

The Real William Shaksper

by Alan Robinson Esq

*The following paper was given at the Henley meeting of the DVS in Autumn 2003.
A fully referenced version of this article will appear in the 2004 Commemoration book.
Interestingly, Katherine Duncan-Jones ignores Langley in Ungentle Shakespeare
but Michael Woods mentions him in In Search of Shakespeare.*

The facts known about Shaksper's life are sparse but very little analysis has been done even of these. Many deductions and inferences can be made with a fair chance of arriving close to the truth.

The starting point is that William Shaksper had a well-to-do early childhood but was, by the age of twenty, a family man and the eldest son of a totally ruined, penurious family. Then he very rapidly acquired money - from no known source - becoming a very rich man, a multimillionaire by today's standards.

Values

The money that William Shaksper of Stratford-upon-Avon amassed during his lifetime, how he acquired it and where he spent it is important. To get this into perspective we must have an understanding of the value of that money in present day terms.

The relative values between different goods and services have changed in four hundred years but the value of labour then, as now, affected the great majority of people. At the turn of the century, the pay per day for a skilled building artisan was fixed by law at 6.5 pence but was actually between 10 and 12 pence; his labourer received 6 to 8 pence. Today the skilled man is paid some twenty to thirty thousand pounds a year for a 240 day working year, which gives him about £100 a day. Similarly, the building labourer gets about £8 an hour, bringing in about £60 a day. So, since the Elizabethan pound had 240 pence, the ratio in the working man's pound between then and now comes to about 2,000.

However, the well-to-do yeoman was said to have an income then of some £400 which probably compares with today's equivalent of about £100,000 for someone with lands and investments so the ratio there is only some 250. Conversion factors have been accepted anywhere between these and for our purposes a mean between the two of 700 will be used.

William's upbringing - nurture and nature

The making of a child is said to be a composite of breeding and environment, especially early parental training. Both factors were unpromising for our

William. The men of the family were self-interested and aggressive. His grandfather, Richard Shaksper, was a husbandman, living in Snitterfield in a rented house belonging to Robert Arden of Wilmcote There are records of his being fined on at least three occasions, generally misusing the common land. William's uncle, Henry Shaksper, also of Snitterfield, was fined for fighting bloodily, for not looking after his property boundaries, for not wearing a cap to church and was jailed for debt.

His father, John Shaksper, was variously described in legal documents as husbandman, glover, butcher, money-lender, twice fined for illegal dealings in wool, and a speculator in barley and timber. He was fined for making a dunghill in the street outside his house and he was a frequent litigant, like William.

William's parents were completely illiterate. They probably married in 1557. Their first two children, died in infancy and William was baptised on 26th April, 1564, "Gulielmus filius Johannes Shaksper". He subsequently had one brother and three sisters.

In his early childhood his father was well-to-do, becoming High Bailiff (Town Mayor) in 1568 and High Alderman (Deputy Mayor) in 1571. Then, in 1572, despite being the influential High Alderman, he was fined for usury and things started to go very wrong. By 1576 he was broke and by 1579 the family had sold off everything they had to raise money. He never went near the council and dare not go to church for fear of being dunned.

By 1582 the neighbours were threatening him and he petitioned for sureties of the peace against four townsmen "for fear of death and mutilation of his limbs". The families were destitute. William and his brother must have worked all hours to keep them fed. There would be no time nor money for schooling.

On 27 November 1582 the 18-year-old "William Shagspere" married the 26-year-old "Anne Hathwey" by special licence. The parish clerk must have had a sense of humour, spelling his name that way; the bride was three months pregnant and their daughter, Susannah, was baptised on 26 May 1583. On 2 February, 1585 the twins, Hamnet & Judith were

born; (Hamnet drowned in August, 1596) and by 1585 John Shaksper was in gaol for debt and the family fortunes were at rock bottom.

About this time, William left home, almost certainly going to London since he was well-known there later and Anne had to borrow money from a shepherd to feed the family. It was never repaid even when they were very rich. (1601 - Will of Thomas Whittington - "Item I geve and bequeth unto the poore people of Stratford 40s that is in the hand of Anne Shaxpere, wyf unto Mr. Wyllyam Shaxpere and is due debt unto me").

