

# The Genius of Shakespeare

*Jonathan Bate*

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## **The Genius of Shakespeare** Jonathan Bate

This fascinating book by one of Britain's most acclaimed young Shakespeare scholars explores the extraordinary staying-power of Shakespeare's work.

Bate opens by taking up questions of authorship, asking, for example, Who was Shakespeare, based on the little documentary evidence we have? Which works really are attributable to him? And how extensive was the influence of Christopher Marlowe?

Bate goes on to trace Shakespeare's canonization and near- deification, examining not only the uniqueness of his status among English-speaking readers but also his effect on literate cultures across the globe.

Ambitious, wide-ranging, and historically rich, this book shapes a provocative inquiry into the nature of genius as it ponders the legacy of a talent unequalled in English letters. A bold and meticulous work of scholarship, *The Genius of Shakespeare* is also lively and accessibly written and will appeal to any reader who has marveled at the Bard and the enduring power of his work.

## **The Genius of Shakespeare Details**


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Author : Jonathan Bate

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## **MK says**

This book blew my mind when I first read it and its still the book I recommend to anyone who wants to learn more about Shakespeare. The first 5 chapters look at Shakespeare in the context of his contemporaries, the rest of the book looks at how we look at him ever since. Heavily researched but extremely readable.

I also have this book to thank for introducing me to Lope de Vega, another author who should be in the literature canon but because he wrote in Spanish, is not.

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## **Michael Lydon says**

I never would have guessed that a thorough understanding of Shakespeare's aspectuality and performativity required a primer in quantum mechanics and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, but by book's end it somehow all makes sense. Despite its deceptively stale, broad title, this study is written by a scholar keenly aware of the critical pratfalls that have plagued Shakespeareans in the past. Bate's conclusions on the Bard are properly nuanced and non-dogmatic, but at the same time still pointed enough to be relevant. They effect a novel reading of the plays that values their adaptability to changing cultural circumstances while never robbing them of intrinsic meaning. Some strange structural anomalies and baffling tangents aside, this is an indispensable resource for people who want to experience Shakespeare as the craftsman, humanist, and cartographer of the human mind he is celebrated as today, and not just another dead white European male.

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## **Sara says**

not really a scholarly monograph, but not pop history, either. If you've been away from Shakespeare as long as I have, this is a great way to situate him and his work. My favorite takeaways were 1. the discussion of the Romantic fallacy of reading Elizabethan sonnets as autobiographical, and 2. the work on ambiguity, or the simultaneous validity of contradictory readings. An enjoyable and educational read!

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## **Fhsanders54 says**

The genius of Jonathan Bate more like! The first half of the book spends time looking at all the influences upon Shakespeare from reading the classics at grammar school to the university writers and scholars such as Christopher Marlowe. He also shows how Shakespeare borrowed hugely from literature through a wide range of books and Chronicles. The second half of the book looks at his "afterlife", his adoption and adaptation by the Restoration, the Romantic movement, the German nation and ultimately the world. His work is shown to have inspired all other arts, whether it be poetry, music, novels or indeed art itself. A beautifully written book by a total devotee and expert

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## **Roman Clodia says**

This isn't a biography but is one of the best general introductions to Shakespeare and how we can think about his works that I have read. It would be perfect for both general popular readers and undergraduates, and takes an eminently – and refreshingly – sensible approach to issues such as the authorship controversy, canonicity, and 'global Shakespeare'.

The 'genius' of the title is itself a play on words since genius in Shakespeare's time meant not the transcendence that we give it but more a sort of characteristic disposition or natural character as taken from the Latin 'ingenium'.

Bate, then, offers a diverse, expansive and shrewd look at what Shakespeare means in the world. He unpicks the variety of ways in which Shakespeare has been received and appropriated as both the upholder of establishment values (e.g. by successive Tory governments) and as a liberal, possibly rebellious or unorthodox voice.

Engaging and intelligent, this is an excellent and accessible insight into some of the ways Shakespeare is currently thought about in academia.

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## **John Purcell says**

This is a very readable, thought provoking book. It is certainly a book for lifelong lovers of Shakespeare and yet, is also, due to Jonathan Bate's enthusiasm and his light-hearted approach, a perfect introduction to the life and work of the Bard for those who have decided its time to know more.

