

## What Malone really said about Shakespeare

by Kevin Gilvary

Edmond Malone (1741–1812) is the scholar most credited with establishing the biography of ‘William Shakespeare.

Samuel Schoenbaum refers to him as “perhaps the greatest of all Shakespearean scholars” (1970, ix). Wells and Taylor describe him as “one of the greatest intellectuals of the English Enlightenment, the most talented and influential of all scholars to have dedicated his energies to the explication of Shakespeare’s life and work.” (1987, 55). His recent biographer, Peter Martin, calls him a “scholar-collector, editor, biographer, and critic”, referring to his “heroic and obsessive” approach to his work and his “enormous contribution to Shakespeare studies” (1995, xv–xvii).

However, a careful reading of Malone’s works reveals his own considerable scepticism regarding previously published assertions concerning Shakespeare’s life and writings. In this article I explore the grounds for wondering whether Malone ever – especially in his later years – doubted the attribution of the plays and poems to William Shakspeare of Stratford upon Avon.

### Malone’s Background

Malone was born in Dublin, the son of an eminent lawyer. He was an outstanding student at Trinity College, Dublin and at the Inner Temple, London. He returned to practise law in Ireland until he inherited a large sum of money in the mid-1770s and was able to establish himself as a gentleman scholar in London. His house at 40 Langham Street, W1, is marked by a blue plaque. He was thus able to walk to the British Library, then housed in the British Museum, as well as visit archives in London, Stratford and other places. His particular ambition was to collect all the documentary evidence about Shakespeare into “one uniform and connected narrative” or, as we might say, into a literary biography.

### Knowledge of Shakespeare’s Life

When Malone established himself in London, there was little interest in the biography of Shakespeare. David Garrick had made Stratford famous with his 1769 Jubilee, but little was known about Shakespeare’s life beyond what had been written by Nicholas Rowe in a short preface to his edition of the works in 1709. Rowe’s essay, entitled ‘Some Account of the Life &c of William Shakespeare’, was mainly a criti-

cal account of Shakespeare’s works with some biographical comments. Rowe treats biographical data in about 1000 words, just under one-eighth of his introductory essay, concerned almost entirely about his life in Stratford (up-bringing and retirement), and he offers few biographical data about Shakespeare in London despite some investigation on his own part. Later, Malone would dismiss Rowe’s Account as containing only ten biographical facts, of which eight were false.

Rowe’s Account was abridged and re-organised by Alexander Pope in 1725, but without acknowledgement. This Rowe-Pope version was frequently reprinted in the eighteenth century, appearing as a separate pamphlet in 1740 as a preface to the collected works edited by Thomas Hanmer (1743), William Warburton (1747), Samuel Johnson (1765) and George Steevens (1773, 1778, 1785, 1793, 1803, 1813). At the time Malone arrived in London, George Steevens commented:

All that is known with any degree of certainty concerning Shakspeare is – that he was born in Stratford upon Avon, – married and had children there – went to London, where he commenced actor, and wrote poems and plays, – returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried. I must confess my readiness to combat every unfounded supposition respecting the particular occurrences of his life. [Quoted by Malone 1780, I, 654]

### Malone’s Contributions

Confronted by this absence of knowledge concerning the life of William Shakespeare, Malone set about investigating records and archives, where he made many significant discoveries among the documentary evidence concerning Shakespeare’s family background. He investigated the parish register, Shakespeare’s memorials and the inscription on Anne Hathaway’s tombstone at Stratford. He borrowed the Stratford Corporation books and found references in the Worcester Diocesan Records, the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, the Stamp Office and the College of Arms. He made accurate transcripts of various deeds and wills of Shakespeare himself, John Hall, and Thomas Nashe, husband of his grand-daughter Elizabeth.

In addition, Malone challenged the many myths which had arisen about Shakespeare in the eighteenth century and restricted himself to contemporary documents. Finally, he exposed the forger-

ies published by Samuel Ireland. His output can be summed up under three headings: (i) an attempt to ascertain the order of the works; (ii) biographical inferences from the plays; and (iii) a life of Shakespeare.

