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## **“A Kind of Character in thy Life”: Shakespeare and the Character of History<sup>\*</sup>**

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the early modern concept of “character” – and Shakespeare’s use of the word – as a way to rethink the nature of Shakespearean biography. Through the material of evidence of Shakespeare’s character, his writing, I turn to the figuring of “history” in Shakespeare’s plays, the writing of letters (leaving traces of characters as writing), before finally imaging a different kind of Shakespeare biography.

KEYWORDS: biography, character, history, Richard Quiney, *Henry IV Part 2*.

The circle of my concerns in this article began as a complex interaction or intertwining between Shakespeare’s biography and Shakespeare’s writing of biographies, between, in effect, two forms of history. It was in part an avenue for me to think through a way both of writing Shakespeare’s biography and of writing about it again, this time for Bruce Smith’s forthcoming *Cambridge World Shakespeare Encyclopedia*. The interlacing is driven by my increasing anxiety about what kind of history we can make of Shakespeare’s life, how or whether to connect the points of knowledge into a narrative. But enough by way of preface.

As the Duke in *Measure for Measure* prepares to unfold to Escalus his plan to leave Angelo in charge in Vienna, he asks,

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<sup>\*</sup> This article began life as a lecture for the Huntington Library in Pasadena, California, and then as the 2010 Sam Wanamaker Lecture at Shakespeare’s Globe in London. My thanks to both organizations for the invitation.

perhaps seeking reassurance, "What figure of us think you he will bear?" Moments later, after Angelo enters, "Always obedient to your Grace's will," the Duke begins the transfer of power with a comment whose specific meaning for our understanding of Angelo the play will only later start to unpack: "Angelo, | There is a kind of character in thy life | That to th'observer doth thy history | Fully unfold" (1.1.16, 25-29).<sup>1</sup> My concern is initially going to be with the collocation of three of the Duke's nouns – *figure*, *character* and *history* – and with the semantic fields within which they operate in early modern usage and in Shakespeare's writing, intertwining with each other as they make themselves apparent to those observers, the spectators who watch characters unfolding themselves through their histories, trying to figure out the figures before them.

Though *character* did not yet mean a role played by an actor in a play – that seems to be only a post-Restoration usage – Joseph Hall's *Characters of Vertues and Vices* (1608) and the first group of Overbury's "many witty Characters" in 1614 mark a new stage of interest in the presence of the Theophrastan form in England, those brief prose descriptions of a type of socially observed individual<sup>2</sup> – and it is their status as brief and fragmentary and fixed that I will want to use later. But Shakespeare had long been keen on the word and its cognates. As characters start to be "charactered," filled from their initial status as "characterless" – a word for which the OED gives Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* as its first example ("And mighty states characterless are grated | To dusty nothing," 3.2.184-185) – to becoming not "characterful," a word not yet in use, but perhaps "characterical," "characteristical," "characterized," for, though they could not yet show their "characteristics," they might start to acquire "characterisms," of the kind that Ben Jonson attached to the "persons of the play" listed in the printed text of *The New Inn*, each of whom now had "some short characterism of the chief actors" to describe them (see Berger 1997).<sup>3</sup> Such a grouping of characters might in theory be called a "charactery," a word Shakespeare used both for collections of symbols (characters in the sense of letters of

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Shakespeare are from Wells' edition (1986).

<sup>2</sup> The first Overbury group is printed in the second edition of Sir Thomas Overbury, *A Wife Now the Widow* (1614) and expanded in a number of subsequent editions in 1614 and 1616. For details of the progression of inclusion, see W.J. Paylor (1936).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in OED, characterism 1.

the alphabet or similar symbolic systems), for, in *Merry Wives*, “Fairies use flowers for their charactery” (5.5.72), and for the marks and traces which for Brutus are inscribed as “All the charactery of my sad brows” (*Julius Caesar*, 2.1.307), those signs of a troubled mind that Portia wants to understand, to be able to read or decode but which depend on the character’s expounding, laying bare his own character to her as he has already done to the spectators who can read what his wife cannot.

But the devices of character, the ways in which a character is formed in a play are also, in a sense, part of that exceptional skill in moral philosophy that Joseph Hall identified at the start of his *Characters of Vertues and Vices* as the art of certain “Divines of the olde Heathens” who “bestowed their time in drawing out the true lineaments of every vertue and vice, so lively, that who saw the medals, might know the face: which Art they significantly termed *Charactery*” (Hall 1608:A5a). The compact way in which such character-study might be delineated either in one of Hall’s characters or in Shakespeare’s creation of characters might also be “charactery” in another sense, as that “arte of shorte, swifte and secrete writing by character,” the shorthand system that Timothy Bright invented and published in his book *Characterie* in 1588. The epistemology that makes character visible is a product of precisely the brevity and rapidity of shorthand and the decoding that the secret writing system requires. An early modern playgoer may be learned in the charactery of performance, in the notational forms through which an actor denotes his characters, moving from the other notational forms of writing by the playwright to the representation of a person characterized in action.

We are of course used to the connections between character and engraving, not least since Jonathan Goldberg explored some of this nexus in his look at “the inscription of character” in an article that rightly found its place in his collection *Shakespeare’s Hand* (Goldberg 2003:10-47, esp.31-38; see also Lieblein 2009). The sense of something distinctively stamped or impressed is there in Hall’s reference to “medals.” In the very last piece added to the ninth edition of Overbury’s characters in 1616, there is a definition of “What a character is,” tracing its root in the “infinitive moode χαραξω which signifieth to ingrave, or make a deepe Impression” (Paylor 1936:92). That root is most apparent in and present in the semantic field

defined by the simplest form of the word in English, “charact.” But the writer of the Overbury character also sees character as “an Egyptian Hieroglyphicke, for an impresse, or shorte Embleme; in little comprehending much,” pointing us to a recurrent undertone in the word, one that seems to be ignored by modern explorations of its meanings, for “charact” and “character” and their associated forms “characteric,” “characterical” and “characeristical” are all used in relation to magical and cabbalistic symbolism, to the domain of secret meanings that have unknown power, to the potency of charms, talismans and spells. A character is in that sense a magical object, something that depends on learned skills and with symbolic meanings. Only then does the answer to “what a character is” move on to the specifically English version, “a picture (reall or personall) quaintlie drawne in various collours, all of them heightned by one shadowing” (Paylor 1936:92). Character as secret writing or as individual identity is a magical, charmed, powerful form, something hidden and needing particular skills to lay bare.

