In *Shakespeare’s Wife* Germaine Greer runs full tilt against the ‘bardolaters’ who have belittled and demonized Ann Hathaway, using painstaking archival research to refute or at least question their assumptions and offer another interpretation of the scant information available. She achieves this partly by spreading her net wider than the records directly relating to the Shakespeare and Hathaway families, and looking at the society they lived in, in and around Stratford.

Her conclusions are grounded in a deep knowledge of the laws and morals of the time, as well as an intimate acquaintance with the Complete Works of the Bard. On the subject of the marriage of Will and Ann, she points out,

In the sixteenth century ‘living away from a wife’ was a crime, punishable in both the ecclesiastical and the civil courts. … If Ann had alleged desertion, Will would have been a fugitive from the law. If she did not allege desertion, it was probably because she was not in fact deserted. … No commentator on Shakespeare has ever suggested that during his absences from Stratford he missed his wife and children. Yet it is Shakespeare who gives voice to the yearning of the women who wait out the weeks and months for the return of the man they love. If he didn’t miss Ann, he was vividly aware that she missed him. (146-7)

Greer is frequently entertaining and usually reasonable, though her exasperation sometimes surfaces. Speaking of some neighbours, she says, ‘We are usually given to believe that, because Hamnet Sadler witnessed Shakespeare’s will,
the Sadlers were William’s friends rather than Ann’s, as if the woman who lived a few doors down from them and saw them every day was creeping around Stratford with a bag over her head’ (135). She will spend pages on detailed accounts of the stock in trade of Stratford widows to back up her speculations on how Ann made a living, or the symptoms and treatment of syphilis when considering what Will died of. Sometimes – and perhaps this is inevitable – she will float a possibility, for example that Ann’s mother died young and that Joan Hathaway was her step-mother, and thenceforth treat it as fact. She defiantly admits that ‘most of this book is heresy, and probably neither truer nor less true than the accepted prejudice’ (356). Her contempt for the male of the species boils over on the final page when she accuses the ‘Shakespeare wallahs’ of being ‘incapable of relating to women’. But though she says, ‘There can be no doubt that Shakespeare neglected his wife, embarrassed her and even humiliated her,’ she still unreservedly calls him ‘the most eloquent Englishman who ever lived’ (27). And she is prepared to defend him against his admirers, one of whom decided that Shakespeare rejected his daughter Judith after the death of her twin brother Hamnet: ‘If Shakespeare was so unjust as to shun his daughter because of her bereavement, he cannot have been the man we think he was’ (268).

There are few facts known about Ann Hathaway, but with such treatment they can be made to speak volumes. At the very least we can appreciate that she brought her three children, including twins, through the perils of infancy, and for many years looked after them and supported them with part-time help, at best, from her husband. What Ann was really like, and what her husband thought of her, is something we’ll never know, but Greer has provided a good case for rejecting many of the uncharitable assumptions that have accreted over the course of four centuries.