

A Novel Shakespeare

Review: *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*

Stephen Greenblatt, New York: Norton, 2004.

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Shakespeare's substantially documented but scarcely sketched life sheds little light on how an artisan's son of provincial origin and without a university diploma became the predominant writer both of his time and of all ages. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, a new critical biography written by Stephen Greenblatt, an eminent Harvard professor and the architect of the critical movement New Historicism (a term Greenblatt coined in 1982) is "about an amazing success story that has resisted explanation."

Greenblatt deftly draws from Shakespeare's works and contemporary documents (both literary and non-literary) to expound how Shakespeare transmuted his life and world into his work. With the playwright's close associations with commercial acting, troupes and his royal patrons in the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts, Shakespeare's works certainly warrant historical and biological plowing. By grounding Shakespeare in his social context, Greenblatt tacitly refutes the various "Shakespeare is not Shakespeare, but is really the Earl of Oxford, Sir Francis Bacon, or even Queen Elizabeth" conspiracy theories, which Greenblatt would not even deign to name.

Shakespearean biographers have always paddled in the benighted documentary dearth, much as what Greenblatt says of outsiders excluded from a sonneteer's "charmed coterie" – they could only "grop[e] in the darkness of biographical speculation." As a bold newcomer in this grand literary lineage, Greenblatt "exercise[s] in speculation" and elaborates on it at dramatic length, more than often achieving "the touch of the real" to magnificent effects.

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Early modern England was full of conflicts and contradictions. In one generation, the nascent nation state went back and forth from Catholicism to Protestantism, each transition salted with literal cries of bloody murder. London was a boisterous metropolis under the control of a reactionary city authority, which was occasionally at odds with the ambivalently permissive crown. Shakespeare, while a stark contrast to the riotous, self-destructive university wits, was not without scandal; his “lost years”, his early marriage and subsequently “abandonment” of his young family and his astonishing rise as something like an overnight sensation in the sophisticated playing ground both invite and defy explanation. Greenblatt identifies a plethora of triggering events in these private and public spheres and links them with some of Shakespeare’s greatest dramatic achievements: his appeal to and wariness of the crowd, his presentation of romantic love, the use of equivocation, the theme of restoration, and the immortal characters Falstaff and Hamlet.

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This methodology is certainly open to doubt. To put it bluntly, if an episode in a work synchronizes to a life event, then the relevance rightfully carries some currency; if it appears years after, then it suggests an underlying psychological significance (for the former, the death of Shakespeare’s son Hamnet and the poignant lines about losing a child in *King John*, for the latter, Hamnet’s death and the traumatic turbulence in *Hamlet*).

The world has long known that artists are treacherous creatures. Gustav Mahler famously composed the *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children) when his own daughter was in full bloom of life (incidentally, she did die untimely three years later). A writer as prodigiously versatile to the extent of seemingly omniscience as Shakespeare might well draw emotional themes from exterior sources just as he drew his plots from Roman literature, British and Scottish history, and folklore.

Greenblatt is not unaware of the risks involved: “to understand how Shakespeare

used his imagination to transform his life into his art, it is important to use our own imagination.” Indeed, there are many a “might”, “perhaps”, and “would have” in the book, maybe too many for the comfort of a historian or a more demure literature scholar; more questionably, after three or four subjunctives, Greenblatt sometimes drops those disarmingly conciliatory words downright. An unwary reader, or one who does not read the book page by page, might mistake Greenblatt’s thinking aloud as a given. A critical biography doth require a critical reader.

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Greenblatt boosts his reasoning with histrionic presentation. Anecdotes are employed to open most chapters, to substantiate lines of thought, and to emotionally engage the readers. Chapter 3 “the Great Fear” (on the conjecture that Shakespeare was a covert Catholic, with the sonorities of a psychological drama) and Chapter 8 “Master-Mistress” (dealing with the difficult homoeroticism and dubious morals of his Sonnets) are prominent in their dramatization of Shakespeare, of whom most surviving accounts imply a quietist, if not downright drab personality. Based on circumstantial evidence, with an investigative reporter’s insight and a dramatist’s verve, Greenblatt makes Shakespeare the man worthy of a Derek Jarman movie. This is not to say Greenblatt is willful in scholarship; his text and bibliographical notes show extensive primary and secondary sources, which also run against the charges that New Historicists disregard previous scholarship, as if “the advent of New Historicism has wiped the academic slate clean.” (Barry, 177)

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Will in the World is learned but never pedantic. The book presents a rich tapestry of Renaissance England, and it is a great tribute to both the professor and the Bard that despite the attention paid to economical and social text production, the Shakespeare in Greenblatt’s reconstruction does not seem diminished.