Most early modern dictionaries define “character” in senses that have nothing to do with individuation, emphasizing the imprint that creates a letter. So, for example, Thomas Thomas in his 1587 Latin-English dictionary, defines the Latin “character” as “A token, or note, a marke, signe, seal, or print in a thing: a letter, a figure, a stile, forme, manner of speaking or writing” (see Thomas at *LEME*). Against this norm, the ways in which Shakespeare uses the word are distinctly unusual. So, for instance, *OED* cites *Twelfth Night* as its first example for “The face or features as betokening moral qualities; personal appearance” (*n.10*) when Viola tells the Captain “I will believe thou hast a mind that suits | With this thy fair and outward character” (1.2.46-47) – and we should note how the passage marks out a separation and hopefully an interconnection between inside and out, between the stamps and imprints that are “outward” and the unknowable “mind” within. Something similar is going on when Menenius, describing the terrifying image of Coriolanus moving “like an engine,” tells Sicinius “I paint him in the character” (5.4.19, 27), both as a character portrait of the Overbury kind but also accurately, truthfully, in a lifelike representation of those visible qualities.

The grouping of individual characters, that is, the “graphical symbols” (*OED* 3.a) we know as letters of the alphabet, produces

that distinctive mark of individuality in handwriting, that character that is the Duke's in *Measure* ("here is the hand and seal of the Duke. You know the character, I doubt not, and the signet is not strange to you," a character that the Provost recognizes, 4.2.192-194) and the one that is not Olivia's in *Twelfth Night*, "Though I confess much like the character" (5.1.343). The letter is in Maria's hand, which is so like Olivia's that "on a forgotten matter we can hardly make distinction of our hands" (2.3.154-155), but its effectiveness depends on Maria's assessment of the character of Malvolio. It suggests a transitioning of the term from writing to the personality of the individual but that depends not on Shakespeare's use of the word but rather on mine. But there are only two characters in *Twelfth Night*: the writing that is like Olivia's and the fair and outward character of the Captain.

But even more important for my concerns is the way that for Shakespeare an object can simultaneously be defined as belonging to two people through the shift in definitions of the word "character" in relation to it. The object is now his, now hers, because of the semantic change. Drama often depends on recognition tokens but when Antigonus leaves Perdita in Bohemia there is a clutch of objects left with her that are observed differently by different people. There are also, usually unnoticed, the ones that are taken (scavenged? stolen?) from Antigonus' corpse before burial by the clown, for the proof of Antigonus' identity as the corpse depends in part, says the Third Gentleman, on "a handkerchief and rings of his, that Paulina knows" (5.2.65-66). But with Perdita there is, as far as the shepherds old and young are concerned, a christening robe – the "bearing-cloth for a squire's child" (3.3.112) – together with objects that are "Gold, all gold!" (118). But there are also objects that the shepherds do not mention: there is the "mantle of Queen Hermione's, her jewel about the neck of it" that we hear of from the Third Gentleman (5.2.32-33). Though the mantle might, I suppose, be the "bearing-cloth," the shepherds do not comment on the jewel, only the gold that surrounds it, the "these" that Antigonus suggests "may, if fortune please, both breed thee, pretty, | And still rest thine" (3.3.46-48). And then there are, says the Gentleman narrating the recognition, the "letters of Antigonus found with it, which they know to be his character" (34-35). But the letters begin their dramatic life not as "his character" but as Perdita's: "There lie, and there thy character" (46) – and, again, these are significantly the only occurrences of "character" in the play. They are the written account

of her identity, not a Theophrastan character of a social type, but they are also a character of a narrative and dramatic type, the abandoned baby, that which is lost which, of necessity, in drama will always be eventually found. Such writing, unread to us, has a character peculiar to its dramatic status, a character both of Antigonus in more ways than his handwriting and of Perdita in more ways than simply as a document of identification. But the metamorphosis of the possessive pronoun, "thy character" to "his character," is central to the transitions of meaning and of dramatic function that the single object creates, those letters as documents that are made up of letters as characters, as charactery, documents about her written by him, as the character changes from being sign of authorship (Antigonus') to sign of subject (Perdita's), from being written by to being written about.

We do not need to read these letters, these alphabetical characters that make up this letter in *The Winter's Tale*, or rather have it/them read to us. Their contents are self-evident in their meaning. But whenever we look at Shakespeare's will, that much-pored-over document, we look for different signs of character. They are there, of course, in the sense of his handwriting, at the foot of each page, the signature almost lost from the first sheet, more emphatically present on the second, and, on the third, with the assertion of authorship, of the act of authorizing, in the added phrase "By me," followed by the increasingly shaky handwriting that formed the characters of the surname. Shakespeare writes characters and we read back into the form of the characters, the impress that they make on the sheets of paper, meanings of, for instance, the state of his health. So Schoenbaum reads "By me" as "emphatic" as it validates the will but also that "the wavering scrawl of the surname" is a sign that in March 1616, on or after the visit of the lawyer Frances Collins on the 25<sup>th</sup>, "a feeble hand held the pen" (Schoenbaum 1975:246). But writing alphabetical characters as a signature is not the same as writing that reveals character. Collins did not produce a fair copy of the will for Shakespeare's signature and, just as much as the work of Hand D in his contributions to *Sir Thomas More*, the will shows all the signs of revision and rethinking, some perhaps made in January 1616 when he probably first visited Shakespeare, others certainly the result of changes between January and March, like the wedding of Shakespeare's daughter Judith to Thomas Quiney, Quiney's excommunication for failing to secure the right licence, and much

more seriously the death of Margaret Wheeler in childbirth and the burial of her and her child on 15 March. The day after Shakespeare's will was dated, Quiney appeared in court to be tried for "carnal copulation" [*carnalem copulationem*] with Wheeler, confessed his crime, received a sentence of open penance for three successive Sundays and bought himself out of such public humiliation for the small fee of five shillings for the poor of the parish (Schoenbaum 1975:239-240).

