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# Using Shakespeare Biography to Teach First-Generation College Students

MARDY PHILIPPIAN

Lately, in the run-up to a new semester, as my colleagues and I staple posters, or course advertisements, to bulletin boards all over campus, I am acutely aware of the need—increasingly offered as strong advice masquerading as unspoken mandate from administrators obsessed with class-sizes and their related financial bottom-lines—to promote aggressively my assigned slate of course offerings. While I’m not formally trained in the principles of visual design or in Don Draper’s secrets of marrying image to word, I have learned how to put a poster together so that it might snag the eyes of undergraduates passing by. I’ve learned for example to come up with a catchy title and secondary course description, one that offers more than the unengaging language found in the university’s course catalogue, whose descriptions read like a kind of tax code for registering students. Last fall, for example, playing to the lowest common denominator, I taught an iteration of Shakespeare for English majors that was entitled “Shakespeare: Power, Sex, and Violence.” Unlike the previous semester, when I hadn’t advertised in such a shameless way, the course filled up, doubling in size. The next semester I advertised a Shakespeare course for non-majors as “Shakespeare and Hollywood.” The enrollment in that course went from three the previous spring to 25, capping out. These are university offerings pitched through marketing dynamics and a desperation born in response to a growing lack of interest in learning for its own sake, a longstanding experience of which was learning to read and engage with Shakespeare.

An obvious question to pose, then, is why do students, many of whom at my university are first-generation college, enroll in a course on Shakespeare? Do they hope to associate themselves with an established reputation of distinction, as Ben Jonson no doubt did in writing his dedicatory poem for the First Folio, an effort to associate his own reputation as playwright, poet, and critic in some concrete form with Shakespeare’s authorial and cultural prestige? Early filmmakers adapted Shakespeare’s plays for this very reason, namely to borrow some of his cultural capital and so lend credibility to the new technology and fledgling art form. And, of course, some (perhaps many?) students today similarly enroll in a course on his poetry and plays to gain their own measure of perceived sophistication, a kind of aspirational cultural cache. Perhaps they intuit that even a cursory familiarity with Shakespeare is expected of a learned person, inchoately believing that to know Shakespeare is to belong to a certain way of life, a certain class of person.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the reason may be, students’ often vaguely self-understood

## First-Generation Shakespeare

motivations are nonetheless a possible mechanism for engagement that can be leveraged to move them toward developing an understanding of the value of attentive reading, historical reconstruction, and a more thoroughgoing knowledge of Western cultural history. Yet, I must admit, these days, it would seem that learning must be almost exclusively sold as either sexy, instrumental, or socially advantageous.

In contrast to the competing popular valuations of higher education in the United States at present, and in support of the rarer impulse not to see these valuations as mutually exclusive, the trajectory of Shakespeare's life offers a framework for discovering (and understanding) the role that learning can play in relation to the need for an intellectually rich life and the daily need for material provision. In particular, rigorous attention to language as historical evidence of (and informed speculation about) Shakespeare's education plays a crucial role in the formation of professional *and* personal goals, a potentially invaluable twin benefit that undergraduates often need to be reminded is also available to them. Understanding the relationship between words and ideas is key for first-generation college students if they are to find deep value and meaning in their work as learners and in their post-graduation labors. Yet in order that we, their teachers, might enable students to gain this understanding, I argue we must reconsider the relationship between knowledge and skill, between knowing what has been said about a playtext and applying to a playtext those skills that validate that knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, my claim here provokes the question of how best to facilitate a new or renewed attentiveness to language. My preferred strategy is to use the genre of literary biography as an attractive, inviting aperture through which to view and consider the relationship between the uncertainties of lived, daily life and the accomplishments of a lifetime. As Michael Benton points out, "In the teaching of literature, there should be a place to explore [...] the structure of literary biographies and [...] their means of representation," as a means of identifying instructive parallels between an author's life that has been biographically recorded and a reader's own life as it is being lived in the present.<sup>3</sup>

My advertising campaigns should hardly be surprising to faculty teaching Shakespeare on college and university campuses in the United States today, particularly when many if not most enrollees in our classes are first-generation college students.<sup>4</sup> My ad campaigns are a symptom of the pressure to prove that departmental offerings are relevant to students' personal aspirations and professional goals but also of the habits of consumption that students have learned from the wider acquisitive culture that surreptitiously debilitate them from within, pressures and habits that have been in the making for a long time. In 2000, for example, Sharon O'Dair published her *Class, Critics, and Shakespeare: Bottom Lines on the Culture Wars*, a cogent response from within Shakespeare Studies to how students' awareness of their class status in turn effects how they value the traditional, humanist pursuit of learning for its own sake, an awareness that often re-characterizes what Abraham Flexner famously called "the usefulness of useless knowledge" as unmarketable, unimpressive to prospective employers, and unjustifiable to parents who are paying their tuition and to students temporarily supported by high-interest loans.<sup>5</sup>

