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A CRITIC AT LARGE

WILL POWER

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Why Shakespeare remains the necessary poet.

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Why do we read critical biographies of Shakespeare? The reasons that we shouldn't have been ably given by his best critics. "Reader, looke / not on his Picture, but his Booke" was Ben Jonson's advice right there at the start, on the title page of the First Folio, confronting the familiar Droeshout portrait of the unprepossessing bald guy with the ruff. The advice not to look at the life continues to this day. Artists, Auden insisted, should be anonymous; Shakespeare, for all intents and purposes, is, and we should revel in it. But Auden filled his criticism with confident assertions about Shakespeare's love life, and Jonson himself couldn't help but chat compulsively about the man: he couldn't write Latin or Greek, he was a social climber, he needed an editor. Whatever our official pieties, deep down we all believe in lives. The sternest formalists are the loudest gossips, and if you ask a cultural-studies maven who believes in nothing but collective forces and class determinisms how she came to believe this doctrine, she will begin to tell you, eagerly, the story of her life.

The life and works of a man whose life is so plain and whose works are so fancy produces the kind of book that belongs less to a scholarly genre than to a performing genre, a hoop for a scholar to jump through when he no longer has anything to prove, as Lear is a role for an actor to jump through when he has done all the others. To the long run of such life-and-works books, the Harvard professor Stephen Greenblatt now offers his own reading, with the perfect punning title "Will in the World" (Norton; $26.95). Greenblatt's book is startlingly good—the most complexly intelligent and sophisticated, and yet the most keenly enthusiastic, study of the life and work taken together that I have ever read. Greenblatt knows the life and the period deeply, has no hobbyhorses to ride, and makes, one after another, exquisitely sensitive and persuasive connections between what the eloquent poetry says and what the fragmentary life suggests. A fully postmodernized critic, he knows the barriers of rhetoric and artifice that make us write the poems and then have the feelings as often as we have the feelings first. But he does not make the postmodern mistake of overestimating those barriers, either. Poets may often write things they do not feel, but they rarely feel things that they do not, sooner or later, write. The absence of one emotion in Shakespeare, the undue intensity of another are powerful indicators of a mind and a man at work.

Drawing on surprisingly fertile decades of biographical scholarship, Greenblatt is not afraid to make definite assertions. He begins with a fine, disabused picture of Stratford circa 1564, when the poet was born. Against the old notion of an expansive Elizabethan culture connected by the open English road, he draws a portrait of a society nearly Soviet, or perhaps South American, in its paranoias, public persecutions, and sudden, murderous changes of ideology.

The underlying crisis was religious. In half a century—within the lifetime of Shakespeare's father, John—England had gone through a very conservative regime of Catholicism, to an uneasy form of improvised state Catholicism under Henry VIII, through a period of radical Protestantism under King Edward VI, back to Roman Catholicism under Queen Mary, and then on to the staunchly Protestant monarchy of Elizabeth. As each sect seized power, it set about burning and disembowelling those who had been ascendant moments before. By the time Shakespeare was a young man, to be a Catholic priest at all was a capital offense.

The fear and brutality of this unending religious civil war was relieved by the richness of the surrounding folk

culture: May Days and Robin Hood pageants, morality plays in tavern courtyards and miracle plays on holidays. “Folk culture is everywhere in his work, in the web of allusions and in the underlying structure,” Greenblatt writes. And this folk culture was, for Shakespeare, inextricably tied up, as it is in the Mediterranean world to this day, with the rituals and calendar and enveloping presence of the old faith. Greenblatt is assured here, where earlier generations of scholars were reserved: little doubt remains that Shakespeare, whose father, mother, and daughter were all, at times, secret Catholics, was at some level a partisan of the old religion. (A disinterested record remarks after his decease that “he dyed a papist.”) His mother, Mary Arden, came from an old, distinguished, and ardently Catholic family. His father, John, a glovemaker (and therefore an artisan, but one who dealt in luxury goods), was a leading citizen of Stratford, an alderman and bailiff, who participated in the Protestant ascendancy, arranging to have the local church ripped up and its icons and paintings removed—but who at the same time helped make sure that the schoolmasters hired for the public school were Catholic sympathizers, and secretly signed a Roman Catholic “Spiritual Testament” and hid it in the rafters of his house. (The testament of faith was found, still concealed, in the eighteenth century.)

