



Shakespeare and Co.: Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and the Other Players in His Story

Stanley Wells

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From one of our most distinguished Shakespeare scholars, here is a fascinating, lively, anecdotal work of forensic biography that firmly places Shakespeare within the hectic, exhilarating world in which he lived and wrote.

Theater in Shakespeare's day was a burgeoning "growth industry." Everyone knew everyone else, and they all sought to learn, borrow or steal from one another. As Stanley Wells suggests: "To see Shakespeare as one among a great company is only to enhance our sense of what made him unique."

Wells explores Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, both behind the scenes and in front of the curtain. He examines how the great actors of the time influenced Shakespeare's work. He writes about the lives and works of the other major writers of Shakespeare's day and discusses Shakespeare's relationships—sometimes collaborative—with each of them. And throughout, Wells shares his vast knowledge of the period, re-creating and celebrating the sheer richness and variety of Shakespeare's social and cultural milieus.

Shakespeare and Co. gives us a new understanding of how the Bard achieved unparalleled singularity as the greatest writer in the language.

Shakespeare and Co.: Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and the Other Players in His Story Details

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From Reader Review Shakespeare and Co.: Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and the Other Players in His Story for online ebook

Kate says

Truly enjoy this discussion of the active playwrights of Shakespeare's period. Covers a bit of the biographies of others, and how they were borrowing plot, play structures and topics from one another. Also discusses the possible collaborations between Shakespeare and other playwrights.

Gave me a much better sense of the "theater scene" from about 1590 to 1620 or so.

Definitely a book of details, and I enjoyed reading some passages from other writers' plays.

Kelly says

There are some good tidbits in here that I wasn't aware of previously (like the impressment of boys into theatrical service against their will). The main advantages of this book, though, are the mini-biographies of Marlowe, Dekker, Johnson, Middleton, and Fletcher. Biographies of Shakespeare tend to touch lightly on these (and other) colleagues, so it's good to get a little more here. There's a lot on these pages about the layers of authorship within individual plays, and while the Arden (and other) editions do a great job of breaking authorship issues down, it's nice to have these issues addressed in a single volume; and one which takes contextual relationships between playwrights into account.

Michael Cayley says

A good and readable book on the theatrical world in which Shakespeare operated and on major contemporaries who influenced him, collaborated with him, and/or interacted with him and his plays. The other playwrights treated in some depth are Marlowe, Dekker, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and Webster, with quite a lot of quotations. There is little in the book that is specially original, and the account of the circumstances leading up to Marlowe's death can be questioned: but Stanley Wells gives a very good overview, and if he persuades some readers to discover how good some of the plays of his contemporaries are, so much the better.

Eric says

For those who might be interested in the personalities of the Elizabethan dramatic world beyond William Shakespeare, Wells' book offers a nice overview. Of course, the era's finest playwrights are placed in the familiar Shakespearean context, but this book serves as a series of mini-biographies for those who want a quick, but thorough, overview. Biographies could be - and have been - written about major players such as Marlowe and Jonson, so anyone seeking an in-depth look at these popular figures might be disappointed. But lesser-known writers such as Dekker and the team of Beaumont and Fletcher get a turn in the spotlight here, shedding much-needed light on them. The book probably works best as an overview, perhaps an introduction

to more thorough research. But it is a quick, easy and informative read.

Wendy says

This is an engaging overview of Shakespeare's relationships with his contemporaries. I particularly enjoyed the chapter on how Shakespeare might have been influenced by the skills and personalities of the actors he wrote for, as well as various discussions of Shakespeare's collaborations. I had no idea that Shakespeare had collaborated with other writers on *Pericles*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Measure for Measure*, among other works. Nor did I know that the text of *Macbeth* as we now have it probably contains a number of revisions made by Thomas Middleton.

Wells is good at presenting the big picture and at providing colorful details without getting bogged down in minutiae. This is a great book for general readers who happen to be a bit curious about Shakespeare and his time. For those who want to dig deeper, there are extensive notes, a bibliography, and a small selection of period documents reproduced at the back of the book.