The turnaround

Then comes the quite astonishing information - generally unrecognised as such - that in 1589, William joined with his father in a lawsuit to recover his mother's property in Wilmcote which had been sold in the bad times. The implication is startling. In four years someone had acquired sufficient money to pay off all the family debts and indulge in the luxury of an uncertain lawsuit. Otherwise the lawyers wouldn't have accepted the case - which failed - and the local citizens would have been down on the Shaksper for any money still owing.

In thirteen years the father had only sunk lower; William was on his way up, becoming one of the richest men in Stratford. So it is likely that only he could have provided enough income to keep the whole family alive, healthy, housed and make them free from their enormous debts in such a very short time.

Unlike almost all other men of the time who became wealthy, there is no recorded evidence anywhere of any business activity of any sort by which our William could earn the high levels of money indicated. He must have arrived in London as a country lad of twenty-one with a Warwick accent and no schooling, his training having been in the harsh world of debt and threat. As his later life shows, he was a tough, aggressive and astute.

If he had no legitimate career or business, he could only have made a fortune so quickly and easily in the flourishing Elizabethan underworld, probably in prostitution and the rackets which went with it. His known associates show this to be very likely.

The theatres and prostitution

The sex business during Elizabethan times was rampant and it was generally recognised that the theatres were common meeting places for picking up prostitutes, amateur and professional. This was certainly so with the Curtain, from its opening in 1576

until it was closed. It was publicly declared to be such by Stephen Gosson in 1579 and Robert Greene, believed by many to be an Oxford pseudonym before he adopted "Shaksper", wrote a long treatise on it.

After the City theatres were closed down in the City, Henslowe's Rose, Langley's Swan and then Burbage's Globe were built in Southwark, joining the bear pits which had occasional use as theatres. Many brothels moved across the river into Southwark and joined up with the already existing sex and gambling area of the "stews" around the south end of London Bridge. The high class establishments were in good big houses with gardens and there were many of them. The area was owned by the Bishop of Winchester and the prostitutes were known as "Winchester Geese".

Most of the theatre owners were brothel owners including Henslowe, Edward Alleyn, the actor-manager (who married Henslowe's step-daughter), Langley, Aaron Holland and many others. In fact, Alleyn's wife was "carted" as a prostitute in 1593 but it is thought that this was really because she didn't close down her brothel during the plague. You will remember how rich Alleyn became, founding Dulwich College but, unlike Shaksper, his business dealings are known.

William's London associates

The real clue for Shaksper's wealth lies in the court record: in November 1596, William Wayte, the stepson of Mr. Justice William Gardner, applied for sureties "for fear of death and so forth" against "William Shaksper and Francis Langley and Dorothy Soer and Anne Lee." Note that the main culprit in a crime was always placed first - and there's William, listed before one of the most notorious men in England whom Justice Gardner despised. It is a very reasonable assumption that he was Langley's chief bully-boy and probably had been for some years, by this time being well known throughout the theatre and brothel world. It was an ideal career for one of his breeding, upbringing and lack of education. The two women are not known but were probably brothel "madames".

Francis Langley was a real villain, mixed up in every criminal activity that can be imagined, particularly usury at rates between 20 and 100 percent. His biography makes fascinating reading. He was involved with dealings in a diamond which had been stolen from a treasure ship and which was eventually sold to Queen Elizabeth for about £1,500; that's a million pounds today. He was known to Lord Burghley and Hunsdon. He acquired - but never

really paid for - the Manor of Paris Garden, built himself a manor house and many other dwellings and opened the Swan Theatre in 1585. He had been denied a license for it by Mr. Justice Gardner who had also tried to suppress his other activities. However, plays were performed there by Pembroke's Men and others but their dealings with Langley were not very happy.

Later, in 1599, amidst much unpleasantness and gang-violence, Langley built the Boar's Head theatre outside the city limits just north-east of the Tower. He died in 1602 owing a colossal amount of money. Shakspermeantime was noted for unpaid taxes by the Lord Treasurer referred to "Residuum Sussex".

William in Stratford

He must have been spending time and money at home. In May 1597, he bought New Place, the second largest house in Stratford, called "The Great House" by the locals. It had a 60 ft. frontage, was 28 feet high, had five gables, three storeys, two barns, two gardens and ten fireplaces. Later, in 1602, the property was reconveyed to him for a quoted fee of £60, a quarter of its annual value. But this figure grossly over-estimated its actual worth which was probably about £700.

