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Zombie Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT The year 2016 has seen an unprecedented level of interest occasioned by the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. This interest is in marked contrast to the surviving information concerning the event: the cause, place and even date of Shakespeare's demise are all unknown. Moreover, attention to the mere fact of death adds nothing to knowledge of Shakespeare's work; rather it distracts attention. This article surveys the anniversary celebrations in relation to the contrasting life records, arguing that the Anniversary has produced a "Zombie Shakespeare", a twenty-first century biographical fantasy indicative of commodification rather than literary or creative imagination. This article is published as part of a collection on Shakespeare studies.

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William Shakespeare died in Stratford-upon-Avon on 23 April 1616, exactly 400 years ago (Schoenbaum, 1991: 3).¹ It was his fifty-second birthday.² Not until Samuel Beckett contrived to be born on Good Friday, and to die at Christmas, has an artist managed his own dying so neatly (Knowlson, 1996: 704).³ *Exit, with a dead march. Muffled trumpets sound.* Meanwhile a noise of voices, everywhere, joins in a cacophony of commemoration. Royalty pays respect to royalty. *Trailing pikes, accompanied by a death knell.* His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales broadcasts a Shakespearean eulogy to Her Majesty the Queen to celebrate her ninetieth birthday, with a deft backhander to old Shagspear in return. Stars of screen and stage join the chorus. Dame Judi Dench and Sir Ian McKellen trade *Hamlet* jokes with the heir to the throne. *A scream, below.* As a one-off Midsomer Murder mystery, John Nettles examines *Shakespeare's Legacy* for Yesterday, the Freeview RAF / Nazi Reunion Channel. Fresh discoveries are announced. On the Isle of Bute, a new copy of the First Folio has been found in the library of Mount Stuart. At the National Archives, Shakespeare's last will and testament is examined—yet again—this time by X-ray, to show that the second page (intake of breath) was drafted *at a different time from the others*, and that *at least four or five different inks were used*. Leaving his “second best bed” to his wife may not, after all, be a husband's final cutting slight. Not even the authorial bones are left undisturbed. An archaeological dig organized by Staffordshire University, disseminated via Channel 4, reports that the skull has been stolen.⁴ Even Shakespeare the Zombie cannot rest in peace, is not perhaps even there.

Does the death of Shakespeare matter? It is hardly news. Nor are the so-called “new” discoveries “news”. As on so many matters, Malone was the first in arguing that giving Anne the second best bed was worse than ignoring her altogether: “he had recollected her,—but so recollected her, as more strongly to mark how little he esteemed her” (Malone, 1780, vol. 1: 657). However, already, before the beginning of the nineteenth century, George Steevens countered in the same book that this was a gross over-reading of the manuscript (Malone, 1780, vol. 1: 655). Since the biggest and best bed would automatically go to the principal heirs—Shakespeare's elder daughter and her husband—the next best bed could just as easily be a mark of affection. As for the bones, the American Shakespearean Norris announced in 1876 that to get a photograph of Shakespeare's skull “would be a great thing” (Norris, 1876: 40). But he was already too late: Irving in 1818 reported the grave being opened by accident but yielding nothing but dust. Even so, “it was something, I thought, to have seen the dust of Shakespeare” (Irving, 1819–1820: 65).

Why do we keep repeating ourselves? Two hundred years ago, Irving had given up on the earthly remains of Shakespeare. He knew, in ways that are salutary in this year of manic *Überkitschlichkeit*, that the bodily author is now no more than a figure of speech, of little more significance than the name of Homer or the ghost of Sophocles. Indeed, it is a fair enough statement that we possess more *significant* information about the biography of Sophocles than about that of Shakespeare. The body hunters deny this. The curators at the National Archives have understandably stressed the relevance of their research to the understanding of Shakespeare. The late addition to the will shows, apparently, that Shakespeare was still showing interest in his affairs *after* his retirement, a month before he died; this also contradicts his reputation as a “miser”. But do either of these things show anything meaningful at all about the understanding of the “historical William”?⁵ Shakespeare had no reputation as a “miser” in his lifetime; and there is no evidence whatsoever that he “retired”. Both ideas have been invented to fit the paucity of real information.