There is no evidence that Shakespeare was a believing or a churchgoing Catholic; in his London years, he must have gone regularly to a Protestant church, or there would have been recorded legal consequences. Catholicism seems tied up for him, as it was for Englishmen well into the nineteenth century, with a love of ceremony and theatricality, a longing for a set of rituals that Protestant sobriety was eager to forbid. It was the pagan part of Catholicism that he loved—“Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang”—and the Puritan part of Protestantism, its Malvolio-ism, that he feared. In 1575, Greenblatt tells us, when Shakespeare was eleven, a group of local artisans, exactly like those in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” wanted to put on a play for the Queen on her visit to Kenilworth Castle, just twelve miles from Stratford. Playacting had been banned, however, and they wrote to complain tactfully about “certain of their preachers, men very commendable for behavior and learning, and sweet in their sermons, but somewhat too sour in preaching away their pastime.” It was this preaching away of his favorite pastime that Shakespeare associated with Protestantism. The medieval part of his imagination, his delight in lists of local flowers (“I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows / where oxlips and the nodding violet grows”), the light of fairy tale and fable that shines through all his comedies, was haunted by the old faith and its rituals. Greenblatt uses “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” as a road map in his section on Shakespeare’s childhood, and persuasively so. The play, one of the very few in the entire canon without any previous literary model, is the most deeply autobiographical of Shakespeare’s works, in that it encompasses the three formative sources of his imagination: the fairy world of pagan folk memory and ritual; his father’s world of rustic tradesmen and artisans, joiners and tailors and glovers; and the world of young lovers having sex in the woods, which eventually got him trapped in a bad marriage—all seen from the safe point of view of the aristocratic life that he would get to know in London.

Against these sources of poetic inspiration, the wellspring of his worldly ambition—of the drive that had him writing two plays a year for twenty years and made him perhaps the wealthiest working writer in England—seems to lie in the sudden financial disasters of his father. Sometime around 1577, John Shakespeare began to absent himself from town meetings and then frantically to sell and mortgage all the properties in his wife’s inheritance. Although he lived a quarter century more—until well after his son became rich and famous—he never recovered either the land or his social position.

What happened? Greenblatt speculates that it was some compound of bad financial luck, Catholic recusancy, and drink. Whatever the source, the sense of social loss must have been crushing for young Will. John, in his heyday, had tried to buy a coat of arms for his family—a semi-legal but regular act for arriviste merchants—and then, once the hard times came, was forced to let the application lapse, a disappointment that the younger Shakespeare, it seems, never let himself forget. As D. H. Lawrence showed in his great story “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” children may not know much about their parents’ sex lives, but they always have a keen intuition about how much money there is in the house, because it touches so directly on their sense of security. Like Charles Dickens, who experienced the same lurching fall of family fortune in adolescence, Shakespeare seems to have sworn to do anything in life that he could to get himself and his family well out of the flood of fear, and safe somehow in a big bourgeois house.

Greenblatt confidently follows recent scholarship in its contention that Shakespeare—who would have received what is, by our standards, a thorough grounding in Latin and in classical literature at the Stratford public school—may have gone off around 1580 to become a tutor for two interlinked Catholic families in Lancashire, the Hoghtons and the Hesketh. If he did, two significant encounters were possible. One would have been with the soon-to-be-martyred Jesuit Edmund Campion, who was in hiding with both families at exactly that time. (In a bizarre episode, Campion bested his tormentors in a public debate before he was hanged and hacked to pieces.) If Shakespeare did meet Campion, the most charismatic Catholic of his day, the lesson he took from the encounter was that it was insane to throw your life away on a principle of faith. As Greenblatt points out, among the vast array of human types that Shakespeare drew—prostitutes and sorcerers, pickpockets and Egyptian queens—the only one he never attempted a sympathetic portrait of is the saint-fanatic, the visionary religious.

