

Performing Identity and Historical Legacy: Germaine Greer's Reinterpretation of *Shakespeare's Wife*

Afsana Kabir Preety¹, Rifat Afrin Ritu² ✉

¹ Lecturer, English Discipline, Khulna University, Khulna, Bangladesh

² Lecturer, Department of English, Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Khulna, Bangladesh

Article Info

Article History:

Received

16 September 2026

Approved

30 September 2026

Published

10 October 2026

Keywords: Ann Hathaway, feminist historiography, gender performativity, new historicism, patriarchal narrative

Abstract

For centuries, Ann Hathaway has been a marginal figure in the Shakespearean world, stereotyped as the undesirable wife who trapped a genius. Germaine Greer's *Shakespeare's Wife* (2008) challenges this narrative, but a gap remains in analyzing its approach through a robust theoretical framework that can deconstruct the mechanisms of this historical erasure. This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Greer's work, framed by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism. It aims to demonstrate how Greer reinstates Ann's legacy by exposing the patriarchal power structures that shaped and silenced her. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals that Ann Hathaway meticulously performed the socially mandated roles of chaste maiden, economic breadwinner, and devoted nurse. Her successful management of the household and children in Shakespeare's absence was a vital performance of economic agency. However, these essential contributions were systematically devalued and erased by the very patriarchal system that demanded them, concluding in her symbolic dispossession in Shakespeare's will. With that note, the study concludes that Greer's work is a potent exercise in feminist historiography, demonstrating that Ann's historical neglect was not a failure of her performance but a function of a power system that renders women's labor invisible. *Shakespeare's Wife* thus provides a critical paradigm for re-evaluating the wives of great men, arguing that historical silence is an active concept of patriarchy.

© Copyright 2026

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's Wife is a part-historical and part-biographical work by Australian writer Germaine Greer (2008). It is a study that claims Shakespeare's wife, Ann Hathaway's rightful place in history. Greer has woven facts and historical data on Elizabethan women along with the biography of Ann Hathaway or Ann Shakespeare. Ann had a struggling life, and she experienced utter helplessness after her marriage to William Shakespeare. Generally, women are burdened with

social norms in such a way that their real identities are often erased. Ann Hathaway, as Greer shows, was caught in a dire situation about which she could not do anything. Indeed, little was known about the world-renowned playwright's wife before the publication of Greer's book, which reveals how women are treated in a patriarchal society.

Germaine Greer's *Shakespeare's Wife* (2008) represents a significant intervention in both Shakespearean biography and feminist historiography. By reconstructing the life of Ann

✉ Corresponding author:

Email: retuafreen@gmail.com

p-ISSN: 2252-6323

e-ISSN: 2721-4540

Hathaway from the scant historical record, Greer challenges a centuries-old consensus that has painted her as an undesirable, even burdensome, figure in William Shakespeare's life. This scholarly endeavor raises a critical research problem: how have patriarchal narratives systematically erased the agency and contributions of women like Hathaway, and what methodologies can effectively recuperate their historical legacies? This paper addresses this gap by arguing that Greer's work successfully reclaims Ann's identity by exposing the dual process of gender performativity and historical construction that condemned her to a "wife-shaped void" (Greer, 2008, p. 4).

There are names that Greer mentions, for instance—Socrates' wife Xanthippe, Bacon's wife Alice Barnham, Milton's wife Mary Powell, and Dante's wife Gemma Donati.

The prevailing historical narrative, largely constructed by "bardolaters," casts Ann Hathaway as an older, illiterate seductress who trapped a young genius into a loveless marriage, thus justifying Shakespeare's long absence in London and his perceived neglect in his will (Roiphe, 2008; Shapiro, 2008). Greer systematically dismantles this caricature, replacing it with a portrait of a competent, resilient woman who managed her husband's household and children for decades in his absence. However, while Greer's book has been reviewed from a general feminist perspective, a thorough analysis through the combined lens of Judith Butler's (1993) gender performativity and Stephen Greenblatt's (1989) New Historicism remains underexplored.

Consequently, this study has two primary objectives: first, to analyze how Ann Hathaway's identity was performatively constituted and disciplined by the regulatory norms of Elizabethan patriarchy; and second, to examine the historicity of Greer's text itself, exploring how it re-embeds Ann within the specific social, economic, and material conditions of her time. By applying these theoretical frameworks, this paper will demonstrate that Ann's story is not merely a biographical correction but a potent case study in how women's lives are shaped by, and often lost to, the power structures that record history.

Greer's (2008) book, *Shakespeare's Wife*, is comparatively a recent work originally published in 2007, and not much work has been done on it. Critics have examined and interpreted *Shakespeare's Wife* mostly from a feminist perspective. Not many scholars have scrutinized it through the lens of gender performativity or new historicism. This paper aims to explore how women fulfill their duties due to their social and economic status and the reinforcement of regulatory norms. Moreover, it will analyze the historicity of *Shakespeare's Wife* so that Ann Shakespeare's life and a particular time in history can come to light. Moreover, it is important to discuss what the scholars think of Ann Hathaway and her contribution. A review of other papers will help to develop the concept of the paper.

