The Mysterious

Stephen Greenblatt conjures a life,

"I set out to solve a mystery," says Cogan University Professor Stephen Greenblatt. "The basic facts of Shakespeare's life have been known for a very long time—more than a century. The mystery has been, how could you possibly connect what we know about his life"—real-estate transactions, a last will and testament, parish records—"with what we have, which is the greatest body of imaginative literature in the English language?" Shakespeare was the son of a glovemaker in a provincial town and he "left lots of traces of himself in a bureaucratic culture," says Greenblatt. We know, for example, that he invested in numerous properties around his hometown of Stratford and famously left his wife his "second-best" bed, but we have no letters, no diaries, none of the books he must have owned, nor even a full-length play in his hand to help us understand how this seemingly ordinary existence yielded his astonishing plays.

As Greenblatt writes in his introduction to his new book, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, "readers rarely feel closer to understanding how the playwright's achievements came about" even after reading the best of the existing biographies. "If anything, Shakespeare often seems a duller, drabber person and the inward springs of his art seem more obscure than ever." How is it possible to get from the works to the life and from the life to the works? That is the question Greenblatt set out to answer with his own account, one that acrobatically entwines an extensive and vibrant knowledge of Elizabethan life with a penetrating understanding of Shakespeare's plays and poems. Greenblatt, the founder of a critical approach to literature known as New Historicism, has spent 40 years engaged in scholarly study of the period's history, sociology, and anthropology. He brings to the examination of Shakespeare a remarkable understanding of what life was like in Renaissance England combined with an unusual economy and power of expression.

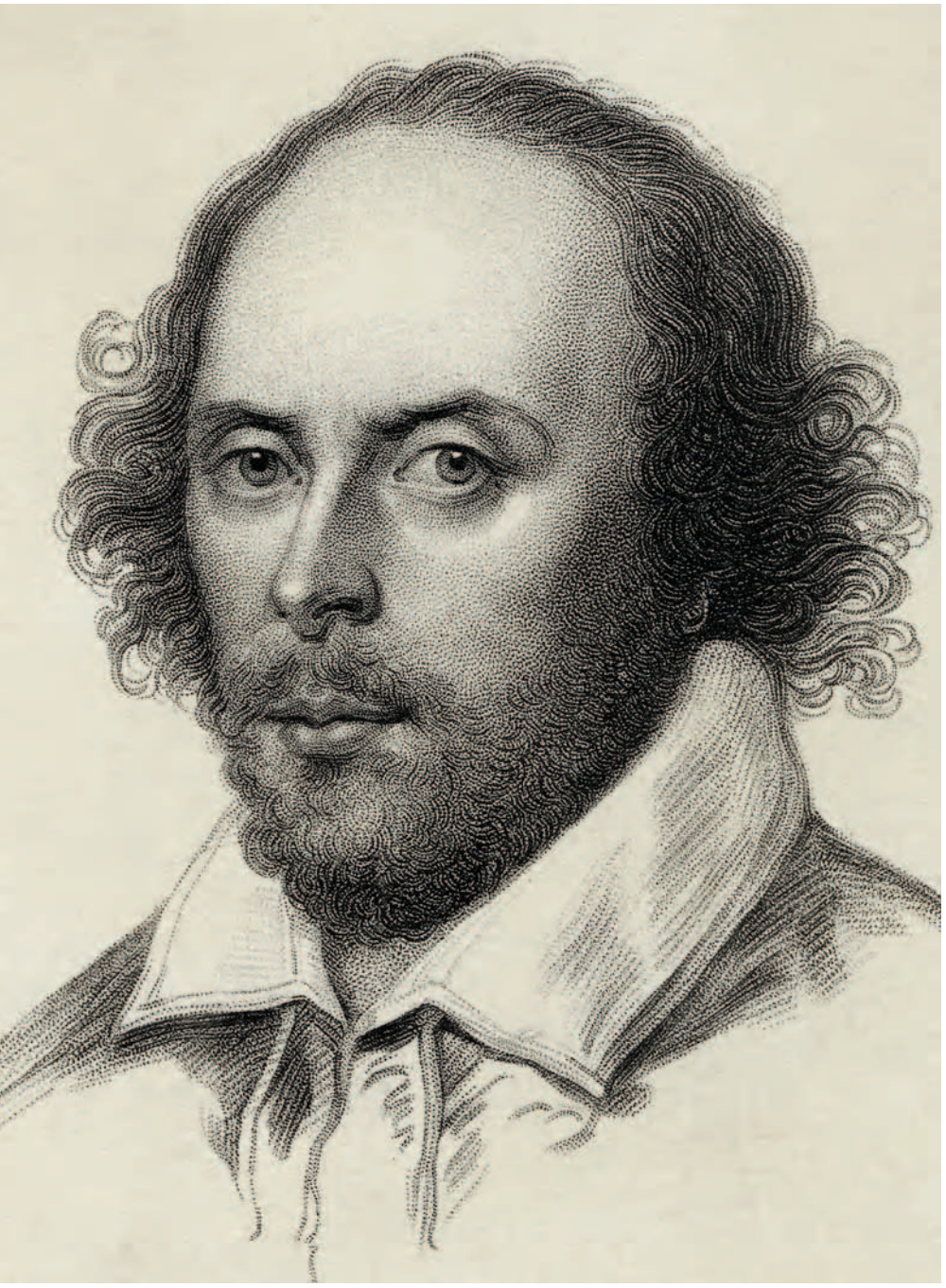
When the movie *Shakespeare in Love* appeared in 1998 (screenwriter Marc Norman had discussed an early stage of the script with Greenblatt), "it was a revelation to me," the scholar says

