed discussion of twentieth century Shakespearean criticism, exploring the theories, debates and discoveries that have shaped our understanding of Shakespeare today
- looks at contemporary performance of Shakespeare on stage and screen
- cross-references between sections of the guide to suggest links between texts, contexts and criticism
- provides further reading by play and detailed chronologies.

Demystifying and contextualising Shakespeare for the twenty-first century, this book offers both an introduction to the subject for beginning students and an invaluable resource for more experienced Shakespearians.

Robert Shaughnessy is Professor of Theatre at the University of Kent.

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First edition published 2011 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Minion and Helvetica by Taylor & Francis Books

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Shaughnessy, Robert.

The Routledge guide to Shakespeare / Robert Shaughnessy. – 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616–Criticism and interpretation–Handbooks, manuals, etc.

I. Title.

PR2976.S3445 2010

822.3'3–dc22

2010024259

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-27539-2 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-27540-8 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-203-83523-4 (ebk)

For Nicki

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Acknowledgements

This book has taken a long time to complete, and along the way I have had much cause to be grateful to family, friends and colleagues for support, encouragement and advice. For initiating the project and seeing it through the first stages, my thanks to Liz Thompson and to the series editors of the Routledge Guides to Literature, Richard Bradford and Jan Jedrzejewski. Among the many colleagues whose generosity, shared insights, and sometimes indirect but nonetheless much-valued help have helped to make this book what it is, I thank in particular Pascale Aebischer, John Russell Brown, Mark Burnett, Peter Holland, Barbara Hodgdon, Graham Holderness, Kate McLuskie, Carol Rutter, Bill Worthen and Ramona Wray. Colleagues at Roehampton University and the University of Kent provided sympathetic ears and critical companionship: Chris Baugh, Peter Boenisch, Michael Dobson, Darryll Grantley, Susanne Greenhalgh, Patrice Pavis, Alan Read, and Melissa Trimmingham; special thanks to Peter Reynolds (who secured this book's first period of leave) and Paul Allain (who enabled its second). I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the award of a further term of research leave. My thanks to the two anonymous reviewers of my leave application, for showing the difference between a hawk and a handsaw.

At Routledge, it has been a pleasure to work with Polly Dodson and especially with Emma Nugent, who has been both immensely supportive and extraordinarily patient, especially in the final stages. Lisa Williams's sharp-eyed and imaginative copy-editing saved me from my errors and untied knots; Andrew Watts calmly steered the book through to publication.

My family have lived with this book for as long as I have, and it has been both their amused refusal to take matters Shakespearean too seriously, and their ability to see through to what really matters, that has kept in view a world elsewhere. For this, and much else, I thank Caitlin, Nathaniel, Gabriel and Erina. My deepest thanks to Nicki, who has travelled through it with me, and who knows what is truly beyond words. This is all for you.

Preface

This book is for anyone, from undergraduate level upwards, who is interested in the works of William Shakespeare, in the stage and screen versions which these have generated and inspired, and in the critical debates that have been provoked by them, with a particular, though not exclusive, emphasis upon the work of the past three decades. Offered as a comprehensive single-volume resource, it combines a biography of Shakespeare as a professional poet and playwright, seen in the context of his theatre, and of the cultural, social and political worlds in which the works took shape, a concise account of every work in the canon, and a summary and overview of modern criticism, performance and film. During the past quarter-century, the field of Shakespeare studies has been one of rapid change, diversification and often fierce debate; the aim of this guide is to indicate to readers how to engage further with the most provocative, stimulating and illuminating criticism that has been produced during this exciting period of literary history, and also to reflect upon its future, perhaps even to contribute to it. At the same time, whilst recognising the legitimate and desirable predominance of the new, the contemporary and the innovative in today's critical reading lists, the guide also aims to position recent and current movements in the context of what came before them, not only to establish their place in the larger historical landscape but also to remind its users that not everything that was published on Shakespeare prior to the last quarter-century has been superseded or discredited (far from it). There are, of course, some areas in which a broad – and, for the time being, seemingly solid – consensus appears to have been reached. For most readers of this book, performance – and, increasingly, performance on screen and online – is the primary, and seemingly natural, medium in which Shakespeare's words and works are encountered and brought to life; in this respect, there is nothing out of the ordinary in this book's use of theatre and performance, actual and imagined, as a key point of reference for the plays. However, since this book aims not only to record and reinforce consensus but, where necessary, to interrogate it, it also highlights the real and growing differences within the discipline of Shakespeare performance studies, particularly as it has begun to register the implications of the new thinking about theatre and performance that has been taking place beyond the Shakespearean critical industry.