## Using Shakespeare Biography

A number of well-known factors account for this seemingly desperate state of Shakespeare-instruction such as the over four hundred-year distance between the language of the modern day late-adolescent and the Elizabethan tongue. And unlike their historical counterparts, twenty-first century students are not accustomed to listening to or reading aloud a play's complex language and meter for several hours on end. Also writing in 2000, Frank Kermode reminds us of this important historical difference:

It is true that the audience, many of them oral rather than literate, were trained, as we are not, to listen to long, structured discourses, and must have been rather good at it, with better memories and more patience than we can boast. If you could follow a sermon by John Donne, which might mean standing in St. Paul's Churchyard and concentrating intensely for at least a couple of hours, you might not consider even *Coriolanus* impossibly strenuous.<sup>6</sup>

Distinct from these two symptoms of cultural distance, which significantly condition students' experiences of reading the plays, Bruce Avery argues that two additional "sources of resistance" affect how students interact with the texts we assign: "insecurities" that stem from a lack of expertise in the subject, their "initial incompetence"; and, secondly, "their media consumption habits."<sup>7</sup> Avery rightly observes that the typical college student consumes an enormous amount of electronic media that "encourage" a "kind of passive acceptance of surfaces," essentially habituating one to receive programming in a wide variety of forms as self-evidently clear in their expressed meanings.<sup>8</sup> When consuming this media, interpretive work is rendered unnecessary and so that particular critical-thinking skill is at best dormant and at worst profoundly diminished. Teachers of Shakespeare, then, have reason to believe that they are in a deep pedagogical quandary.

Complicating the interplay of this set of cultural conditions that presently define the undergraduate experience of reading Shakespeare, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in their longitudinal study of "2,322 students enrolled across a diverse range of campuses," find that the average student spends nine percent of a seven-day week (168 hours) during the semester or quarter in class (15.12 hours) and only seven percent (11.76 hours) studying. Further, Arum and Roksa conclude that academic rigor involves a minimum of forty pages of reading per week and a minimum of twenty pages of writing over the course of the semester or quarter. But the authors also share that of the sample-set of students whose work habits they studied, "fifty percent [...] reported that they had not taken a single course during the prior semester that required more than twenty pages of writing, and one-third had not taken one that required even forty pages of reading per week."<sup>9</sup> Across campuses work expectations are negligible and the vast majority of an average student's academic week, according to the findings an incredible fifty-one percent (85.68 hours), is spent socializing.<sup>10</sup> The sea-change (to quote *The Tempest's* Ariel but misapply the meaning) in higher education that these statistics report may be the result of pressures to reduce academic rigor in favor of raising

## First-Generation Shakespeare

enrollments. Thus, higher education has become increasingly synonymous with what David Labaree calls “credentialism,” students’ primary concern and motivation as enrollees is to secure “the greatest exchange value for the smallest investment of their time and energy.”<sup>11</sup> A student’s purpose for attending college is now increasingly defined by a theory of economic exchange and not by a long-established or classical ethic or moral imperative. The humanist model gives way to a Keynesian model, a “market-based logic of higher education.”<sup>12</sup> These, then, are the difficult circumstances and beguiling conditions in which we find ourselves as we attempt to attract and engage first-generation college students in the study of Shakespeare. In short, we face the two-fold challenge of making material in a Shakespeare course accessible through a means other than painstaking, time-consuming study and of making the course material obviously transferrable to students’ intended job markets.

To address the growing pressure to teach what so many parents and elected officials claim is valuable college course material, and to do so while raising my students’ understanding about, if not practice of, intellectual rigor, I have been turning more and more to Shakespeare’s biography, to those details of his life that mirror the challenges and gambles that students face, especially first-generation college, who have so much riding on their pioneering foray into higher education. And while some Shakespeareans argue against such a dependent use of literary biography in a Shakespeare course, I have found the practice to engage rather than mystify, bore, or repel students. I agree with Michael Hadfield when he writes, “Biographies are only valuable if we know when we read them and how we plan to use the knowledge they provide,” but disagree with him when he continues, “The biography is there to help us understand the literature, which is what really matters, not the life itself.”<sup>13</sup> For many young people today, perhaps especially those seeking to establish themselves in an unfamiliar cultural context, the details of an author’s life matter. If a parallel might be drawn between a student’s own struggles, challenges, failures, and successes in life and those of an author whose work is under careful consideration in a college course, then the recorded biographical life matters. To say otherwise borders on classism, just exactly what first-generation college students should not be made to feel directed toward themselves or confront as part of an identity constructed for them, particularly in a classroom. Again, when Hadfield writes, “We cannot simply anchor the works in the life, because not enough facts remain for us to be able to do this: we must use the works to explain the life, so that the two exist in a problematic symbiotic relationship,” I could not agree more. In fact, overtly communicating this principle to students as we begin reading biographical material of Shakespeare has allowed me to engage them in a kind of extended consideration of the relationship between historical fact, the absence or paucity of historical information, and the modern practice of literary historicism. Further, when Hadfield claims, “In general, [biographies] do not matter if there are a lot of them because that simply encourages thought about the biography—not about the purpose of biography,” this is simply nonsensical. How might a conscientious student of literary history develop an appreciation for the value of a literary biography’s relationship to its subject’s literary work unless several have been read and scrutinized for what in