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## **Nicholas Whyte says**

<http://nhw.livejournal.com/1143903.html>[return][return]A jolly good look at various aspects of Shakespeare, trying to identify what, if anything. The first half includes a chapter on the documents we have relating to Shakespeare, another on the Sonnets (where, against his will, Bate identifies his own candidate for the Dark Lady), a brilliant one on the authorship question, an analysis of Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare, and a look at the way Shakespeare uses his other sources. [return][return]His line on the authorship question is entertainingly solid. Myself I have tended to find the sheer irrationality of the supporters of alternative candidates (the Earl of Oxford, Bacon, etc) a fairly strong strike against them. Bate points out that the Oxfordians, for instance, tend to regard every line of the plays as a work of sheer unassailable genius; while we who believe that the man from Stratford wrote them are also able to accept that he occasionally had an off day.[return][return]The second half of the book broadens out to consider Shakespeare's impact on subsequent literature. I wondered a bit about this - it seemed to me a bit of a stretch to credit Shakespeare posthumously for the Romantic movement in England, France, Germany and Scotland; perhaps if I knew more about literature of that period generally I could assess to what extent Shakespeare's works really were central. I found a couple of the other stories told here more compelling - the claiming of Caliban as a heroic anti-colonial figure by Aim

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## **Mr Stewart F Chanter says**

Fascinating read. Quite heavy going in certain places and probably not for people who have never read any Shakespeare 'commentary' before (try James Shapiro or someone like that first). There is a chapter on the 'Shakespeare didn't write Shakespeare' movement where a key assumption seems to have been that Shakespeare was too uneducated / working class to have possibly written such stuff. This theory is smashed to smithereens. There are chapters on nationalism and how he has been commandeered by different countries including Germany - partly as an anti-French / anti-classical statement and how Romanticism was born with the reemergence of Shakespeare. There is then the embracing of him finally by the French romantics notably Stendhal and Hugo. The most interesting chapter for me was the Marlow competition chapter and how Shakespeare saw the ghost of Marlow as his biggest threat (given what Marlow had achieved when he died - the mid boggles as to what he could have been). WS then proceeds to take Marlow and respond to him - the obvious MOV versus the Jew of Malta for example, but also Henry V as a response to Tamburlaine the Great and the incorporation of people / commoners not just Kings. The other key points are the sheer flexibility of Shakespeare evidenced by how many people / movements have adopted him for their means and the thing that always strikes me - he wrote for Kings but he also wrote for the people. Henry V has a lot of patriotism and tub thumping but real poignancy as well, mirrored in writing from WW1 - the common soldier would rather be safe in their local with a pint not in the trenches or about to fight the French at Agincourt. That's why attempts by the political elite to monopolise him have failed and always will. Heavy in bits but ultimately very rewarding. Probably not one for anyone who thinks Shakespeare was written by Francis Bacon or Marlow himself after faking his own death!!

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## **Boar's Head Eastcheap says**

Professor Bate will probably be a familiar face, or voice, to anyone on the 'Shake-scene' in the UK. You can hear him participating in Shakespeare-themed episodes of BBC Radio's 'In Our Time', he heads a University of Warwick MOOC on 'Shakespeare and his World', and amongst his many written accomplishments, he edited the Arden third edition of Titus Andronicus.

This is such an engaging book. Because you don't read Shakespeare, he reads you", we learn almost as much about Professor Bate as we do about Shakespeare. If you want to know what a modern Shakespeare scholar is like, you could do worse than start here.

Bate sets out on a quest: firstly to properly define that horribly over-used word, 'genius', and then to see how and why Shakespeare qualifies. In this, given my teaching preferences, I was fascinated by his chapter on 'Marlowe's Ghost', which explains lucidly the competition Shakespeare felt, even after Marlowe died. Here's an example of Bate's writing style, from that chapter:

'... who would deny that Shakespeare is linguistically his most magnificent self in Falstaff? - I propose that in order to create a 'good overreacher' in the character of Henry V, and thus to kill off the legacy of Tamburlaine, Shakespeare also had to kill off part of himself. The Falstaff part which he denied was precisely that part which was most himself, which had its origins in Cade, and which owed nothing to Marlowe.'

In my readings of his works, Bate often 'proposes' things. Not out of diffidence - it comes across as polite, almost gentlemanly. So much better than the ponderous and condescending tones of **MC Bradbrook** or **Frank Kermode** ... in terms of what this tells us about Bate, I'd suggest that his mild-mannered speaking voice is matched by his general style. Whilst the other two authors obviously knew just as much, it's always more enjoyable to be spoken to, not *at*.

What else do we learn? Plenty, in the same way that regular readers of my blog will have assimilated plenty about me from my ongoing intertextual and cultural references. Bate speaks with real eloquence and enthusiasm about how artists like Fuseli, Berlioz and Verdi interpreted the plays. I came away a little awestruck, to be honest, by the range of his knowledge. Another highlight was the occasional cheeky modern politics. And he's persuasive, encouraging me (quite kindly) to set aside my innate prejudice against Lurhman's *Romeo + Juliet* and give it a fair chance as an interpretation to be watched, not the bane of a teacher's life.

Finally, I love the fact that he proposed another name for that coveted title of 'genius'. If you want to know who that might be, you'll have to read the book.

It feels slightly odd, lionizing the author of a book which itself lionizes another author, but this was an excellent read.