The life-records of Geoffrey Chaucer, edited by Crow and Olson for Oxford University Press, number 656 pages (Crow and Olson, 1966). They contain not one reference to the writing of Chaucer. Yet even this is better than what we know of Shakespeare's life. At least we know what Chaucer was doing when he was not writing. We know the life of Sophocles as a writer indeed much better than we know Shakespeare. In the case of Sophocles, we know that he won the prize at the Dionysia for the first time in 468 BCE (beating Aeschylus!) (Easterling and Knox, 1985: 764). This tells us three things we do not know about Shakespeare: the date of Sophocles's earliest recognition for his writing; the names of the judges, who included the Athenian general Cimon, so giving some political context; and (wondrous to remark) an *actual performance date of a surviving work—Triptolemus*.⁶ That is the depth of our ignorance of Shakespeare: we do not have a single piece of external evidence precisely dating a first performance of a single play.

That is not to say that, to paraphrase *Game of Thrones*, “we know nothing”. Historical extrapolation of the career of Shakespeare is reasonably solid at least in outline. The *Palladis Tamia* of Francis Meres (a Rutland churchman) in 1598 gives us a bare *terminus ante quem* for a number of plays (Meres, 1598, sig. 2O2^r).⁷ But by far the largest body of evidence for knowledge about Shakespeare's writing comes from the surviving editions of his plays. The life-records, paltry as they are, tell us about the wrong things. He owed money on taxes in London in 1597 (Schoenbaum, 1975: 162).⁸ He had some dealings in malt in Stratford in 1598 (Schoenbaum, 1975: 179).⁹ From a literary point of view, however, the sole records that are helpful come from the theatre: share-owning documents from the acting companies, or the names of other actors (Schoenbaum, 1975: 199).¹⁰ Shakespeare owned one-tenth of the share of the lease of the Globe Theatre on its opening in 1599; likewise he owned a seventh of the share of the lease of the Blackfriars Theatre from February 1612 (Schoenbaum, 1975: 154).¹¹ Even so, these are records of Shakespeare the actor and not Shakespeare the writer. Indeed, they are outshone once more by the literary remains (Erne, 2003: 14). It is the Quartos that give the most evidence of actual performances, whether in the theatres or at court. And it is the Folio that gives the only account surviving of Shakespeare's methods or feelings as a writer: “His mind and hand went together: and what he thought, he vttered with that easinesse, that wee haue scarce receiued from him a blot in his papers” (Shakespeare, 1623, sig. πA3^r). That is it.

Let us say it, then, amid the tawdry memorials and endless TV shows: *The death of Shakespeare is of no interest whatsoever*. Except in so far as it is symptomatic of the kind of distracted attention we pay to his life: in all the BBC tributes, only Philomena Cunk got this point.¹² It is only by inference we can say he died at all. Nobody paid the slightest attention to the death of Shakespeare until fifty years after the event. Like so much in his life the story is a fabrication, first supplied by the Reverend John Ward, who became vicar of Stratford in 1662. Ward was a commonplace rural parson and kept 18 volumes of miscellanies, of pharmacy, anatomy, pious musings, and good intentions to study Arabic, Anglo-Saxon and Hebrew. He knew (in all likelihood) Shakespeare's nephew Thomas Ward, who had inherited the poet's house in Henley Street; and he refers to a “M^{rs} Queeny”, possibly Shakespeare's daughter Judith, who scandalously married Thomas Quiney the vintner and taverner, and survived into the Restoration. Could it be, then, that it was Judith who spitefully confided to Ward (as he then sensationally recorded) that her father died after a heavy drinking session with his old boozing literary friends Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton? To provide authenticity, Ward invented a post-hangover fever to explain his author's demise (Schoenbaum, 1975: 242).¹³

Sadly, since this is a terrific story, there are some problems with evidence. First, Drayton is believed to have avoided alcohol. The inferred pretext of celebrating his daughter's wedding squares oddly with Shakespeare simultaneously downgrading her part in his will (Schoenbaum, 1991: 78). While later biographers have sniffed haughtily at the dubiousness of this story, the fever (sometimes said categorically to be typhoid) persisted in more finished and scholarly tellings, even though there is not the slightest knowledge of Shakespeare's ailments at any time of his life. Although the Victorians preferred not to think of Shakespeare drinking himself to death, they too liked to picture his old writing chums trotting back to the Midlands to reminisce about their Bankside hits. Nonetheless, the truth is: how Shakespeare died, and how he felt in his last months, God only knows (Duncan-Jones, 2001: 266; Greenblatt, 2012: 387).

