

CHAPTER ONE

SHAKESPEARE LIVES!

IN THE WINTER of 1795, a poorly educated nineteen-year-old clerk named William-Henry Ireland stood petrified in his family's London study as two men in powdered wigs interrogated him. The visiting dignitaries, Samuel Parr and Joseph Warton, were among England's most esteemed men of letters. They had hurried to the Ireland home to inspect a tattered piece of paper the boy claimed to have found while rummaging in an old trunk.

"I confess I had never before felt so much terror," the young man wrote several years later, "and would almost have bartered my life to have evaded the meeting." He had no idea that the document he'd presented to his father after dinner one night, and the others that followed in succeeding days and weeks, would soon make him and his father the talk of London. He certainly never dreamed he was about to cause an uproar in the English literary world.

William-Henry Ireland was unaccustomed to attention. He was a quiet, unassuming boy who passed his time as an unpaid apprentice to a lawyer friend of the family. His father, Samuel, was a pompous, social-climbing writer, engraver, and collector of antiquities. To call on the Irelands at their

comfortable home on the edge of London's theater district was to step inside Samuel Ireland's peculiar cabinet of curiosities. Here and there were paintings by Hogarth and Van Dyck, rare sixteenth-century books, a piece of a mummy's shroud, a Tahitian carpet made of bark, and a leather jacket worn by Puritan ruler Oliver Cromwell.

Samuel's latest and most remarkable acquisition, however, was the sheet of paper his son had ceremoniously handed him a month earlier. Worn at the edges and heavily creased, the paper was inscribed with florid handwriting in faded ink. Dated two centuries earlier, the document was an avowal of religious faith. On it, the writer declared himself "most solemnly" a Protestant. At the bottom was a signature with embellished capitals: "Wm Shakspeare."

It was an astonishing discovery. William Shakespeare, who had died in relative obscurity in 1616, had lately risen in popular esteem to become England's matchless literary genius. Will of Stratford was now a secular god: the immortal Bard! Yet aside from a few signatures, nothing written in Shakespeare's hand—not a letter, not so much as a couplet—had ever been found. If the yellowed note William-Henry Ireland had discovered was genuine, it was the literary equivalent of the Crown Jewels.

Samuel Ireland was ecstatic to have laid his hands on so precious an artifact. For years, the collector had lusted after Shakespeare memorabilia. He had often said, his son recalled, "that he would willingly give half his library to become possessed even of his signature alone." Providence had evidently delivered.

Huddled in the lamp-lit study, the Irelands' two learned visitors questioned the boy closely. In particular, they were curious about the trunk where he had found the note.

William-Henry's replies were polite but vague. He said the trunk was at the estate of a wealthy and reclusive acquaintance, where he had been sifting through old records. The gentleman, professing no interest in arcane manuscripts, had told him to help himself to any old papers he found. William-Henry couldn't be more specific than that, he explained to his inquisitors; the mysterious gentleman had demanded that his name be kept secret.

The boy tried to keep his voice calm and his gaze steady as he spoke. To the two scholars frowning at him, his story must have sounded like poppy-cock. As a schoolboy, William-Henry had endured more than a few canings for stumbling over a recitation. He was worried in particular about Dr. Parr, a squat, irascible man with bristling eyebrows who was known as a boxing enthusiast. At Harrow, where he had taught for many years, Parr had viewed himself as benevolent because he never flogged a pupil twice in a single lesson. Old Dr. Warton was a more benign presence, but he was an intimidating figure all the same. A renowned literary critic and a poet, Warton was said to have been one of the few men able to hold his own in arguments with the late Samuel Johnson, one of eighteenth-century England's most disputatious intellectuals.

But Warton and Parr were literary men at heart, not prosecuting attorneys. They seemed to accept William-Henry's story. In fact, like many in the English literary world, the pair had been waiting impatiently for just such a find—especially one proving that William Shakespeare was a steadfast Protestant like good Queen Bess, not a traitorous papist as rumors had alleged.

Now, as the two scholars bent over the table in the Irelands' study, examining the sheet of faded script like entomologists, William-Henry struggled to maintain an air of nonchalance. His father, by contrast, was confident, almost smug. Indeed, Samuel Ireland was perhaps more credulous than a collector ought to be. Seated in his accustomed place in his book-filled lair as he awaited his guests' verdict, he took comfort in knowing that the carved oak chair he occupied was the very one in which young Will Shakespeare had held Anne Hathaway on his lap—or so he'd been told by the Stratford man who'd sold him the piece two years earlier.

Dr. Warton at last set down the document and addressed his host with the gravity of a pilgrim before a sacred relic. "Sir, we have very fine passages in our church service, and our litany abounds with beauties, but here, sir, here is a man who has distanced us all!" *Here is a man.* To Samuel Ireland and his two guests, the Bard was suddenly a living presence in the room, having somehow materialized in Georgian London as eloquent as ever.

Standing quietly in a corner, William-Henry, too, was overwhelmed with a sense of miraculous possibility, but he wasn't thinking about William Shakespeare. Excusing himself, the boy withdrew to a small back dining room. A moment before, he had been almost too frightened to move. Now he was dizzy with elation.

"I reclined myself against the window frame, still ruminating on the words I had heard," he wrote in his 1805 memoirs, "fired with the idea of possessing genius to which I had never aspired."

Until that moment, William-Henry Ireland had never seriously considered that his ability as a writer might bring him success in life. He had certainly never imagined sharing a pedestal with Shakespeare. Now, unexpectedly, a world of possibilities had opened up—possibilities beyond the reach of any honest writer. What had started as a ploy, born of frustration, to win the respect of his chilly, Shakespeare-worshipping father, promised much more. The boy realized it was in his power not only to earn renown for himself and his father but also to reshape the reputation of England's greatest writer. And someday, perhaps, he might dazzle the world as an author in his own right.