The first sheet of the will was completely rewritten, though even the new version has deletions and interlineations, the whole probably in the hand of Frances Collins' clerk. The second and third sheets are full of changes, changes that we want to read as signs of character, changes we want to characterize, to read back into intention, to use as signs of interiority and intentionality just as much as we do when looking at Shakespeare's characters in the plays. Take, for instance, this provision: "& to my ffellowes John Hemynge Richard Burbage & Henry Cundell xxvj<sup>s</sup> viij<sup>d</sup> A peece to buy them Ringes."<sup>4</sup> How do we read the meaning of its interlineated status, its sign of addition? Was it always intended but written in at this point for some formal reason to align it with other such bequests for rings to people in Stratford like Hamlett Sadler, William Raynoldes, William Walker, Anthonye Nashe and John Nashe? Was it an afterthought? Why only these three of the King's Men? That Heminges and Condell went on to edit the Folio has prompted the thought that the two events, the bequest and the editing, are somehow interconnected, that Shakespeare might have already been thinking about the planning of a collection of his plays and that the rings are therefore able to be construed as a sign of entrusting the two friends with the task.

But the object, the will's bequests to Heminges and Condell, resolutely resists such interpretation. We can read it as biographical document pointing towards a future printing only if we are prepared to read as readers of Shakespeare's plays, to read it as manifesting a history that not only reaches back through the years of Shakespeare's involvement with one company, with three at least of whom he might not unreasonably be friendly enough to make a

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<sup>4</sup> I use the transcription in Chambers (1930:2.172).



bequest, but also must be seen as reaching forward, as a sign or portent, a figure that prefigures an event seven years later.

And if such reading of this comparatively simple provision is, in effect, a denial of adequate historiography in favour of a creation of purpose that we might wish to find, a statement of connection to a printed object whose production we might hope to show as authorized in as many senses as possible, then the anxiety about the meaning of the second-best bed is even more complete as a desire to create a history, to find not only in the nature of the bequest but also in its status as interlineation (therefore supposedly to be seen as afterthought) and in its absences of terms of endearment a statement about the marriage. We want, that is, to read from the character of these characters, these acts of inscription, to a history as personal narrative, no *grand récit*, but a narrative whose significance depends on the historical power of the individual about whom the narrative is being constructed. We yearn to narrativize.

And that leads me back to Angelo's history that will be unfolded in the course of *Measure for Measure*. Shakespeare's histories, I want to emphasize, are far more substantively narratives of individuals, what the *OED* calls "The whole train of events connected with a particular [...] person, [...] and forming the subject of his [...] history" (n.4.b), than we have tended to assume. History for Shakespeare can occasionally be generic, as in Polonius' catalogue or in the Page's definition to Christopher Sly of the drama they will watch, "It is a kind of history" (*The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, 2.140) – and it might be worth recalling that in Henry Cockeram's dictionary of 1623 tragedy is defined as "a History or play of death" and comedy as "a History or play of mirth" (Cockeram at *LEME*). But most dominantly for Shakespeare, it is the narrative of a person's life, for, as Jaques argues in *As You Like It*, following conventional tropes, all human life can be seen as a form of drama in seven scenes that adds up to being a "strange, eventful history" (*As You Like It*, 2.7.164). Individual lives are histories. So Orsino asks Cesario about her/his father's daughter, "And what's her history?" (2.4.109); Marina tells Pericles "If I should tell|My history, it would seem like lies|Disdain'd in the reporting" (2.1.106-108); Brutus tells his "countrymen" that "Brutus' tongue|Hath almost ended his life's history" (*Julius Caesar*, 5.5.33, 39-40); and Warwick, in a crucial speech to Henry IV, begins by defining his

terms: “There is a history in all men’s lives|Figuring the nature of the times deceased” (*Henry IV Part 2*, 3.1.75-76). It is a passage I shall come back to soon. Whoever in the printing/publishing industry gave Shakespeare’s plays different titles at different times was working at the same intersection of individual and history: *Henry VIII* has running-heads in the Folio that identify it as “*The Famous History of the Life of King HENRY the Eight*,” Q1 and Q2 call *Hamlet* “*The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*,” *King Lear* started its print-life as “*His True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three Daughters*” in 1608, some of the plays the Folio groups as “Histories” are also called “The Life and Death” of the central character (*Richard III*, *King John*, *Richard II*), *Henry V* is “*The Life*” in Folio and “*The Chronicle History*” in quarto, the first issue of the first quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* is “*The History*,” and so on. And, when Nicholas Rowe first wrote Shakespeare’s biography, he praised his histories where a reader/playgoer “will find the Character as exact in the Poet as the Historian” and continues,

He seems indeed so far from proposing to himself any one Action for a Subject, that the Title very often tells you, ’tis *The Life of King John*, *King Richard*, &c. What can be more agreeable to the Idea our Historians give of *Henry the Sixth*, than the Picture *Shakespeare* has drawn on him! His Manners are everywhere exactly the same with the Story [...]. (Rowe 1709:1.xviii)

And I am unembarrassed to find myself in Rowe’s company.

