

CULTURE

Shakespeare in Love, or in Context

If society creates art, as Stephen Greenblatt believes, then why was Shakespeare's achievement so singular?

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SHARE AS GIFT  REMOVE 

Shakespeare is a biographer's nightmare. Not because the information about him is so overwhelming or incriminating but because it is so slight and so stubbornly innocuous. We forgive our great poets almost anything—suicide (Sylvia Plath), homicide (Ben Jonson), incest (William Wordsworth), hubris (Oscar Wilde), drunkenness (Edgar Allan Poe), insanity (Friedrich Nietzsche), sexual excess of every description (Byron, Shelley, Houellebecq—who not?). What we are loath to forgive is quiet respectability.

The things we know for sure about Shakespeare's life could be put into three pages and read aloud on Nickelodeon. Born to a social-climbing glover in provincial Stratford-upon-Avon, he went to school in his home town, picked up "small Latine and lesse Greeke" (as a better-bred colleague put it), married at eighteen a woman some years his senior, fathered three children (one of whom died), headed to London and became the best-loved playwright of his day, performed the parts of elderly men, struck advantageous financial deals, and bought himself gentleman status in the form of a coat of arms. He then moved his family into the finest house in Stratford, retired at around fifty, and died at fifty-two, having written a will that virtually disinherited a daughter who married unwisely, shortchanged his wife, and provided a model of what in a lesser man might be called control-freakishness. Not content to bestow the bulk of his fortune on his preferred daughter, Susanna, he specified that after her death it go "to the first son of her body lawfully issuing, and to the heir males of the body of the said first son ... [or] second son ... and for default of such heirs to the third son ... [or] to the fourth, fifth, sixth, & seventh sons." This was not a man who left much to accident. This was not a man whom but for the capacious and shockingly imaginative plays that he left behind we would ever take for a free spirit.



What is the relation between the singer and the song? We do not like it that the man who wrote ravishing scenes of young lovers defying their parents damned his own child for romantic indiscretions. We do not like it that the man who created the wildly witty, raucous Falstaff was not himself the life of the party—that he was not even, as his near contemporary John Aubrey said, a "company keeper." How much more gratifying for biographer and reader alike if Shakespeare were, well, Marlowe, or Thomas Kyd, or any of the many other playwrights who swirled around him in sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century London. The lives of these men were full of duels, charges of atheism and espionage, barroom brawls, and breathless trysts. Maybe, we think, we just don't know enough about Shakespeare. But then again, maybe we know little because there is simply little to know. Perhaps Shakespeare just went home earlier than the others, risked less, bragged less, fought less, courted fewer women and disasters alike.

There were six dramatists on the scene when Shakespeare arrived in London in the 1580s: Robert Greene, Thomas Watson, Christopher Marlowe, George Peele, Thomas Nashe, and Thomas Lodge. They were all far more flamboyant and colorful than their Stratford colleague. They were also, in all likelihood, far less gifted. But we will never know, because every one of them save Lodge (who quit the theater) died far too young to have fulfilled his potential—Marlowe at twenty-nine, Greene at thirty-two, Nashe at thirty-three, Watson at thirty-five, Peele, the eldest, at thirty-nine.

There are artists whose art is life: Marlowe and Greene, to be sure, but also Oscar Wilde, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Henry Miller. Such artists may produce great literature as a by-product of their genius, but it will always be, to steal Milton's phrase, the work of their left hand. Then there are artists whose literature is the work of their right hand, who strategically retreat behind self-effacing, innocuous, or saccharine personas. T. S. Eliot the bank clerk, Philip Larkin the library drone, Sylvia Plath the bubbly blonde housewife—the personas can't require too much work, because the mind behind them is working feverishly. Such a persona had "Gentle Shakespeare," as one less gentle contemporary characterized him. He did not have time to attend to his mask. He was too busy attending to the parade of personalities in his mind.

This does not mean that the world was unimportant to him. It fairly bursts through the seams of his drama. Nobody knows better than Stephen Greenblatt how much the world mattered to Shakespeare. Greenblatt, after all, is not just any Shakespeare scholar: he is the founder and leader of the academic New Historicist movement, probably the most influential school of literary criticism in America today. It proposes that great works of art result less from the solitary effort of a single artist than from "the circulation of social energy," in Greenblatt's words. "A people will ... invent its drama according to its own history, spirit of the times, customs [and] opinions," he argues, quoting the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder. Society creates art.

This conviction is everywhere apparent in Greenblatt's new biography. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* is, more than anything else, the biography of an age. This is not to say that Greenblatt ignores several key issues about Shakespeare's life. He persuasively addresses, for instance, how the Stratford schoolboy could have grown intrigued with London theater and acquired both the skills and the inspiration to write plays of his own. He is refreshingly frank about the quiet fiasco that was Shakespeare's marriage. Unlike many of his predecessors, he does not bend over backward to contrive some secret affectionate meaning in Shakespeare's ungenerous bequest of his "second-best bed" to his wife. On the contrary, he points out that it was an afterthought; the first draft of Shakespeare's will allotted his partner of thirty-four years precisely nothing.