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## **Bettie? says**

The main educator on Shakespeare and his World, The University of Warwick

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## **Mark Donnelly says**

Jonathan Bate surprised and amazed me. His writing style drives the narrative, which in some cases is quite detailed, forward at a steady pace. I devoured this book in a few days. He had me at the first section all the way through to the last page.

In the 1580s, and in the first couple of years of the 1590s, the university wits, namely: Greene, Marlowe, Nashe, and Pearle had the stage. Around that time Greene protested with this statement:

"Yes, trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a Player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; and, being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene on a country."

The stage is set, and the upstart Crow plans, learns, networks, and writes, and writes, and writes. In 1592-1594 the plague closed the theatre. This was quite beneficial because in this time, Shakespeare wrote his first two plays, and had a swashbuckling time. It was during this time, discussion turns to how in 1594 Shakespeare was able to buy in to the Chamberlain's men. This is all meticulously crafted in scholarly style by Bate, and when he delivers possible solutions to the mysteries: I knew he had a strong case.

This develops through the politics, the work, the relationships, and most importantly, 'The Genius of

Shakespeare'. We are then taken on the stage of Shakespeare, the international one, and how his ability to relate with all people propelled him to be loved like no other writer. It was his ability to love Nature and all life, which transcended him from a poet to an Icon. His legacy, unsurpassed, remains and remains the writer's / poet's standard of absolute artistic brilliance.

This is a book that captured my heart, and will remain with me forever. There are so many books on Shakespeare, and I have no need to read another one.

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### **Sammy says**

"The Genius of Shakespeare" is written in distinctly dry prose, features unusual critiques of various Shakespearean characters and plays, and doesn't seem to be dense enough for the Shakespeare expert yet nor is it enlivening enough for the novice.

Conversely, Bate's analysis is intelligent and well-researched: how does one man go from citizen to great talent to idol of the Western world? Why must fools insist on denying Shakespeare's authorship of the plays, in the face of overwhelming evidence and ignoring so much about the mores of the time and the similarly lacking evidence we have for the Bard's contemporaries? What is it that makes Shakespeare a genius, and how can we approach that topic in less pretentious terms than Harold Bloom? (I love ol' Harry, but he lacks Richard Dawkins' ability to write intelligently but for the common man.)

In my not inconsiderable Shakespeare library, "The Genius of Shakespeare" is far from a highlight. However, it is lovingly put together, asking a lot of the right questions, and reaching the answers through the correct method: acknowledging the limitations to our evidence, asserting the uncertainty of our suppositions, and following them through to the most logical outcome. While I question many of Bate's arguments when it comes to dealing with specific criticisms of the plays, he is a true academic, and for that, I'm grateful.

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### **Liz Polding says**

Clever, well researched and beautifully written, with one of the best refutations of the argument that Shakespeare did not, in fact, write Shakespeare. Interesting comparison with the prolific Lope de Vega, too. Excellent.

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### **Caroline says**

This isn't your standard biography of Shakespeare - point of fact, it isn't a biography at all. It's more of an attempt to explain: why Shakespeare? Why is he considered the ultimate literary genius? Why does he occupy an exalted position scarcely rivalled by anyone else in any other field, let alone literature? What is it about Shakespeare and his work that we esteem so highly? Why has Shakespeare survived and thrived? Why does Shakespeare continue to appeal not just to new generations but other countries and cultures as well?

One of the most interesting arguments Bate makes is on the very definition of the word 'genius'. Prior to Shakespeare the concept of 'genius' was more about a spirit, a personal unique spirit, and had nothing to do with creative endeavour and output and achievement at all. The gradual turning of the meaning to 'unparalleled and utterly unique brilliance' came about largely as a result of the need for some way to describe Shakespeare above all others.

Bate also argues that the primary reason for Shakespeare's enduring appeal is his ambiguity and adaptability. Shakespeare never constrains his plays and his characters to one motive, one reason, one catalyst - there are always multiple reasons, multiple ways of interpreting and analysing his works, and as a result they are capable of meaning different things, often diametrically-opposed, to different groups simultaneously. Everyone can read themselves in Shakespeare, and as a result Shakespeare has continued to have resonance even four hundred years after the plays were written.

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## **Rob says**

There is a veritable industry of Shakespeare books, and has been for centuries, but interestingly it had settled into being rather an academic preserve prior to the arrival of this book in 1997. Then the success of this intelligent and detailed but clearly generalist and more-or-less introductory work was then magnified with the release of various Hollywood movies based on Shakespeare plays (Romeo + Juliet, Branagh's Hamlet and All's Well That Ends Well etc.) as well as the Oscar-winning Shakespeare in Love. Jonathan Bate is a lively guide, setting out his universe early and skating proficiently over all the controversies and deeper issues, while celebrating the things that really make Shakespeare the shorthand for genius as we now define it in the modern world (Or, as Bate puts it: "Why is 'Shakespeare was a genius' as near as we are likely to get to a fact as opposed to an opinion in matters of aesthetic judgement? Because 'genius' was a category invented in order to account for what was peculiar about Shakespeare.")