But it is Warwick’s use of “figuring” that I first want to worry at a little, especially recalling that collocation of *history* and *figure* at the opening of *Measure*. Where *character* could not yet mean a representation in a play, *figure* could. Think of Ariel who, Prospero tells him after the banquet that is not eaten, “Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou|Performed” (3.3.83-84). This is OED’s earliest citation in this sense (*n.11.a*). As “character” entangles the individual and the symbolic representations of language, so too does “figure.” No wonder that the soldier in *Timon* who finds the epitaph, combines the two words: “The character I’ll take with wax.|Our captain hath in every figure skill,|An aged interpreter, though young in days” (5.4.5-7). There is the rhetorical figure that is so dominant as a meaning in early modern dictionaries (OED 21) and the symbols (letter as well as number) that create the words, that system of language in which the captain is skilled (OED 18-19). There are the diagrammatic and ornamental figures (OED 13-15).

But, where *OED* as it sorts out the meanings of “character” moves from the imprint towards the individual, the sequence for “figure” is the reverse, moving from the outward shape of something or someone through the represented form or likeness to the written character. Character, one might say, becomes an individual, figure develops from being an individual’s appearance.

Warwick is not speaking of the external shape of the body, the figure that represents or the ornamental. Rather, he is engaging with the ways in which history reveals a patterning, unfolds its figures, representing its diagrammatical basis, not least as an act of the mind or imagination. We could compare the way in which a gentleman in *Measure* tells Lucio “Thou art always figuring diseases in me, but thou art full of error – I am sound” (1.2.51-52). Since figuring can be representing, it can show or purport to show that which, as Hamlet defines it, precisely because it is internal, is “that within” which must necessarily or can conceivably be something that “passeth show” (1.2.85). So, as Anne is accompanying the corpse of Henry VI, that “key-cold figure of a holy king” (*Richard III*, 1.2.5), she meets Richard whose heart, or so he claims, is “figured in my tongue” (1.2.181). This act of figuring moves from inside outside; it is in a more serious way an act of figuring out. But Warwick’s suggestion is that the understanding of individual histories is the accurate decoding and simplifying of the complexity of a series of events into a pattern, a shape, a form, that which has been, those events that are the mark of history both as individual events and as the fact of their pastness, their being an aspect of “the times deceased.” The diagram is the process by which the individual in history and the individual’s history is figured.

But, as the three states of time – history, immediacy and possibility, or past, present and future – demand an awareness of their sequentiality, that that which is past, is history, is always already signifying the possibilities of the future, so the verb form of “figure” also suggests “prefigure” (*OED* v.5), as in *Henry VI Part 3*: when the three suns appear in the air to York’s sons after the battle of Wakefield, it is Richard who asserts “In this the heaven figures some event” (2.1.32). Here the diagram that the suns make, the diagrammatic figure that they represent, portends something to come, not something past, figuring the nature of the times but in a

different time-field, no longer times deceased but times as yet unborn.

So Warwick in 2 *Henry IV* sees a profound interconnection of possibilities between the understanding of the past and the prediction of the future.

There is a history in all men's lives  
 Figuring the nature of the times deceased;  
 The which observed, a man may prophesy,  
 With a near aim, of the main chance of things  
 As yet not come to life, who in their seeds  
 And weak beginnings lie intreasurèd. (*Henry IV Part 2*, 75-80)

Analysing the past, that history which can be observed, enables one to gauge the likelihood of future events. The seeds and weak beginnings of the future lie in the past. But the prediction is not guaranteed to be accurate; it is only "With a near aim," a reasonable shot but one that may miss the target and, in any case, is trying to point towards the "main chance," a complex form of the central issues of fortune ("issues" in Shakespeare's usual sense of consequences, not our meaning as "problems, those things which are at issue"). The side outcomes may not even be guessed at with such a reasonable chance.

Warwick's movement from history to futurity is one that Henry IV manages completely to misunderstand: "Are these things then necessities?|Then let us meet them like necessities" (87-88). But Warwick has carefully and sensibly argued that these things are not necessities, only probabilities. When Richard considered what Northumberland had done to him, he might predict what Northumberland might do to his successor: "King Richard might create a perfect guess|That great Northumberland, then false to him,|Would of that seed grow to a greater falseness,|Which should not find a ground to root upon|Unless on you" (84-86). But the "guess" only turns out to be accurate, "perfect," in retrospect, as it becomes history, as it, more narrowly, proves to be part of Northumberland's history, the history of this man's life. There is nothing in Northumberland's earlier actions that necessitates the later ones, only that there are seeds that might root and sprout in a parallel or comparable way, provided that there proves to be fertile soil for rebellion, "ground" which Henry conveniently supplied. The sequence of repetition is not inevitable, only a possibility that grows

to probability the more one observes past times, dead times, times deceased.

Henry had, indeed, understood this process when he first opened the topic, defining Richard II's comment as "words, now proved a prophecy" (64). As Henry goes on to quote more of Richard's language, not quite accurately repeating what he heard and we may have heard in the earlier play,<sup>5</sup> altering its historical record, the data of the event, his phrasing oscillates between event and inevitability:

"The time shall come" – thus did he follow it –  
"The time will come, that foul sin, gathering head,  
Shall break into corruption;" so went on,  
Foretelling this same time's condition,  
And the division of our amity. (70-74)

The movement from "shall" to "will" is, I take it, a question about the extent to which the second revolt of Northumberland cannot choose but occur. But at the centre of the scene is that other oscillation, between time singular and time plural, between the time and the times: "the time shall come" but also "the revolution of the times." The plural (if one discards the two occurrences as a multiplier) appears an extraordinary fifteen times in 2 *Henry IV*: times that are "wild," "idle," "rotten," times that "do brawl," lack "trust," belong to "costermongers," times that have a "condition," that mark their change as "revolution," that need to be "construe[d] [...] to their necessities," that will have "after-times," and finally are, in Pistol's erroneous promise to Falstaff, his failed prophecy, going to be "golden."<sup>6</sup>

The scene in which this dialogue is placed is one of Shakespeare's most astonishing moments of dramatic device. Indeed, I don't think there is anything more extreme in drama until Molière's *Tartuffe* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. By this point we are nearly half-way through the play (at the start of Act 3) and yet only now does the title-character, Henry IV himself, make his entrance. David Troughton, when he played the king for the RSC in

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<sup>5</sup> Compare: "Northumberland, thou ladder wherewithal | The mounting Bolingbroke ascends my throne, | The time shall not be many hours of age | More than it is ere foul sin, gathering head, | Shall break into corruption [...]" (*Richard II*, 5.1.55-59).

