Shakespeare – From the Stable to the Stage

THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT WAS TAKEN FROM

"OUTLINES OF THE LIFE OF SHAKESPEARE"

by J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps
London: Longmans, Green, and Co.
1883

EDITOR'S NOTE:

*The Excerpt below deals with **horses in relation to Shakespeare**. The page numbers are 71 through 80. The images were extracted from an online resource. It was soon discovered that following page 75 came page 79. The first assumption was that the internet resource had accidentally skipped pages 76 – 78. Fortunately, I had an ancient original physical copy of the book with me, which I was hoping to avoid copying from because the 139 year old book is rather delicate. However, to my surprise copying from the ancient book did not look to be necessary! When I looked closely in the original printing of the book, I found that in the book following page 75 was indeed page 79!*

At this point I assumed now that the book publisher (not the internet resource) merely assembled the pages incorrectly. After 79 came 77 and after 77 came 78 followed by another 79. This second page 79 did not contain the same text as the earlier page 79! My assumption that the text would be out of order, and I'd have to re-order the pages, proved to be unfounded. The pages, in this strange order, as far as I can tell, read correctly. Therefore the pages that follow from the actual book, in the order in which they appear, despite the bizarre order of numbering is entirelycorrect, as best as I can tell!

Mark Moran, M.S.

It has been repeatedly observed that the visits of theatrical companies to the poet's native town suffice to explain the history of his connexion with the stage, but it is difficult to understand how this could have been the case. There is no good evidence that a single one of the actors belonged to his neighbourhood, and even if he had casually made the acquaintance of some of the itinerants, it is extremely unlikely that any extent of such intimacy would have secured the admission of an inexperienced person into their ranks. The histrionic art is not learnt in a day, and it was altogether unusual with the sharers to receive into the company men who had not had the advantage of a very early training in the profession. It might, therefore, have been reasonably inferred, even in the absence of tradition, that at this time Shakespeare could only have obtained employment at the theatre in a very subordinate capacity, nor can it be safely assumed that there would have been an opening for him of any kind. The quotations above given seem to indicate that his earlier occupation was something of a still lower character. A traditional anecdote was current about the middle of the last century, according to which it would appear that the great dramatist, if connected in any sort of

manner with the theatre immediately upon his arrival in London, could only have been engaged in a servile capacity, and that there was, in the career of the great poet, an interval which some may consider one of degradation, to be regarded with either incredulity or sorrow. Others may, with more discernment and without reluctance, receive the story as a testimony to his practical wisdom in accepting any kind of honest occupation in preference to starvation or mendicancy, and cheerfully making the best of the circumstances by which he was surrounded. The tale is related by several writers, but perhaps the best version is the one recorded by Dr. Johnson, in 1765, in the following terms,—"in the time of Elizabeth, coaches being yet uncommon and hired coaches not at all in use, those who were too proud, too tender or too idle to walk, went on horseback to any distant business or diversion;—many came on horseback to the play, and when Shakespeare fled to London from the terror of a criminal prosecution, his first expedient was to wait at the door of the play-house, and hold the horses of those that had no servants that they might be ready again after the performance;—in this office he became so conspicuous for his care and readiness, that in a short time every man as he alighted called

for Will Shakespeare, and scarcely any other waiter was trusted with a horse while Will Shakespeare could be had;—this was the first dawn of better fortune;—Shakespeare, finding more horses put into his hand than he could hold, hired boys to wait under his inspection, who, when Will Shakespeare was summoned, were immediately to present themselves, 'I am Shakespeare's boy, sir;'—in time Shakespeare found higher employment, but as long as the practice of riding to the play-house continued the waiters that held the horses retained the appellation of Shakespeare's Boys." Dr. Johnson received this anecdote from Pope, to whom it had been communicated by Rowe; and it appears from a statement in the Lives of the Poets, 1753, that it reached the last-named writer through Betterton and Davenant.

It has been and is the fashion with most biographers to discredit the horse tradition entirely, but that it was originally related by Sir William Davenant, and belongs in some form to the earlier half of the seventeenth century, cannot reasonably be doubted. The circumstance of the anecdote being founded upon the daily practice of numerous gentlemen riding to the theatres, a custom obsolete after the Restoration, is sufficient to establish the

antiquity of the story. In a little volume of epigrams by Sir John Davis, printed at Middleborough in or about the year 1599, a man of inferior position is ridiculed for being constantly on horseback, imitating in that respect persons of higher rank,—"*He rides into the fieldes playes to behold.*" Ben Jonson, in the Induction to Cynthia's Revels, first acted in the year 1600, also alludes to the ordinary use of horses by visitors to theatres (Workes, ed. 1616, p. 184); so does Decker in his Guls Horne-book, 1609; and a later reference to the practice occurs in Brome's Court Beggar, a comedy acted at Drury-Lane Theatre in the year 1632. Many writers have rejected the tradition mainly on the ground that, although it was known to Rowe, he does not allude to it in his Life of Shakespeare, 1709; but there is no improbability in the supposition that the story was not related to him until after the publication of that work, the second edition of which in 1714 is a mere reprint of the first. Other reasons for the omission may be suggested, but even if it be conceded that the anecdote was rejected as suspicious and improbable, that circumstance alone cannot be decisive against the opinion that there may be a particle of truth in it. This is, indeed, all that is contended for. Few

would be disposed to accept the story literally as related by Johnson, but when it is considered that the tradition must be a very early one, that its genealogy is respectable, and that it harmonizes with the general old belief of the great poet having, when first in London, subsisted by "very mean employments," little doubt can fairly be entertained that it has at least in some way or other a foundation in real occurrences. It should also be remembered that horse-stealing was one of the very commonest offences of the period, and one which was probably stimulated by the facility with which delinquents of that class obtained pardons. The safe custody of a horse was a matter of serious import, and a person who had satisfactorily fulfilled such a trust would not be lightly estimated.