The Routledge Guide to William Shakespeare is structured in four parts, which can be consulted independently, and approached in any order. Part I, 'Life and contexts', presents a chronologically ordered account, based on what is known of the professional and occasionally personal circumstances of its subject, which provides the basis for a succinct cultural history of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century literary and theatre industries. Preferring to refrain from the speculative habits to which Shakespearean biographical writing is liable, this part traces a career trajectory that sees its protagonist

engaged as a working playwright, theatre maker and entrepreneur in early modern London's most successful and politically best-connected, playing companies. Part II, 'Works', which follows the ordering of the Oxford and Norton editions, consists of twenty-five sections, each ascribed to a play or group of plays. In some cases the groupings reflect the sequential nature of the works in question (the *Henry VI* and *Henry IV* plays), in others generic affinities and partnerships (the narrative poems, the early comedies, the late plays); elsewhere works have been placed alongside each other in order to encourage readers to consider what may be less familiar works (*King John*, for example) alongside the more well-known ones. There are as many ways of reading Shakespeare as there are readers of Shakespeare; and, partly in order to reflect the spirit of critical and creative diversity of the material addressed in the third and fourth sections of the book, the works in this section are addressed in different ways. Some are considered in terms of their originating historical contexts and conditions of performance; others with regard to subsequent performance histories; in two instances (*Othello* and *The Tempest*) the plays' centrality to recent critical debates around race, ethnicity and postcoloniality make these concerns the focus of discussion. Each section is, however, anchored in the key factual information that is summarised in the inset text boxes. Elsewhere in this volume these are used to summarise supplementary material or matters that lend themselves to digressive treatment. Here will be found information about authorship (whether sole or collaborative), dating, publication history up to the printing of the 1623 Folio, and a brief list of important sources and influences, both known and conjectured. Also provided are listings of noteworthy stage and screen productions, and the significant personnel involved in them, and of the spin-offs and offshoots that the work has generated. In general, these brief performance histories concentrate on the period post-1950, though important earlier twentieth century productions are included when appropriate. Perhaps inevitably, given the provenance of this book, there is an emphasis upon productions within the British context, though important productions taking place beyond the shores of the small island are also acknowledged.

Part III, 'Criticism', begins with a short overview of the development of Shakespeare studies during the twentieth century before moving to a consideration of modern criticism from three interrelated perspectives. Chapter 1, 'Histories', traces the evolution of practices of reading that may be broadly termed contextual and political, beginning with the historicisms of the 1940s and 1950s, and proceeding via the new historicism and cultural materialism of the 1980s and after to the present. Chapter 2, 'Languages', examines those modes of interpretation that have been primarily concerned with literariness, and with the operations of discourse, how and why the works' words work in the ways that they do; it ranges from the close readings of New Criticism to the equally close (but theoretically and methodologically antithetical) readings of post-structuralism. Chapter 3, 'Subjectivities', addresses both the rise and fall (and recent rise again) of character criticism and, in relation to it, the critical work that has made questions of gender and sexuality its central concern. This compartmental sectioning is, of course, an artificial way of organising the vast output of its field of study: as will be seen, many of the critical practices and practitioners considered inhabit overlapping categories, and effective interpretation can, and usually will, draw upon a range of perspectives, methods and analytical tools. In a sense, it is obvious that all of the criticisms considered here that have operated in the wake of the changes that occurred a quarter-century ago can be said to be 'historicist', in that neither language nor gender nor performance can be sensibly considered without reference to the conditions that produced and continue to reproduce them. Rather than serving to act as a marker of firm subdisciplinary boundaries, then, the tripartite classification of Part III aims to offer a set

of complementary angles of approach to a critical field. Following this, Part IV looks at Shakespeare on screen and on stage through the lenses of the histories of film and performance criticism.

All quotations are from the *Norton Shakespeare* (1997), edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus.

Part I

Life and contexts

1 Introduction

Son of Stratford

Each year, on the Saturday nearest to 23 April, the otherwise unremarkable English Midlands town of Stratford-upon-Avon hosts a birthday celebration in honour of its most renowned former inhabitant. In 2009, this began at 9.45 a.m. with a reception at the Shakespeare Centre adjacent to the property known as Shakespeare's Birthplace, hosted by the President of the Shakespeare Birthday Celebrations, the veteran Shakespearean actor Sir Donald Sinden. At 10.30 a.m., a procession departed from the steps of the Birthplace, led by Sir Donald and featuring amongst its numbers Stratford civic dignitaries, representatives of Birmingham, Warwick, London, Oxford and Cambridge Universities, pupils from local schools, members of the theatre profession and delegations from around the world that included the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, the High Commissioner for the Bahamas, the Political and Press Secretary for Ireland, and the Ambassadors of Kazakhstan, El Salvador, Serbia and China. It fell to the last of these to carry out the task of addressing the several hundred guests in attendance at the Birthday Luncheon, an event lasting nearly four hours, on the topic of 'Worldwide Appreciation of Shakespeare'.