<sup>6</sup> 1.1.9, 2.2.121, 4.4.60, 1.3.70, 1.3.100, 1.2.170, 4.1.99, 3.1.45, 4.1.102, 4.1.277, 5.3.97.

2000, used to complain bitterly and not entirely ironically, as he sat for so long in his dressing-room waiting for his first scene, that, dammit all, the play had his name on it. That the scene becomes a reflection or meditation on the processes and continuities of history seems an inevitable outcome of the delay. As Warwick and Henry attempt to create what is in effect a theory of history, they use as their data their recollections of events, their rewriting of history through recharactering the speeches past. Their history is made out of the characters in their plays, the events seen and unseen, events that can be, have been and will be known by playgoers. We characterize their histories through the kinds of histories that we have for them – hence, to take the most obvious example, 1 and 2 *Henry IV* make different kinds of sense, create different histories and hence different expectations dependent on whether or not we know/have seen *Richard II*. Our activities as play-watchers are profoundly altered by how we create the character of their histories and the histories of their characters.

But the play of character in a history play is always a matter which in the context of the performance is physicalized as individuals, while the character of history in other circumstances is far more likely to be a play of characters as written traces. Where the written appears in, for example, *Henry IV Part 1*, it is marked by a functional clarity that is distinctly unlike the material traces of the historical record. When Peto searches Falstaff's pockets and "findeth certain papers," most Prince Henry tells Peto to "keep close" so that they can be "read [...] at more advantage" (2.4.535), items we are later told are "tavern reckonings, memorandums of bawdy-houses" (3.3.157). But one is read out:

Item a capon... 2s. 2d.  
 Item sauce... 4d.  
 Item sack two gallons... 5s. 8d.  
 Item anchovies and sack after supper 2s. 6d.  
 Item bread... ob. (2.4.528-532)

This tavern reckoning is easy to comprehend, its characters read back across the vast bulk of Falstaff and his preferences for more drink than food – and for food like anchovies that stimulate more drinking. We read it against the play's character, Shakespeare's writing of the character, as another sign of its/his characterization. There are aspects of the writing we might want to know more about

and which editors don't seem to want to help us understand: is that a high price for a capon at a tavern?<sup>7</sup> Or for sack? The corporation of Stratford-upon-Avon paid 20 pence for a quart of sack and a quart of claret when a visiting preacher was entertained at New Place in 1614. But Shakespeare's audience would have grasped the pricing structures Falstaff's bill represented. As a piece of writing its character is clear. Indeed, it seems to me significant that we give the tavern reckoning a significance in relation to the character. There is no function for it other than as an aspect of Falstaff's dramatic being. It will reappear later as a small item in the plot when Falstaff is claiming that he has lost far more than these bills but, even there, its return is a sign of the individual.

Such writing, in other words, functions as characters about character. And that is exactly what we try to make the material traces of writing about Shakespeare himself mean, that these too can be seen as signs of his character. Virtually everything that constitutes the documentary evidence for Shakespeare himself is in the form of writing. Images of buildings, for example the surviving evidence for New Place, apart, the only other exceptions are, of course, images of Shakespeare and reading them for signs of character is a pretty forlorn activity. When, for instance, Mark Broch and Paul Edmondson writing about the Cobbe portrait, the painting most recently and, I'm afraid, unconvincingly claimed as showing Shakespeare, try to analyse what it "tells us about Shakespeare" and judge that in it Shakespeare "looks self-assured, but relaxed and gentle at the same time. His face [...] open and alive, with a rosy, rather sweet expression, perhaps suggestive of modesty [...]. It is the face of a good listener," I can only wonder that they do not seem to grasp at all how little early modern portraits were representational, how little they were designed to tell viewers about the emotional character of the sitter, how deeply conventional they were (See Broch and Edmondson 2009:22-23). None of the claimed images (portraits and church-monument) enable us to read the "character of [his] sad brows."

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<sup>7</sup> Kevin Quarmby points out that, according to the Corporation of London Records Office *Letter Book Y*, a table of price controls imposed on the Worshipful Company of Poulterers dated 9 July 1577, a "Capon, best," costs "2/-" (fol. 161v). By 1633-1634, the best capon cost 2/6, suggesting both that inflation was relatively minor even over more than fifty years, and that the cost to Falstaff of capons would hardly seem unusual to a 1590s audience. See Jones (1981:147-148).