### Chronology of Works

Malone must have been working on an outline chronology of the works before he came to London. His essay ‘An Attempt to Ascertain the Order in Which the Plays Attributed to Shakspeare Were Written’ was first published among the prefatory material of the Johnson–Steevens second edition of 1778 (vol. I), occupying 76 pages. An expanded version appeared in Malone’s own edition of the works (1790, vol. I, part I) now in 126 pages. A third version was prepared by Malone’s literary executor, James Boswell junior, in the posthumous edition of 1821 (vol. II), expanded again to 180 pages. Most of the expansions concerned further documentation regarding performances and Malone’s discussion. There are remarkably few changes to his preferred dates, something upon which Malone congratulated himself.

Malone’s chronology has been largely accepted by later scholars such as Edward Dowden (1874), Sir Edmund Chambers (1930) and by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (1987). However, Malone remained extremely guarded about the status of these dates due to a lack of sufficient material to establish certainty:

The materials for ascertaining the order in which his plays were written, are indeed so few, that, it is to be feared, nothing very decisive can be produced on this subject. In the following attempt to trace the progress of his dramatick art, probability alone is pretended to. The silence and inaccuracy of those persons, who, after his death, had the revival of his papers, will perhaps for ever prevent our attaining to any thing like proof on this head. [1778, 1790, 1821]

These points have been elaborated in *Dating Shakespeare’s Plays* (2010). There is no evidence of when any work was composed or when authorial revisions took place (if ever): *Henry V* and *Hamlet* both exist in shorter and in longer forms. The records of perfor-

mances are very fragmentary and it is not known if the plays performed were recently composed or even in which version a play was performed: *Richard II* was played at the Globe on the eve of the Essex Rebellion, but it is not known whether the deposition scene was included or even if the play was Shakespeare’s. The publication records offer no link with composition.

Both *1 Henry VI* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* are thought to date to the early 1590s, yet were not published until the First Folio in 1623. Malone was commendably cautious about his chronology:

If the dates here assigned to our author’s plays should not in every instance, bring with them conviction of their propriety, let it be remembered that this is a subject on which conviction cannot at this day be obtained; and that the observations now submitted to the publick, do not pretend to any higher title than that of *An ATTEMPT to ascertain the chronology of the dramas of Shakspeare*. [1778, 1790, 1821]

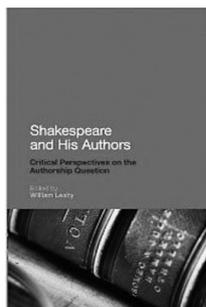
### Biographical Inferences from Plays

Malone was the first writer to make biographical inferences from the works of Shakespeare. Originally, these were confined to a few observations on the sonnets, which appeared in his 1780 supplement (vol. I). He accepts Steevens’s suggestion that the expression “my pupil pen” in Sonnet 16 “may be considered as a slight proof that the poems before us were our author’s earliest compositions.” Malone recorded a similar comment on “this growing age” in Sonnet 32 to suggest that Shakespeare may have written this poem when he was older. Regarding Sonnet 93, where the poet refers to himself “like a deceived husband”, Malone wrote a lengthy note on the subject of jealousy, but was well aware that his point was conjectural and not factual:

All I mean to say is, that he appears to me to have written more immediately *from the heart* on the subject of jealousy, than on any other; and it is therefore not improbable that he might have felt it. The whole is mere conjecture.

At this point, he quoted Steevens’s comment that very little was known for certain about Shakespeare (Malone 1780, vol. I, 654). Malone (to his credit) then quotes Steevens’s rejection of the jealous-Shakespeare hypothesis:

That Shakspeare has written with the utmost power on the subject of jealousy, is no proof that he ever felt it. Because he has, with equal vigour, expressed the varied aversions of Apemantus and Timon to the world, does it follow that he himself was a Cynic or a wretch deserted by his friends? STEEVENS.



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Malone counters this, believing that he himself had full awareness of “the whole tenour of his [Shakespeare’s] character” which put him in a position to say which feelings Shakespeare derived from personal experience and which he did not:

Every author who writes on a variety of topicks will have sometimes occasion to describe what he himself has felt. To attribute to our great poet (to whose amiable manners all his contemporaries bear testimony<sup>1</sup>) the moroseness of a cynick or the depravity of a murderer, would be to form an idea of him contradicted by the whole tenour of his character, and unsupported by any kind of evidence. MALONE.