The other connection would have been theatrical. While Hoghton kept a small company of players, just next door the brilliant young Catholic Ferdinando Stanley kept a far more professional troupe. Lord Strange's Men, as they were known, included many of the actors whom Shakespeare worked with for most of his adult life. If he did meet his future colleagues then, it would explain a great deal. He returned to Stratford in 1582 and was quickly pushed into a shotgun wedding with an independent-minded older woman named Anne Hathaway. The marriage produced a daughter, born six months after the wedding day; a son; and another daughter; and a lifetime of misery. Shakespeare's "abandonment" of his family for London, in 1587—a family who were the obsessive focus of his financial advancement for the rest of his life—makes better sense if we imagine not that he was a young man running away to seek his fortune but that he was an already experienced player, trying to resume an interrupted career.

Shakespeare's double-minded, if not actually two-faced, attitude—absorption in Catholic ritual, rejection of the fanatic commitment that Catholic existence demanded—shaped his understanding and taught him a productive fear. For the rest of his life, he trimmed to power. Where the other major writers of his age got caught up in the great debate of the time—Ben Jonson became a Catholic and spent time in prison; Christopher Marlowe got so mixed up in Protestant espionage that it probably cost him his life—Shakespeare made a point and, in the end, an artistic virtue of evading any position and keeping his own counsel. All Shakespeare's tragic heroes—Othello, Macbeth, Lear, even Hamlet—have plenty of courage; what they lack is prudence and judgment. Between bravery and craft, Shakespeare always prefers craft, and between stupid courage and intelligent cowardice he is always with those who run away, with Falstaff, not Hotspur. He had seen—on a pitiful scale through the example of his father, on a horrific one through the example of the Catholic martyrs—what conviction coupled with a lack of realism could get you.

Shakespeare was something close to an overnight sensation before there were any. He began working in London in the late fifteen-eighties, and by the early nineties he was among the most famous writers in the country. He managed, as few have done since, to play a perfect lowbrow-middlebrow-highbrow trifecta. His fame rested on his popular comedies: "The Comedy of Errors" and "The Taming of the Shrew." His middlebrow fame was made by his history plays, particularly by the now rarely performed three plays on the life of Henry VI—the snobbish wits of the day were impressed by those, and began writing history plays of their own. He made a highbrow and aristocratic reputation with his polished neoclassical poems, "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece."

It was an extraordinary social position to have attained so quickly. As a playwright, Shakespeare was the "ordinary poet" of the company, then called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, that became the leading show-business concern in London. (It could fill a theatre with three thousand people at a time when all London had a population of barely two hundred thousand.) At the same time, he was a pet of the aristocrats; an old tradition has the Earl of Southampton giving him a gift of a thousand pounds, an enormous sum. So much success so soon made him enemies; and perhaps the most striking chapter in Greenblatt's book is that on Shakespeare's

rancorous relations with the "University wits," and particularly with Robert Greene. It is well known that the first reference to Shakespeare as an author is a bitterly poisonous attack that Greene penned on his deathbed, in 1592. Greene was the charismatic center of the group of college-educated writers who had come down to London from Oxford and Cambridge in the fifteen-eighties. Although Marlowe was the most impressive writer among them, Greene was the wits' wit, their Peter Cook, the man they all looked up to even in the absence of any work equal to his talent. When the ailing, impoverished Greene condemned Shakespeare as "an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers," who is "in his own conceit the only Shakescene in a country," the charge was clear: this newcomer was a plagiarist, a hustler, an egotist who first courted and then stole from the real talents.