John J. Ross says in "Shakespeare's Chancere: Did the Bard Have Syphilis?" that "Shakespeare's relationship with his wife Anne Hathaway was probably not close. They married when he was 18 years of age, and she was 26 years old and pregnant. He lived in London, whereas Anne stayed in Stratford. Infamously, he bequeathed her only the 'second-best bed'." (p.400)

Katie Roiphe (2008), in her article titled "Reclaiming the Shrew", says,

We have almost no solid facts about Mrs. Shakespeare's life, and we know almost nothing about Shakespeare's marriage. We know that the playwright could have brought his wife to live with him in London and did not, though we don't know how often he made the three-day trip back to Stratford. We know that in his will, he left his wife only his "second-best bed". (p.30)

Roiphe asserts that critics were almost unaware of the issues regarding Shakespeare's family life and marriage before the publication of Greer's work. It is usually difficult to locate the whereabouts of the life of a writer like Shakespeare, who has not revealed himself in his works. Still, "From this slender evidence," as Roiphe says, "along with liberal and dubious readings of the plays and sonnets, scholars have created a robust portrait of Shakespeare's unhappy domestic life — a "marriage of evil auspices," as one scholar put it". Scholars have injected their fantasies and imagination into Shakespeare and Ann Shakespeare's relationship because of a lack of information. Greer takes the bold attempt to delve

into the untold matters. The matter that Roiphe raises is pointed out by many writers, historians, and critics as well. But the unknown fact that is revealed in *Shakespeare's Wife* is that when Shakespeare was far from his family and the responsibilities he had, it was Ann Hathaway who struggled alone and maintained everything.

Roiphe (2008) adds, "The prevailing image of Ann Hathaway is that of an illiterate seductress who beguiled the young Shakespeare, conceived a child, and ensnared him in a loveless union". Ann Hathaway was indeed introduced as a "seductress" and "illiterate" woman to the world. But that is an identity imposed by the bardolaters and Shakespeare's biographers, who did not even meet Ann Hathaway. In this regard, Marilyn Yalom (2009) in her paper "The Second-Best Bed and Other Conundrums" says, "we simply do not know for sure whether Ann could or could not read. Greer asserts that Ann's daughter, 'ten-year-old Susannah could both read and write, which raises the question of whether she was taught by her mother' (p.30). Greer has given evidence of Ann's being literate and deserving of a better husband, which Roiphe also agrees with. Unfortunately, Shakespeare belonged to a patriarchal society where women were always segregated from the men's world with the help of the regulatory norms. Shakespeare might have wanted to keep his personal life private, but that attempt gave access to society to accuse Ann Hathaway.

Laura Shapiro (2008) in "Greer Tames the Shrew: A Feminist Icon Rescues the Shakespeare's' Marriage" says, "Because of the supposedly shotgun marriage, biographers have asserted that young Shakespeare was seduced by an ugly old maid and dragged to the altar, and that he fled for London because the marriage made him miserable." Ann Hathaway was surely represented as a seductress, "an ugly" and "old maid" but this representation is nothing but an utter misconception of the flatterers of Shakespeare. Greer says that "the typical Elizabethan seducer was a boy" (p.61). Moreover, Greer asserts that Shakespeare was not a man of many prospects that Ann had to seduce him. Just a "shotgun wedding" cannot make a woman "ugly" and "seductress". The fact is that Shakespeare himself created a void in others' psyches regarding his wife by keeping her aloof from his extolled world. Indeed, as

Shakespeare never gave any exposure to Ann Shakespeare, it worked as evidence for the biographers and bardolaters to address her in the above-mentioned manner. As a result, scholars consumed the information like a delicious fruit. Richard E Peterso in "Did Joyce Write Hamlet" says, "Those premises, craftily arranged by Stephen, lead to the portrait or study of Ann Hathaway as the seductress of young Shakespeare, the older woman ('a boldfaced Stratford wench') who chose 'the boy Adonis' for a tumble in a cornfield (L?9.258-60)" (p.366). This is utterly disgraceful for a lady to face this amount of shame and humiliation.

Charles Nicholl (2007) in "Married to the Myth" praises "Greer's spirited attempt to defend Ann Hathaway". Nicholl mentions that it is hard to deny that "Shakespeare's marriage has been viewed negatively" because of the issues like "the age difference", "the shotgun wedding", "the long months apart while Shakespeare worked in London" etc. which have made a clear impression that "Shakespeare entered the marriage unwillingly" and it was "loveless". He quotes from Greer that, "Ann has left a wife-shaped void in the biography of William Shakespeare, which later bardolaters filled up with their speculation, most of which do neither them nor their hero any credit (Nicholl). This is actually the problem of patriarchal society. The discrimination of sex and gender makes the discrimination in power practice where one sex is ruled by the other and women are considered as the weaker sex. Ann Hathaway performed her part properly, yet she became a failure as it has failed to impress the men's world.

Scheil and Holderness (2009) say in *Critical Survey*, "Katherine Scheil offers a paradigm for how Hathaway's life has been imagined along the lines of domesticity and sexuality, inspired by the problematic 'second best bed' phrase from Shakespeare's will" (p.4). This phrase is used by different historicists. A bed is not just a piece of furniture rather it has sexual and domestic implications when speaking about a married couple. In "The Second Best Bed and the Legacy of Anne Hathaway" Katherine Scheil says, "As an object of material domesticity as well as a reminder of sexual activity, the 'second best bed' embodies both the sexual and domestic sides of this famous wife, linking her physically to Shakespeare and to the domestic life that likely kept her at Stratford for the

duration of her life” (p.59). She has pointed the fact that this “second best bed” defines Ann Shakespeare’s domestic life and that she was a wife who has spent her life performing her duties regarding her home and family. It may also indicate Ann Hathaway’s capacity to fulfil her husband’s physical needs. Another point that Scheil raises is also noticeable that Ann remained in Stratford for the rest of her life. Shakespeare left for London and spent his life there and Ann remained in Stratford alone with all the responsibility. Shakespeare might have neglected his duties towards his family but Ann took care of everything. But the society Ann belonged to blamed her as Scheil says, “She has frequently been cast as an aggressively lusty woman (perhaps because of their eight-year age difference) who attracted Shakespeare physically” (p.65).