The fact is that we cannot know for certain that Shakespeare even died on 23 April. Strictly speaking, the death itself is not recorded, but only the burial in the town church of Holy Trinity. The parish register gives us this: "1616, 25 April. Will. Shakspere, gentleman" (Schoenbaum, 1975: 250).¹⁴ There is no time of death or even date; no *post mortem*, no mourners, no last address. Inspector Morse, never mind Barnaby, would not have had much fun in this episode. Shakespeare's retirement from London to Stratford, so widely cited as to appear to be concrete fact, is also pure speculation. The first note of it is found in Nicholas Rowe's *Life of 1709*: "The latter Part of his Life was spent, as all Men of good Sense will wish theirs may be, in Ease, Retirement and the Conversation of his Friends" (Rowe, 1709: xxxv). Rowe calculated that Shakespeare's financial and property dealings gave him the opportunity to down tools and up sticks. It appeared natural to the manners of the polite society of the early eighteenth century, in which Rowe circulated, for an author to aspire to a country retirement and a deathbed in his native town. This all lent to the authorial life a satisfying symmetry. It is worth remembering, though, that the idea of retirement is nowhere mentioned in any record, and that the language and social fashion embodied in it are of a later period (Duncan-Jones, 2001: 249). Retirement, here, is a mere literary device: a way of returning Shakespeare home. It is entirely possible that a document will one day turn up which shows Shakespeare living in London shortly before his death. Indeed, the mortgage on a house in Blackfriars in 1613 already makes this possible (Schoenbaum, 1975: 224).¹⁵

But who cares, in any case? The reason we pay attention to the life of Shakespeare is based on two kinds of fallacy. The first is that the life of a writer, especially a great one, is always worth knowing. There are some wonderful lives of writers: in English, there are Ellmann's Wilde, Lee's Woolf, most of all Boswell's Johnson. But that is because all of these writers were also interesting as people. Plenty of other biographies of writers show that this is not a necessary truth; perhaps more accurately, it is a contingent falsehood. The second fallacy is that the life of the writer is necessary to understand the writings. Borges wrote beautifully about both fallacies:

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary (Borges, 1964: 246–247).

Borges the man likes the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson. "Borges" the author of the books does so also. But the relation is like the one between an actor and the character she

plays on stage or on screen. It is a mimetic relationship, parenthetical, we could say sublimated. Jorge Luis Borges, KBE, *ciudadano*, justifies his existence via his literature. But he is not really responsible for it, and certainly does not own it. "It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition".

Many writers have said, like Borges, that they would like us to leave them alone, and just read the books. This is true of writers, like Beckett, who hated fame, and who wrote themselves rigorously out of their books; and it is true of writers, like Proust, who wrote themselves incessantly into their books. Jean-Yves Tadié, author of *Proust*, one of the best lives of any writer, fastidiously writes about Proust the author and not "the other Proust" (Tadié, 2000: xvii–xx). Anyone ever tempted to write about Shakespeare's death should read Tadié on Proust's asthma. In Proust's case there is at least the excuse that we know he suffered from asthma. There are vast archives of his letters, his notebooks, his proofs. And Proust, of all writers, was happiest writing about his memories. But the memories are still writings, and best studied as writing, not as theosophic hauntings. Still more is this the case with Shakespeare. His life records are extraordinarily thin. That we have even this many is down to the fact that we have looked so hard (indeed, too hard) to find them. Shakespeare's life is the exemplary philosophical case of under-determination. In a similar way, the study of the First Folio constantly suffers from the opposite problem of over-determination. It has been studied *too much*. We know more about its pages, its paper, its founts, even the broken founts, than we do about any other printed book. As a result, we can make no reasonable comparison.

Every so often, perhaps while watching Ben Elton's new sitcom, *Upstart Crow* (ah, what a falling off was there, from *Blackadder II*), I think of David Lodge's novel *Changing Places* (1975). In it, Professor Morris Zapp aspires to write the ultimate literary life:

a series of commentaries on Jane Austen which would work through the whole canon, one novel at a time, saying absolutely everything that could possibly be said about them. The idea was to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle, historical, biographical, rhetorical, mythical, Freudian, Jungian, existentialist, Marxist, structuralist, Christian-allegorical, ethical, exponential, linguistic, phenomenological, archetypal, you name it; so that when each commentary was written there would be simply *nothing further to say* about the novel in question (Lodge, 1975: 34).