Malone referred to “our author’s forgetfulness of his wife” which he deduced from the bequest of his “second-best bed” to her in his will, showing that he remembered her, but did not “esteem” her highly. Malone accepted the possibility that Shakespeare was unhappy in his marriage and argued that both Sonnet 93 and his bequest were supportive of this interpretation. In general, however, Malone makes very few inferences from the works about Shakespeare’s life and character.

Malone either rejects or ignores other inferences. In his notes about Sonnet 23 (“As an unperfect actor”), Malone reports with caution the claim made by Steevens that Shakespeare might have witnessed poor acting performances by a touring company in Stratford or soon after his arrival in London. Malone remains very cautious: “Whether the lines before us were founded on experience, or observation, cannot now be ascertained. What I have advanced is merely conjectural.” In Sonnet 37, he rejects the literal interpretation offered “by a late editor” to the phrase “made lame by fortune’s dearest spite” (Capell 1779, I, 60). Malone makes no comment about the content of Sonnet 126 (“O thou my lovely boy”), merely about the rhyming scheme.

### Life of Shakespeare

For Malone, writing the Life of Shakespeare was his great ambition. When he came to publish his own edition of the works, it seems that he anticipated ten volumes in total and initially prepared and had printed vols II–X containing the plays and the poems. He then seems to have realised that his prefatory material would not fit into one volume, which he divided into two parts. He included an expanded Attempt to Ascertain the Order, the text of many documents and his own 80-page preface, but dispensed with the customary reprints of the prefaces of Theobald, Hanmer, and Warburton “because they appeared to me to throw no light on our author or his works”. In his preface, he

also explains why he includes Rowe’s “meagre” Account, so as to add his own footnotes and challenge almost everything Rowe had written about Shakespeare. Malone then announced his own intention to write a new Life of Shakespeare:

With the materials which I have been so fortunate as to obtain, relative to our poet, his kindred, and friends, it would not have been difficult to have formed a new Life of Shakespeare, less meagre and imperfect than that left us by Mr. Rowe: but the information which I have procured having been obtained at very different times, it is necessarily dispersed, partly in the copious notes subjoined to Rowe’s Life, and partly in the Historical Account of Our Old Actors. At some future time I hope to weave the whole into one uniform and connected narrative. [1790, I, i, lxiii]

At this time he was most circumspect about his current state of knowledge when offering his chronology: after mentioning the great efforts to discover material relevant to the life of Shakespeare, he notes that despite “the most diligent inquiries, very few particulars have been recovered, respecting his private life or literary history.” (1790, I, i, 262). During the next decade, he set about finding new documentary material about Shakespeare, exposing the forgeries of William Henry Ireland (1796), assisting James Boswell, senior, in the Life of Johnson and preparing an edition of the prose works of John Dryden, to which he added a Life of Dryden.

Malone’s letters to his friend, Bishop Percy, indicate his continuing interest in his ambition: “the Life of Shakespeare, on which I am now employed”

### *Dating Shakespeare’s Plays: A Critical Review of the Evidence*

edited by Kevin Gilvary

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(1793); “I have got through half his life and hope to finish it this summer” (1794); “I have above half the Life of Shakespeare to write” (1803); “my favourite object is the Life; of which about a third part remains to be written” (1807); “I still cherish a hope that I shall live to finish the Life of Shakespeare, about two thirds of which are done” (1809).

Malone died in 1812 and named James Boswell, junior as his literary executor. Boswell finally published Malone’s edition in 1821, nine years after Malone’s death; the Life of Shakespeare appeared as volume II (in three volumes of prefatory material), arranged in the following manner:

pp. 1-287 [early] Life of Shakespeare (to 1592) incl.  
pp. 167-279 Discussion on Spenser’s possible allusions to Shakespeare  
pp. 288-486 Attempt to Ascertain The Order  
pp. 487-697 Transcripts of Documents

In the early part, Malone states:

It is somewhat remarkable that in Rowe’s Life of our author, there are not more than eleven facts mentioned, which are then listed:

1. That he was the son of John Shakspeare, and born at Stratford in April 1564;
2. That he died there in 1616.

These are both true, and were furnished by the parish register.