Scheil (2009) asserts that “The material circumstances of history (like beds and wills) affect the later reconstruction of lives” (p.69). Because of the cultural materialization and normative reiteration, wives like Ann Shakespeare did not get their recognition and respect in history. In “Mrs. Shakespeare: Anne Hathaway” J. M. Pressley says, “The hard facts of Anne Hathaway’s life can be summed up in a paragraph”. It is truly noticeable how Ann Hathaway has been portrayed in a narrow space in Shakespeare’s life. Pressley later claims that, to Greer Ann “is a heroin systematically wronged by history”. Greer does not say things like these very much straight about Ann rather she draws the picture with references, instances and possibilities to create a space for the reader to decide. Pressley talks about Shakespeare’s will that “The only mention Shakespeare himself actually makes of Anne is in his last will and testament. It is but a single line: ‘I give unto my wife my second-best bed with the furniture’”. Pressley also mentions that Shakespeare never mentions Ann Shakespeare anywhere except the will. There lies the mystery and misery of Ann’s life. Pressley finely points it out at the end of the article saying “it is impossible to determine any real sense of Shakespeare’s relationship with Anne from the scant evidence available to us today”.

The reviews emphasize that Ann did not get the place in the celebrated world of Shakespeare that she was worthy of. The passing of time has marred Ann Hathaway’s true identity for the world. Almost all of the scholars have agreed to the point that Shakespeare’s admirers have devalued Ann Hathaway. But most of the scholars have not pointed out that the bardolaters have got the scope for criticizing Ann because of Shakespeare. Ann Hathaway’s life became so materialized by the regulatory norms that she never raised her voice against the oppression she went through. This would be the focus of this research.

While these reviews effectively summarize Greer’s arguments and the historical controversies, they largely stop short of a sustained theoretical analysis. They acknowledge the patriarchal bias in the historical record but do not systematically employ theories of performativity to explain how Ann’s identity was constructed, nor do they fully leverage New Historicism to connect her personal story to the broader power dynamics of Elizabethan England. This paper builds upon this foundation by synthesizing these critical insights and applying a consistent theoretical framework to analyze the mechanisms of Ann’s erasure and Greer’s method of recovery, thereby moving beyond description to a more rigorous analytical critique. By applying the mentioned theoretical frameworks, this paper will demonstrate that Ann’s story is not merely a biographical correction but a potent case study in how women’s lives are shaped by, and often lost to, the power structures that record history.

METHODS

This research is based on a literary piece; hence content analysis method has been used to collect information. This study is a qualitative research. The primary source of data is Germaine Greer’s *Shakespeare’s Wife* and the secondary sources of data are books, journals, articles, reviews, etc. that are associated with the research topic. Two theories have been incorporated to establish the arguments. Stephan Greenblatt’s (1989) idea of new historicism is used to analyse the historical records and Judith Butler’s (1993) idea of gender performativity helps to establish the Ann Hathaway’s position.

This paper explains Stephan Greenblatt's (1989) idea of new historicism and Judith Butler's (1993) idea of gender performativity as two distinct theories for the research. Also, it has tried to establish a relation between the theories and connect that to Ann Hathaway's condition in Greer's *Shakespeare's Wife* to substantiate the claim. Together, they provide a robust framework for analyzing both the content of Greer's biography and the historical conditions it seeks to represent.

The emergence of new historicism is often considered a threat in the literary world. Because it violates "the doctrine of noninterference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people's practical lives" (Veesser, 1989, p. ix). According to H. Aram Veesser (1989), new historicism lends the opportunity for scholars "to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics" (p. ix). Stephan Greenblatt (2005) says in the book *The Greenblatt Reader*, "One of the peculiar characteristics of 'new historicism' in literary studies is precisely how unresolved and, in some ways, disingenuous it has been – I have been – about the relation to literary theory" (p.1). In short, new historicism is related to history and the relation of a literary work with history, where the scope of questioning politics, power, ideology, society, etc., affects people's personal lives. According to the definitions, it can be said that Greer's (2008) *Shakespeare's Wife*, as a historical writing, relates the cultural, social, and ideological facts of the Elizabethan period. For this study, New Historicism provides the tools to examine *Shakespeare's Wife* not as a neutral recovery of facts, but as a text that actively engages with the power structures of the Elizabethan era. It allows us to investigate how Greer re-contextualizes Ann Hathaway within the material practices—such as property laws, inheritance customs, and domestic economies—that shaped her existence. This lens reveals the historicity of Greer's work, showing how she illuminates the "lived textures" of the past that traditional histories have overlooked (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2002).