## Using Shakespeare Biography

them might be validated and what remains creative conjecture? Finally, I also agree with Hadfield that as students of literature, we cannot “ignore the lives of Donne and Shakespeare,” for example, except “at our peril.”<sup>14</sup>

There are, then, four facets of Shakespeare’s life and career that I highlight for my students during week one of the semester and then regularly revisit as the course progresses. They are: 1) understanding the market-based *and* personal value of collaborative work; 2) identifying an avocational or vocational path one’s life might follow; 3) developing the requisite technical skills to enter a chosen path; and 4) learning to adapt and innovate as life proceeds. While I reiterate the usefulness of thinking about Shakespeare’s life in parallel to their own, I do not organize the course around these facets. Rather, I design class activities and writing prompts that gradually equip students with a firm grounding in a knowledge of the history of playing in sixteenth-century England, of genre formation, of particularly relevant philosophical and theological currents, of poetic strategy and technique (including adaptation-as-process), and of the sweep of Shakespeare’s life. Yet I lead them into these interrelated areas of understanding by way of Shakespeare’s biography, a life that, as Jonathan Bate’s biography makes clear, unfolds in stages. In addition, I also include my own.

Like me when I was their age, most first-generation college students have few informed persons in their lives who can guide them through the college matriculation experience. When I began in the fall of 1990 as a first-generation college student, I was eager, aspiring, and anxious. No one in my family could advise me on how to negotiate matriculation and they did not value an earned undergraduate degree as anything more than a kind of union card in the workforce. My family’s shared habit of mind led them to define a college degree as an instrument of economic advantage, nothing more. There was no discussion of college coursework as an opportunity to experience learning as a good in and of itself, of learning as a mysterious process of personal reformation and transformation. That sort of talk was absent, I assume because the motivations to which it would have referred was deemed too ethereal, too self-indulgent. My father was a butcher, the son of Armenian and Italian immigrants, and my mother a waitress, whose grandfather had moved west to California to escape the coal mines of Kentucky. My parents worked long hours and then side-jobs here and there. Thus, the chance to attend college was always represented to me as the means by which to climb higher on the American socio-economic ladder. When I chose to major in English and to become a teacher, my parents were thrilled because it meant that I would have a steady income, health benefits, and, lastly, that I would be joining a respectable profession. At no point, however, was room made in our conversations for the actual substance of what I was encountering in my reading and writing or what I was confronting in myself. Something of a separation developed between me and them, a separation that persists to this day. As class-time permits, as relevance to course material might invite, and as the semester progresses, I share all of this mini-autobiography with my Shakespeare students. In doing so, I aim to provoke students to consider the value of their own respective biographies, thus enabling them to connect their lives to the specific course content.

## First-Generation Shakespeare

Such use of biography is not rare, though some Shakespearians, as I've noted, maintain reservations about its incorporation into a course curriculum. David Waller, for example, drawing upon the earlier suggestions of historian Barbara Tuchman and historian of science Thomas L. Hankins, assigns portions of biographies about composers, writers, painters, sculptors, and architects in his two-course interdisciplinary survey. Waller notes the value of "how the details of one person's life can tell us about his or her historical milieu, and, reciprocally, how that milieu inhabited that person's psychology."<sup>15</sup> Citing Tuchman, "Biography is useful because it encompasses the universal in the particular. It is a focus that allows both the writer to narrow his field to manageable dimensions and the reader to more easily comprehend the subject."<sup>16</sup> And this has been exactly my experience as a teacher of a Shakespeare survey course. Waller's particular strategy is to emphasize the crucial role that social networks play in the development of aesthetic, political, social, and philosophical ideas as artists, writers, and thinkers share, react, collaborate, and go on the attack. Teaching a course on John Milton's prose, for example, could hardly be responsibly undertaken without devoting great attention to his response to contemporary political, philosophical, theological, and pedagogical conflicts and debates of the middle-seventeenth century in England and to the educational training and devout upbringing that helped to form his core values and publicly expressed views. As Waller describes his pedagogy,

I bring the biography into the classroom. I plan lectures and discussion to take advantage of and reference the background information that the students have accumulated up to that point [...]. The biographical story tempers (in all senses of that word: to mitigate, to blend, to strengthen) the more conventional presentation by regularly drawing attention to a particular figure's acquaintances and collaborations. Thus, biography makes survey material memorable and allows more insight into how the world actually works.<sup>17</sup>