3. That his father had *ten* children.
  4. That his father was a woolman.
  5. That when the poet came to London “he was received *into the company* of actors then in being” as if there was but one company.
  6. That he was but an indifferent actor.
  7. That *Falstaff* was originally called *Oldcastle*, and that the poet was *obliged* to change the name of that character.
  8. That Lord Southampton gave him 1000*l.* to complete a purchase.
  9. That he left three daughters.
  10. That he was driven to take shelter in London in consequence of stealing deer from Sir Thomas Lucy’s Park.
- The preceding eight facts will all be shown to be false. [Boswell 1821, II, 69]

Malone spent much time in demolishing Rowe’s biographical assertions but he failed conspicuously to write a “uniform and connected narrative” which he had announced in 1790. Throughout there are so many notes and discussions that it is unreadable. He himself gives the principal reason:

Of all the accounts of literary men which have been given to the world, the history of the life of Shakspeare would

be the most curious and instructive .... But many of the materials for such a biographical detail being now unattainable, we must content ourselves with such particulars as accident has preserved, or the most sedulous industry has been able to collect. [Boswell 1821, ii II, 3-4]

When it came to writing the Life of Shakespeare, Malone failed to uncover the same kind of documents he had found for Dryden: there were no private documents, no personal letters to or from him, no private diaries or journals either by or mentioning him, and no prefaces or epilogues offering biographical insights written by him.

Malone complains that previous researchers had missed the opportunity to interview surviving relatives of Shakespeare: our poet’s grand-daughter, Lady Barnard, died in 1670; his sister, Joan Hart, was living in 1646; his eldest daughter, Susanna Hall, in 1649; and his second daughter, Judith Quiney, in 1662. Malone lists a serious lack of interest among other researchers, most notably Sir William Dugdale, who published his *Antiquities of Warwickshire* in 1656:

We might reasonably have expected some curious memoirs of his illustrious countryman: but he has not given us a single particular of his private life; contenting himself with a very slight mention of him in his account of the church and tombs of Stratford upon Avon. [Boswell 1821, II, 4-5]

Malone comments on other writers who failed to show the same level of investigation as he himself had done.

## Conclusions

Edmond Malone must indeed be accounted a great Shakespearean for his tremendous efforts to discover material relating to his life and works. By the end of his life, Malone realised that it was not possible to offer a “uniform and connected narrative” of Shakespeare’s Life.

He was also aware that his attempt to create a chronology was mainly conjectural and that any inferences made from the works needed to be supported with clear allusions from contemporary documents. From this position, it is only a small step to doubting the attribution. Perhaps he did.

Malone’s voluminous and somewhat chaotic papers were deposited at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and may contain greater expressions of doubt than was made in Boswell’s edition of 1821.

Shortly after Malone’s edition came out, Henry Hallam still could do no more than echo the blunt and baffling words of George Steevens from half a century earlier:

It is not the register of [Shakespeare's] baptism, or the draft of his will, or the orthography of his name that we seek. No letter of his written, no record of his conversation, no character of him drawn with any fulness by a contemporary has been produced. [*Introduction to the Literature of Europe*, 1837]

K.G.

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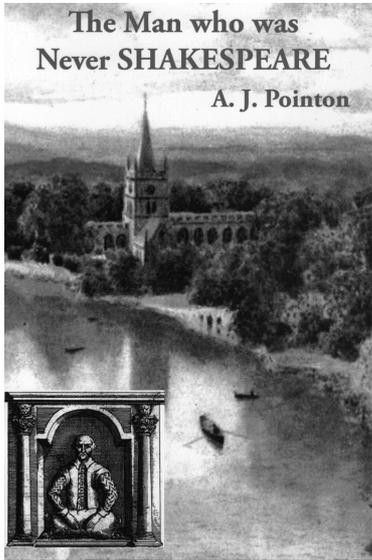
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[Endnote:]

1. Malone may have been alluding to John Weever who called Shakespeare "Honie-tong'd" (*Epigrammes*, c. 1599), to Anthony Skoloker, who called Shakespeare "friendly" (*Daiphantus*, c. 1604), or to Augustine Phillips or John Combe, who left Shakespeare some money in their wills.

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