On the other hand, Butler (1993) says that because of the difference in bodies, the "domain of

power" is constituted. This power is practiced through reiteration. Butler takes the help of Foucault's idea of "repression" to establish the idea that "'repression' operates as a modality of productive power" (p.22). This is how women become subjects to the social norms and laws in the name of protection. They are always to be submissive to men, and gender is "always a sign of subordination" for them (p.13). Men are considered the strongest and women the weakest. This is the result of gender identity and distribution of power discourse, "where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic culture conventions" (p.40). This theory is crucial for understanding Ann Hathaway's plight. Her identity as a "wife" was not a natural given but a role she was compelled to perform according to stringent social scripts. Her perceived failure or success in this performance was judged by a patriarchal society that ultimately devalued her contributions. By applying this lens, we can analyze how Ann's actions—managing the household, raising the children, nursing her dying husband—were not merely duties but performative acts that constituted her social identity, an identity that was nevertheless rendered invisible by the very power structures that demanded its performance.

New Historicism provides the macro-level context of Elizabethan power structures, while gender performativity offers a micro-level analysis of how those structures were enacted and embodied. This combined approach allows for a comprehensive examination of how Greer's text excavates and reinterprets the performative and historical forces that shaped, and subsequently erased, Ann Hathaway. At this point, this study opens a gateway for future scholars to elaborate on it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, we have tried to theorize gender performativity and new historicism and showed how female gender is materialized through normative reiteration over time. Female performance thus changes with time. New historicism and gender performativity can be used to relate the role and the performance of women of a particular time while talking about that particular time, when a literary text was written, as

well as its historicity. In this chapter, we shall try to analyse Greer's (2008) *Shakespeare's Wife* to explore its historicity and to show how the gender roles had been materialized for women in general and Ann Shakespeare in particular.

Ann the Maid

Germaine Greer (2008) in *Shakespeare's Wife* has tried to represent Ann Hathaway's life. This part of the study focuses on how the performance of being an ignorant country woman was forced upon Ann by Shakespeare's biographers trying to extend the gap between the bard and his wife. From the very beginning of the book, Greer has tried to vindicate Ann Hathaway and her position. Ann's contribution in Shakespeare's life is remarkable as per Greer's observation. Greer mentions that Ann Hathaway's family was "well established in the district for generation" (p.14). Their house was a farmhouse of twelve rooms that is known as "Ann Hathaway Cottage" now. And noticeably, "Ann had exactly the same cash portion as Will's mother when she married John Shakespeare" (p.17). So, Ann was more solvent than Shakespeare because Shakespeare had only his grammar school education when he married Ann. This fact clarifies that there should not be any misconception, if there is any, that Ann was after Shakespeare's money.

Another important fact is that John Shakespeare was in glove-making business and it was a "smelly, messy business" (Greer, 2008, p.32). After marrying Mary, Mary Shakespeare encouraged him to leave the glove-making business to start wool trade. But soon after wool trade went under the government's control and punishment was declared for the traders who were trying to evade government regulation. After few years, in October 1576 'Privy Council' testified all the wool brokers and suspended wool deals and fined with post bond of £100 to illegal traders. In this situation, John Shakespeare's business fell apart. Greer says that he could be saved if Mary Shakespeare could handle his glove-making business for a while. Greer points that almost all the scholars assumed that "in the late sixteen century wives played no part in the family business. An Elizabethan wife was first and foremost a helpmeet" (Greer, 2008, p.35). But Greer says that there were many women who had to run the family business when their husbands were away. At this

time Will, as Greer calls Shakespeare in this book, presumably stayed at school till he was fifteen. After that, another accident cost John Shakespeare his property along with the property Mary Shakespeare had because John Shakespeare was not very careful in borrowing and lending. In this situation, when Mary was concerned and she was thinking about what property to offer her sons to find their match as they lost almost everything, Shakespeare "pre-empted her by impregnating Ann Hathaway and marrying her forthwith" (Greer, 2008, p.40). Maura Stanton writes a beautiful poem, "Anne Hathaway's Cottage", where she gives the reference to Ann Hathaway and her cottage that she left after marrying Shakespeare. Ann Hathaway was pregnant and was married to Shakespeare when Shakespeare had nothing of his own and his family was financially exhausted. Ann does not seem to have a reason to seduce Shakespeare in these circumstances. Shakespeare was not even famous back then. Hence, the claim that Ann Hathaway is a "seductress" is pointless.

To clarify this fact of seducing it is important to talk about Ann Hathaway's look, appearance and position. In the third chapter of the book, Greer states that as a fatherless girl, "Ann was unlike many young women of her age not only in being unmarried, but also in being to some extent free and independent" (p.42). All the unmarried women, over the age of twenty-one, were independent because they could earn money and spend it according to their will and they could marry anyone without parents' consent. But the married women could not earn money. Ann had her own property so she was not an idle woman as she had to take care of that as Greer (2008) claims that Ann did not pass her life in "idleness" as a husbandman's daughter (p.43). Along with property, Ann might have one or more cows because the usual drink of the family was whey that comes from milk by separating curd. About women's job, Greer states that women handled the side of milking animals and preparing the milk products and also girls were placed out like boys to serve at other's farms. Considering the situation, Greer claims that Ann might have been placed in service when she was young as she never lived at their house in Shottery. It is also known that women were supposed to do one very heavy task and that was laundry. So, Ann was quite busy with her life. That is perhaps the

reason for Greer to say, "It is only in the halcyon imagination of bardolaters that Ann could have sat around for twenty-six years waiting for a boy to set her cap at" (p.44).

