

**NAXOS**
AudioBooks

**NON-
FICTION**

BIOGRAPHY



Hesketh Pearson
**A Life of
Shakespeare**

Read by
Simon Russell Beale

with
**David Timson
Daniel Philpott
Caroline Faber**

NA221612

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| 1 | The birth of William Shakespeare, 22/23 April 1564 | 10:34 |
| 2 | POET AND PATRON: Venus and Adonis (1593) The Sonnets | 13:43 |
| 3 | THE PRENTICE PLAYWRIGHT (1590-93): Love's Labour's Lost | 1:26 |
| 4 | Henry VI Parts 1, 2, 3 • Richard III • The Taming of the Shrew | 4:55 |
| 5 | The Two Gentlemen of Verona • The Comedy of Errors | 7:15 |
| 6 | THE POET PLAYWRIGHT: (1594-1596): A Midsummer Night's Dream | 4:35 |
| 7 | The Merchant of Venice | 2:06 |
| 8 | Richard II | 2:33 |
| 9 | Romeo and Juliet • King John | 8:29 |
| 10 | THE TOP OF HAPPY HOURS (1596-1603): Henry IV Parts 1 & 2 | 7:37 |
| 11 | The Globe is erected in Southwark: Henry V | 6:28 |
| 12 | Much Ado About Nothing • As You Like It | 5:32 |
| 13 | Twelfth Night | 3:51 |

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| 24 | ROMANS AND GREEKS (1599-1603): The Earl of Essex | 3:07 |
| 25 | Julius Caesar | 8:23 |
| 26 | Property purchases in Stratford • Ben Jonson • All's Well That End's Well | 8:23 |
| 27 | Measure for Measure | 1:59 |
| 28 | LIFE'S FITFUL FEVER (1604-1606) | 2:20 |
| 29 | Hamlet | 7:27 |
| 30 | Othello | 4:14 |
| 31 | Macbeth | 4:16 |
| 33 | King Lear | 6:27 |
| 34 | GREEKS AND ROMANS (1606-1608): Timon of Athens • Pericles | 2:51 |
| 35 | Anthony and Cleopatra | 5:05 |
| 36 | Coriolanus | 1:08 |
| 37 | SUNSET (1609-1616): Cymbeline • A Winter's Tale | 6:00 |
| 38 | The Tempest | 2:25 |
| 39 | Settled permanently at Stratford | 12:25 |

Total time: 2:36:57

Hesketh Pearson

A Life of Shakespeare

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EARLY BIOGRAPHIES OF SHAKESPEARE

'Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice.'

Othello's plea for nothing more nor less than the truth to be told when he is spoken of after his death, could be seen as a posthumous plea by Shakespeare to the generations of biographers, who have felt moved to interpret his life and work according to their own characters and persuasions.

The plain truth is, however, that there is merely a handful of known and substantiated facts about Shakespeare on which to build, including the year of his birth 1564 (though not the exact day) and his death in 1616.

Between these hard facts exists a world of surmise and wishful thinking that has produced some very entertaining biographies and some which are plainly ludicrous. 'Extenuation' has been necessary to satisfy the curious.

It does seem extraordinary that there

are so few contemporary references to Shakespeare, or that no one saw fit to ask his surviving family about him before the direct line became extinct in 1670. There are eulogies by his friend Ben Jonson ('Sweet Swan of Avon'); and passing references, by his theatrical colleagues Heminge and Condell in their Preface to the first Folio, to his working practices: 'What he thought, he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers'. These testify to his genius and the high esteem in which he was held by those who knew him well. But that's about all we can safely testify to – opinions of the man and not facts.

All we really have are his will, registers of births, deaths and marriages, a few contracts for land and property deals and the occasional involvement in a legal dispute. There are no letters or anything of

a personal nature at all.

His first tentative biographers, therefore, writing in the mid- to late-seventeenth century were eager to grasp at anything to fill out the meagre facts, and local legends and traditions found their way into print. It was in these early biographies that the story of Shakespeare poaching deer and having to flee Stratford began; or the fiction that his first contact with London theatre was tending the horses for the gentry outside the London playhouses. The brief biographer John Aubrey (1626-97) was responsible for one of the most colourful legends: that Shakespeare's father was a butcher and his son following in the trade: 'when he killed a calf he would do it in a high style, and make a speech.'

These disparate tales were first gathered together into a formal biography in 1709 by Nicholas Rowe (1674-1718). It is traditional in tone and prefaces the first edited edition of the Works. As the eighteenth century progressed, a more scholarly approach was adopted towards Shakespeare's life and the renowned Edmond Malone (1741-1812) was the first to eschew hearsay and legend and interpret the documented facts, few though they be. He set the standard for all the main biographies that followed for the

next hundred years, culminating in Sir Sidney Lee's epic *Life* of 1898, which ran into 14 editions.