Photograph by Robert Adam Mayer

Mr. Shakespeare

and an age, to tell the story of Will in the World.

by JONATHAN SHAW



Opposite: Stephen Greenblatt. Above: the Edward Scriven engraving of William Shakespeare (circa 1810-1820), from a drawing by Ozias Humphry of the "Chandos" portrait of the playwright, now in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

now, "that millions of people could be tremendously excited about how it was possible for Shakespeare to go from being the author of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*...to being the author of *Romeo and Juliet.* That is really what that movie is about...The intuition behind the movie, the intuition that reached such an enormous audience, [is one that] I believe passionately is true: it wasn't simply that Shakespeare sat a little bit longer at his desk and thought a little bit more about how to write poetry, but that something happened in his life. He had access to something in his real life and was able to use that to create something astonishing."

Will in the World pursues this intuition broadly, ranging from the erotic power of *Venus and Adonis*'s landscape of the body ("...within this limit is relief enough,/Sweet bottom grass, and high delightful plain,/Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,/To shelter thee from tempest and from rain.") to the panic of Shakespeare's rivals on the emergence of this "upstart crow," as some called him, to the playwright's preparations for retirement—each with equal interest. Greenblatt begins simply, demonstrating Shakespeare's uncanny ability to embrace and refashion the ordinary in order to bring alive a scene he likely only imagined. In *Henry VI*, part 2, describing the rebel peasant Jack Cade in battle, Shakespeare wrote that he

> *...fought so long till that his thighs with darts*
> *Were almost like a sharp-quilled porcupine;*
> *And in the end, being rescued, I have seen*
> *Him caper upright like a wild Morisco,*
> *Shaking the bloody darts as he his bells.*
>
> *(act 3, scene 1, lines 362-66)*

"Shakespeare himself," writes Greenblatt, "had in all likelihood not served in the wars and had never seen a soldier's thighs pierced with arrows, but, as a country boy, he had almost certainly seen his share of sharp-quilled porcupines. He had also certainly seen his share of Morris dancers—'wild Moriscos'—leaping about in a kind of ecstasy. From such sights he constructed his astonishing image of the unstoppable Cade."

But Greenblatt, who is editor of the *Norton Shakespeare* (see "Anthologizing as a Radical Act," July-August 1998, page 38) as well as

Engraving by Edward Scriven/Mary Evans Picture Library

general editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, also makes occasional imaginative leaps that lesser scholars might not dare, as in his "largely heuristic" speculative encounter between Shakespeare and the future Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion.

Shakespeare's parents, his Stratford schoolmasters, and the family friends for whom he named his twin children were almost certainly secret Catholics in a country whose laws at that time fiercely enforced Protestantism. Starting from this revelation, Greenblatt pursues the possibility, frequently raised by the playwright's biographers, that during the so-called lost years between the time Shakespeare left Stratford as a young man and his arrival in London, he was living in the north of England under the name William Shakeshafte in the household of a prominent Catholic sympathizer. If Shakespeare was himself a recusant Catholic, or merely a close associate of such people, he would have been painfully aware of the fate that awaited him were he discovered. One Stratford schoolmaster's brother, a priest who was part of Campion's secret missionary effort, was caught on his way to a nearby village and eventually "executed in the grisly way designed to demonstrate the full rage of the state: he was dragged on a hurdle…past jeering crowds, and then hanged, taken down while he was still alive, and castrated. His stomach was slit open and his intestines pulled out to be burned before his dying eyes, whereupon he was beheaded and his body cut in quarters, the pieces displayed as a warning."