Another prevailing controversy about Ann Hathaway is whether she could read or write. Greer (2008) directly states, "scholars desirous of separating Shakespeare from his pesky wife have taken for granted that all her life she could neither read nor write, they want her, need her to have had no inkling of the magnitude of her husband's achievement" (p.51). Here Greer argues about Greenblatt's statement that Shakespeare's wife could not read and her husband's letters were read by the neighbour. Greer claims that Ann's brother and her daughter could read and write, and Shakespeare's brothers were also literate. So, she needed not to go to some stranger to know what is written in the letters. In fact, early modern letters were written in a fashion that those could be read aloud and no private matters were supposed to be mentioned in a letter. Another fact is that Ann belonged to a true Protestant family and they used to read their bible regularly. It indicates that Ann could also read at least, if not write.

In the book, Greer (2008) also talks about Shakespeare and his writing. Shakespeare's sonnet no.145 is thought to be written for Ann Hathaway. In the sonnet, "hate away" is interpreted as "Hathaway" by the Shakespearean cryptologists. So, if it is written for Ann Hathaway as Greer connects it, then as described in the sonnet by William Shakespeare, "Ann Shakespeare's heart was merciful, her tongue ever sweet, and her judgement gentle" (p.59). Greer says, "We know from contemporary legislation that educated boys were considered a risk to simple country girls" and that is what exactly happened with Ann Hathaway as a simple country girl (p.60). It is also a fact to consider that "the typical Elizabethan seducer was a boy" (p.61). In one of Shakespeare's narrative poems, that was printed with his sonnets in 1609, he talks about a "devilishly clever boy" who woos a country girl and gets her, but soon after abandons her. Greer comments that as Shakespeare was not a young man with prospect there was no point in wooing him. Greer captures Ann as "a sober, industrious, patient, frugal wife" and Shakespeare as "young and witty, possibly handsome" (p.66). At the end of the chapter, it is clarified by Greer that the

women who worked outside their home were always the victim of sexual harassment and they were considered "vulnerable to the sexual advances of their employers and their sons" (p.70). That Ann was seduced by Shakespeare and she was pregnant was a news which could ruin Shakespeare's reputation and that is the reason Shakespeare's parents gave their consent in their marriage as Greer indicates.

From late 16th century to early 17th century, there were records that men could evade the marriage even after the marriage bond, which is why mothers brought their "fatherless children" at Holy Trinity to make them christened (p.78). Such a child was registered as a "bastard" (p.78). When they were registered the name of the father was required. If any man denied to be the father then the woman was punished sometimes, even publicly to be "unlawfully pregnant" (p.79). It seems like when a woman is pregnant, her life is ruined, still, she has to suffer and the man responsible for all is perhaps enjoying his life somewhere else. As Greer states that if Shakespeare denied his being the father of the child, Ann would have to be whipped publicly and forced to "stand in front of the congregation on a Sunday, clad in nothing but a white sheet" and at the time of delivery the midwives would refuse to do their job and would have left Ann in extreme pain till she announced who the father is (pp.79-80). Greer claims that this would harm Shakespeare's and his family's reputation and the situation would be more intense if Ann died in pain. This was the scenario in the then England. This is why Greer has criticized Greenblatt's statement that "an unmarried mother in 1580s did not, as she would in 1880s routinely faced fierce, unrelenting social stigmatization" (p.80). In the 16th century England, premarital pregnancy was common, but people could not tolerate "bastardy" (p.80).

There is another important issue that Shakespeare's biographers often indicate that Shakespeare was in love with another woman when he married Ann Hathaway. That is to say, Shakespeare did not want to marry Ann Hathaway and he was forced to marry her. This was said because in the Bishop of Worcester's register, on 27 November 1582, a marriage licence was issued that "inter William Shakespeare and Annam Whateley de Temple Grafton" (p.81). But it is

considered as a scribal error that “Hathaway” was mispronounced as “Whateley” (p.81). Another fact that Greer mentions is, the name William Shakespeare was very common at that time. So, if it was not type mistake then it would have been any other William Shakespeare. As Greer records, there are misleading pieces of information produced by Greenblatt, Sir Sidney Lee, Burgess and many other scholars about Shakespeare being so innocent and Ann being the misery of Shakespeare’s life.

Greer’s initial task is to dismantle the myth of Ann as the predatory seductress. A New Historicist reading reveals how this myth served a specific cultural function: to protect the narrative of Shakespeare’s genius from the blemish of a mundane, pre-marital pregnancy. Greer counters this by re-embedding Ann in her material context. She establishes that Ann, a fatherless woman of twenty-six, was legally and financially independent, possessing a share in a substantial farmhouse (Greer, 2008, p. 14). This economic standing makes the notion that she needed to “trap” the son of a financially struggling glovemaking implausible. Greer turns the seduction trope on its head, citing contemporary norms that “the typical Elizabethan seducer was a boy” (p. 61).

From a performativity perspective, Ann’s predicament highlights the brutal regulatory framework governing female sexuality. A pregnant unmarried woman faced public whipping and humiliation (Greer, 2008, pp. 79-80). Her body became a site of public scrutiny and discipline. By marrying her, Shakespeare participated in a performative act that restored social order, yet the historical narrative placed the burden of transgression solely on Ann. Furthermore, Greer challenges the performative of illiteracy imposed upon Ann. Arguing that Ann’s daughter and brother were literate and that her Protestant upbringing necessitated Bible reading, Greer (2008, p. 51) suggests that the claim of her illiteracy is a discursive strategy to further separate her from Shakespeare’s intellectual world. The performance of being an ignorant country woman was forced upon her by biographers seeking to widen the gap between the bard and his wife.