'He was not of an age, but for all time,' said Jonson of Shakespeare, and it is a curious fact that Shakespeare's life and character has been interpreted by each succeeding age according to the prevailing literary fashion of the time. Thus in the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, Shakespeare was seen as a rough, even uneducated poet, whose talent was 'natural', and whose works demanded 'improvement' for a more refined age.

For the Romantics the emphasis was on his poetry, his deep sense of feeling, and, like his own King Lear, a battler against the elements. It is not surprising therefore that the most famous actor of the day, Edmund Kean, was described as acting Shakespeare like 'flashes of lightning'.

For the Victorians, Shakespeare was transformed into an English gentleman, full of wise saws, epithets and patriotic odes, the national poet and ultimately, by Edwardian times, the literary representative of Empire.

It was in this era that the writer Hesketh Pearson formulated his view of Shakespeare. He reacted against the stuffy

academic biographies that had proliferated in the nineteenth century. 'I doubt whether Shakespeare himself would have liked the Shakespeareans any more than Christ would have liked Christians' he wrote. Pearson sought out the man behind the literary criticism, and wanted to make him accessible to the 'man in the street'.

Pearson was an actor, and worked briefly for the great actor-manager Herbert Beerbohm Tree, playing minor parts in Tree's epic productions of Shakespeare. His very personal interpretation of Shakespeare's life is from the viewpoint of a man of the theatre. Shakespeare, like Pearson, had been an actor, and the man Pearson creates for us is very much in his own image. He brings an actor's eye to his commentary on the texts, and is an undoubted labour of love. 'Shakespeare filled my world' he writes. When hospitalised with tuberculosis during the First World War, he attributes his survival to the Bard's ability to make him laugh in the Falstaff scenes from Henry IV Part 2. It was a lifelong love affair and if, at times, Pearson gets carried away with his enthusiasm (even at one point telling us the colour of Shakespeare's hair – unverified), we can forgive him, for he creates a stimulating and real personality. Pearson

wrote: 'For me his works alone would have made life worth living; so I am writing about something I love as much as life.' This is the infectious mood of Pearson's 'Life'.

There have been many popular biographies of Shakespeare written since Pearson's was published in 1949, but few that make the reader (or listener) want to know more of Shakespeare and his plays.

Notes by David Timson



Simon Russell Beale is one of Britain's leading classical actors. He won Best Actor in the Evening Standard Awards for his individual interpretation of *Hamlet*, and his Ariel in *The Tempest* was marked by an Olivier Award. Among his many other starring roles in London theatre was *Candide* and *Mosca* in *Volpone*. He has a busy career in TV and film too, with appearances in Branagh's production of *Hamlet* and in the outstanding TV dramatization of *Persuasion*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has also recorded *The Life of Oscar Wilde* and *Great Speeches and Soliloquies* of Shakespeare.



David Timson has performed in modern and classic plays across the country and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode* and *The Seagull*. He has appeared on TV in *Nelson's Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*, and in the film *The Russia House*. A familiar and versatile audio and radio voice, he reads *The Middle Way – The Story of Buddhism*, and performs in *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Naxos AudioBooks. He has directed *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, *Henry V* and *Richard III* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Daniel Philpott trained at LAMDA and, after success in the prestigious Carleton Hobbs Award for Radio Drama, recorded for BBC Radio 4. His theatre work includes various productions on the London fringe. For Naxos AudioBooks he has also recorded *Frankenstein*, *Famous People in History II* and *Dracula*.



Caroline Faber trained at Webber Douglas. On leaving, she made an immediate impact with performances at the Royal National Theatre, Watford Palace and other theatres in the UK. Her television appearances include *Midsomer Murders* and *Comedy Nation*.

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue

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| DOWLAND LUTE SONGS Steven Rickards, counter tenor, Dorothy Linell, lute | 8.553381 |
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The music was programmed by Nicolas Soames

Cover picture: William Shakespeare.
Courtesy: National Portrait Gallery.

Hesketh Pearson

A Life of Shakespeare

Read by **Simon Russell Beale**

with **David Timson • Daniel Philpott • Caroline Faber**

The plays of William Shakespeare, and his famous lines, are part of the national consciousness. There may be few solid facts about Shakespeare the man, and yet not only do we want to know all about him – we feel, through his plays, we do. In this classic biography, Hesketh Pearson puts his skills as an actor and biographer to lively use, looking at the man as much through his work – the great plays and poems – as through the extant facts. Having heard this affectionate account, you will go back to the plays with more understanding and enjoyment.

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Abridged by David Timson
Produced by Nicolas Soames
Edited by Sarah Butcher, SFS
Recorded by Norman Goodman, Motivation Sound

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Total time
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