Greenblatt is far less persuasive about Shakespeare's father, who he gratuitously decides was an alcoholic, because his fortunes declined in midlife and his son's plays "depicted heavy drinkers from close up." For John Shakespeare's decline numerous explanations suggest themselves. John Shakespeare was in trouble with the law almost from the start of his career; his social ambition attracted him repeatedly to illegal financial transactions, any one of which could easily have thrown him into a tailspin. As for the younger Shakespeare's intimate knowledge of drinking, why, most of his theater friends were formidable drinkers—as, indeed, he may have been himself. In any case, the only explanation for his death, within decades of it, was that he "had a merry meeting, and it seems drank too hard, for Shakespeare died of a fever there contracted." Even if this report is mistaken, it implies that he was hardly the teetotaling and puritanical son of an alcoholic that Greenblatt evokes.

Shakespeare's drinking portraits are for the most part hugely sympathetic, even though Greenblatt unconvincingly claims the reverse. As evidence he cites a passage from *Hamlet* in which the prince, infuriated by his uncle's incestuous marriage to his newly widowed mother, sounds off at a banquet of drunken celebration—the sort

of drunken celebration in which his newlywed "parents" are at that moment absorbed. Worse, Greenblatt misreads Shakespeare's most famous drinker, Falstaff, fashioning the best-loved character ever to stride the English stage (even Queen Elizabeth demanded to see him again!) as an essentially reprehensible figure. To be sure, Falstaff is a rake, a ne'er-do-well, and a lousy soldier, not to mention horrifically overweight. But his gruff love for the errant Prince Hal, his wily, inspired paeans to sack (his liquor of choice), and haunting assaults on the honor that leads men blindly to their war deaths ("I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath!" he says over the dead smirk of a military "hero") may make Falstaff the most life-affirming and humane of Shakespeare's characters, as well as the most outrageous and brilliant.

Greenblatt insists that Shakespeare sides with the selfishly manipulative Hal, who at the end of the Henry IV cycle rejects Falstaff. This insistence is the more striking because a number of critics—most passionately and recently Harold Bloom—have associated Shakespeare with the rejected Falstaff, and Hal with the narcissistic young Earl of Southampton, whom Shakespeare may have courted in the first part of his love-sonnet sequence. It is a telling case of critics' finding the Shakespeare they resemble. Bloom, a famously corpulent drinker and a robust academic rebel so out of step with his literary colleagues that Yale had to create a one-man department for him, thinks Shakespeare identified with the boisterous, sack-swilling one-man show Falstaff; Greenblatt—a consummate academic insider, a king in his profession, and a man reputed to make no enemies—believes the poet identified with the politic, smooth-talking monarch-to-be Hal.

The larger problem with *Will in the World*, however, is that it pays infinitely more attention to the miscellaneous curiosities and marginal obsessions of the sixteenth century than to anything that seems pivotal in Shakespeare's life or work. We are offered tremendously detailed historical accounts of witchcraft on the British Isles. We are given the lowdown on "the sort of thing that put [King James] to sleep" and the sort of thing that woke him up. We are informed with faithful regularity of the ways in which enemies of the state (along with bears, dogs, and other creatures) were tortured during the English Renaissance. We also get a long chapter on ecclesiastical infighting about the existence of purgatory, and nearly endless speculation on whether and to what degree Shakespeare might have come into contact with Catholic recusants in his youth. All this would be well and good if Shakespeare were a religious thinker or a religious poet or in any way religiously invested; but, as Greenblatt himself admits, he pretty clearly was not. The only saints to which Shakespeare was sensible, on the evidence of his plays, were the saints of love: Romeo and Juliet call each other "saint," and compare kisses to biblical oaths. Elsewhere the Bard seems blithely indifferent to theological niceties, expediently mixing and matching astrology with Anglicanism, classical mythology with Catholicism, folklore with Judaism, and pantheism with legalese.



What we miss while we are being briefed on the scriptural and superstitious trivia of the English Renaissance is any engagement with Shakespeare's more obvious personal preoccupations. If he has a single play that tangentially invokes witches, he has twenty-some plays, 154 sonnets, and a couple of lengthy poems that centrally engage the madness and poetry, the hypocrisy and higher reason, of romantic love. Why does Greenblatt give us so little about this? Aside from a few passages on the Earl of Southampton, whom Shakespeare may or may not have fancied, Greenblatt is silent on the sorts of relationships that may have inspired his subject to return so knowingly and obsessively to eros. Not even a reflection about the infamous Dark Lady of the sonnets.

