



## A National Biography: Shakespeare and the *DNB*

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This paper was originally presented at the Literary Fads and Fashions Conference held at the University of Nottingham in November 2004. The idea of speaking about Biographies of Shakespeare at such an event may, at first, have seemed incongruous, although I am not making the claim that either the writing of biographies or the study of Shakespeare are, or have ever been, particularly short-lived trends. Neither am I claiming that producing biographies of Shakespeare has ever been an obscure literary movement which was out of step with popular literary tastes. However, what will become clear through this paper is that Shakespeare biography, far from being a single all-encompassing genre is, in fact, a literary pursuit which can only really be understood in terms of discrete fads and fashions.

Works such as *The Appropriation of Shakespeare* edited by Jean Marsden and Jonathan Bate's *The Genius Of Shakespeare* have argued convincingly that the reason for the longevity of Shakespeare as an icon and the continued cultural dominance of his work is that the plays and poems are open to numerous interpretations and can be performed, witnessed, and read in different ways at different historical points. In this way, the works of Shakespeare can be appropriated to convey the beliefs or aspirations of different people at different times. Following on from this just as the works of Shakespeare can be read in many ways, so can their author. Claiming that a play or a poem of Shakespeare's is 'about' something in particular often involves claiming that Shakespeare meant to convey that particular something in his writing. In this way, the point of Shakespeare's work being so open to interpretation leads naturally on to the idea that Shakespeare's own life is equally devoid of fixed meaning. This is something which is supported when we consider how closely connected the man and his works are – 'Shakespeare' was a man who lived four hundred years ago; but 'Shakespeare' is also the work that he produced. The perceived facts of Shakespeare's life have always had a significant bearing on the reception of his works. The compilers of the 1623 First Folio obviously felt it necessary to include information about the man who created the plays, and so they placed the now famous engraving by Martin Droeshout on the second page, just after a poem by Jonson which, although asking readers to ignore the picture and concentrate on the works, obviously drew their attention to it. Indeed, all four of the prefatory poems make more mention of Shakespeare the man than any of his works.

The author is important then, yet the details of his life are notoriously few and far between, and as Paulina Kewes has noted, accessible accounts of Shakespeare remained 'slight, superficial, and factually incorrect' until well into the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> This is no coincidence, for Victorian England seemed obsessed with biography, and those who undertook biographical writing did so with a productivity

that was quite overwhelming. Samuel Schoenbaum has said that no age before or since has ‘indulged a greater passion for biography.’<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the pinnacle of this passion was the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Initially conceived as a compendium of biographical essays on notable individuals from around the world, this was considered overly ambitious and its mandate was reduced to just the British Isles. In all the *DNB* lists 29,120 men and women, of which 27,195 are substantial biographies. The *DNB* remained the most consulted reference work of biographical information until the autumn of 2004 when the second edition was published by OUP. The project began in 1882 when Leslie Stephen, then editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, was placed in charge and, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1885, the first volume (Abbadie – Anne) was published. Following that, a new volume was issued every three months until the sixty-third and final volume (Wordsworth - Zuyelestein) in June 1900. Praised by both the press and academia, the project was hugely influential and its association with the *Athenæum* – where it was announced and reviewed – lent it an unparalleled influence amongst the intellectuals of the late nineteenth century. The section on Shakespeare appeared in the fifty-first volume of the *DNB* (‘Scoffin-Sheares’) in July 1897. It was presented as a chronological account of the poet’s life from his ancestry, to his birth, death and descendants, followed by the publication and presentation of his plays and finally a ‘general estimate’ of his genius. It is an extremely comprehensive biography and even recently was still being hailed as the best short account of Shakespeare’s life in existence.<sup>3</sup> It was written by the then-editor of the *DNB* Sidney Lee who had taken over the project in the spring of 1891 after Leslie Stephen resigned due to ill health.