Ann the Breadwinner

In this section, we have tried to focus on Ann Hathaway’s life after marriage. Her performance as a wife as a mother, and as the breadwinner was rendered invisible by a patriarchal culture that did not formally recognize women’s domestic labor as “work.” Ann’s performance as the economic anchor of his Stratford household was erased, demonstrating how the regulatory norms of patriarchy value certain performances over others.

After Ann and Shakespeare were settled, Ann gave birth to a girl and because of that, she was confined for forty days in her house. But if she had borne a boy child, she had to lie down for thirty days. This time is called the time for purification when the husband abstains from the wife. During these days the woman is not allowed to enter into the church. Ann had entered on the forty-first day into the church to be churching. As Greer says, churching was a humiliating ritual at the same time an occasion for great cheer. In 1584, Ann was again pregnant with twins. Having twins is a much difficult task for the mother. So, Ann had to struggle with Judith and Hamnet to keep them alive as twins are usually born premature.

After three and a half years of married life, Shakespeare decided to leave Stratford. Greer (2008) says, “One of the longest-lived explanations of Shakespeare’s sudden departure from Stratford is that he had been caught stealing version from Sir Thomas Lucy’s park at Charlchote: this is Nicholas Rowe’s account of the circumstances, written in 1709” (p.140). This fact was also pointed out by Richard Davies before Rowe’s publication. It was the tradition that when the husband was far to earn livelihood, the wife remained at home with the children and the husband made his visits according to his comfort. There is evidence of abandoning wives in England at that time as Greer shows. Robert Greene is another famous figure who abandoned his wife after he had spent the marriage money that he got from his wife and after having a child. But he came back and sought forgiveness from his wife while he was dying and had a debt of 10 pounds to a man. Greene addressed his wife as “sweet wife” as if suddenly his wife became so important to him (p.145). Henry Field who was a close friend of John Shakespeare, was also known because of leaving his wife. Later, he and his wife, both were punished by the church because of living

separately “without the rule of law” (p.146). If Ann would complain about Shakespeare for staying far for a long time, Shakespeare would also get punishment or he would have been charged. But Ann did nothing like that, rather she protected him by remaining silent and performing her duty. But we hardly see anyone giving her any credit for that. Greer claims that there are entries in the burial registers that when the father left the family the sons starved and the wife could not survive or cope up with the situation (p.147). But “Ann Shakespeare did cope” (p.147). Greer says that if Ann had loved her husband, she must have suffered when she was left with her children alone by her husband. It is also indicated that no commentators have even mentioned Shakespeare’s missing his wife and children. With this idea, if Shakespeare did not miss Ann, he must have been aware that Ann was missing him. Greer also mentions Grace Sharrington who married Anthony Mildmay in 1567 and suffered alone for twenty years while her husband roamed around Europe. Anthony was saved from the court by his father though. For Ann, it must have been difficult to stay alone in Stratford while her husband was roaming around the street “full of whores” (p.150). Greer wonders how Ann spent the nights lying alone on the matrimonial bed thing about her “young husband” “being drawn into ‘drinking, fencing, swearing, quarrelling, drabbing’” (p.151). Still in that difficult time, Ann somehow found a way of feeding her children with good nutrition.

In chapter ten, Greer (2008) records information about women who spent their life earning on their own. Ann’s stepmother Joan Hathaway was one of the women in Warwickshire who had their farm to run. Hathaway’s neighbouring women like Ann Pace, were also involved in farming. Shakespeare’s friend’s mother Ann Nash was also a widow who had a farm of four and a half yardland in Welcombe. “The Warwickshire Corn Enquiry of 1595 lists several female heads of farming households” like Anne Baker and Alice Wall (p.158). There are plenty of references in *Shakespeare’s Wife* of women who were involved in farming and heavy works and earned money. Greer records several jobs in which women were involved according to the records in 1576. Women earned from those job like,

‘for drawing of straw in the chapel garden’, twelve pence, for taking food to the gardener, four pence, to Jane Salt ‘for drawing of straw’, three pence, to Empson’s wife, for carrying straw, two pence, to the gardener’s wife for drawing of straw, four pence, and to Jane Plummer for the same, two pence. A ‘poor woman’ was paid one penny ‘for bearing in of chips’, and ‘Conway’s wife’ also got a penny for carrying a load of sand. Conway’s wife Margaret appears in the accounts again, as the recipient of two pence for ‘making clean the gaol’ in 1581 and four pence for doing the same job in 1586. (pp.160-161)

Women were also involved in works like “wet and dry nursing”, “tailoring”, “upholstery”, “millinery”, “embroidery”, etc. and there were women like “laundresses”, “fishwives”, “street vendors”, “wax-chandlers”, “brewers”, “bakers”, “confectioners” even “ironmongers” and “shoemakers” (p.163). Deserted wives and widows made their livelihood by doing these sorts of work, but for Ann, it would have been difficult because no farm could take a maid with three children. Ann had to do something from her home, perhaps making cheese. Ann remained at home being “sixteenth century ‘housewife’” (p.168) with cloth-related trades. Even in London, females occupied about half of all type trades and apprentices to craft. But in Elizabethan literature working women are almost hard to find. So, women were not represented as they were in reality.