The major downside of this book is that reading it will fill you with curiosity about a great many plays that are rarely read these days and even more rarely performed.

Rachel says

Pleasantly written series of anecdotes about Renaissance playwrights, full of wit and understanding.

Ed says

Stanley Wells knocks everyone off his pedestal in this linked collection of articles and shows us how the competitive cut and thrust of the burgeoning theater business was carried out. It is a welcome summing up of some of his work over the past several decades in which he has had a very successful career as a Shakespeare scholar. He has written a lot, been honored by the great and the good in the Shakespeare biz and has edited TWO collected works. There is nothing terribly new here--he is of the opinion that Marlowe was killed in a drunken brawl and not as part of a greater conspiracy by Essex and that he was only denounced by Kyd after a day of torture. Robert Greene shows up to use a few of his dying breaths to accused Shakespeare plagiarism.

What makes this book exciting is the picture that Wells paints of the English theater at the end of the 16th century and beginning of the 17th. Plays were written, learned, blocked and put on stage constantly. Companies vied with each other to get the most popular actors and the best dramatists. Royal and noble patronage was available and avidly sought and everyone had to stay a step ahead of the Lord Chancellor. It was time that shaped our language and literature, intensely creative and insanely competitive. No one knew what they were doing, of course--no one said "That Hamlet is quite a play. I'll bet that people will be reading it 400 years from now."

Wells depicts this literary and dramatic explosion very well--it is clear that he not only knows his subject backward and forward but loves it as well.

Julia says

Very helpful introduction to the theatrical milieu of Shakespeare.

Annett says

An interesting read about Shakespeare and his contemporaries even though it is sometimes far too detailed when it comes to the various plays. Stanley Wells, however, manages to create an atmosphere that makes Shakespeare's times move a little bit closer and the dealings of his days more understandable while not even starting to discuss the author question.

Oliver says

Kyd, Lyly, Marlowe, Middleton, Fletcher, Beaumont, Jonson. Some of those names are known, while others are obscure, but all were contemporary dramatists of Wm. Shakespeare. This book focuses on these "other" writers who borrowed and collaborated with each other and with the Bard of Avon (I did not know that several of Shakespeare's plays were co-written). There is also discussion of theater life in the 16th and 17th centuries--e.g., writing plays could prove quite profitable and, oh yeah, the women flocked to these guys. Further, the book points out the social milieu under which these plays were written and performed, notably the need to comply with royal censors--or face prison or worse; the role that the plague played in when/where the plays arose. All that being said, the book, for me, was somewhat of a slog. Wells presupposes the reader has great knowledge and recollection of Shakespeare's plays, something I do not have.

Brian Willis says

The monolith that is Shakespeare bestrides his narrow world like a Colossus, but the truth is that Shakespeare worked and, indeed, collaborated with a number of talented playwrights who wrote impressive plays that should be recognized. Although Marlowe and Jonson's stories are fairly well known, this book excels especially when telling the lesser known stories of Dekker, Middleton, Fletcher and Beaumont, and Webster. If you would like to know more about those other playwrights, but especially without searching out lengthy or obscure biographies, this book is perfect for you, giving brief biographies as well as appreciative excerpts of the best of these works of Shakespeare's peers.

Emily says

This book taught me more about Shakespeare than almost anything else I've read in the last few years. It answered my questions about the little eyases in Hamlet and the boy companies that were popular at the time. It gave me a profoundly vivid picture of what it was like in the world of theatre at the time. I loved getting a sense of the landscape of the Shakespearean theatre community. Because of COURSE it was a

community. It was THEATRE. That is what we do. We run around in communities. Hating each other, Loving each other, Working together, NOT working together. I loved getting a sense of Shakespeare as a collaborator in a richly vibrant time. Genius, yes. But surrounded by a world of geniuses. And a working theatre maker.

And I now have a long list of plays by his contemporaries that I really want to get my hands on and read.

(Thanks to my brother for giving me this book!)