When a professor parses well-informed literary biography, and then connects those carefully discussed portions to the literary works to which they bear particular relevance, students are invited to access literary coursework through the lives of once breathing, thinking, people. Shakespeare becomes not the disembodied mind promulgated by Martin Droeshout's portrait printed in the First Folio, or even Harold Bloom's hyperbolic assertion that Shakespeare is the mind that invented the modern dimensions of self-awareness, consciousness, and, in fact, the very notion of being human itself, but rather a restless young man afforded an education by a father of some communal status, a late-adolescent early married to an older woman already with child, an aspiring actor, playwright, and later businessman, a father who lost a young son to illness, and the most esteemed writer of his day. This is a life trajectory that tends to attract my students' attentions, not because it is somewhat well-known, but because it was so uncertain that any of it would, or even could, occur. Like Shakespeare, my students will, in

## Using Shakespeare Biography

most cases, experience the misgivings of early adulthood, romantic love, financial struggle, and profound emotional loss.

So how do I begin? I begin with an engagement strategy and exercise that probably seems unrelated to the use of biography, though, as I will make clear, demonstrably is. On the first day of class, I read the choric opening of *Henry V*. Doing so invites students into a theatrical approximation that recalls the experience of leaving the environs of Southwark and Bankside for the imaginative spaces of The Rose and The Globe. This iconic opening monologue also explicitly names the terms according to which theatre operates. As James N. Loehlin reminds us,

Of all Shakespeare's plays, *Henry V* is the one most concerned with its own theatricality, its own status as a performance. Accordingly, it provides a wealth of material for a self-conscious exploration of Shakespearean performance and representation. Addressing charged political issues of war, politics, and heroism, *Henry V* is a text that demands strong interpretive choices, and one that makes immediately apparent the role of performance in creating the meanings of a Shakespeare play.<sup>18</sup>

Theatrical productions are "inventions" that offer audiences "A kingdom for a stage, princes to act, / And monarchs to behold the swelling scene" (1.1.2-4). And perhaps most significantly, the Chorus reminds audiences that a play succeeds when it successfully works upon their "imaginary forces," "For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings, [...] / Turning the accomplishment of many years / Into an hourglass" (1.1.18; 28, 30-31). As a first-generation college student, I sat enraptured in my initial Shakespeare course as Dr. Robert Viking O'Brien walked into the room, stepped his six-foot frame up onto a table at the front of the class, and recited the whole of the Chorus's opening prologue. The imaginative, inventive power of the Elizabethan theatrical world had come to campus. Similarly, I use this prologue to announce the rhetorical techniques by which Elizabethan playwrights arrested their audiences' collective attentions.

This kind of unprefaced, cold-opening also allows me to model, to demonstrate, how slow, attentive, thoughtful reading, and a commitment to rereading a text, enables a person to speak lines as if they are one's natural, ordinary, means of language, thus animating them into accessible linguistic experiences. I see this as the pedagogical proof in the pudding. Reading biographical materials catalyzes interest in Shakespeare the entrepreneurial artist, which leads to a growing interest in his work and in learning to read that work well. As Avery strongly suggests I should, this way of beginning the semester allows me to put Shakespeare's language in my students' ears, to expose them in a stretch of thirty-four lines to the kinds of rich and challenging linguistic experiences that will follow. I take this early opportunity to model for them the rising and falling action, the cadence of iambic pentameter punctuated by caesura and varied vocal intonations, variety that is unscripted, must occur, and is always risky if not sometimes experimental. As the class progresses, I turn more and more

## First-Generation Shakespeare

of the reading over to students, making them increasingly accountable for intelligibly delivering lines that highlight whatever philosophical and theological themes we might be chasing down in the compact language of the playtext. To be sure, not every student is a skilled reader, either at the beginning or end of the semester. But the attempt to read well and to understand the meaning of the textual passage is the thing. Toward this end, I require my students to write short summaries of line-sections in the margins of their anthologies so that they might better demonstrate to themselves that they understand what they've read. The basic exercise follows in this way: 1) read the text; 2) write a short summary in the margin of the text; 3) read the text out loud a few times until the delivery makes sense. Through this daily habit of reading, I intend to teach my students about the nuts and bolts of line structure, meter, and sense, the kind of technical skill they should increasingly possess as the course unfolds over sixteen weeks. The daily habit of reading I've described is the initial equivalency of demonstrable parsing skills and rhetorical awareness that I hope students will carry beyond my class. This routine exercise forms the basis of the gathering of textual evidence they will need for later, longer writing assignments and serves to increase the amount of writing I require, a requirement formed in response to Arum and Roksa's research and recommendations.