Greenblatt is almost equally silent on father-daughter relations, another of Shakespeare's capital preoccupations. *King Lear*, often considered Shakespeare's greatest work, is almost exclusively about this. Two of the plays he wrote before retiring from the theater, *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, and also the very last, *The Tempest*, stand and fall on the bond between fathers and daughters. Within a few years of writing so feelingly of Prospero and Miranda in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare signed over practically his entire fortune to his daughter Susanna—at the expense of his wife, his other child, and even the poor of Stratford. Surely there is something here for Greenblatt to explore.

But then, love, whether between parent and child or man and woman, is not, historically, of interest to New Historicists. And this is the reason that Greenblatt's much awaited biography of Shakespeare ultimately proves an expression of academic fashion more than a study of genius. Greenblatt, like the literary movement he kicked off, is contemptuous of themes that go beyond time and place. "Transcendent" is a bad word among scholars in general and Greenblatt's historicists in particular, because it refers to any subject, pattern of human behavior, or existential question that is not "culturally particular"—that does not change from era to era, kingdom to kingdom. Greenblatt's reality, he has said, consists of "historically embedded social and psychological formations." The "commitment" of New Historicists is to "particularity"—or, one might say, to peculiarity. "Trans-historical" dilemmas like "to be or not to be," to love or not to love, leave them cold. They pride themselves on their ability to look at literature and discover the forgotten customs, cultural quirks, and social idiosyncrasies behind it.

But ephemeral customs and cultural quirks are not why Shakespeare is arresting today, and to people all over the world. Amused as we may be by the ingredients of the witches' cauldron in *Macbeth*, they are _____ we watch the play. It is *Macbeth's* universal themes—ambition, obsession, _____ power—that have made it outlast

King James's dissertations on sixteenth-century demonology. It is the eternal problem of how to keep passion alive that brings readers back to *Antony and Cleopatra* rather than to some annals of Elizabethan political intrigue. Greenblatt's critical approach turns gold into lead. It takes texts of universal appeal and authors of individual genius and reduces them to catalogues of culturally particular—and contemporarily irrelevant—minutiae.

If *Hamlet* is not *Hamlet* because of its allusions to purgatory, Shakespeare is not Shakespeare because of the miscellany of sixteenth-century cultural influences on him. All his now obscure rivals were subject to precisely the same influences, but only Shakespeare became Shakespeare. Greenblatt's democratic instincts notwithstanding, communities don't write plays, and cultures don't write plays. People write plays. Individual authors working with universal themes write the stuff that survives.

In spite of himself, Greenblatt seems to realize this. In his own writerly practice he believes in both the universal and the individual that he officially renounces. A storyteller by temperament, he regularly compares tales from his own life with tales from, well, Shakespeare and his time. Trans-historical truth, anyone? And in the introduction to his most recent book about the new historicism he has no sooner sung a hymn to "social energy" and the virtues of collaboration than he discovers that he is unable to write the next chapters with his co-author. "Immersion [in the practice of writing] is not for us fundamentally collaborative," he declares, rather shockingly. "It is doggedly private, individual, obsessive, lonely."

If America's foremost Shakespeare scholar could give Shakespeare the benefit of such insights, there is no telling how strong a biography he might offer us. Greenblatt is an incisive thinker—not to mention an uncannily ingratiating voice on the page. When I first read him, as an undergraduate English major, I well nigh fell in love with him. His tragic flaw, were he a Shakespearean hero, would be not his practice but his theory. A survey of the writings of many of Greenblatt's followers quickly shows how dry and dreary is the fruit of this theory without the originator's personality to give it juice. Greenblatt's life of Shakespeare represents the best of the New Historicist movement. But it does not represent the best we could hope for from Greenblatt, or the best we should demand in a biography of the Bard.

They seemed so perfectly matched: the biggest literary genius of all time and the biggest literary scholar of our own time. But if they are well suited in some ways, they are direct opposites in others. Greenblatt has the personal charm Shakespeare lacked. Where Shakespeare seemed old at two, Greenblatt seems young at sixty; where Shakespeare was transparently, even unambitiously, ambitious, Greenblatt is forever

"giddy with amazement," he says, at his successes. But where Shakespeare was liberated by his work, Greenblatt is hamstrung by his. Indeed, his literary instincts seem almost the opposite of Shakespeare's. Whereas Shakespeare could never stop generalizing about mankind ("Thus conscience does make cowards of us all"), Greenblatt rejects such generalization, championing an endless succession of local details instead. Whereas Shakespeare seems to have kept social interaction to a minimum, Greenblatt is the herald par excellence of social energy and collaboration.

Or is he? Perhaps his private habits differ from his public theory. Perhaps if Greenblatt would only preach what he practices rather than practice what he preaches, he would move far closer to the playwright he loves—and move us far closer too.

Will in the World

By Stephen Greenblatt

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