As the *DNB* was a compendium of biographies submitted by 653 different contributors, there is some variation between the style and tone of each article. The editors did pay close attention to submissions however and, in general, the essays are pretty uniform. That said, there are a number of features of the Shakespeare entry which mark it out as different to the others. Most obviously, it was the longest entry; stretching to forty-nine pages – and this despite the fact that there is allegedly so little known about Shakespeare. forty-nine pages is three pages more than Shakespeare’s contemporary dramatists Fletcher, Greene, Kyd, Marlowe, Middleton and Nashe, added together, which would seem to imply that he was considered the most interesting (or at least, the most worthy of a biography) amongst English renaissance dramatists. But of course, the Shakespeare essay was also longer than anyone else’s in the whole dictionary, and by some margin – the next longest entry, on the Duke of Wellington was fifteen pages shorter than Shakespeare’s – and, if we consider that the average essay was less than one page in length, the space allotted to the man from Stratford certainly suggests that he was considered more important than anyone else in the dictionary.<sup>4</sup> That the biography of Shakespeare was the most important in the *DNB* seems likely, that it was the most important to appear in volume 51 is certainly taken for granted by its reviewer in the *Athenæum*. The *Athenæum*’s primary literary review for July 1897 begins, ‘The new volume of this important and essentially national undertaking is mainly notable for the editor’s elaborate monograph on Shakspeare... The rest of its contents do not call for much remark’ (*Athenæum*, 117). Discussion of Shakespeare’s life then takes up five of the review’s six columns, almost becoming a biography itself.

The reasons behind Shakespeare’s continued presence at the heart of literary activity – his role as the ‘national poet’ or some kind of unsurpassed literary icon – are still being debated today, and I do not intend here to discuss why the editors of the *DNB* decided to write more about Shakespeare than say Marlowe or Milton – although I would say that it is at least partly to do with the way in which the facts of

his life can be interpreted in different ways as I said earlier. Instead, what interests me is the *way* that Shakespeare was being written about and what this achieved in the context of the *DNB*. The first clue to the way in which Shakespeare is treated is in the first line of the *Athenæum* review: the anonymous writer talks about ‘this important and essentially national undertaking’ (*Athenæum*, 117). Of course the *DNB* by its very nature was a nationalist project – it was not a dictionary of universal biography – but sometimes the undertaking veered towards the jingoistic. Indeed, Sidney Lee felt that the *DNB* was something of a victory for the nation of England over the rest of Europe. It was of some pride to the *DNB* team that their German equivalent the *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie*, also completed in 1900, had taken twenty-five years to produce just forty-five volumes; the *DNB* had been accomplished in fifteen and a half (see Curthoys). Not only this, but the project had been financed entirely through the private contributions of the entrepreneur George Smith (who made a loss of £70,000 overall – which is roughly equivalent to £5 million today), and Lee felt that, because it had not been funded by the state as it had been in ‘foreign countries,’ that it was ‘in truer accord with the self-reliant temperament of the British race... this “Dictionary of National Biography” is the outcome of private enterprise and the handiwork of private citizens’ (Lee, ‘Statistical Account,’ lxxviii). This partisan attitude was in keeping with certain cultural ideas at the time, and indeed the term Jingoism was first coined in the 1870s in reference to Disraeli’s aggressive foreign-policy regarding the Russo-Turkish war.<sup>5</sup> This found expression in projects such as the Oxford English Dictionary which was begun in 1884, and institutionalised in the creation of such specifically English organizations as the National Trust in 1895, the National Portrait Gallery in 1896 and the Gallery of Modern Art (later the Tate London) in 1897.