Greenblatt makes two arguments about this ugly business. First, that the Greene attack is a reflection of Shakespeare's early absorption into Greene's circle—there was no other circle worth being absorbed into, and Shakespeare's competitive admiration for Marlowe especially is written all over his plays—and of the anger of Greene and his group at Shakespeare's refusal to give them the deference they felt they deserved. They began by taking in the young country-man player and, Greenblatt observes, "probably thought that he was rather naïve and guileless and that they could easily take advantage of him." Soon they discovered that the naïve young outsider was just as ambitious as they were, and far more able and adaptable.

Greenblatt's more profound argument is that a lasting record of Shakespeare's engagement with Greene lies in the figure of Falstaff, and in the relationship between Falstaff and Hal. "The deeper we plunge into the tavern world of Falstaff," he writes, "the closer we come to the world of Greene; his wife, Doll; his mistress, Em; her thuggish brother, Cutting Ball; and the whole crew." All the contemporary accounts emphasize Greene's wit, his enormous appetite for food and sack, his size, and his habit of haunting brothels and taverns. The contemporary records of Greene are so Falstaffian that one exasperated inventory of his masquerades seems to come right out of "Henry IV": "a wild head full of mad brain and a thousand crotchets: a Scholar, a Discourser, a Courtier, a Ruffian, a Gamester, a Lover, a Soldier, a Traveler, a Merchant, a Broker, an Artificer, a Botcher, a Pettifogger, a Player, a Cozener, a Railer, a Beggar, an Omnigatherum, a Gay Nothing."

This identification is a triumph of biographical criticism and a proof of its real value. The point, as Greenblatt emphatically argues, is "not to strip away the reimagining, as if the life sources were more important than the metamorphoses but, rather, to enhance a sense of wonder at Shakespeare's creation . . . that took elements from the wasted life of Robert Greene and used them to fashion the greatest comic character in English literature." One need not accept the identification to value the discovery. Biographical criticism may be a practice without certainties, but it is not a game without rules. Each time we come closer to Shakespeare's life, we escape from the aridity of formal criticism or the cheap generalities of social history into a recognizable world of real experience. When A. L. Rowse insists that Emilia Bassano Lanier, the tempestuous, adulterous, musical, poetic wife of a court musician, was the original "Dark Lady" of the Sonnets, we can buy it or not, as we please. But the very existence of a woman like Emilia demonstrates that the clichéd images of Elizabethan women, as subservient wives or unruly whores, are too grossly tuned to capture the reality of Shakespeare's world. Whether she is the Dark Lady or not, Emilia is a dark lady. Good biographical criticism dissolves determinisms, and replaces them not with gossipy puzzle-solution certainties but with glimpses of life as it is lived, and art as it is made. Criticism is always a map of possibilities, roads taken, neglected, and cut fresh, and the map of art is never more vivid than when the possibilities of a period are incarnated as the people in a life.

In 1596, when Shakespeare had probably written "Romeo and Juliet" and "Richard II" but was at least four years away from beginning the sequence of tragedies that we still value most, he felt confident enough in his social elevation to revive his father's old application for a coat of arms. He got it, complete with the defensive motto "Non Sanz Droict," "Not Without Right"—meaning, presumably, not without the right to have it. (Greenblatt, a skilled, close reader, notes that the clerk has in one draft of the sketch quietly added a comma, changing the meaning: "No, Without Right.") He put up with a lot of ridicule for the social climbing—Ben Jonson wrote a play where a country bumpkin takes the motto "Not Without Mustard"—and didn't seem to care. Shakespeare seems to have moved in very fancy circles while making a point of sticking to small rented

rooms above dubious little businesses. Most of his money seems to have gone to buy land back in Stratford.

It was an odd arrangement; two full days' ride away, in London, Shakespeare couldn't have spent much time with the family he was providing for. Yet Greenblatt argues persuasively (as Joyce had Stephen do in "Ulysses") that the death of his only son, Hamnet, at the age of eleven, in 1596, was the crushing and transforming blow in his life. The heartbreaking lines about a lost child that begin "Grief fills the room up of my absent child, / Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me," from "King John," were written just afterward, and before long he began a new version of an old revenge play bearing a variant of his son's name.

