For twenty years my principal interest in the study of Shakespeare has been twofold. First, to better understand Shakespeare the writer, what sort of man he was and how his mind worked. Second, to resolve and explain certain passages in his texts long believed by scholars inscrutable. It has always been my conviction that these interests were two sides of the same coin. Knowing Shakespeare better, we are better equipped to know his plays. Better knowing his plays brings us closer to knowing Shakespeare.

During my studies at Oxford I perceived among my colleagues rather less appreciation for the keenness of Shakespeare’s intelligence than was, in my opinion, warranted. Even today, the eighteenth-century notion that Shakespeare was an ill-educated country rube who ‘warbled his woodnotes wild’ has its adherents. Indeed, this undervaluing of Shakespeare’s intellect has animated any number of conspiracy theorists – some extremely well organized – who offer the Earl of Oxford or Christopher Marlowe or Francis Bacon or other pretenders – as the ‘actual’ author of Shakespeare’s plays. But when Hemminges and Condell produced their Folio, William Shakespeare had been dead seven years; surely enough dust had settled for the author of The Tempest to reveal him- or herself. Yet no one stepped forward. And the dedicatory poems which precede the plays point to the man from Stratford. In the rantings of Shakespeare’s nay-sayers – and the forces who would co-opt him now to serve their own philosophical or religious agendas – the playwright may still be paying the price for his natural modesty, reticence, and ‘civill demeanor.’

As to Shakespeare’s apparent lack of a college education, it is well to remember that English higher education then as now centered on a program of ‘directed reading’ rather than taught courses. From the thousands of disparate quotations and allusions which litter his plays we can deduce that Shakespeare
was a prodigious reader. Though his course of reading was, perhaps, self-directed, it was colossal – witness his vocabulary: unique words in Shakespeare total more than 17,000 (many of his own invention) – four times the vocabulary of today’s average college graduate and twice as large as John Milton’s. It was not until the publication of Sister Miriam Joseph’s *Shakespeare’s Use of the Arts of Language* in 1947 that scholars recognized how vast was Shakespeare’s grasp of formal rhetoric and how adroit his facility in using it. Only in the latter decades of the twentieth century have scholars grasped the depth of Shakespeare’s readings in ancient history, law, medicine, and other disciplines – including, as the present book exhibits, time and chronometry.

Are we really arrogant enough to believe we are the first generation to recognize these elements in Shakespeare’s plays? Surely there were among his first auditors (and readers) men and women whose breadth of knowledge and understanding rivaled Shakespeare’s? And just as surely, the writer must have believed this. Otherwise, would he not have felt himself an Orpheus playing to an audience who had no ears?

This book suggests that Shakespeare wrote not only for the mass audience, but simultaneously for that stratum of *cognoscenti* whom Gabriel Harvey dubbed ‘the wiser sort.’ And that Shakespeare did so because he was vexed by questions of morality, custom, politics and faith which he determined to interrogate mimetically. In so doing, Shakespeare pursued the tradition of socially relevant, topical, morally challenging drama as old as Aeschylus and as contemporary as today. The creation of literature *demands* that the author write about those subjects which society or government or church commands one *not* to write about. As Stanley Kunitz observed, a writer of literature must condemn himself to lead a ‘counter-life.’

Shakespeare did so. And by exercising his prodigious talents with Joycean ‘silence and cunning’ he thrived by writing for two audiences: one, the great mass of entertainment-seeking playgoers; the other, a wiser sort who were themselves wrestling with those problems of conscience which the age, the government, and the churches imposed upon all thinking persons.

After a thousand years of enslavement, the fifteenth century had seen the human mind begin to revivify. On the continent of Europe – in those benighted precincts where the Inquisition burnt Bruno and Tyndale and condemned Galileo – just as, in other districts, Lutheran iconoclasts defaced a cultural legacy of fifteen centuries – a heavy yoke still burdened human aspiration. But in England – where large-scale violence against this or that religious group was no longer in prospect when William Shakespeare came up from Stratford to London *circa* 1582 – where a unique and novel tolerance of *don’t ask, don’t tell* had taken hold – the environment was fertile for the flowering of dramatic art which vigorously interrogated ideas.
True, by modern standards England was no paradigm of tolerance. But by the standards of Reformation Europe, surely it was. In my view it is precisely because Elizabethan and Jacobean England tolerated both the Catholic and Protestant confessions – thereby compelling their adherents to live cheek-by-jowl and share a common language, customs, traditions – even patriotism – that Shakespeare found the freedom to write as he did. He was tolerated, and he was tolerant. He found the via media, and from that vantage point looked upon and considered all things human. Which is why his genius still speaks so eloquently – and challengingly – to us today.

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