



William Shakespeare: The Man Behind the Genius

Anthony Holden

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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

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