Combined with attention to Shakespearean poetics, I use biography to humanize our course subject matter and to involve students in a dialogue with themselves about the directions their lives might take. While I believe that the close-reading skills they develop in my course are invaluable since they can be applied to a wide variety of texts, it is the use of Shakespeare's recorded life as a hermeneutic of reflection that is usually the most powerful. Beginning with details of rural Stratford-upon-Avon, his limited education, and his youthful marriage, students begin to recognize the life of a late-teen whose formal learning and relational commitments are at odds with his future interest in London's burgeoning commercial theatre scene. Focusing upon his education, we consider the importance that attentiveness to and curiosity about the world around him must have played in his growing up, a disposition that students can also choose for themselves. Moving from the petty school to the King's New School was hardly equivalent to the university education that exposed George Peele (Christ's Church, Oxford), Robert Greene (St. John's College, Cambridge), Christopher Marlowe (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge), John Fletcher (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge), and Francis Beaumont (Broadgates Hall, Oxford; now Pembroke College) to a wide range of classical learning, a lack of exposure that led Greene in particular to demean Shakespeare famously as nothing more than an "upstart crow."

Like Shakespeare must have felt about the entrepreneurial environment of Bankside, first-generation college students often feel a mixture of strong attraction, aspiration, and anxiety about what the future might hold. They, too, are venturing into unfamiliar cultural territory with an eye toward becoming successful in some as yet indefinable sense. Using biography in the college or university Shakespeare course draws upon personal information as a means of opening up the wider, general observations about the poetry and plays and their historical

## Using Shakespeare Biography

contexts that those of us teaching the material often struggle to make engaging. The relevance of formal and conceptual information is not in question here, rather how to make it consistently engaging is. And here is where literary biographies of Shakespeare, as opposed to the traditional long, scholarly introductions characteristically found in all anthologies published since *The Riverside Shakespeare* in 1974, function as collections of information to which students more readily relate. A literary biography is less abstract than a highly wrought introductory essay with its peculiar lexicon, inaccessible points of historical reference, swirl of philosophical, religious, and psychological ideas, and quick narrative pace. The sheer sophistication of this scholarly apparatus is frequently cognitively overwhelming for students with little or no experience reading such prose let alone with linking such prose to Shakespeare's linguistically and conceptually challenging works. Thus, inviting students to encounter Shakespeare through the lens of a biographical narrative as a segue into close-readings of the plays and poetry embeds these inexperienced readers of early modern work within a personality, a psyche, a relational person, within, in other words, a flesh and blood human being like them. Such an emphasis on the value of the human person's life-story as both a literary heuristic and as a pedagogic strategy for initiating students into the critical discourse of Shakespeare studies draws upon students' abiding interest to humanize the conceptual, as well as the presently wild popularity of published biographies.

If we consider the following representative scholarly apparatus, written by the eminent Herschel Baker and appearing at the front of *Henry V* in the second edition of *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1997), we will note the high level of scholarly diction, thoroughgoing awareness of similarities between Shakespearean plays, and a fluid, meta-critical interrogation of Shakespeare's ability to reference obliquely current events and celebrated figures of his own day, in this case the late 1590s in London. Here is Baker:

Of Shakespeare's few actual or alleged allusions to contemporary events--for example, Maria's new map with the augmentation of the Indies" in *Twelfth Night* and Hamlet's "little eyases"—none has seemed more certain than that in the prologue to Act V of *Henry V*, where the Chorus, "by a lower but by loving likelihood," compares the King's triumphal return from France to that in store for "the general of our gracious Empress" when he comes back from Ireland "bringing rebellion broached on his sword."<sup>19</sup>

While some may wish to accuse me of cherry-picking my examples, this excerpt nonetheless demonstrates the impressively difficult characteristics of the typical well-researched, well-written scholarly introduction. In this particular example, Baker's decision to open with a discussion of contemporary allusions may leave first-generation readers even more befuddled than had he opened with a discussion of the Chorus's powerful imposition upon audiences' imaginative powers. Again, it is an audience's "imaginary forces" that "now must deck our kings, [...] / Turning the accomplishment of many years / Into an hourglass"

## First-Generation Shakespeare

(1.1.18; 28, 30-31). Baker's is an outstanding introduction to the play, but is it the kind of material that we should push our students to encounter first? To be fair, introductory materials are heavily invested in Shakespeare the person, even if this clear investment is obscured by the conventional scholarly elements I name above. Wouldn't we accomplish more, then, by first engrossing students in a more narrowly focused narrative about the life of the figure whose play they've been asked to read?

Like other forms of the genre of biographical writing, literary biography purports to offer essential insights into the lives, careers, and accomplishments of the authors whose work I assign. Some of the most transformative experiences that I had as an undergraduate student of literature occurred while reading literary biographies: Richard Ellman's *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (1948) and Samuel Schoenbaum's *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (1975). Reading Ellman's treatment of Yeats was the first time I can remember dialoguing with myself at length about the social habit of adopting masks of identity, as defense, ploy, and play. Schoenbaum carefully elaborated life-details eroded by time and made further distant by my acutely felt cultural distance from sixteenth- or twentieth-century England. Each of these literary biographies became for me access points to creative and created lives. Prior to reading them, I had not yet imagined Yeats and Shakespeare as flesh-and-blood persons, who, like me, experienced feelings of eagerness, aspiration, and anxiety.