It is important to observe that all the early traditions, to which any value can be attached, concur in the belief that Shakespeare did not leave his native town with histrionic intention. Even in the absence of those evidences, although it might not necessarily, still it might, and most likely would, be a fallacy to assume that his dramatic tastes impelled him to undertake an arduous and premeditated journey to encounter the risk of an engagement at a metropolitan

theatre, however powerfully they may have influenced his choice of a profession after he had once arrived in London. For, residing throughout his youth in what may fairly be considered a theatrical neighbourhood, with continual facilities for the cultivation of those tastes, if he had yielded in his boyish days to an impulsive fascination for the stage, it is most likely that he would in some way have joined the profession while its doors were readily accessible through one of the numerous itinerant companies, and before, not after, such inclinations must have been in some measure restrained by the local domestic ties that resulted from his marriage. If he had left Stratford-on-Avon in his early youth, there would be no difficulty in understanding that he became one of the elder player's boys or apprentices, but it is extremely unlikely that, at the age of twenty-one, he would have voluntarily left a wife and three children in Warwickshire for the sake of obtaining a miserable position on the London boards.

It is not, therefore, requisite to assume that Shakespeare rushed in the first instance to the theatre or its neighbourhood in search of employment, and a plausible explanation can be given of the circumstances which led him

to the occupation mentioned in the Davenant anecdote. It appears that James Burbage, the owner of the Theatre, rented premises close by Smithfield in which he "usually kept horses at liverye for sundry persons;" his assistant, or rather manager, of the stable being "a northerne man usually called by the name of Robyn," possibly the same individual whose life was afterwards sacrificed by the unfortunate rise in the price of oats. If the course adopted by Sadler on his arrival in London was, as is most likely, the one also taken by the poet, the latter would at once have proceeded to Smithfield to obtain the best price for the horse which carried him to the metropolis, the further retention of the animal being no doubt beyond his means. He might readily upon this occasion have become acquainted with James Burbage, at a time when he was desirous of obtaining any kind of situation that presented itself, the tradition leading to the inference that he was engaged by the latter to act in some equine capacity. If so, one of his duties would have been the care, during the performances, of the horses of those of Burbage's Smithfield customers who visited the theatre. This enterprising manager was also the landlord of a tavern in Shoreditch, where it is possible that his own horses may have been

kept. He must, at all events, have been just the kind of person to be ready to take an active and intelligent rustic into his service, without being too inquisitive respecting the history of the young man's antecedents.

The transition from the stable and the fields to the interior of the theatre may not have been long deferred, but all the evidences unite in affirming that Shakespeare entered the latter in a very humble capacity. The best authority on this point is one William Castle, who was the parish-clerk of Stratford-on-Avon during nearly all the latter part of the seventeenth century, and used to tell visitors that the poet "was received into the playhouse as a serviture," in other words, an attendant on the performers. A later account is somewhat more explicit. We are informed by Malone, writing in 1780, that there was "a stage tradition that his first office in the theatre was that of prompter's attendant, whose employment it is to give the performers notice to be ready to enter as often as the business of the play requires their appearance on the stage;" nor can the future eminence of Shakespeare be considered to be opposed to the reception of the tradition. "I have known men within my remembrance," observes Downes, in 1710, "arrive to the highest dignities of the

theatre, who made their entrance in the quality of mutes, joint-stools, flower-pots, and tapestry-hangings." The office of prompter's attendant was at least as respectable as any of the occupations which are here enumerated.

No one has recorded the name of the first theatre with which Shakespeare was connected, but if, as is almost certain, he came to London in or soon after the year 1585, there were at the time of his arrival only two in the metropolis, both of them on the north of the Thames. The earliest legitimate theatre on the south was the Rose, the erection of which was contemplated in the year 1587, but it would seem from Henslowe's Diary that the building was not opened till early in 1592. The circus at Paris Garden, though perhaps occasionally used for dramatic performances, was not a regular theatre. Admitting, however, the possibility that companies of players could have hired the latter establishment, there is good reason for concluding that Southwark was not the locality alluded to in the Davenant tradition. The usual mode of transit for those Londoners who desired to attend theatrical performances in Southwark, was certainly by water. The boatmen of the Thames were perpetually asserting at a somewhat later period that their living depended on the con-

tinuance of the Southwark, and the suppression of the London, theatres. Some few of the courtly members of the audience, perhaps for the mere sake of appearances, might occasionally have arrived at their destination on horseback, having taken what would be to most of them the circuitous route over London Bridge; but the large majority would select the more convenient passage by boat. The Southwark audiences mainly consisted of Londoners, for in the then sparsely inhabited condition of Kent and Surrey very few could have arrived from those counties. The number of riders to the Bankside theatres must, therefore, always have been very limited, too much so for the remunerative employment of horse-holders, whose services would be required merely in regard to the still fewer persons who were unattended by their lackeys. The only theatres upon the other side of the Thames, when the poet arrived in London, were the Theatre and the Curtain, for, notwithstanding some apparent testimonies to the contrary, the Blackfriars' Theatre, as will be afterwards shown, was not then in existence. It was to the Theatre or to the Curtain that the satirist alluded when he speaks of the fashionable youth riding "into the fieldes playes to behold." Both these theatres were situated in the parish of