Trying to read what the written and printed documentary evidence shows of Shakespeare's character is even more clearly both an expectation in biographical writing and a recipe for disaster. Even the evidence of what he was doing for substantial stretches of his life can be thin. Add up, for instance, the signs that Shakespeare retired to live in Stratford-upon-Avon towards the end of his life. Nicholas Rowe put it in 1709, in the first published Shakespeare biography, that

The latter Part of his Life was spent, as all Men of good Sense will wish theirs may be, in Ease, Retirement, and the Conversation of his Friends. He had the good Fortune to gather an Estate equal to his Occasion, and, in that, to his Wish; and is said to have spent some Years before his Death at his native *Stratford*. (Rowe 1709:1.xxxv)

But he was in London when the deposition of his evidence in the Belott-Mountjoy case was taken in June 1612 and when he signed the mortgage on the Blackfriars gate-house in London in March 1613. He was there, too, when Thomas Greene called on him on 17 November 1614, this time “commyng yesterday to towne” – but if Shakespeare had come to town from Stratford, why didn't Greene see him there instead? When in September 1611 the town collected subscriptions to cover the costs of lobbying parliament to keep up the highways, Shakespeare's name is added in the margin but whether that indicates, as Schoenbaum hypothesized, that he “was in London when the sponsors first canvassed support” it is impossible to know (Schoenbaum 1975:229). There is, in effect, no hard evidence of Shakespeare's ever having retired to Stratford, let alone that he there lived the life of a man of good sense in Rowe's terms. He made his will there, he died and was buried there and he wrote plays at a slower rate than in the past but that is very nearly all that can be said. The evidence says nothing of his character and, except in the protracted wrangling over the Welcombe enclosures, too complex a matter to open up here, there is little that connects the surviving dots into anything approximating a sequence of interconnectedness, a narrative that might be more than momentarily coherent, indeed, anything that might pass for a narrative at all.

And in that sense, as a sign of what I quoted the *OED* as calling “The whole train of events connected with a particular [...] person, [...] and forming the subject of his [...] history,” Shakespeare himself has no history, for there is a collection of events but not a “train of



events,” nothing that forms a “subject of his [...] history,” nothing to help us shape it other than the sequence of plays, publications, stationers’ register entries and such-like regularly occurring information, some of which, of course, is vexingly awkward and imprecise – and I speak as someone who has been wrestling for far too long with the difficult matter of when Shakespeare might have written *Coriolanus* and when (not to mention where) the play might have first been performed. The pieces can indeed be separated out, as Graham Holderness did when he constructed his Shakespeare biography as *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare*, each of which is divided into recoverable facts, traditional lore and an imaginative excursus as a short piece of fiction (Holderness 2011).

As textual fragments – both because they are text and because they are fragments of the textualised life of Shakespeare – we can try to read them locally and independently, using those skills appropriate to such material traces, ranging from literary critical or theatrically conscious analysis to philology, palaeography and book history, not to mention social, cultural, local and political history and historiography. We might, this way, get close to deciding whether, say, the signature in the Folger copy of William Lambarde’s *Archaionomia* (1568) is authentic but not to explaining why the signature is so awkwardly written in the ornamental lace border of the title-page, something which Giles Dawson, who does believe it to be authentic, “is inclined to lay to [Shakespeare’s] eccentricity” (Dawson 1992:79; see Schoenbaum 1981:104-109). And, in any case, no-one has made any kind of case for the significance of Shakespeare’s having owned, let alone read, this compilation of ancient British ecclesiastical law, printed in Anglo-Saxon and in Latin translation, a standard law text for exploring precedents.

Even when scholars try to read the materials contextually, we run into problems. So, for instance, there are the difficulties posed by the Richard Quiney letter of 25 October 1598, the only surviving copy of a letter written to Shakespeare (for, outside the published dedicatory letters to Southampton prefixed to *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, there are of course no surviving letters by Shakespeare). Some have wanted to read Quiney’s request for help securing a loan for himself and Abraham Sturley of the very large sum of £30 to clear his debts as a sign of Shakespeare’s being a money-lender, of being like his father, who was prosecuted for

lending money at usurious rate of 20% interest, and like his creation of an evil money-lender, of being characterized as both John Shakespeare and Shylock. I find this a misreading of Quiney's letter, for his statement that "I will holde my tyme & content yowre ffrende" seems clear enough as a promise both to repay by the due date and to satisfy the person Shakespeare would encourage to make the loan, not Shakespeare himself (Chambers 1930:2.102). Shakespeare as intermediary rather than Shakespeare as lender transforms our understanding of the letter. Alan Stewart's superb exploration of it in his hugely enjoyable book *Shakespeare's Letters* places it into a complex network of letters about loans and other "financial transactions that are forged across two distant places" (Stewart 2008:162; see also Eccles 1961:92-99), many of which survive in the Quiney correspondence that formed part of the Stratford archives after Quiney was killed in a tavern brawl in 1602. And Stewart also places it into an early modern culture of credit arrangements which formed most financial transactions to the extent that, as he quotes Deborah Velenze describing it, "[t]he social import of contractual obligation was so great that all social life was practically indistinguishable from the enforced relationality of trust generated by credit" (Stewart 2008:162).

In spite of the superscription, "To my Loveinge good ffrend & contreymann M<sup>r</sup> W<sup>m</sup> Shackespere deliver thees," the letter was never delivered, for the sealed document is in the Quiney papers. Schoenbaum assumes it was never sent: "Perhaps Quiney decided to get together personally with Shakespeare; maybe the playwright called on his countryman at the Bell, near St. Paul's" (Schoenbaum 1975:181). But perhaps it was simply not received. Letters were not left in mailboxes but handed to the intended recipient. Certainly Quiney was able to write to Sturley the same day that, as Sturley put it, "our countriman M<sup>r</sup> Wm. Shak. would procure vs monej," but Sturley was hesitant until he heard the details: "which I will like of as I shall heare when, and wheare, and howe" (Chambers 1930:2.103). We have no idea whether the terms pleased and the deal was done, let alone whether it was repaid.