Developing an initial and then deepening appreciation for the vectors along which their own lives have travelled thus far, and that of Shakespeare by their age and after, invites students to see that they too are at the start of a promising adulthood. Organizing the course around the life-chronology famously articulated by Jaques in *As You Like It* (2.7.142-169) and that also forms the narrative timeline of Jonathan Bate's biography of Shakespeare, I assign relevant chapters, with some overlap of content, from one older and three relatively recent biographies of Shakespeare, Samuel Schoenbaum's invaluable *Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (1987; revised edition), Stephen Greenblatt's *New York Times* bestseller *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004), and, as noted, Jonathan Bate's *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare* (2009). Drawing upon selections from these texts, I look to familiarize my students with Shakespeare's early life, the emerging early modern theatrical practices, and fortunate opportunities that led to his success over time.

While many reviews of Greenblatt's *Will in the World* comment on, as Lois Potter aptly puts it, the "book's chief allegiance ... to imagination," a sharp and frequent critique of the biography, it is an accessible entry point into the life of Shakespeare for undergraduates with little experience reading literary criticism, historiographic studies, or genres of life-writing. As Potter also notes, "The book's particular achievement is that it celebrates Shakespeare's ordinariness without making him dull."<sup>20</sup> And this is a crucial point for teachers to hear. Laury Magnus describes the biography as pursuing "a painterly rather than linear approach," further observing that this strategy lends the study a "speculative, ruminative style."<sup>21</sup> Greenblatt offers a narrative sweep that models how careful attention to historical detail affords fresh appreciation of the poetry and plays as an imaginative

## Using Shakespeare Biography

intervening into a life of inauspicious beginnings and, ultimately, of unforeseen fame. He famously begins, “Let us imagine that Shakespeare found himself from boyhood fascinated by language, obsessed with the magic of words. There is overwhelming evidence for this obsession from his earliest writings, so it is a very safe assumption that it began early, perhaps for the first moment his mother whispered a nursery rhyme in his ear.” Greenblatt continues, “This was a love and a pleasure that Elizabethan England could arouse, richly satisfy, and reward, for the culture prized ornate eloquence, cultivated a taste for lavish prose from preachers and politicians, and expected even people of modest accomplishments and sober sensibilities to write poems.”<sup>22</sup> In these initial passages, students encounter a boy’s earliest exposure to the artful use of words, his wider culture’s value for language, and even the relation that ordinary people enjoyed to language arts. College students have always had similar stories of their nascent awareness of language but also of story, the past as a phenomenon of experience, the importance of conversations with their elders about current events, and the tragedy of young lives sometimes cut short, the collective subject matter of so many of Shakespeare’s plays. Drawing upon Roger Ascham’s widely circulated advice to sixteenth-century schoolmasters, Greenblatt observes,

“All men,” wrote Queen Elizabeth’s tutor, Roger Ascham, “covet to have their children speak Latin.” The queen spoke Latin—one of the few women in the realm to have had access to that accomplishment, so crucial for international relations—and so did her diplomats, counselors, theologians, clergymen, physicians, and lawyers. But command of the ancient tongue was not limited to those who actually made practical, professional use of it. “All men covet to have their children speak Latin”: in the sixteenth century, bricklayers, wool merchants, glovers, prosperous yeomen—people who had no formal education and could not read or write English, let alone Latin—wanted their sons to be masters of the ablative absolute. Latin was culture, civility, upward mobility. It was the language of parental ambition, the universal currency of social desire.<sup>23</sup>

Having read only a few pages of the opening chapter of Greenblatt’s biography, I ask students to see and comment on the parallel in their own lives between their parents’ hope that they gain an education and John and Mary Shakespeare’s desire that their son learn Latin, the *lingua franca* of burgeoning possibilities for upward socio-economic mobility in early modern England. The parallels are easy to establish. Assigning this opening chapter, I begin a semester of conversations about the plays and poetry that overtly situates them in the reconstructed lived experiences of a schoolboy and hope of an ambitious family. This opening chapter is quite effective, then, at leading students to consider their own origins and reasons for attending college. And while I do not assign all of Greenblatt’s *Will in the World*, I do also require students to read “Chapter 4: Wooing, Wedding, and Repenting” for its rather humane discussion of the influence that sexual desire,

## First-Generation Shakespeare

understandings of moral probity, and parental life-patterns have upon the decision to wed, another palpable theme in the plays and classroom topic of discussion.

