
Review Articles

Shakespeare from All Angles

A review of recent Shakespeare biographies

Annalisa Castaldo

Widener University

The documented facts about William Shakespeare's life would fit on a single sheet of paper; and that is precisely what makes him so attractive to biographers of all kinds. The combination of genius, cultural centrality, and factual ambiguity allows writers of all stripes to project whatever they wish onto the almost blank canvas of Shakespeare's life. Some questions get debated over and over. What was Shakespeare doing during the so called "lost years" (1584-1592)? Are those love sonnets really written to a young man? How could the son of a glover with a grammar school education write the greatest works of literature in the English language? And from these debates spring theories – Shakespeare was a secret Catholic or bisexual (although rarely both), or just some actor whose name was used by the aristocrat who really wrote the plays. Short of building a working time machine, none of these myriad theories can be proven, but that doesn't stop biographers from trying. And the range of approaches is truly dizzying; there is, it appears, a Shakespeare for every reader and a biography of every type and focus.

Even within the traditional biography there is variety. Consider, for example, *Shakespeare the Biography* by Peter Ackroyd and *Will in the World* by Stephen Greenblatt, published

just one year apart. Ackroyd has written a number of biographies, as well as “biographies of place” such as *London: The Biography*, and historical novels. His writing style is graceful and easy to follow, but his history is rigorous; he is writing a fact-based account of Shakespeare and even when facts are missing, Ackroyd does not fall far into speculation. Concerning the lost years, for example, he points out that by 1592, Shakespeare is already established as a playwright and suggests that therefore he was, perhaps, recruited by a traveling company. But almost immediately Ackroyd pulls back from speculation: “Did [Shakespeare] join a company of travelling players when such a group was performing in Stratford? There is no record of this” (101). Rather than imagine further, Ackroyd turns to a discussion of the Queen’s Men, recently formed in 1587 when they arrived in Stratford, and the later connection between Shakespeare and Richard Tarlton the clown. The point for Ackroyd is not to build castles in the air, but to provide as much historical, archeological, and cultural information as possible, so that the reader may come to whatever conclusions he or she wishes.

Greenblatt, on the other hand, is almost all speculation. He begins, in fact, with what is practically a manifesto: “To understand who Shakespeare was, it is important to follow the verbal traces he left behind back into the life he lived and the world to which he was so open. And to understand how Shakespeare used his imagination to transform his life into art, it is important to use our own imagination” (14). In other words, what all biographers do occasionally, make unsupported claims, Greenblatt makes his main approach. Consider, for example, how Greenblatt deals with the question of Shakespeare’s sexuality, something any Shakespeare biographer must confront. Whereas Ackroyd discusses the question in three pages while covering the sonnets and focuses on what is known of male friendships in the sixteenth century, Greenblatt scatters references to Shakespeare’s possible homosexuality throughout. The first comes while Shakespeare is still in school and (perhaps) watching or (perhaps) acting in a Latin play, (perhaps Plautus’s *The Two Menaechmuses*, the source for Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*). “And perhaps on this occasion, Jenkins, recognizing that one of his students was precociously gifted as both

a writer and an actor, assigned Will Shakespeare a leading role” (27). Having speculated this far, Greenblatt then refers to the well-known Elizabethan nervousness around romantic scenes when all the parts are taken by boys. “[It] is possible that the adolescent Shakespeare felt an intense excitement in which theatrical performance and sexual arousal were braided together” (28). So if Shakespeare’s grammar school did put on a Latin play and Shakespeare was cast in a major role and if he did end up kissing another boy on stage, it might have stimulated both a sexual awakening and an awareness of theatrical power. Perhaps.

Greenblatt’s speculation is fascinating or frustrating, depending on an individual’s own desires for and expectations of biography, but it is still formatted in the traditional birth to death manner of the standard biography. Other authors have chosen to illuminate Shakespeare through a close-up, focusing on a tiny slice of the author’s life rather than the entire panorama. James Shapiro, in *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, chooses 1599 as a turning point for both England and Shakespeare, while Charles Nicholl explores Shakespeare’s later life through the magnifying glass of his involvement in a legal case. In both these cases, the authors are up front about their desire to understand Shakespeare through his words as well as his life. Shapiro admits that he has probably not escaped the “circularity and arbitrariness” of full-length biographies, but suggests that by focusing on “the ‘form and pressure’ of the time that shaped Shakespeare’s writing when he was thirty-five” he can speak with more confidence (xv-xvi). Shapiro chooses 1599 because it was “a decisive one, perhaps *the* decisive one, in Shakespeare’s development as a writer” (xvi). It was the year Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It*. Shapiro also claims it was the year Shakespeare drafted *Hamlet*, although there is no proof of that, so that he can then talk about *Hamlet* (which he does quite well).

Shapiro breaks his book into four sections named after the year and mixes historical research about England in 1599 with fact and inference about Shakespeare. Interestingly, Shapiro frequently offers literary interpretation of the plays written at the time, rather than sticking to biographical details. This is not unique; no one

would write or read a biography of Shakespeare without the interest of the plays themselves. But Shapiro does spend more time on the plays as literature than almost any other biographer, often leaving behind the history itself.