At the heart of the play, and very much against the grain of his sources, Shakespeare inserted a spiritual issue that, given the religious tensions of the Shakespeare family, must have been tormenting him at the time of the boy's death and burial: the problem of Purgatory. Good Catholics like his father—who would die soon afterward, and whose personal testament, hidden in the rafters, is agonizingly clear on the point—believed that most souls, including children's, went to Purgatory (the entrance was believed to be a cave beneath Ireland) and could be released quickly only if priests were paid to say Masses. Shakespeare must have been confronted by his parents with the demand that this be done for his son—a thing that Will would probably have thought futile and certainly have known to be dangerous. From the almost unbearable nexus of dead son and dying father, he leaped into the dark space of a play about a son struggling to set his father's soul free.

Greenblatt makes a resonant point about the absence of ceremony in Protestant England and Shakespeare's response to it. To dramatize, to make a play of, this knot of griefs and obsessions was the only way he could find a ceremony adequate to them. Theatre was his religion, both in the sense that it was what he cared most about and in the sense that the ritual of theatre was the only available substitute for the annealing force of public Catholic ritual, as, in one form or another, it remains today.

What makes "Hamlet" different from Shakespeare's previous work is the way it brings out a complete inner life. Before Hamlet, soliloquy is mostly just exposition of motive. ("Why am I acting this way? Well you may ask. I'm doing it because . . ."—as in "Richard III.") With Hamlet, as Greenblatt very neatly puts it, we get "an intense representation of inwardness called forth by a new technique of radical excision." In the original story that Shakespeare drew on, Hamlet's madness and his delay make complete narrative sense: he feigns madness because he is still a child when his father's murder by his uncle becomes publicly known; he waits for years, acting like an idiot, until the moment is right for him to strike and claim the throne. Shakespeare, by compressing the plot into a matter of days, making Hamlet full-grown, and having the murder a secret known only to Hamlet, through the Ghost, makes Hamlet's show of madness not just superfluous but truly self-destructive—it does nothing but draw suspicious attention to him. In any case, Shakespeare's Hamlet is half-crazy and suicidal before he even sees the Ghost, and most of his soliloquies, instead of furthering our understanding of the action, are at direct cross-purposes to it. (Hamlet knows very well that a traveller *has* returned from that bourne from which no traveller returns.) What Hamlet says replaces the clear exposition of motive with a kind of chattering, compulsive, image-chasing interior monologue of dreads and desires.

Greenblatt shows that this device is key to the mature tragedies that follow, including "Othello" and "King Lear." In the original stories, the motives of each of the key characters were perfectly clear: Iago, in the source, is in love with Desdemona; Cordelia refuses to speak because she has been quarrelling with her father about the man she is going to marry. Their behavior is as transparently motivated as that of people in melodramas. Shakespeare, in each case, eliminates the motive in ways that make a mess of the story, and allows it to become something more than a story. His characters have drives that are rooted in who they are, not motives generated by a plot. "What you know you know," Iago says at last to the man whose life he has destroyed, and there is no more he can say.

The compulsive nature of the characters' actions allows for both black comedy—Lear can be mocked by his fool because his behavior is ridiculous in a way that Oedipus' is not—and human sympathy; we feel sorry for Lear in a way that we never feel sorry for Oedipus. In Shakespearean tragedy, it didn't have to happen: rescue was one call or timely doubt or conversation away. By cancelling out the ordinary neatness of narrative explanation, Shakespeare does not merely mystify his people, as the Mona Lisa is made mysterious by the

occluding fog of her *sfumato;* he humanizes them. We know them the way we know real people—not as illustrations of some principle, or as exemplary remote figures who have "desires" and "arcs" of success and failure, but as compulsion machines capable of charm.