Now, Shakespeare’s feelings towards the country of his birth (as indeed his feelings towards anything) are unrecorded and Lee is unable to recruit Shakespeare directly to praise England. Instead, as we shall see, Lee finds other ways to reinforce the idea of England’s supremacy. Of course, writing is always influenced by the ideology of those who have created it and the period in which it was written, and biography is no exception; the way in which a biography is written can greatly alter the message it produces. What is interesting about the *DNB* however is that the use of what we might call artistic license went against the *DNB*’s stated aims. In December 1882 – again in the *Athenæum* – Leslie Stephen announced the project and set out the direction the dictionary would take stating that he wished to include ‘the greatest possible amount of information in a thoroughly business-like form’ (Stephen, 850). If this is the sort of biography that Stephen envisaged, it is not terribly well fulfilled by Sidney Lee’s essay on Shakespeare. Lee frequently uses conjecture to explain events and even makes up events themselves. How, for example, was Lee to know that Shakespeare was in a happy frame of mind when he wrote *Much Ado About Nothing* or that the playwright found Prince Hal to be an attractive character? (Lee, “Shakespeare,” 1311). Similarly, although it is generally accepted that Shakespeare moved from Warwickshire to London at some point between 1582 – when he married in Stratford – and 1592 – by when he appears to have been well established in the London theatrical scene – Lee decides, seemingly arbitrarily, that he knows exactly when he travelled; Shakespeare went to London ‘trudging thither... during 1586’ (Lee, “Shakespeare,” 1292). And while most people would accept that we can only guess as to Shakespeare’s mode of transport, Lee announces that there is no doubt he travelled ‘on foot’ (Lee, “Shakespeare,” 1292). By presenting such conjectural statements along side more concrete facts such as dates and figures which can be found in the

documentary record, Lee is able to lend an air of accuracy and legitimacy to the way in which he presents Shakespeare. What this amounts to, over the course of the essay, is a rhetorical style that serves to convince the reader that Shakespeare was a certain type of individual through an intermingling of fact and fiction. There is not only something romantic about the playwright making his way slowly and solitarily ('trudging' Lee has decided) to the capital, but it also fulfils other agendas. There is firstly the nationalistic desire that is fulfilled by the thought of Shakespeare passing down the length of England between Stratford and London, travelling through the various towns and villages along the way. It would, of course, have meant that he would have interacted with the inhabitants of the places he passed through and thus touched the lives of the people of England first-hand.<sup>6</sup> There is also a definite sense of self-improvement in the picture that Lee paints of the young man leaving Stratford unaided and under his own steam to strike towards the capital and a future that he will carve out for himself. This fits in with an idea of autonomy similar to the 'self-reliant temperament of the British race' in completing the *DNB*.

Another aspect of the Shakespeare entry that marks it out as different to others in the *DNB* is the length of space devoted to the playwright's genealogy; no other entry spends as long in tracing the ancestry of its subject. If we consider that Francis Bacon, for example, is twelve years old within eight lines of his biography, and the Duke of Wellington has joined the army by the third paragraph of his, it is certainly curious that William is not even born until the third page of the Shakespeare entry. Again Lee does not just stick to the documentary record and, despite informing his readers that Shakespeare's ancestry can not be traced beyond his grandfather, he is able to ensure that the playwright has a venerable pedigree. Lee states that Shakespeare 'came of a family whose surname was borne through the middle ages by residents in very many parts of England' (Lee, "Shakespeare," 1286). This not only means that Shakespeare's ancestors are shown to stretch back into England hazy past – thus making him a very English individual whom no other country can have a claim to – but the idea that his name is held by residents of many parts of England casts Shakespeare as a sort of English Everyman; he represents England and its inhabitants. Indeed, the Shakespeare of this biography is a man who is inextricably entwined with the country of his birth. One of the more subtle ways in which this is achieved is that Sidney Lee has constructed what I would call a very geographic biography, meaning that the names of towns and villages in England are woven throughout the article – frequently when their presence is incidental at best. An example of this is when Lee examines an alleged incident from Shakespeare's childhood. One of the earliest stories told about Shakespeare was that he left Stratford as a young man in order to escape the repercussions of having been caught poaching the deer of a local landlord. Lee decides that this story is credible enough and notes that one of its earliest advocates was a seventeenth-century vicar at Saperton in Gloucestershire (Lee, "Shakespeare," 1291).

Now, citing the vicar obviously lends some historical credence to a story that Lee wants to promote, but the locating of the vicar's parish also serves the function of infusing the biography with the names of provincial areas of England – the geography lends a particularly English air to the essay. And the names come thick and fast: Penrith, Kirkland, Doncaster, Rowington, Snitterfield, Wilmcote, Fulbroke, Worcester, and numerous others – many of them are not even places that Lee claims Shakespeare had any connection with, but they all find their way into the narrative. The frequency and repetition of the names of towns and villages of England serves to infuse the biography with a very English flavour adding to the sense of nationalism.