Nicholls aims not for a turning point or a definitive year; instead he is attracted to the details of a well-known but little studied aspect of Shakespeare's life. In 1612, Shakespeare gave evidence in a court case involving his former landlord's refusal to pay his daughter's dowry. While Shakespeare's testimony may seem dry, Nicholl's points out, "We know the thousands of lines he wrote in plays and poems, but this is the only occasion when his actual spoken words are recorded" (3). Nicholls links the events described in the deposition, which took place in 1603-05, with the plays Shakespeare was writing at the time: *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Timon of Athens*, and *King Lear*. He notes that these are, by and large, "problem plays": difficult to categorize by genre or tone, bitter, ethically complicated or ambiguous. While not claiming that Shakespeare's living situation created this singular tone, Nicholls does want to suggest that the two were intertwined.

In addition to detailed physical reconstructions (he spends an entire chapter simply describing what Shakespeare would have seen as he walked in any direction away from his rented rooms at the corner of Silver and Monkwell Streets), Nicholls delves into the legal case itself. Charles Mountjoy, Shakespeare's landlord, refused to pay his daughter's dowry, after a marriage which Shakespeare, according to testimony, had a large role in creating by persuading the young man to agree. The fact that *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well* problematize marriage and the process of getting married is linked by Nicholls to Shakespeare's role in the Mountjoy household, that the difficulties of bringing the young couple together started Shakespeare exploring this issue in drama. Both Shapiro and Nicholls, of course, are speculating as much as Greenblatt, although their language is more circumspect and they are more straightforward about making these connections. Their speculations run one way – from history to play, rather than both ways as Greenblatt does.

While these four biographies do not begin to cover the offerings, I would like to end this review by looking at a few of the more unusual approaches. The first of these is *Shadowplay* by Clare Asquith. The wife of a British diplomat, Asquith was struck by the way Soviet playwrights coded secret messages into their plays and wondered if Shakespeare's plays revealed similarly coded Catholic messages. While not the first person to suggest that Shakespeare was a secret Catholic, Asquith is unique in how much she sees as code. For example, it is well known that Shakespeare's early comedies feature a short dark female character and a tall fair one. Previous scholars have believed this reflects the makeup of the acting troupe – that Shakespeare was working the physical characteristics of his actors into the plays. Asquith, on the other hand, sees the tall fair female representing Catholicism and the short dark one representing Protestantism. How far to follow Asquith's theories is up to the reader.

And finally, there is the whole category of works that might be termed the anti-biography; books that argue the works attributed to Shakespeare were written by someone else. I find the arguments made by these books to be classist (only an aristocrat could have written so beautifully!), illogical (the general argument is that the real author needed a cover because it was shameful or inappropriate for a noble to write plays. But numerous aristocrats in this period wrote and circulated work of all kinds), or downright ridiculous (most of the claimants for "the real Shakespeare" died before the plays stopped appearing). The main candidate for the role is currently Edward de Veres, Earl of Oxford, but why people feel that a drunken spendthrift who once killed a man just to see what it was like (and who wrote poetry – trite poetry – under his own name) is a better fit than Shakespeare is a mystery. John Shakespeare may have been a glover, but he was also, for some time, Mayor of Stratford, and his wife, Mary Arden, was connected to the noble family of Arden. Shakespeare may not have gone to University, but the Elizabethan grammar school curriculum would make any modern graduate student weep. It's intense focus on reading, memorizing, and imitating classical authors (in the original Latin and in English) was perfect training for a poet.

There is one of these works I will discuss and that is *History Play* by Rodney Bolt. Bolt argues that Shakespeare's plays were actually written by Christopher Marlowe, who did not die in a tavern brawl in 1594 but staged his own death, escaped to the Continent, and used Shakespeare as a cover for his continued plays. I say "argues" but that is not what Bolt is really doing. What sets Bolt apart from other anti-Shakespeare biographers is he quite lacks their terrible earnestness. Bolt instead plays with history, biography, and knowledge. As he writes in his afterword, "By assuming the seemingly preposterous I have hoped to shake up our notions of the possible, or at the very least to look a little more sharply at how we construct truth" (314). To accomplish this, Bolt mixes very real and solidly researched history with blatant fiction. Going several large steps beyond even Greenblatt's "perhaps," Bolt writes as if he were in the room and knew not only what happened, but also how people reacted and what their temperaments were. He mocks the biographer's reliance on sources by citing works that don't exist and including works that he himself has made up. He ends his romp by describing how Shakespeare died "sated and swine-drunk after a night spent swilling with his merchant cronies" and at that moment "on an island near Bermuda, Kit Marlowe picked up a quill (plucked from the wing of an albatross), dipped it in deep red ink that Oliver had made from the gum of a dragon's-blood palm, and began his first novel" (310-11).

This fantastical ending is very far from Ackroyd's sober conclusion that "he died as he had lived, without much sign of the world's attention" (516) and a one-page discussion of the publishing of the First Folio. That is not to say that Bolt is better or worse than Ackroyd, or that one form of biography is to be exalted over another. The better reaction is simple amazement at the sheer range of responses Shakespeare's life evokes (and this is not even to touch on the fictionalized accounts). Shakespeare functions like other mythic, although not necessarily mythical, characters, like Jesus and Robin Hood. The very ambiguity and blank spaces in the documentation make it not only possible but also necessary for biographers to speculate, imagine and question, and each iteration, each generation, speculates anew and in

ways specific to contemporary concerns. (It is no accident that Shakespeare's sexuality was the hot topic of the 1970s, or that right now, biographers are exploring the possibility that he was secretly a member of a repressed minority religion.) Ben Jonson famously wrote that Shakespeare was "not of an age, but for all time." If that is true, it is because not only his works, but also his very life, allows for constant reinterpretation, so that we will always feel that Shakespeare is "one of us."

Works Cited

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