The parade proceeded along Henley Street and down Bridge Street, where it paused for the ceremony of the unfurling of the flags of the nations, institutions and interest groups represented by the parade. Onwards, with each member of the parade clutching floral tributes that ranged from single stems to lavish wreaths, the procession wound its way past bemused Stratford townspeople, up Sheep Street, along Chapel Street and past the site of the house that Shakespeare bought in 1597, New Place. It passed the King Edward VI Grammar School and Mason Croft, home of the University of Birmingham's postgraduate outpost, the Shakespeare Institute, down Old Tow, alongside Hall's Croft (home of Shakespeare's daughter, Susanna), finally to arrive at the Holy Trinity Church. Here members of the procession were invited to add their flora and assorted greenery to a growing pile at the base of the monument to the figure in whose memory the whole event had been orchestrated. Reminiscent simultaneously of a christening, a wedding and a funeral (for this birthday is also a day of death), the celebration traces commemoration as a collective pedestrian act, for one day a year transforming the sites of shopping and sauntering into what is both a mobile shrine and a cradle of possibilities, and into a biographical narrative which begins and ends with the gift of flowers, an act in Shakespeare associated both with the furthest reaches of madness (Ophelia, Lear) and profoundly redemptive grace (Perdita): 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance' (*Hamlet*, 4.5.173); 'Here's flowers for you' (*Winter's Tale*, 4.4.103).

Most of us would agree to recognise the procession as an enactment of a secular pilgrimage ritual, undertaking a journey that literally takes its participants in Shakespeare's footsteps from the womb to the tomb. The procession thus traces the arc of a biographical narrative that acknowledges key markers of the life (home, school, funerary monument) as well as acknowledging a global cultural afterlife. What might provoke disagreement, however, is what significance to attach to the extraordinary emotional and cultural investment that the event appears to represent. For the idealist, the gathering is a tribute to a spirit of genius capable of transcending history and geography to speak across and beyond cultural differences; for the cynic, the ceremony is a particularly lavish and sentimental perpetuation of the myth of that very transcendence. Complicating the meanings of the event, in 2009, was the fact that in this year, for the first time, the procession organisers expanded what had been for many years a rather solemn, dogged (and rather dull) trudge through the streets of Stratford into an extravaganza that included stunts, spectacle, street entertainers and a wide variety of local community groups on parade.

Although, sadly, the plan to mount a Royal Shakespeare Company actor, wrapped in the flag of St George, astride one of six motorcycles and send him down Bridge Street declaiming lines from *Henry V* had to be called off for safety reasons, there was much else for the crowds that had turned out to witness the event to experience. Attractions included stiltwalkers and skateboarders, extras in Elizabethan fancy dress, displays of salsa and line dancing, belly-dancing and Japanese fan dancing, and 'Gramophone Man', whose act consists of playing 'music from 1902 to 1960 on a wind-up gramophone'. If it was not immediately obvious what some of this had to do with the nominal meaning of the procession, it was undoubtedly lively. Moreover, it formed the centrepiece of a long weekend of Shakespeare-themed activities around Stratford that had begun with the unveiling of what was claimed to be a newly discovered likeness of Shakespeare, the Cobbe portrait, and which included Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) actors reciting sonnets and offering masterclasses, the Shakespeare Marathon and half-Marathon, performances of *Hamlet: Sword of Vengeance*, an adaptation in Mandarin Chinese presented by the Beijing Performing Arts School at the Civic Hall, and Shakespearean face-painting for the under-fives in the grounds of New Place.

The rich variety of activities on offer is at once a testimony to the persistence and the power of Shakespeare, the man, the works and the myth, in twenty-first-century culture, and a sign of the ingenuity and the effort that need to be expended in order to persuade the consumers of everyday culture of his, its and their continuing vitality: ostensibly the focus and meaning of the Birthday festivities, Shakespeare is as much pretext as text and context, and the beneficiary of an afterlife which, depending upon which angle you consider it from, is either joyously inevitable or embarrassingly prolonged.