Perhaps the ultimate gift to Shakespeare on the 400th anniversary of his death would be, not a World Shakespeare Congress (which is of course taking place, this July and August), but a World Shakespeare Moratorium. However, this is to give in to the academic's vice of saturated boredom. I am not yet prepared to give up reading Shakespeare, or going to see his plays. I love the new Globe *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance. I am even going to the World Shakespeare Congress. But I would like to see an end, sometime soon, to writings about the death of Shakespeare. Let us keep to the literary records, to the surviving texts and paratexts, including those by other writers; and to the records of the stage. The rest of the life records, let us put them in his tomb, to replace the missing skull. It is time to kill him off, properly this time. The problem with *Zombie Shakespeare* is the same as with zombies in general: he keeps returning, however often he is stabbed. I come to bury him, not to praise him. For, as

with all zombies, it is not Shakespeare we are looking at when he comes back. It looks like him, but it is not him. Winter is coming. I am on the lookout for some obsidian. Until the next ice age, at any rate, which may even be pretty soon, let's finally agree with the First Folio and stick to reading him. *Brexit Shakespeare. Alarums. Lights fade. Silence.*

Notes

- 1 A debt to Schoenbaum, doyen of Shakespearean biographers, will be evident throughout.
- 2 Neither of these statements is verifiable, since the only surviving records are of baptism and burial; see below.
- 3 Beckett was born on Good Friday 1906; he died on 22 December 1989 and was buried the day after Christmas.
- 4 Online sources for the preceding, which for the benefit of posterity I declare have not been made up, may be found as following: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36099669>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36122933>; <http://yesterday.uktv.co.uk/shows/shakespeare-the-legacy-with-john-nettles/>; <http://www.mountstuart.com/media-and-news/news/shakespeare-first-folio-discovered/>; <http://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/blog/shakespeares-will-new-interpretation/>; <http://www.staffs.ac.uk/news/staffs-uni-aca-demic-carries-out-first-ever-archaeological-investigation-of-shakespeares-grave-tcm4290279.jsp>.
- 5 "The Quest for the Historical Jesus" is the title given to the translation of Albert Schweitzer's review of the historical criticism of the Jesus-story first published in 1906, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*.
- 6 The source is Plutarch's *Life of Cimon*, 8.8.
- 7 Meres lists eleven plays later found in the First Folio, and one other for which the text is now lost.
- 8 Shakespeare is named in the King's Remembrancer Subsidy Roll on 15 November 1597 as a tax defaulter in Bishopgate ward who failed to pay an assessed 5s. (E. 179/146/354).
- 9 He is named as having illegally held 10 quarters (80 bushels) of malt or corn during a shortage (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Records Office, Misc. Doc. I, 106).
- 10 In the Master of the Wardrobe record, Shakespeare is listed among "Players" who were given scarlet cloth to be worn for the King's Royal Procession through London on 15 May 1604 (The National Archives, Lord Chamberlain's Department, Special Events, L.C. 2/4(5), fo. 78).
- 11 A tripartite lease for the Globe Theatre consisted of an agreement between Sir Nicholas Brend (grounds owner), the Burbage brothers, and five members of the Lord Chamberlain's company, which included Shakespeare. It was described by John Heminges and Henry Condell in their testimony during the 1619 Court of Requests action *Witter v. Heminges and Condell*. In 1615, Thomasina Ostler's court plea has a list of shareholders for the Globe Theatre and Blackfriars property which includes Shakespeare's name.
- 12 "Cunk on Shakespeare"; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07bqgdt>.
- 13 *The Diary of the Rev. John Ward, Vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon, Extending from 1648 to 1679*, ed. Charles Severn (London: H. Coburn, 1839): 183-4. The manuscript is now in Washington D.C., Folger Shakespeare Library MS V.a.292, fo. 150.
- 14 Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Records Office, DR 243/1.
- 15 Henry Walker's Blackfriars Gate-house was purchased on 11 March 1613 by Shakespeare, William Johnson, John Jackson, and John Heminges for £140; British Library, MS Egerton 1787.

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Additional information

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