As well as being clear on the historical chronology, Bate is also properly focused on the dramatic genesis of these works and so perfectly-placed to skewer the bizarre and seemingly endless line of Anti-Stratfordians, or people who claim a third party wrote Shakespeare's works. (Some of them are even big names: Tolstoy, Freud, Mark Twain, Orson Welles...) The fundamental argument used is based on his supposed second-class education. It really is as vapid as that: it comes down to the fact that he was not one of the most-highly educated of his peers. But wait, right there's your proof: for Jonson to have written about Shakespeare as he did, warmly while chuckling at his "little Latin and less Greek" says everything. Jonson knew that Shakespeare was his main (and superior) rival, just as Shakespeare knew that Marlowe was his model to follow when starting to augment his acting activities with writing. Bate's section on the cues Shakespeare took from Marlowe, his contemporary with the university advantage, while shooting past him is breathtaking, truly worth reading. While Bate proposes that "Shakespeare was born as a dramatist by way of his strong (mis)reading of Marlowe, and that he matured as an author by grace of the (mis)fortune of his dramatic brother's death", he also proposes that "the key gift which belonged to Shakespeare, but not to Christopher Marlowe, was experience as an actor."

And, along those lines, his discussion of certain scenes from Shakespeare that show quite clearly that they could only have been written by an actor with a grammar school education - and not a peer of the realm or other academic figure without a theatre background - is well-nigh definitive. Put simply: "Many of the boldest of Shakespeare's departures from his sources were injections of performance or self-conscious allusions to theatre." That was the part that could not be faked. It's fairly easy to fake courtly language or knowledge of kings, because many have access to those sources (doing something groundbreaking with them



is something else). It was practically impossible in those days for a peer of the realm to fake knowledge of the theatre. Now, I would suggest, that part is a little easier, with our wall-to-wall coverage of actors and backstage plays/films, but still difficult when it comes to the telling details.

There is also plenty of discussion of how Shakespeare may have been magnified by the paucity of works surviving from the time. Possibly there was more of a collaborative sense of putting on plays (rather like folksinging) that may have meant there were other great plays that could have tussled with the Shakespeare works. Still, the evidence of the references of the day that survive make it quite clear: people were astonished by the sheer quality and wide-ranging ambition of the Bard's plays. They were different, calling upon elements from many different works, dramatically innovative, full of crowd-pleasing and reader-pleasing moments alike.

Indeed Bate is forthright on the overriding importance of the multiplicity of voices that Shakespeare used in his plays:

"Since the eighteenth century, Shakespeare has been admired above all for two things: the range of his characters and the inventiveness of his language. The two go closely together, for it was by investing so many of his dramatic persons with memorable language that Shakespeare animated more voices than did any contemporaries. And because he animated so many opposing voices, he has been able to speak to many later dispositions."

He also looks at the philosophical underpinnings to our readings of Shakespeare, from the Romantic visions to the changes wrought in schools of philosophy. In particular he looks at the rivalry between philosophy and the theatre, in the context of Wittgenstein suggesting that we have to take Shakespeare as he is, without recourse to aesthetic judgments, or - as he put it - to "give up literary criticism", much as he himself had decided to "give up philosophy":

"Philosophy was born with Plato, who regarded his enterprise as a rival one to that of theatre. Though it grew from the profoundly dramatic method of the Socratic dialogue, the Platonic pursuit of wisdom and of essence could not abide theatre's implicit claim that everything is performance. By returning thinking to the performative mode, Wittgenstein was bringing to an end the centuries-long battle between philosophy and theatre. Giving up philosophy means acknowledging the superiority of theatre's way of doing things".

Another strong passage is Bate's discussion, focused on *Measure for Measure*, which looks at ambiguities of meaning and whether there can be either/or readings. One of the major figures in this debate in the 20th century was William Empson, still an undergraduate when he formulated his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, who used his study in quantum theory to illuminate the truly human response to ambiguity, "Undecidability, as Empson perceived in that crucial passage of *Seven Types*, is a condition of nature, not a fallibility or predilection of the interpreting mind. In an aspectual world, Negative capability becomes comprehensible as a law rather than a mystery. The sonnets can be understood as both autobiographical and fictive, Hamlet can be seen as both iconic and elusive."

Shakespeare's influence is such, and so varied in its manifestations, that there is plenty to feed upon in this introduction. That Bate is an arresting writer with a forthright and accessible voice is good news for both the casual and not-so-casual reader and a great recommendation for this book.

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