In a sustained burst of manic energy in the months to follow, William-Henry Ireland would produce a torrent of Shakespearean fabrications: letters, deeds, poetry, drawings, and, most daringly of all, an original full-length play longer than almost any of Shakespeare's known works. A parade of notables—dukes, earls, a bishop, the poet laureate—would pay visits to the Irelands' home during 1795 as though to a holy shrine. The Ireland forgeries were hastily done and forensically implausible, but most of the people who inspected them were blind to their flaws. The newly discovered play, declared Francis Webb, secretary of the College of Heralds, was quite obviously the work of William Shakespeare. "It either comes from his pen," he wrote, "or from Heaven."

The improbable story of the Bard's teenage double—the most audacious literary forger in history—would never have unfolded had Shakespeare not recently become a god, for what is a god without holy relics? In Shakespeare's case, unfortunately, there were almost no tangible traces left from his time

on earth. His life and the things that inspired him were largely a mystery. This was intolerable to his late-eighteenth-century worshippers. The news that Shakespeare's manuscripts had finally been discovered was easier to accept than the disheartening reality that none of them ever had and likely never would. People ached to see firsthand the poetry that had flowed so magically from the Bard's quill. Because the Ireland forgeries seemed to bring England's greatest literary hero within reach at last, his admirers let themselves be fooled.

As a result, much of England in 1795 would fail to notice that a naïve and reckless nineteen-year-old was impersonating the nation's greatest writer. This unremarkable teenager's first attempt at playwriting would be hailed as Shakespeare's lost masterpiece, and on April 2, 1796, the most celebrated actors of the day would recite his lines before a packed house at London's prestigious Theatre Royal at Drury Lane. William-Henry Ireland's name would be forever linked to that of William Shakespeare.



WHEN HIS EARLY forgeries transfixed much of London's intelligentsia, William-Henry Ireland was as astonished as anyone. He hadn't quite realized how desperately Englishmen yearned to see and hold a page inscribed in Shakespeare's hand. He had begun producing forgeries with the goal of pleasing just one person, his father. In this the boy succeeded spectacularly.

"It is impossible for me to express the pleasure you have given me," the collector had told his son in December 1794. That evening, William-Henry had presented his father with the first document signed with Shakespeare's scrawl at the bottom. He was thrilled to hear his father's words, even if they conveyed a collector's gratitude more than a father's affection.

In his nineteen years, William-Henry had almost never heard words of praise from his father. The boy was a watchful, solitary lad with unruly dark hair and a thin frame. He made little impression on the people he met. He seemed consigned to the shadow of his voluble, extroverted father, whom he referred to as Mr. Ireland. Even in the best of times, Samuel Ireland was an overbearing presence in his son's life.

Nearly forty years after his forgeries, William-Henry could vividly recall a family excursion on the Thames when he was a boy. As the boat had sailed slowly upstream past Alexander Pope's villa at Twickenham, Samuel had held forth on the late poet's glittering reputation—though he would have been hard-pressed to recite any of his verses. The collector styled himself an intellectual, despite a lack of education. Perhaps to compensate, he favored formal turns of phrase in his writing as well as his conversation. Patting his son's head, he had remarked, "I fear you will never shine such a star in the hemisphere of literary fame." It was unlikely anyone's child would grow up to rival Alexander Pope, of course, but for a parent to make such an off-hand comment to a child showed a tactlessness verging on cruelty.

Along with his father, William-Henry lived with his older sisters, Anna Maria and Jane, and the family housekeeper, a Mrs. Freeman. There was no Mrs. Ireland, and no one spoke of her; Samuel had presumably become a widower when the children were young. An older son, Samuel Jr., had died in early childhood. Samuel Sr. had taken to calling his surviving son Sam, as though it were Samuel Jr. who had survived and William-Henry who had vanished. It was not unheard of at the time for parents to do this, but it seemed to underscore the obvious fact that William-Henry was a disappointment to his father.

Indeed, in the latter's eyes, the boy was lazy and dull-witted, if not a hopeless dunce. Samuel on occasion hinted that William-Henry was not his natural offspring, suggesting that he would one day reveal a shocking secret. He never did, but William-Henry understandably came to have doubts about his parentage.

Samuel's one true love was Shakespeare. "Four days, at least, out of seven," William-Henry wrote forty years later, "the beauties of our divine dramatist became his theme of conversation after dinner; while in the evening, still further to impress the subject upon the minds of myself and sisters, certain plays were selected, and a part allotted to each, in order that we might read aloud."

Reading aloud was a well-practiced skill in Georgian England, one that was important enough to be taught in school. The Irelands read Shakespeare aloud so often that the Bard was almost a member of the household. Ap-

preciative of the sound of his own voice, Samuel would reserve the starring role for himself. Shakespeare's already archaic language was thus a familiar part of William-Henry's childhood. He may not have learned any of the major roles by heart, but the general sound and syntax of Elizabethan verse was etched in his mind.

Often Samuel would hold forth by himself, reading from a play of his choice, usually a tragedy or a history, "dwelling with enthusiasm on such passages as most peculiarly struck his fancy," William-Henry wrote. After his recitation, Samuel would expound at length on the Bard's unsurpassed genius. "At such periods, there was no divine attribute which Shakspeare did not possess, in Mr. Ireland's estimation: in short, the Bard of Avon was a god among men."

When Samuel spoke of Shakespeare, the boy would listen without saying a word. Samuel may well have thought he was too dense to appreciate great literature, but William-Henry was paying rapt attention to his father's extravagant praises of the poet. Soon enough, he adopted them as his own.

