



William Shakespeare: The Man Behind the Genius

By Anthony Holden

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Anthony Holden doesn't pull any punches in his choice of biographical subjects. Having already taken on the Prince of Wales, Laurence Olivier, and Tchaikovsky, this time Holden has gone for no less than the Bard himself. Dismissing claims that there is nothing left to say about the poet and playwright, Holden's bold study argues that, on the contrary, the archives are rich with traces of Shakespeare as husband, father, actor, dramatist, poet, and Stratford lad made good. Holden also argues that "if each generation recreates Shakespeare in its own image," then we need a new version for the 21st century. He obliges with a racy, incident-packed account of the glovemaker's son who rose to subsequent immortality via the stage of Elizabethan London. In addition to poring over the established evidence, Holden makes some controversial but intriguing claims. Not only was Shakespeare a covert Catholic who spent his so-called lost years as a budding actor in Catholic households in Lancashire under the name of "Shakeshafte" but he also suffered from sexually transmitted diseases, experienced a nervous breakdown, fathered an illegitimate son via his middle-aged landlady, and sailed close to the political wind with what Holden sees as his residual Catholic and "republican instincts." It's all very entertaining--if at times far out on its own interpretative limb--and a lively and refreshing approach to the Bard as an Elizabethan man behaving badly. *William Shakespeare: The Man Behind the Genius* may not be for all time, but it resonates richly with our times. --Jerry Brotton

From Publishers Weekly

First-time bardographer (and biographer of Olivier and Prince Charles), Holden colorfully if superficially fills in the blanks between Shakespeare's vast output of verse and the paltry official record, which leaves much about the man to speculation. Unlike Park Honan's recent, soberly deductive life, and more in tune with Harold Bloom's and Anthony Burgess's zealous conjectures, Holden's kitchen-sink approach packs in his own hypotheses based on circumstantial evidence, recent biographic theories and all the hoary old traditions. Regarding the early "lost years," Holden supports the Lancashire hypothesis, that the young Catholic William "Shakeshafte" was a tutor and amateur actor in the stately home of a recusant Lancastrian nobleman. Holden further speculates that the legend of the deer-poaching Will's escape to London after a run-in with an anti-Catholic Warwickshire knight had as much to do with religious persecution as theft. As Shakespeare's life progresses, Holden's guesswork becomes less convincing in explaining such mysteries as the identities of the sonnets' Dark Lady (just an amalgamation) and their dedicatee, "Mr. W.H." (his brother-in-law, William Hathaway). With the better established facts of the Globe's theatrical world, Holden's biography loses some of its energy. Sometimes reading dubiously between the lines of Shakespeare's plays, such as projecting Macbeth's insomnia on the Bard, Holden sums up the actor-playwright-poet's final change of roles into Stratford's first citizen. 8 pages color, 8 pages b&w illus. not seen by PW. (July) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

A host of biographers have sharpened their quills to connect the dots of Shakespeare's life, and to this rank Holden, a journalist for London's Times and Observer and author of tributes to the royal family, can now be added. With a story full of the characters of the age, Holden crafts a lively and interesting Shakespeare anchored to his times. He brings a sense of immediacy to the best of his chapters and sometimes almost transports one to the Bard's time. Perhaps this is enough for a popular biography. And a popular biography is what Holden set out to write. However, it becomes apparent that Holden is not a Shakespearean critic. While drawing upon the bard's work to explicate his life might work when contemporary events are tied to the play, it is less successful when used to explain events in Shakespeare's childhood and early life. Nonetheless, this

is recommended as a popular biography. If your collection needs an outstanding biography of more heft, then stick with Samuel Schoenbaum's William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life (Oxford Univ. Pr. will be releasing a revised edition this month).

-DNeal Wyatt, Chesterfield P.L., VA

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