In February, 1598 he was "listed" for "hoarding 80 bushels of grain and malt in time of famine" which was illegal by edict of the Privy Council. It

was said that "the poor people paid many times over in order to stay alive" at this time; Shaksper didn't suffer and became known for his hoarding.

In 1602 he bought land for £320 for his brother Gilbert and a cottage opposite New Place. In July 1605 he bought a half share in Stratford parish tithes for £400 and in 1614 with others he attempted, but failed, to enclose common land in Stratford. At some time he bought a house for his sister Joan and two other houses and property in Stratford with others in Old Stratford, Bushopton, the Manor of Rowington and Welcombe.

On 25th March 1616 he made a revised will and on 25th April he was buried in a nameless grave under a stone engraved with a common verse in the chancel of the parish church, a right as 'lay rector' he had bought with the tithes. In his will, apart from many properties which he left to his two daughters, he left money or gifts worth at least £700. His wife and parents had obviously been well provided for, Anne by virtue of the inheritance laws and his father having sufficient property on his death to show he had lived well.

William in London

Having made his money by some untraceable means, in 1599 he bought a coat of arms and also an eighth share in the Globe Theatre and later a share in the Blackfriars Theatre. The grain hoarding and the

Shaksper's basic dates and investments

26 Apr	1564	Baptised "Gulielmus filius Johannes Shakspere"
27 Nov	1582	18-year-old William Shagspere married the 26-year-old Anne Hathway
26 May	1583	Daughter Susannah baptised
2 Feb	1585	Hamnet & Judith born; (Hamnet died 11 August 1596)
	1585	Father John in gaol for debt
	1589	William joined with his father in a lawsuit to recover some of his mother's property
	1596	William Wayte craves sureties against William Shaksper and others
May	1597	William bought New Place at a possible cost of £700
Feb.	1598	W S "listed" for "hoarding 80 bushels of grain and malt in time of famine" In 1597, 1598, 1599 and 1600 he was cited as having tax arrears in London
Feb	1599	He bought a twelve percent share in the Globe theatre at a probable cost of £120. And bought a coat of arms for £30 "for his father"
	1602	He bought land for £320 for his brother Gilbert and a cottage
	1603	Listed in the King's Men, along with Burbage, in a license to play in the Globe
	1604	Listed in the King's Men to receive red cloth for a royal progress He was listed as an actor in one of Jonson's plays and years later by Burbage
Jul	1605	Bought half share in Stratford parish tithes for £400
Aug	1608	Rented the Blackfriars Theatre
10 Mar	1613	Bought the Blackfriars gatehouse for £140
	1614	Attempted, with others, to enclose common land in Stratford
25 Apr	1616	Buried in Trinity Church, Stratford, No name on his gravestone, just a silly verse