The second set of biographical selections come from Samuel Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, a text that has been invaluable to me in the courses that I teach. With its pioneering blend of biographical narrative, primary documents, and judicious claims about how the tantalizing content of historical documents need not lead to unsupportable conjecture, Schoenbaum's biography opens a new lens on early modern material culture for students in my course. I use both the larger folio edition (1975) and the revised *Compact* version (1987), copying pages out of the former when absent from the latter. To see in high relief sixteenth-century baptismal records (p. 21, folio; p. 25, *Compact* version), town maps, signature variations, "A Possible Portrait of Anne Hathaway" (p. 74, folio; p. 92, *Compact* version), and The Grant of Arms (1596) (pp. 168-169, folio) reminds students that our classroom discussions concern actual flesh-and-blood people, not historical abstractions or mythical persons. I ask my students, what are the documents that testify to your existence, to your being alive? Are you not also documented, recorded, and filed away somewhere? And what is an application for a coat of arms, for heraldry, but the desire of all socially ambitious people? And what is the present cultural equivalent of a purchased coat of arms? Shakespeare's and my students' lives begin to conflate in provocative ways as students begin to frame queries that are as much about themselves as they are about our course subject. Especially useful for generating a kind of ground's-eye view or material sense of the landscape as well as how social reputation could be subjected to excoriating public scrutiny are Chapters "9: London and the Theatres" and "10: The Upstart Crow."

Finally, here is a representative excerpt from a section of Bates's celebrated biography, a chapter entitled "The Boy from the Greenwood," that weaves the complimentary discourses of pop-psychology, cultural geography, and literary close-reading:

Before school, we are shaped by family and environment. Father: the alderman with his civic business, his trade as a glover. Mother: from a little further up the social ladder, with a network of associations in the local gentry of the old faith. Paternal grandfather: Richard Shakespeare, a yeoman farmer from the village of Snitterfield on the fringes of the Forest of Arden. Maternal grandfather: Robert Arden of nearby Wilmcote, owner of the land that Richard farmed.<sup>24</sup>

In the years that I've taught Shakespeare to undergraduates, an increasing percentage of whom have been first-generation college, I have stood in front of the class and rattled off many of these same biographical details like so many dead letters. Reciting such facts, even for the benefit of my students' maturing historiographical sensibilities, is never engaging. I'm bored and they're counting the minutes. The experience I had of reading Ellman's and Schoenbaum's biographies as accidental preparation for my reading of Yeats and Shakespeare radically focused my mind on the points of connection between the worlds they

## Using Shakespeare Biography

experienced as mind-embodied creatures, like me, and the form and content of their poetic output. Citing a seventeenth-century *Gazetteer*, Bate injects relevant geography into his biographical passage:

*Warwickshire, Varvicensis Comitatus*, is bounded on the North by Staffordshire, on the East by Leicester and Northamptonshires, on the South by Oxford and Gloucester, and the West by the County of Worcester. In length from North to South thirty three Miles, in breadth twenty five; the whole Circumference one hundred and thirty five; containing one hundred and fifty eight Parishes, and fifteen Market Towns. As it is seated well near in the heart of England, so he Air and Soil are of the best; the River Avon divides it in the middle.<sup>25</sup>

Bate hopes to give readers a spatial orientation of the world under discussion. Width, breadth, and all centrally located in “the heart of England.” And here the more familiar mythical stories of the country boy destined for great accomplishments begin to take shape. This is the backdrop of landscape against which an unabashed romance of longing, risk, and success will unfold. “The Arden scenes of *As You Like It*,” Bate continues, “begin with the exiled Duke contrasting the natural order of the forest with the flattery and envy of the court. As in the Robin Hood story, the wished-for conclusion is the restoration of the right ruler.” In the span of a little over one page, Bate situates readers in the locale of Shakespeare’s boyhood, introduces them to his familial relations, those relations’ respective avocations and social stature, and then segues into a discussion of one of the plays that most prominently draws upon a rural setting as both theme and plot device. This much would be difficult to achieve in as engaging a manner through the use of PowerPoint, Socratic discussion, or in-class performance.

What I’ve outlined here by drawing upon Bate’s representative example of literary biography is a simultaneous concern with helping students, especially those identified as first-generation, to gain demonstrable skill in reading imaginative literature, even historically and culturally distant texts, and with teaching them to learn to generalize those skills over a wide range of textual interactions, and, in so doing, to address larger societal questions of the moment regarding the value of learning for its own sake. If first-generation college students are prone to see my course offerings in Shakespeare and early modern English literature and culture only as specialized boutique courses that hold no relevance to either their own ongoing skill-set development as undergraduates or the many decades of life that will follow graduation, then what might I do to change that perception? By maintaining a focus on the acquisition of attentive reading practices (an ubiquitously marketable skill), properly celebrating students’ successes in accruing those skills, and following up with students after the semester is over to find out if they continue to use those skills, I might yet achieve a positive counter-response to the prevailing societal views that deter so many students from enrolling in courses that genuinely interest them, pursuing, again, what Flexner valued as the “usefulness of [so-called] useless knowledge,” and experiencing what

## First-Generation Shakespeare

O'Dair calls “the freedom to do intellectually challenging work.”<sup>26</sup> As a genre, or as a narrative tool that draws the strands of life-writing, celebrity, and analytical reading together, literary biography encourages students of Shakespeare’s work not to be discouraged by utilitarian forces but instead to devote time and energy to attentive reading, to historiographical writing, and to transferring the skills learned in my class to others. Nor should enlivened Shakespeare students be naively caught by lofty promises that their lives will be transformed by the sheer encounter with the many ideas circulating through the plays. Instead, many of us might choose to use literary biographies of Shakespeare as a point of shared print interest that establishes a dialogue between student, professor, and Shakespeare’s work, a dialogue between the living and the dead and between the past, present, and future.