Jonfaith says

As in a ruin we it call

One thing to be blown up, or fall;

Or to our end like way may have

By a flash of lightning, or a wave;

So Love's inflamèd shaft or brand

May kill as soon as Death's cold hand;

Except Love's fires the virtue have

To fight the frost out of the grave -- Ben Jonson

The heartland is frozen this darkened morn. There may be a few giggles about now in that special place in Hell.

This was an elusive book. Wells attempts to grasp Shakespeare and his contemporaries and situate such into a tight focus, unfortunately without much supporting documentation. What is left is conjecture. I thoroughly enjoyed the sections featuring Marlowe and Jonson. The areas where Wells attempts to divine the collaboration of Fletcher and Middleton into later works from the Bard proved a bit ponderous. This isn't a scholarly analysis but a popular survey larded with some informed guessing.

Nathan says

Wow! Wells is a very good writer and this book was engaging, fascinating, and well-written! I leaned more about Shakespeare, more about some other playwrights I knew little about, and was introduced to playwrights I had never heard of! So glad I read this book!!!

Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

As a Shakespeare dilettante, I find some of the attributions regarding collaborations slightly worrying. I'm not quite sure why this has been worthy of research. One of the more risible of 'evidence' put forward, I forget where, was that Middleton was co-author of "All's Well That Ends Well" (incidentally Wells also professes this attribution). The argument was: 'As an example, the word "ruttish" appears in the play, meaning lustful - and its only other usage at that time is in a work by Middleton' or something to that effect. So, creative writers are supposed never to have used a word only once in their entire oeuvre? This is quite typical of academics who have no idea how creative writers - and particularly dramatists - work. But the

most preposterous of all must surely be their citing of the stage direction 'all': "'All" (preferred by Middleton) only occurs twice in the Folio - both times in All's Well.' Playwrights were writing their plays on the hoof to impossible deadlines. Stylometric analysis is a method which has been seriously challenged and is evidently flawed because it takes no account of how writers write. Only a few obsessives really care, those of us who can bring ourselves to watch Shakespeare, generally just enjoy and don't really worry about whether he might have had assistance from this or that writer. We know he collaborated as a matter of habit, so one for the historians to mull over, the rest of us will focus on what is best, the often-astounding dialogue...

Statistics is a very dangerous tool for someone to use who is not experienced with the kind of mathematical artifacts which can be produced in complex analyses. It is VERY easy to amend the modelling parameters slightly to produce the answer you are hoping for, and few people will ever delve into the workings of a complex statistical algorithm to see whether the weights put on different variables are justifiable or not. In practice, skilled English professors are not going to have the mathematical experience to challenge the findings.

Gill says

Some bits I knew already - this is a very good general introduction for the non-specialist.

effie says

Listen, I loved tf outta this book. Big ol' Shakespeare nerd since literally age 5 (shout out to children's illustrated Tempest and Midsummer's!!), and this was still a page-turner. The best best BEST chapters are the ones about everybody ELSE - as Mr. Wells mentions numerous times, Billy Shakes was constantly referred to by contemporaries as 'the boring one' compared to the rest of the Elizabethan writing crew, who were straight up murdering people in the streets and getting arrested every five minutes for disorderly conduct. In particular, I read the Marlowe chapter like six times and literally wrote down notes #queero #spycon #legend

Ella says

Super fun and gossipy, and I totally want to read some Marlowe and Webster now.

Abel Guerrero says

Written in a brisk, engaging style, this book provides a useful overview of how Shakespeare fits into the theatrical scene of his day. There's some very interesting content about collaboration, along with biographical accounts of his contemporaries' lives, works, and writing styles.

Bob says

An excellent overview of the other playwrights who populated London while Shakespeare wrote. Stanley Wells has a lot of praise for them, and points out that there was lots of collaboration among the playwrights (Shakespeare too on occasion). London had a thriving theatre business in the late Elizabethan and Jacobin eras... the need for a constant flow of plays was extraordinary...and many many plays are lost... This book is an important correction to the idea that only Shakespeare is worth reading