While Ann was struggling with three children to earn livelihood, Shakespeare needed private space and time to write the poem “Venus and Adonis” which was housewives’ favourite and best-seller. It was his first work which was printed by his name. This might have made Ann’s life more miserable because the poem was “erotic” that was popular with “excited housewives” (p.190). Ann also lost her son Hamnet Shakespeare in 1596. It was heard that Shakespeare’s only son died of hunger or of any disease caused by malnourishment. Another fact is, between the twins, Hamnet was also the weaker one from birth. The evidence says, presumably Shakespeare was not present at the funeral and Ann had to arrange everything by herself. Just after that Ann’s father in law died and her daughter Susanna got married. During this time Shakespeare started to become famous and published many of his sonnets. It is

possible that Ann had got a copy of the book too and she might have been aware of her husband being lonely and homosexual by reading through the sonnets, though the word “homosexual” did not exist in 1609. Ann was fifty-three in 1609 still struggling alone.

One of Greer’s most significant contributions is her detailed account of how a deserted Elizabethan wife might have survived. A New Historicist approach here illuminates the hidden economy of women’s work. Greer populates her narrative with historical evidence of women working as farmers, laundresses, brewers, and ironmongers (pp. 160-163). This context refutes the assumption that Ann lived in idle dependence on London remittances. Instead, Greer posits that Ann likely engaged in cloth-related trades or cheese-making from home to support her three children (p. 168).

This portrayal directly engages with gender performativity. The role of “housewife” in this era was not a passive identity but an active, economic performance involving management, production, and commerce. Ann’s successful performance of this role for nearly three decades—ensuring her family’s survival without scandal—is a testament to her capability. Yet, this performance was ignored by a patriarchal culture that did not acknowledge women’s domestic labor as “work.” While Shakespeare’s performance as a playwright in London was immortalized, Ann’s performance as the financial anchor of his Stratford household was obliterated, validating how the regulatory norms of patriarchy value certain performances over others.

Ann the Nurse

In this section, we have tried to focus on how Ann managed the household when Shakespeare came back to Stratford from London. It is quite visible in this part that Ann Hathaway’s performance of gender was demanded, exploited, and then systematically unacknowledged in the most permanent of records.

It is quite impossible to point out the time when Shakespeare came back. Some scholars say that Shakespeare appeared even before; at his father’s funeral, for his daughter’s wedding, and at his mother’s funeral. They assume this just because they think Shakespeare should have come, but

there is no evidence of his attending the events. But evidences point out that Shakespeare came back permanently when he was ill. It is said that perhaps Shakespeare came back to find “peace and quiet in Stratford” leaving the “hurly-burly London” behind (Greer, 2008, p.281). By this time, Ann Shakespeare had already spent about thirty years without her husband. But there was no scandal on her name. It is also assumed that Shakespeare wanted a break from the theatre and so he went back to his home. In Elizabethan England, “Husband and wives did not go about as couples” (p.184). After Shakespeare was home, he had his own gossips and Ann had her. On 9 July 1614, a great fire broke into the town and it destroyed fifty-four dwelling houses along with office houses, barns, and stables. Ann Shakespeare’s residence New Place was saved by luck or as Greer says, perhaps “Ann’s good management” save it (p.286). Shakespeare was in London at that time.

In chapter eighteen, Greer (2008) says that Shakespeare might have come back to New Place because of his illness. This illness started four months before Shakespeare died. It is claimed by Greer that people who died in April 1616, most of them were suffering from some serious catastrophic infection. Rev. John Ward said that Shakespeare died of a fever. Greer explains this fact that “Ward is using the late-seventeenth-century version of the theory of plethora to explain the poet’s death as a sort of melancholy accident” (p.294). But fever at that time killed people rapidly or did not kill at all. On the other hand, Shakespeare, as a young man of fifty-two, was too young to suffer the last stages of illness of old age. Greer talks about a disease “syphilis” which she thinks Shakespeare was infected with (p.297). She has given information about the verse that is written on Shakespeare’s gravestone. She has also criticized Greenblatt’s interpretation of the four-line verse. According to Greenblatt, those words were written because Shakespeare hated his wife. Greer says that those words were written so that one could dig the grave. Because digging up the grave would reveal that Shakespeare died of terminal syphilis. Any patient with such disease needed great care and Ann took care of her husband by keeping him clean and offering him comfort. When the husband is severely ill and bedridden for about four months, a wife has a lot to do. She has to take care of her

husband and at the same time manage the house. Ann had done the same. Shakespeare updated his will on 25 March and died on 17 April.

Ann Shakespeare struggled throughout her life and after Shakespeare's death situation was almost the same for her. This woman worked alone to run her family with three children when Shakespeare was far in London. Suddenly her husband came back with some serious illness and she also handled her husband. After four months of suffering, Shakespeare died leaving something for Ann Shakespeare that Greer reveals gradually. A famous playwright after earning a lot of money and reputation could possibly leave a lot for his children and his wife. In chapter nineteen, Greer shows what Ann Shakespeare got from her husband. This chapter describes William Shakespeare's will. Most of his property went to his elder daughter Susanna and her family. His younger daughter also got money along with some property. People like John Hall and Elizabeth Hall also inherited from Shakespeare. But somehow Shakespeare forgot to mention his wife in the will. Other scholars say that Shakespeare has left his "second-best bed" for his wife. On the other hand, Greer says that Ann Shakespeare's name was absent in her husband's will and she was not appointed as her husband's executor. In this regard, Greer (2008) mentions some scholars like Charles Knight, Schoenbaum and Wood who have explained that as Ann Shakespeare does not appear in the will, she will have the "dower right" as a widow (p.320). According to Burn's *Ecclesiastical Law* of 1763, as Greer mentions, "widows have been tolerated to reserve to their own use, not only their apparel and a convenient bed, but a coffer with divers things therein necessary for their own persons" (p.321). This tradition was practiced only in London, York and Wales but it was not properly established under law. A widow could enjoy the "dower right" till she marries someone else. Ann Shakespeare was sixty and not in a state to remarry. So, she perhaps decided what she wanted for her when Shakespeare died. From her husband's huge wealth and property, she just got a bed and a few things that she used. Greer says that in *Biographia Literaria*, Part I of the sixth volume, the "second-best bed" was transcribed as the "brown best bed" (p.316). According to Greer, it was an error made in the transcription. Another