### Notes

1. Writing on this very point, Douglas Lanier notes the long-standing association between knowing a bit of Shakespeare, a totem of high culture, and socio-economic aspiration: “For many, high culture continues to symbolize cultural or economic opportunity, the very possibility of upward mobility” [*Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 18].

2. In “Renaissance Humanism and the Future of the Humanities” [*Literature Compass* (2012): 665-678], Jennifer Summit offers an excellent overview of two versions of the humanist educational program and the gradual separation between them that began in the middle of the twentieth century in the work of scholars Paul O. Kristellar on the one hand and Hans Baron and Eugenio Garin on the other. She discusses at length the need to reunite “knowledge and skill, *episteme* and *techné*” (670). Summit argues that the literary humanities of the twenty-first century university in the United States are fractured by their “expatriation of their constitutive skills into ancillary units of composition and beginning language instruction, and [a] consequent inability to articulate the rationale of disciplines that were originally created through a dialectical relationship between *episteme* and *techné*” (672).

3. Michael Benton, “Literary Biography: The Cinderella of Literary Studies,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39.3 (2005): 56.

4. The term “first-generation college” student has been used by higher-education researchers since the early 1980s. The term refers to college and university students whose parents have no college, university, or post-secondary experiences. For discussions of the term and its many cultural implications, see Janet Mancini Billson and Margaret Brooks Terry, “In Search of the Silken Purse: Factors in Attrition among First-Generation Students,” *College and University* 58 (1982): 57-75; Patrick T. Terenzini, Leonard Springer, Patricia M. Yaeger, Ernest T. Pascarella and Amaury Nora, “First-Generation College Students: Characteristics, Experiences, and Cognitive Development,” *Research in Higher Education* 37.1 (1996): 1-22; Anne-Marie Nunez and Stephanie Cuccaro-Alamin, *First-Generation Students: Undergraduates Whose Parents Never Enrolled in Postsecondary Education*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for

## Using Shakespeare Biography

Educational Statistics (NCES) (1998); Laura Horn and Anne-Marie Nunez, "Mapping the Road to College: First-Generation Students' Math Track, Planning Strategies, and Context of Support," *Education Statistics Quarterly* 2.1 (Spring 2000): 81-86; Susan P. Choy, *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2001); Edward C. Warburton, Rosio Bugarin, and Anne-Marie Nunez, *Bridging the Gap: Academic Preparation and Postsecondary Success of First-Generation Students*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2001); Ernest T. Pascarella, Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak and Patrick T. Terenzini, "First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes," *The Journal of Higher Education* 75.3 (May/June, 2004): 249-284.

5. Sharon O'Dair, *Class, Critics, and Shakespeare: Bottom Lines on the Culture Wars* (University of Michigan Press, 2000); see her follow-up essay entitled, "I Was So Right About That: Social Class and the Academy," *Rhizomes* 27 (2014), <http://rhizomes.net/issue27/odair.html>; Abraham Flexner, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge," *Harpers* 179 (June/November 1939): 554-552.

6. Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000), 4.

7. Bruce Avery, "You Don't Know Jack: Engaging the Twenty-First-Century Student with Shakespeare's Plays," *Pedagogy* 11.1 (Winter 2011): 138.

8. *Ibid.*, 138.

9. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 71.

10. Arum and Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, 97.

11. David Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (Yale University Press, 1997), 259 and 45.

12. Arum and Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, 17.

13. Andrew Hadfield, "Why Does Literary Biography Matter?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 65.4 (Winter 2014): 376.

14. Hadfield, "Why Does Literary Biography," 377.

15. David Waller, "Small Worlds: Biography in the Interdisciplinary Survey," *College Teaching* 56.3 (Summer 2008): 178.

16. Cited in Waller, "Small Worlds," 178. For the fuller discussion, see Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

17. Waller, "Small Worlds," 179.

18. James N. Loehlin, "'On Your Imaginary Forces Work': Shakespeare in Practice," *Teaching Shakespeare through Performance*, ed. Milla Cozart Riggio (New York: Modern Language Association, 1999), 286-294, 287.

19. Herschel Baker, "Introduction: *Henry V*." *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 974.

20. Lois Potter, "Review: *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* by Stephen Greenblatt," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56.3 (2005): 374-375.

21. Laury Magnus, "Review: *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* by Stephen Greenblatt," *College Literature* 33.4 (2006): 226; 228.

22. Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 23-24.

23. *Ibid.*, 24.

24. Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare*, Random House, 2009, p. 30.

25. *Ibid.*, 30-31.

## First-Generation Shakespeare

26. O'Dair, *Class Critics, and Shakespeare*, 7.

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