
Take a second look at one of the few authentic portraits of Shakespeare, the famous frontispiece to the First Folio, engraved by Martin Droeshout. Then imagine (or draw) two or three lines from the playwright’s mouth on either side. What emerges is a cat, staring at us from one of its nine lives. Inspired by this image, Graham Holderness divides his engrossing biography into nine “lives”: Shakespeare the writer, the player, the butcher boy, the businessman, the man in love (which counts as three “lives”/chapters), the Catholic, and the face. In each case, he moves steadily from the known facts, to informed speculation, to imaginative recreation, to something approaching fiction. At the end, in life nine, as he contemplates Droeshout’s engraving, he admits that “there’s no art” by which one can “find the mind’s construction in the face” of the figure before him. Shakespeare just looks at us like a cat with a cat’s instinct for negative capability. Yet his enigmatic gaze makes us wonder all the more “what was passing in the core of the Shakespearean being,” even as we recognize that “we have no access to that realm.” Holderness himself tries to summarize Shakespeare (claiming he “pursued pleasure and experience to the ultimate, careless of how many people he wounded and damaged, recklessly defying the laws of God and man in the quest for absolute freedom”), but it sounds as much modern cultural projection as truth.

This contradiction—of all we know about Shakespeare yet how impossible it is to know him—haunts Holderness’s volume. For example, he uses the research of biographers like Peter Ackroyd, Jonathan Bate, Bill Bryson, Katherine Duncan-Jones, Stephen Greenblatt, Samuel Schoenbaum, Stanley Wells, and Michael Wood to construct his own nine lives, even while pointing out how much their findings are “vulnerable to question.” Nor is this the result of discreet scholarly lapses on the part of these eminent sources; rather, it is because biography’s implicit generic claims to factuality ironically lead Holderness to the contemplation of what he prefers to call “metabiography.” “The most unconventional feature of this study,” he writes, is “that it deliberately exploits the manifestly fictional character of much biographical writing, and takes that mode to its natural conclusion”—or what might be called its *reductio ad absurdum*. Biographies are the product not only of the biographer’s striving to capture the facts about a human life, they emerge from “the biographer’s engagement with his subject.” All
biography is thus, at least at some level, either an “original work of fiction” or “a cocktail of fact and fiction.”

Here, of course, the author is most himself and least Shakespearian, most a denizen of contemporary high culture and least an Elizabethan or Jacobean. His postmodernism explains why at times he views Shakespeare through the prism of au courant readings of The Da Vinci Code, the Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, A Farewell to Arms, and Gulliver’s Travels; and it explains why he sees his role as a biographer as being akin to that of a novelist. Moreover, in some ways Holderness’s flights from the fact-bound earth of traditional biography to the airy realms of biographical creative writing are the most interesting parts of the book. For he is largely dependent upon the above-mentioned biographers for his facts, both when he differs with them (e.g., when he sets Jonathan Bate’s “rural,” Midland preoccupations against the “urban,” London interests of Peter Ackroyd) and when he agrees with them (as he does, e.g., with Michael Wood rather than Ian Wilson and Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel on the “Catholic Shakespeare” question). But when he leaves his fellow biographers behind and indulges his belief that he is writing a kind of fiction, at times he holds the reader spellbound.

For instance, his profession that in Shakespeare he sees “the Prince and the player, the writer and the actor, the world and the word, folded into one single figure that leapt and flickered as a living flame” or his improvement on Rowe’s “Account of the Life &c. of Master William Shakespeare” are genuine flights of fancy. Similarly, Holderness’s trilogy of “stories” depicting “Shakespeare in Love” are, by his own admission, the least fact-based and most speculative parts of Nine Lives. They also show Holderness the critic at his most genial (when he reveals an undercurrent of unity in Shakespeare by discussing a missing signet ring), and at his most masterly (when, in a piece of detection Conan Doyle himself might envy, he deftly brings the Adventures of Sherlock Holmes to bear on the Sonnets in order to revisit the theme of homosexual love).

Holderness is not always so successful, however. When he turns from Conan Doyle to Hemingway as the catalyst that will bring out the other, heterosexual kind of love between the poet and the dark lady of the Sonnets, he offers his readers little better than a pornographic twist to A Farewell to Arms. Even more shameful is his penultimate “story” of the dramatist’s death-bed scene. The old tradition, recorded by Richard Davies (Church of England rector of Shepperton in the adjoining county of Gloucestershire) that Shakespeare “dyed a papist,” we are told, should be rejected out of