important fact is that there is controversy about whether Ann Shakespeare had any involvement in publishing the First Folio. It is possible that Ann was involved because when Shakespeare stayed in the house, he must have written something. Papers were expensive that those were kept safe. As Ann took care of Shakespeare as a result, she must have known about the writings and it must have been quite impossible to find those papers without her cooperation. The folio was published after three months of Ann Shakespeare's death. This is how Ann Shakespeare spent her life mostly without her husband.

Greer's account of Shakespeare's final years further explores the dissonance between performance and recognition. When Shakespeare returned to Stratford, likely ill, Ann assumed the role of nurse. Greer (2008) speculates that he may have suffered from a debilitating disease like syphilis, requiring intensive, intimate care for months (p. 297). This period represents another critical performance of wifely duty: the care for the ailing husband.

The New Historicist significance of Shakespeare's will lies in its legal and cultural meaning. The infamous "second-best bed" is not just a personal slight but a symbol of Ann's legal and social dispossession. As Greer explains, Ann was likely entitled to a dower right, but the will meticulously directs property to his daughters and their husbands, leaving Ann without executive power or a clear inheritance (pp. 320-321). This legal document performs the final act of erasure. Despite a lifetime of performing the roles of chaste maiden, capable breadwinner, and devoted nurse according to society's dictates, Ann's identity was ultimately defined by a legal system that subordinated wives to the patrilineal transfer of property. Her performance of gender was demanded, demoralized, and then systematically unrecognized in the most enduring of records.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Germaine Greer's *Shakespeare's Wife* is a profound work of feminist and historical recovery that gains critical depth when analyzed through the lenses of New Historicism and gender performativity. The analysis reveals that Ann Hathaway was not a

marginal or insignificant figure in Shakespeare's life, but a central agent whose performative enactment of her prescribed roles as maid, breadwinner, and nurse, was essential to his freedom and success. However, the patriarchal power structures of Elizabethan England, which demanded these performances, simultaneously ensured they would be devalued and erased from the historical record.

Greer's project successfully dismantles the "wife-shaped void" by re-embedding Ann in the material and social conditions of her time, exposing the regulatory norms that shaped her existence. She shows that Ann's legacy is not one of failure but of unacknowledged resilience. The centuries of criticism directed at her are not based on her actions, but on her failure to conform to an impossible and contradictory ideal within a patriarchal system.

This research opens avenues for future scholarship, suggesting that a similar combined theoretical approach could be fruitfully applied to the biographies of other "wives of great men" who have been similarly marginalized. Ultimately, Greer's work, and this analysis of it, underscore a critical truth: history is not merely a record of what happened, but a narrative constructed by power. Reclaiming figures like Ann Hathaway requires not just discovering new facts, but critically interrogating the very processes that decided which performances were worth remembering and which were destined for the "second-best" bed of history.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (2012). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (10th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Gallagher, C., & Greenblatt, S. (2000). *Practicing New Historicism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (1989). Introduction. In H. A. Veesser (Ed.), *The New Historicism*. Routledge.
- Greenblatt, S. (2005). *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press.
- Greer, G. (2008). *Shakespeare's Wife*. Bloomsbury.
- Loxley, J. (2007). *Performativity*. Routledge.
- Nicholl, C. (2007, September 1). Married to the Myth. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/sep/01/biography.germainegreer>
- Payne, M. (Ed.). (2005). *The Greenblatt Reader*. Blackwell.
- Peterson, R. F. (1990). Did Joyce write "Hamlet"? *James Joyce Quarterly*, 27(2), 365-372.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25485041>
- Pressley, J. M. (n.d.). *Mrs. Shakespeare: Anne Hathaway*. Shakespeare Resource Center.
<https://www.bardweb.net/content/ac/hathaway>
- Roiphe, K. (2008, April 27). Reclaiming the Shrew. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/27/books/review/Roiphe-t.html>
- Ross, J. J. (2005). Shakespeare's chancre: did the Bard have syphilis? *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, 40(3), 399-404.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4484098>
- Scheil, K. (2009). The second best bed and the legacy of Ann Hathaway. *Critical Survey*, 21(3), 59-71.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41556328>
- Scheil, K., & Holderness, G. (2009). Introduction: Shakespeare and "The Personal Story." *Critical Survey*, 21(3), 1-5.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41556324>
- Shapiro, L. (2008, March 31). Greer tames the shrew: a feminist icon rescues Shakespeare's marriage. *Slate*.
<https://slate.com/culture/2008/03/germainegreersshakespeare-s-wife.html>
- Shotgun wedding. (2015). In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (9th ed., p. 1436). Oxford University Press.
- Stanton, M. (1995). Anne Hathaway's Cottage. *New England Review*, 17(1), 147-148.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40242999>
- Yalom, M. (2009). The Second-Best Bed and Other Conundrums. *The Women's Review of Books*, 26(1), 29-30.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20476813>