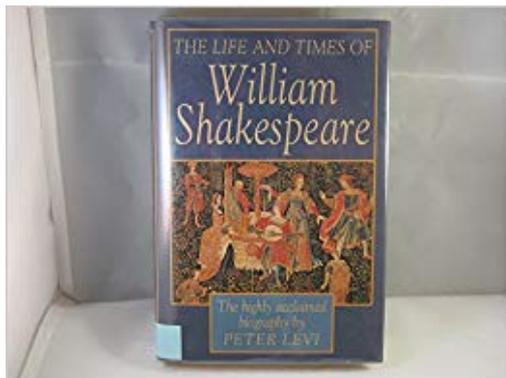


## Life & Times of William Shakespeare *by* Peter Levi



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William Shakespeare was a man of many talents: poet, playwright, comedian, actor. But who was he really? Discover here both the who he was and what inspired his greatest works. This annotated edition includes a biography and critical essay.



## Reviews of the *Life & Times of William Shakespeare* *by* Peter Levi

showtime

Simply doesn't explore his times. Simply documents the lack of information about Shakespeare. None of the claim facts are footnoted. Beware, nearly useless

Cells

I own the Levi book in hard copy but thought it might be useful and convenient to have it on my Kindle. Fortunately, I looked at the sample before buying (\$0.99 was in fact too good to be true). Upon comparison, it is clear that the Kindle book is an anonymous summary of Shakespeare's life -- not even a biography in any real sense of the word. So, don't buy it thinking it is the Levi biography.

With respect to the Levi biography, while dated, it offers a couple attractions. It is written very much from the perspective of a poet, as a previous reviewer has observed. This makes it a very nice narrative just in terms of words and style. Second, it is also written through the lens of Levi's religious background -- Roman Catholicism -- which informs it in a very different way than other biographies (e.g., Bryson, Greenblatt, or Bate). One doesn't have to accept all or any of Levi's argument to be stimulated by the ideas and possibilities he lays out. Finally, with respect to the authorship 'controversy', both Bryson (humorously) in his final chapter and Shapiro (comprehensively) in *Contested Will* deal with that objection. Read Levi for its lyricism and its religious perspective. Read Bryson and Shapiro to address the so called authorship issue.

Very Old Chap

I can hardly say that Peter Levi is 'the best' Shakespeare biographer--there must be a thousand of them, and I've only read a handful. Besides, I doubt that any one commentator is likely to engage all, or even very much, of a mind so various. But Levi's is a very good book with a particular virtue: it is a poet's response to a poet: recall Edmund Wilson (channeling Thoreau) on "the shock of recognition."

The poet in Levi makes him particularly helpful with a play like *Loves's Labour's Lost*--about the most explosive piece of versification Shakespeare ever hatched and of all his plays, I would have thought perhaps the least accessible to a modern audience. Levi makes his case that it is "a masterpiece" and concludes (this surprised me, but I am open to it)--concludes that "this play is particularly suitable even today to be played by intelligent amateurs..." Except he adds: "...who are also on intimate terms,"--which adds a whole new layer of possibility. I wonder what he would have thought of the Kenneth Branagh movie version.

As a poet, Levi has one important quality that he shares with poets like Auden and Coleridge--a sensitivity to the broader culture, together with a fund of knowledge lightly worn. Once in a while his penchant takes him almost to the brink of self parody, as in this priceless bit:

"The refrain of the spring song, 'Cuckoo, jug, jug, pu we, to witta woo!', is a more elaborate set of bird noises than any earlier example I recall in English. I wonder whether someone has been reading Aristophanes' *Birds* with their extraordinary noises: the 'tio tio tinx/' and so on. Or was this a foreign musical tradition? At any rate Shakespeare adopted it gleefully. In French *turlure* was a pagpipe but *turlut* was a skylark, and English larks in seventeenth-century poems sing 'tirra lirra': 'Tirry-tirry leerers upward fly.' The most elaborate French example is by Du Bartas..."

...all the more remarkable because not one of those bits is actual Shakespeare. I think it may be his poet's ear that also gives Levi a special feel for dramatic nuance. Speaking of the inimitable "porter scene" from *Macbeth*, Levi makes the point that the low comedy has an unexpectedly chilly edge: "Shakespeare has simply darkened the scene where he seemed to lighten it, just as he did with *Pompey* and *Abhorson* in the prison in *Measure for Measure*, and with the gravedigging scene in *Hamlet*. There are a thousand more such gems, not all convincing (I think he overrates *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and underrated *Much Ado*, but let that be).

From time to time, Levi enters into the game of speculation over the unanswerable questions: Shakespeare in the lost years of the 1580s, Shakespeare's patronage, Shakespeare's possible Catholicism. Levi is not uninteresting here, but this is a game anyone can play and no one can win--and in any event, newer "research" on many of these points has outstripped him. Indeed in general I suspect it is fair to say that Levi is better as a critic than as a pure biographer. No matter. This is a fine book that deserves a place in any well-chosen Shakespeare library.

Whitebeard

This is the best biography of Shakespeare yet written. Levi capitalizes on earlier research, debunks

many of the more fanciful theories about the bard, sorts through the legends (who really wrote the plays; Shakespeare's gay lover; etc.) and provides a balanced, lively, and readable account of the Elizabethan period, life on the stage, and the origins of his writings. The latter is where Levi shines. He examines dozens upon dozens of texts, contemporaneous, ancient, obscure, and well-known to identify the sources of the works. He goes through the plays one by one with pithy comments on sources, themes, and the social and historical context for each. He has a tactile understanding of poetry and what makes Shakespeare great. His is a patient scholarship, respectful but not reverent. The biography is engrossing. It is not a quick read, but is certainly a worthwhile one.

Yggdi

There is nothing particularly interesting or new to be found in this extremely limited account of Shakespeare's life and times. It wasn't even proofread carefully enough to correct an egregious sentence fragment. Not worth even \$.99.

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