Returning to Shakespeare's journey from Stratford to London, Lee tells us that Shakespeare's favourite route was via Oxford and High Wycombe, rather than to the road by Banbury and Aylesbury, and that the Crown Inn near Carfax, at Oxford, was most probably one of his resting places (Lee, "Shakespeare," 1292). This sounds like promotional material for the English tourist board and it is essentially doing just that; promoting England. Again, Lee lists towns and cities around England as a means of locating Shakespeare within a firmly British tradition – note how the reader is even given the names of the towns that Shakespeare did not pass through. It also, once again, ties Shakespeare in with England – these were his people and he travelled among them. And as Shakespeare becomes synonymous with England, so his popularity abroad becomes an invasion to which foreign nations must succumb. Towards the end of the biography, Lee tells us that 'In France Shakespeare won recognition after a longer struggle than in Germany' (Lee, "Shakespeare," 1331). The use of the word 'struggle' here is quite an obvious way of portraying Shakespeare as a successful invading force. Not that Lee necessarily wants Shakespeare to be an imperialist tyrant. Rather, the eminence of Shakespeare and England is unquestionable, and other people can only benefit by accepting this. Again, this fits with the jingoistic approach of the project as a whole. The Shakespeare criticism produced by other countries is touched on and Lee notes that 'when [*Hamlet*] is as warmly welcomed in the theatres of France and Germany as in those of England and America, [this] lends signal testimony to the eminence of Shakespeare's dramatic instinct' (Lee, "Shakespeare," 1313). In other words – Shakespeare is so good that he is even liked by those foreigners with their notorious lack of taste.

The overall message that the biography conveys is that Shakespeare and England are unalterably connected to each other and that, as Shakespeare is a world-conquering genius, so is England and its people. I do not think that it is wrong to think of the *DNB* essay on Shakespeare in terms of the 'message' that it is trying to convey. From the outset the project was conceived in pedagogical terms and, upon completion of the project, Sidney Lee commented that the aim of the *DNB* was to serve what he called 'the national and beneficial purpose' of allowing future generations access to 'their ancestors' collective achievement' (Lee, "Statistical Account," lxxviii). In talking about the achievements of previous generations of English men and women, Lee is invoking nostalgia for the past and by attempting to allow contemporary access to that achievement, he is obviously attempting to equal or surpass that success. Once again it is a specifically English enterprise and one that could only serve to make the nation even better than it was.

In this way, the life of Shakespeare was appropriated by the *Dictionary of National Biography* so that his biography could serve a nationalistic agenda. As I stated at the beginning, writing about the life of Shakespeare was certainly not a fad, but the way that people went about writing that life was very much subject to ideological trends. The jingoism that is evident in this particular biography of Shakespeare, reflected an upsurge in nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century and was thus part of the cultural discourse of that era. By looking at the fashions that operate within the broader activity of biographies of Shakespeare we can better inform our own understanding of the broader movements of cultural history.

<sup>1</sup> 'Until well into the nineteenth century the most easily accessible accounts of Shakespeare remained slight, superficial, and factually incorrect. Most of them were also heavy in ideological bias.' (Kewes, 78)

<sup>2</sup> 'no age indulged a greater passion for biography... It was the heyday of biographical criticism.' (Schoenbaum, 181)

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<sup>3</sup> In 1993 Samuel Schoenbaum called it ‘undoubtedly the most solid condensed treatment of the subject yet published – unrivalled in amplitude and in richness of documentation.’ (Schoenbaum, 371)

<sup>4</sup> The 29,120 articles in the *DNB* cover 29,108 pages. (Lee, “Statistical Account,” lxxi)

<sup>5</sup> The word comes from a popular song of the time, written by G. H. MacDermott, which included the following chorus:

We don’t want to fight but by jingo if we do...

We’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, and got the money too!

<sup>6</sup> Although, as Stephen Greenblatt points out in *Will In The World*, this version of events is highly unlikely as Shakespeare would probably have been arrested for vagrancy had he travelled alone, and unemployed through England in the late sixteenth century (Greenblatt, 87).

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