However sensitively we reconstruct the social circumstances of such letters, the letter remains isolated, a gesture towards something that remains resolutely opaque. Of course biographers can make any fragments into a narrative, can, that is, adopt a position in relation to

the material traces that will control how they are read. To take the most obvious recent example, Katherine Duncan-Jones offered her “scenes from his life” under the title *Ungentle Shakespeare* and managed to read almost any trace as a sign that Shakespeare was not the gentle-man we might prefer him to have been and that the label of “gentle” he was frequently given by his contemporaries was far from the truth. So, for instance, the will of Thomas Whittington, former shepherd to Shakespeare’s father-in-law, bequeathed to “the poore people of Stratford 40<sup>s</sup> that is in the hand of Anne Shaxspere, wyf unto M<sup>r</sup> Wyllyam Shaxspere, and is due debt unto me, beyng payd to myne Executor by the sayd Wyllyam Shaxspere or his assigns” (Chambers 1930:2.42). Duncan-Jones has no doubt that this means that Anne was “left short of money by her husband” and therefore had to borrow money from “her father’s old friend” and that Whittington “felt that the poor of Stratford were not receiving sufficient benefit from their celebrated townsman’s prosperity;” therefore, “Whittington’s bequest delivers a double reproach: the new-made gentleman’s son had neglected the needs both of his own family and of the poor of his native town” (Duncan-Jones 2001:150). I suppose it could mean that but the use of a will to mark such a reproach would have been very unusual and not very effective. Where Duncan-Jones sees the 40 shillings as a sign that Anne was short of money, Schoenbaum finds it as likely to be “Whittington’s uncollected wages or savings held for safe-keeping” (Schoenbaum 1975:181). Germaine Greer, in her pursuit not of signs of William Shakespeare’s ungentleness but of Ann Shakespeare’s significance, finds in the statement that the money was held by Ann “a single scintilla of evidence that Ann Shakespeare was economically active in her own right,” “operating as a banker,” someone who “may have been empowered to lend and spend [her husband’s income] as she thought fit” (Greer 2007:220-221).

My point is not, of course, to try to arrive at a solution or even simply to disagree with Duncan-Jones and admire Greer’s persistence. Rather, the problem of the fragments are that they cannot be read with assurance, that they are enigmatic in the way that the material traces of history are not in the history plays but that individuals in the history plays are. Just as Shakespeare writes histories, embedding the plays and the characters in them, the figures who figure the history, the ones whose histories make up history, fixing them into what became an unprecedentedly vast

dramatic narrative of secular life, so Shakespeare's life has in turn become a place to make narrative, the History of William Shakespeare, a potentially "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" assemblage of genres if ever there was one, in its combination of documentary evidence and the activities of mythography in the long history of writing his history.

I will want finally to suggest a different form of writing of this man's history, one, in effect, more alert to the character of character in its early modern senses. But I want first to suggest that the recent and welcome revival of interest in characters, the turn to character as it were, is still bedeviled by a series of constrictions in the conceptualization of the term that is largely the consequence of considering too few of Shakespeare's characters and hence of a failure to appreciate how the full range of Shakespearean characterization changes the nature of the histories that are being written (see Yachnin and Slights 2009; Holland 1989). The fascinating and provocative essays in Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights' recent collection on *Shakespeare and Character* are all about Othello and Hamlet and Macbeth and Shylock but not about the First Senator, the Second Clown, the Third Murderer and the Duke of Venice. Read down a random page of the *Index of Characters in Early Modern English Drama* created by Thomas Berger and others, and the rich range of characters is far more readily apparent than in any critical writing about character: Shoemaker, Shone, Shopkeeper, Shore, Shorthand, Shorthuels, Shorthose, Shorttool, Shortyard, Show, Shrewd Wit, Shrewsbury, Shrimp, Shrovetide, Shrove Tuesday, Shrub, Shunfield, Shylock (Berger 1998:90).

The RS Company that performed the eight-play history cycle in 2006-2008 knew exactly how many characters there were in the plays as they scurried to move from character to character. As V.V. Montreux memorably put it,

"The Glorious Moment:" Thursday 13<sup>th</sup>– Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2008, The Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. Eight of Shakespeare's history plays in order of the lives and deaths of kings: *Richard II*, a brace of Henriads, *Richard III*. Approximately 1,389 minutes of Shakespearean performance in which 34 actors played 264 parts, spoke over 200,000 words, wore over 800 costumes and 40 wigs, wielded 120 weapons and, consequently, spilt over 15 liters of stage blood. In the 71-hours that encompass these performances, the average member of the Courtyard

audience wears 2.7 costumes and 0.02 wigs, drinks 3.6 liters of coffee, chats up two-thirds of an actor in the Dirty Duck, and tosses 2.1 carnations at the stage in the tumultuous standing ovation on Sunday afternoon. (Montreux 2008:65)

If Shakespeare's histories achieve one thing in their vast recording of history, it is that there are an enormous number of characters needed, characters with histories limited or extensive, stretching across three plays or apparent only in a scene, characters whose lives are richly figured across time and ones superbly sketched in moments, ones that fully unfold over eight hours of performance and ones whose unfolding is immediate and complete. It is a richness that Molly Mahood mapped out for us in *Bit Parts in Shakespeare Plays* (1992) but whose potential we have too often failed to tap. To think about *Henry IV Part 1* without considering the carters as well as Falstaff is to misunderstand the play's construction of history out of histories. Take some of the roles played by Kieran Hill in the RSC's history cycle – Mayor's Officer, Lord Mayor, Ned Poins, Duke of Orleans, Horner, Earl of Westmoreland – and try to imagine the histories without them. Thomas Whittington is as crucial a character in the History of Mr William Shakespeare as is Anne *née* Hathaway. Character is not a prerogative defined by length of role and not only kings have histories.

By analogy, some of the greatest achievements of the long, long line of Shakespeare biographies have been the uncovering of the minor characters, the bit-part players in his life history, like those named in his will as recipients of bequests for memorial rings apart from the three King's men: William Raynoldes, recusant landowner, William Walker, Shakespeare's 8-year-old godson, Anthonye Nashe, who collected Shakespeare's tithes and whose son would marry Shakespeare's granddaughter and Hamnet or Hamlet Sadler, who thirty years earlier with his wife Judith gave their names and hence were probably godparents to the Shakespeares' twin children, as they would call their own son born in 1598 William, perhaps another Shakespeare god-son. But there was no memorial ring for Richard Tyler the elder, the butcher's son of Sheep Street, whose bequest was deleted. We can, that is, construct Shakespeare's biography out of the other characters who people it. But I don't think even the alternative form of Hamnet Sadler's first name will tell us much about the creative act of imagination that formed a play about a Prince of Denmark.