Shakespeare's biographies

We do not need the annual Birthday celebration to remind us that writing the life of Shakespeare is so much more than a matter of re-examining the documentary record and a legacy of myth: as the story of a local boy made about as good as it is possible to get, it is perhaps one of the greatest, and certainly one of the most enduring, of literary-biographical fables. Yet the desire that is expressed every April in Stratford to follow Shakespeare's tracks is to a certain extent provoked by his own evident wish to cover them: the anniversary of 23 April is a public affirmation of an early modern life which, as far as we can tell, appears to have been lived as privately as possible. Shakespeare's burial site is

marked by the bust that was erected by Stratford residents after his death and a tombstone bearing a warning:

Good friend for Jesus' sake forbear,
To dig the dust enclosed here!
Blessed be the man that spares these stones,
And cursed be he that moves my bones.

The sentiments are conventional, formulaic even; as S. Schoenbaum, author of the definitive biography of Shakespeare's biographers, notes, the curse is intended to descend on the sexton, 'who sometimes had to dig up an old grave in the parish church in order to make room for the newly deceased' (1991: 3).

Whether or not Shakespeare was the composer of these lines, the epitaph seems to contain a veiled warning for the prospective biographer who would hope to 'dig the dust' of their subject's time on this planet. Posthumously memorialising a will to rest undisturbed, and the legacy of his plays and poems aside, Shakespeare left behind a fair few documentary traces of his own life, but little that can be convincingly mined for clues as to how those works came into being. This has not prevented generations of biographers from trying, of course: the first biography, by Nicholas Rowe, was written in 1709 and there have been hundreds since. At the time of writing, the most recent of these include Park Honan's *Shakespeare: A Life* (1999); Anthony Holden's *William Shakespeare* (1999); Katharine Duncan-Jones's *Ungentle Shakespeare* (2001); Michael Wood's *In Search of Shakespeare* (2003, published as a tie-in with a BBC mini-series); the longest entry, at nearly 40,000 words, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Holland 2004); Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (2004); Peter Ackroyd's *Shakespeare* (2005); James Shapiro's *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005); Stanley Wells's *Shakespeare and Co.* (2006); Bill Bryson's *Shakespeare* (2007); Charles Nicholl's *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (2007); Germaine Greer's *Shakespeare's Wife* (2007); and Jonathan Bate's *Soul of the Age* (2008).

Even among mainstream biographers the Shakespeares that are constructed are too many and varied to even begin to summarise here (and out of courtesy to the reader we shall here just once acknowledge, and pass over, the tradition of biographical fantasy that disputes the plain fact that the glover's son from Stratford was author of the works attributed to him; for the definitive account of this topic, see James Shapiro's *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* [2010]). In Greenblatt's account, he was a man whose 'root perception of existence' was 'his understanding of what could be said and what should remain unspoken, his preference for things untidy, damaged, and unresolved over things neatly arranged, well made, and settled', and who, at the end of his life, 'had never found or could never realize the love of which he wrote and dreamed so powerfully' (2004: 324, 388). For Katharine Duncan-Jones, Shakespeare ended his days 'ill and furiously angry with those around him ... perhaps almost mad with anger' (2001: 277). As a biographical subject, perhaps more than any other, Shakespeare focuses the preoccupations of biographers who, knowingly or not, construct him in their own image. Biographical writing about Shakespeare, which ranges from highly specialised scholarship to trade publication, always involves a degree of legitimate speculation, and sometimes blatant fictionalisation. The gaps and silences in Shakespeare's life have also invited the attentions of novelists, playwrights and film-makers, who can be less circumspect about the relations they construct between life and works, and who can be far more adventurously speculative about Shakespeare's

professional career, his political allegiances and social affiliations, his personal relationships and, above all, his sexuality.

The seemingly irresistible appeal of Shakespeare as a subject of factual and fictional biography stems not only from the matchless eloquence, lyricism, emotional depth and range of his writings but also from the apparent disparity between them and the terseness of a biographical archive comprised mostly of contemporary allusions by fellow writers, legal documents, records of financial transactions and parish records, which give a rather fuller account of Shakespeare as a mildly litigious businessman than as a creative artist. The aim of this chapter is not to add to the ever-expanding corpus of Shakespearean life writing, and certainly not to contribute a further portfolio of speculations about the author and his works, but, in the space available, simply to provide the outlines of the life as indicated by the documentary records, whilst also, where there are lacunae in the records that seem to invite significant further investigation, to direct readers towards their fuller treatment elsewhere. It also aims to flesh out the sketch by dealing more closely with the contexts, both professional and cultural, in which that life and work took shape.

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