This account and Greenblatt's descriptions of the approach to London, where travelers were greeted by the sight of such traitors' heads impaled on pikes, persuasively suggest one possible reason why we don't have more personal written material by or about Shakespeare. Even though he was undeniably the most successful playwright of his time, recognized even by rivals like Ben Jonson as an heir to Aeschylus and Sophocles, caution may have schooled him early not to leave traces of himself behind.

The lack of such literary traces, combined with the imaginative leaps required to reconcile Shakespeare's life and work, at least partly explain the currency of theories that someone else actually wrote the plays. *Will in the World* doesn't directly address the subject of an alternative authorship. But the process of writing the book, says Greenblatt, "has made me respect that preposterous fantasy—if I may say so—rather more than when I began…because I have now taken several years of hard work and 40 years of serious academic training to grapple with the difficulty of making the connections meaningful and compelling between the life of this writer and the works that he produced."

That Shakespeare met, knelt down, confessed, and took communion from Campion is the greatest stretch in the book, Greenblatt affirms, but he says it is "worth pointing out that it is within the realm of possibility. The point of that biographical fantasy riff is to show that one of the things that is missing in Shakespeare's work is a representation of sanctity. Shakespeare, if he met Campion, decided either that he didn't like him or that he didn't like that kind of sainthood. Campion was a real saint, an extraordinary figure, but I think Shakespeare saw it was the short and fast road to the scaffold and also in general thought that that level of sanctity was something he [himself] couldn't work with."

Making the Wires Touch

"When you read literary works or see them on the stage, as in the case of Shakespeare," says Stephen Greenblatt, "you are intuitively encountering another human being. It is a legitimate and valid and even necessary part of your experience to ask, 'Who is this person, who is this life?'"

During the last few decades, academics have nevertheless been "understandably allergic" to literary biography. That's because the mid-twentieth-century professionalization of literary analysis centered on developing a set of critical tools for studying the rhetorical effects being produced in a *text*, rather than on life studies. This formal method of literary criticism has the advantage of being highly accessible: the page is right in front of you. On the other hand, it eschews anything that looks like an extraneous or reductivist explanation, so it precludes looking out of a work to a life, a practice formalist critics dubbed "the biographical fallacy."

Yet the readership for formal literary criticism has been steadily shrinking, says Greenblatt, so that "certain presses, like the University of California Press, have said they are not going to publish any more of these monographs—they can't sell them." Such works are important for scholarly training, says Greenblatt, but "we're demanding that our assistant professors publish these things" even as academics themselves read fewer of them. "That signals that something is wrong with this enterprise. It runs the risk of becoming bloodless."

Greenblatt's own critical approach, a reaction to text-centered formal analysis, uses history, sociology, and anthropology to probe the cultural milieu in which works of art were produced. Dubbed "New Historicism," this approach allows a scholar to "amass a mountain of evidence" about the culture. But it, too, runs the risk of obscuring the artist by elevating the culture itself to the level of an allegorical abstraction. "You talk about 'The culture did this' and 'The culture did that,'" says Greenblatt, "but what is the culture?" In the case of his own interests, "What is the mechanism by which a particular culture is expressed in a person named Shakespeare?"

Literary biography, "the only writing about literature for which there is a serious, large audience," he notes, may prove a cure for such critical shortcomings. Ironically, it is the one genre "for which most academics feel a sort of fastidious distaste." The result is that literary biographies are written mainly by non-academics and "on the whole…are very reluctant to grapple in any serious way with why the works have taken a particular form," Greenblatt says. When literary biographies alternate chapters on the life with chapters of literary analysis, as they often do, "what this shows is that the wires aren't touching."

In bringing the artist and art together, the task is *not* to reduce the works to the life, for example by ignoring *Macbeth* and *King Lear* in order to understand what happened to Shakespeare. That is a "stupid and uninteresting project," says Greenblatt, because it forgets that Shakespeare would be of absolutely no interest to us were it not for the plays. Instead, "the question is, how is it possible to get dialectically from the life to the works and the work to the life? In the case of Shakespeare," says Greenblatt, "that's absolutely necessary because we have so little that is actually full-blooded in terms of the life record."