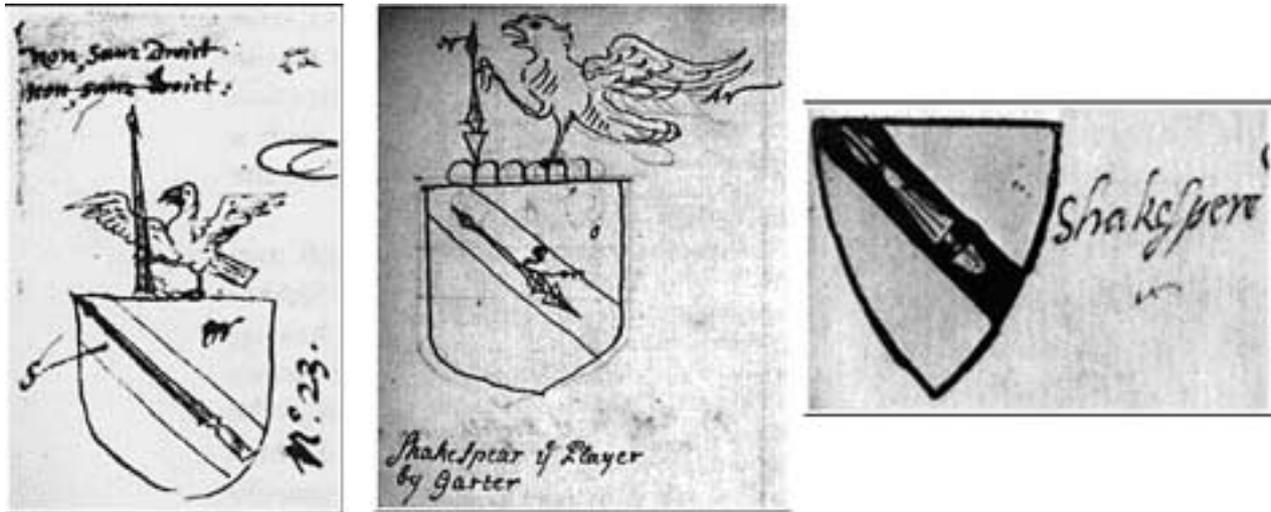


Figure 1: The three versions of the Shaksper Arms

purchase of a coat of arms have given us a picture of Will Shaksper as seen by people in London. He was rich by this time and he bought the coat of arms, from Garter Kings of Arms for £30 - a £20,000 bribe today. It was ostensibly for his father who had applied years before when he still had some money and status.

it was marked "Non, sans droigt", legal French for "No, without right" from the first assessor; when finally granted this was taken by Shaksper as the motto "Non sans droigt" "Not without right". The second version shows "Shaksper - the player" (See Figure 1).

Ben Jonson wrote a play *Everyman out of his Humour*, which unmistakably caricatured Shaksper. In it, were two brothers who formed a composite character of him: Sordido, a grain hoarder who "hated to see a good harvest" and Sogliardo who bought a coat of arms for £30; and Sogliardo "an essential clown, yet so enamoured of the name of gentleman that he will have it, though he buys it. He comes up every term to learn to take tobacco and see new motions (ie puppet shows). He is in his kingdom when in company where he may well be laughed at." In the play, he owned property and the crest on his arms is described as "a boar without a head, rampant" ie brainless with black puddings at the top; the motto "Not without mustard".

Having become a "sharer" which was the term for people who just invested in the theatre, he would be a very powerful man in the theatre world and if he wanted to act, no matter how badly he did it, no-one would dare deny him. There is no record of his having been paid for it and the parts would be small.

The only examples of Shaksper's writing we have are six signatures from legal documents from 1608 onwards, the last three being from his will. Hand-

writing experts in the Public Records Office have declared the first three as almost certainly not by him but by lawyers' clerks.

The invisible poet and playwright

Henslowe and the other producers kept detailed records of payments for plays. Dozens of playwrights and actors are listed but there's no Shaksper. A playwright was paid £5 to £10 for a play which entertained the public. In 1603, the Henslowe Company paid more for a dress in *A Woman Killed by Kindness* than they paid the playwright, Thomas Heywood. Heywood wrote over 200 plays for the theatres. He was the leading dramatist for Queen Anne's Men at the Red Bull and Lady Elizabeth's Men at the Cockpit theatre.

We still have 24 plays by Heywood, two in his own handwriting. The whole of the Shaksper canon published before the first folio in 1623 would have brought in only about £200 to the playwright. Shaksper who later sued a neighbour for £1-13-4 would certainly have demanded the author's fee of £5, which would then have been recorded by Burbage or Henslow.

William Camden, the greatest of Elizabethan historians, had been the headmaster of Westminster School and Ben Jonson, who went there, said he taught him all he knew. He became Clarenceux King of Arms and handled Shaksper's application for Arms, passing it on as unworthy. So he knew William existed as a person. Camden toured England, writing about the towns and their more worthy people. In his book in 1605 he named other people in Stratford but never mentioned Shaksper and in 1616 he never mentioned his death. Camden's writings form the basis of most of the history books on the Elizabethan

period. Many poets and playwrights were buried in Westminster Abbey and when Beaumont died in 1616 there was much public mourning in London. But there was none for William Shaksper of Stratford; nobody cared.

Shaksper's finances

It is impossible to estimate William's total earnings. He and his whole family lived well; he paid off his father's debts. By the time of his death, William must, by law, have provided for Anne since she is not otherwise left anything except a bed. Apart from all this, William left minor legacies of about £700 and the bulk of his fortune to his daughters, particularly Susannah, as properties and investments worth some £2,000. At today's values, his total worth was then over two million pounds.

Yet Shaksper's entire wealth was acquired without leaving one record of any source of his income.