This is not, of course, a formula that can be universally applied; if it could, every melodrama could become Shakespearean just by muddying up the plot. The questions forced on every screenwriter—where is the character's motive? what does he "want"?—are exactly the questions Shakespeare ignored. (When Hollywood melodrama does touch the edge of the tragic, it is nearly always through the removal of motive: Why does Michael ruin his own values and dearest hopes by shooting the policeman and Sollozzo? Why does Gittes pursue Noah? All that keeps "Citizen Kane" from tragedy is Rosebud.) With Shakespeare, the inner life is no longer a condition of narrative but one of existence. They are, therefore they think.

A chapter of Greenblatt's book is devoted to the horrible death of Ruy Lopez, the Queen's physician, and its consequences for Shakespeare's imagination of the "other." Jewish by birth though not by faith, Lopez was found guilty of an attempt on the Queen's life. (He was almost certainly framed.) When, on the scaffold, he cried plaintively that he "loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ," the mob merely laughed at what they took to be an equivocation, before he was ripped apart.

Greenblatt conjectures that Shakespeare was there and was haunted by the laughter, and that "The Merchant of Venice" is in part a response to his shiver. Greenblatt revives the great, too little known speech from a manuscript of a many-authored play about Thomas More, which includes lines, perhaps actually in Shakespeare's hand, where More protests the expulsion of foreigners from England:

Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage
Plodding to th' ports and coasts for transportation. . . .
By this pattern
Not one of you should live an agèd man,
For other ruffians as their fancies wrought
With selfsame hand, self reasons, and self right
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
Would feed on one another.

Shakespeare, in this view, was an instinctive liberal humanist, because, in a world of sharks, he could imagine what it felt like to be sharked, and knew how to bracket experience—to ask, What is it like for *them*?

Yet we also feel that the range of his sympathies is contoured by the inheritance of his world view. Shakespeare, the small landholder, believed in order, authority, and convention, and was scared to death of riots, mobs, spies, and revolutionary change. (When the landholders of Stratford decided to "enclose" the old commons and seize it from the local peasants—a kind of rich man's riot—Shakespeare refused to take any side.) He might have grimaced at the scaffold; he might have shared a mordant snicker with the crowd; and, most likely, he might have just stayed away.

His sympathy for Shylock, after all, is no different from his sympathy for Edgar in "King Lear," or even for Richard III; a plausible villain should always have plausible-sounding motives. It will not do to make Shakespeare too energetic a participant in our own civic creed. We can, though, distinguish between the expression of a self-conscious "humanism" that was not yet fully available to him or to anyone in his time, and the instinctive expansion of human sympathy that is the natural consequence of trying to make all the parts in a play sound like real people. You can't make "The Taming of the Shrew" into a feminist comedy, because it isn't. But you can't help making Katherine an attractive and articulate woman, because she is.

By 1610, Shakespeare had been writing two plays a year for almost twenty years, and though he was obviously enlivened by the theatre—he was always ready to take on a job, even one as slight as designing and painting a shield for a mock tournament—he must have sighed to get out. In 1597, he had bought New Place,

the second-largest house in Stratford. Though he was, by 1610, hardly an old man even by the shorter-breathed standards of his day, the romance of retirement had always been dear to his heart. As Montaigne, one of his favorite contemporary writers, believed, retiring from the world was what a gentleman did. He may also have thought, like Dickens dreaming of Gad's Hill, and Twain in Hartford—those two other intuitive masters who swept their worlds through comic genius and then deepened and darkened in ways that no one could have imagined at first—that his anxieties about social status and family could be resolved if he became a benevolent paterfamilias in a small suburban town.

In the wake of his son's death, Shakespeare had placed all his hopes on his gifted daughter Susanna and her husband, a much respected physician-intellectual. Susanna, who, when she died, many years later, was said to have had some of her father's wit, was clearly devoted to him. The father-son triangles that dominate his middle-period writing—Hal, Falstaff, and the King; Hamlet, the Ghost, and Claudius; Lear, Edmund, and Gloucester—disappear from his last plays. What takes their place is fairy-tale-like stories of a father finding solace in a lost daughter—actually lost, as in "The Winter's Tale," or lost through being overlooked (Miranda is still a little girl in Prospero's eyes, and then, suddenly, she isn't).