Just occasionally one of these extras in the cast-list of Shakespeare's life seems to reveal something of a movement inwards, from the externalities of character to a process of thought and memory, from an external figure to something that helped Shakespeare figure out how to incorporate a transmutation of that history into a play. I have long been intrigued by one of these moments, one that has had rather less attention than it might deserve. On 6 July 1579 another William Shakespeare, this one of Warwick not Stratford, though fairly closely related to the Shakespeares who did live in Stratford, was "walking to the River [Avon] to bathe himself" when he "suddenly and by accident fell into a deeper part of the River and was drowned" – I quote from the translation of the Latin record of the inquest (Fripp 1930:130). Perhaps Shakespeare heard of his namesake's death, as he might have heard of the suicide of another John Shakespeare, at Balsall, a little further afield the same month.

Perhaps, too, he heard of a second death by drowning a few months later on 17 December 1579 of a young woman baptized Katharine who "going with a certain vessel, in English a *pail*, to draw water at the river" – the same river Avon but this time in Tiddington, a village a little over a mile from Stratford, in the parish of Alveston on the south side of the river – "standing on the back of the same, suddenly and by accident slipped and fell into the water, and was drowned" (Fripp 1930:129). The death of Katharine, who was not local to the parish, was judged at the inquest under "coroner's quest law" (*Hamlet*, 5.1.22) an accident, for "not otherwise nor in other fashion came she by her death," and it would not seem significant to me, if it were not for her surname for the poor "spinster" was surnamed Hamlet. I want news of this event to have reached Shakespeare, then aged 15, and I want it to have stayed in his mind and resurfaced from the mess of memories twenty years later as he writes *Hamlet* and drowns Ophelia and has his clowns discuss whether her death is suicide or not. I want, in other words, for this figure to have imprinted itself, charactered itself into his thoughts so that the record of the inquest becomes a material trace of creative process. I want, rather more than I should, to create a Shakespeare who writes from experiential events, though not as much as Edgar Fripp, on whose account of the inquest I rely, who thought it helped to prove that the young Shakespeare worked in the office of Henry Rogers, the Stratford Town Clerk, Steward and

Coroner. I do not want to create a Shakespeare who had to have been to Venice to have written *Othello* or *The Merchant of Venice* but, paradoxically, I do want a Shakespeare who had picked up that fragment of local news as accidentally as Katharine fell in the Avon.

James Shapiro has been suggesting recently, in *Contested Will*, his fine account of the anti-Stratfordians, that the principal problem with Shakespeare biographies, including all those many that trust that Shakespeare did write the plays and that there was not some grand conspiracy to use him as front-man for the writing of others, is that we seek to find modes of finding the inner life, the ways in which life experiences transmute into creative writing. Dissatisfied by trying to read, say, *Romeo and Juliet* alongside Arthur Brooke's *Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* we want, like the audiences of *Shakespeare in Love*, to find in it evidence of Shakespeare's own feelings, not his brilliance at creating representations of feelings. For Shapiro, the great scholar Edmond Malone becomes almost the villain of the narrative of the authorship controversies precisely because Malone in some respects inaugurated the explicit desire to read the works as autobiography. And from Malone to Stephen Greenblatt or Rene Weis or others who want to find what the works have to say about "Shakespeare's inner life," is, for Shapiro, a straight line (Shapiro 2010:265).

Even though there are times this yearning for reading creative writing as autobiography drives me too, I also know that manfully I must try to resist the urge. So, because I can't have that, I want to suggest a way of keeping intact two features of the writing of history, the History of William Shakespeare, that I have been concerned to be identifying: the inevitable discontinuities that the material record of the documentary life manifest and the externalities of the imprint of character and figure as signs of history as personal narrative. Biographical history is a form of parenting that is as brutal in its paternalism as the kind Theseus describes as the potential work of the Athenian father Egeus: Shakespeare, like Hermia, is to us, as to Egeus, "but as a form in wax | By him imprinted, and within his power | To leave the figure, or disfigure it" (*MND*, 1.1.49-51) – and I feel a shudder of horror every time I think about what "disfigure" means here.

As the characters, the writing of the individual, are imprinted and the figure is left or disfigured, that most violent of images of the

erasure or damaging of the figure, the external appearance, the identity of the daughter or biographical subject, perhaps we should instead turn to seeing Shakespeare as a concatenation of types and identities, of cultural formulations not of individuality but of the stereotypicalities of recognizability, of the normative rather than the unique, of the undifferentiatedness of the ways in which we perceive social behavior rather than the exceptionality of genius. I offered earlier an extract from a listing of characters in early modern drama. Here is another such list of characters, this time a few from the sequence of “many witty Characters” written by Sir Thomas Overbury and “other learned Gentlemen his friends” (Overbury 1614: title-page), and by others in later editions of the collection and its rivals, characters who might, at different moments and in different lights, in the light both of documentary evidence and of romantic myths of the author, of the materiality of history and the immateriality of our desires, focus the fragmented beings that make up our scholarly and not-so-scholarly creations of his history – and I leave it to my readers to fit these characters to the negative capability not, as Keats thought, of Shakespeare’s imagination but of Shakespeare’s biography. I end with a list of characters who might be Shakespeare: a dissembler, a golden ass, a flatterer, an ignorant glory-hunter, a tymist, an amonist, an affected traveler, a wise-man, a noble spirit, an old man, a country gentleman, a fine gentleman, an elder brother, a pedant, an ostler, a melancholy man, a distaster of the time, a common player, a rimer.

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P. Holland

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