One of the overarching unities of Greenblatt's book is his assertion that from the crises of Shakespeare's late adolescence sprang questions—What can I do with my life? What do I believe? Whom can I love?—that he grappled with all his life, and to which he found deeper and deeper answers. Thus Greenblatt traces throughout the playwright's life the impact of his father's financial ruin, the role of recusant Catholicism, and the implications of a marriage at 18 to a pregnant 26-year-old.

But perhaps the most interesting assertion Greenblatt makes is that there is a relationship between events in Shakespeare's personal life—including the death of his 11-year-old son Hamnet, whom he effectively abandoned when he moved to London, and the impending death of his own father—and an aesthetic strategy that appears in his plays after 1601.

"In 1757," writes Greenblatt, "a master bricklayer, retiling the house that had once belonged to the Shakespeares," found between the rafters and the roof a six-page "piously Catholic spiritual testament" to which Shakespeare's father, John, had set his name. The purpose of such a document was to absolve a faithful, dying Catholic who nevertheless could not receive last rites and confession, of his sin. Under Catholicism, the living had had an ongoing relationship with the dead. At a burial, the priest would say, "I commit *thy* body to the ground." But with the Protestant Reformation came a fundamental change in the way the living were supposed to relate to the dead. The comforting Catholic traditions—"prayers, alms, and above all special Masses [that] could significantly ease the suffering, reduce the purgatorial prison term, and hasten the soul's passage to heaven"—were now illegal. Even the words of the burial service were changed to "I commit *his* body to the ground." Expanding on ideas he first presented in his earlier academic work, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt suggests that the ghost in *Hamlet*, which is said to have been Shakespeare the actor's greatest role, takes on special significance in the context of Hamnet's death and John Shakespeare's decline, especially because the names Hamnet and Hamlet were effectively interchangeable.

And in the "astonishing succession of plays" after 1601—*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*—Greenblatt argues, Shakespeare has deliberately left key plot elements out, so that these plays unfold in a manner that defies rational explanation. Greenblatt calls this "strategic opacity."

"In the years after *Hamlet*, Shakespeare…repeatedly took his source and deftly sliced away what would seem indispensable to a coherent, well-made play. Thus, though *Othello* is constructed around the remorseless desire of the ensign Iago to destroy his general, the Moor, Shakespeare refused to provide the villain with a clear and convincing explanation for his behavior," even though one is fully articulated in the source. "This excision of motive," he writes, "must have arisen from something more than technical experimentation; coming in the wake of Hamnet's death, it expressed Shakespeare's root perception of existence, his understanding of what could be said and what should remain unspoken, his preference for things untidy, damaged, and unresolved over things neatly arranged, well-made, and settled. The opacity was shaped by his experience of the world and his own inner life: his skepticism, his pain, his sense of broken rituals, his refusal of easy consolations."

> From the crises of Shakespeare's late adolescence… sprang questions that he grappled with all his life.

Greenblatt does not believe that the playwright's aesthetic strategy is reducible to a life crisis, but rather that it is "something existential, something that comes out of the deepest part of Shakespeare's life—specifically, what it meant to have abandoned his son, and for the son to have died, and to live in a culture that says it is illegal even to think that you have a continuing relationship to that person."

Will in the World is full of such richly allusive and suggestive readings. While necessarily conjectural, it provides for the lay reader a scholar's account of the playwright's life—at least, "one that I was willing to go public with," says Greenblatt. Whether or not one accepts every detail, each contributes to an overall understanding of the culture and the artist, and the result is a deeply satisfying account of Shakespeare and his age.

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Shakespeare after All

When kenan professor of English and American literature and language Marjorie Garber taught Shakespeare to Harvard graduates at an "Alumni College" several years ago, the course was so popular that it had to be repeated. Garber, says Stephen Greenblatt, is one of a group of Harvard scholars—including Helen Vendler, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Elaine Scarry, and Louis Menand [not to mention Greenblatt himself]—who are "trying to repair the gap between the world of things that are read in classrooms and assigned in universities and things that are read by people who just love life and literature and who don't read only because they are assigned it." Readers, theatergoers, and even students who want the "pentimento, the underpainting" of what they should know about Shakespeare either in performance or in print will appreciate Garber's lucid companion to the plays, *Shakespeare after All* (forthcoming from Pantheon this December). It is, as she says, "an old-fashioned kind of book about Shakespeare." But only in its form. Drawing on the Harvard lecture course she taught from 1981 to 2003, Garber brings contemporary trends in criticism and theory, including new historical, philosophical, and cultural work, to a close reading of the plays that is a fine complement to Greenblatt's biographical genealogy of the playwright's works.