The idea of retirement worked out no better for Shakespeare than it did for those two other native geniuses. Shakespeare's younger daughter, Judith, made a very bad marriage—he had to fiddle with his will on his deathbed to prevent her husband from getting his hands on her inheritance—and the long retirement was short. He died in 1616, and though the monument that was built to him clearly shows the same man as the Droeshout portrait, there is something about his resemblance to a fat burgher that suggests diminishment, and the words on his tombstone, "Blessed be the man that spares these stones, / And cursed be he that moves my bones," were, Greenblatt chillingly argues, a last-minute attempt to make sure that his wife would not be buried beside him.

It was only word magic, but he liked it. Prospero had transformed the world "By my so potent art. But this rough magic / I here abjure." He makes this quiet announcement right after listing his triumphs. The simple fulcrum on which that greatest of valedictory speeches is balanced—potent art / rough magic—is a six-syllable key to Shakespeare's double consciousness. Drama can seem, can even be, incredibly potent art—very big stuff, the work of magi and majesties, reanimating the past and restoring losses. But in the end it is just rough magic—show business, the craft of the conjuror and the juggler and the player, making shadows in candlelight. Shakespeare was Yeatsian in his shamanistic self-confidence, Audenish in his self-mocking modesties. The line of self-irony that runs through him, and which can give him a certain distance from the melodrama even in his most tragic situations (actors have to work hard not to get a laugh when Lear says, apropos the naked Edgar, "Has his daughters brought him to this pass?"), goes right to the ground of his being. This worldly double sight is present in his constant "democratization" of hard new words and simple old ones—audiences get the plays today even if they understand only every other line, because everything is deliberately said three times over, plain and fancy and in between—and in the admixture of tragedy and comedy, in the pathos of happiness just missed. (Hamlet really might have been happy with Ophelia, as Oedipus would never have been with Jocasta.) Shakespeare shows us that you don't have to look from on high in order to see it all.

Sky change and sea change, magic and art: the standard thing to say is that each age makes a Shakespeare in its own image. Yet the biographical portrait, from John Aubrey's brief one in the sixteen-eighties to John Mortimer's television series in the nineteen-seventies, is in its main elements remarkably consistent, and so is the critical assessment—the tonic notes are struck on different instruments but sound the same scale, from Jonson to Johnson and beyond. He was a genius at comedy, a free-flowing natural who would do anything for a joke or a pun, and whom life and ability bent toward tragedy. He evolved—and this is the note that holds fast through Keats and Coleridge, Matthew Arnold and Virginia Woolf—a matchless all-sidedness and negative capability, which could probe two ideas at once and never quite come down on the "side" of either: he was a man in whom a temperamental timidity and caution blossomed artistically into the nearest thing we have to universality.

Greenblatt ends his book with an evocation of the ordinariness of Shakespeare, now seen as a willed

ordinariness, a determination not to be wild like the cavaliers or snobbish like the wits, but to see the world as it is. This ordinariness, which runs through all the portraits, is what makes him unique among reigning poets. To have Dante as your reigning poet is a noble but not exactly a *daily* sort of thing, while Racine and Molière, splitting the honors between them, help give French literary culture its neatly bifurcated shape. Shakespeare's normalcy is not philistine or easy—in his plays, people lose hands, eyes, wives, minds, lives—and it entails a conservative obeisance to the common order: he believes in kings, bosses, authority. But he does not believe *too much* in those things, and in this lies the beginning of sanity. His skepticism is rooted not in a moral principle, much less a religious dogma, but in the observer's eye for how many daily things—the cycle of seasons, lust, and laughter—escape a single rule:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney sweepers, come to dust.

Even his song of mortality moves in a circle of leases and ashes and paydays. The double life that Montaigne writes about, and which he experienced high up in his tower, Shakespeare experienced in rented rooms and summer visits. As readers and writers, we remain blessed that the reigning poet of the language is so vocationally, so happily, the ordinary poet of our company. ✦