

ANYONE but Shakespeare

by strannikov

From available historical accounts we all know why Kit Marlowe stopped writing: stabbed through or above his right eye and into his brain, his murder terminated his career. His murder, naturally, gave Will Shakespeare no reason to end his own career in June 1593 and if anything gave plausible incentive to continue: but whatever contemporary acclaim WS received over the next twenty-three years, why did Ben Jonson, John Webster, Francis Beaumont, and John Fletcher continue their efforts? Shakespeare was Shakespeare, after all, the greatest poet the language has ever boasted: why did Shakespeare's contemporaries even bother with their paltry efforts?

Perhaps R. D. Blackmore is today an underrated novelist. Many people know that a popular shortbread cookie takes its name from the title of Blackmore's one novel of enduring fame, but likely very few of us know anyone who has read Lorna Doone munching or not on shortbread cookies. Blackmore was an admired and successful novelist of the late Victorian era, justly acclaimed for spending long hours writing, and it is perhaps our loss that Blackmore's works are not read and celebrated today as avidly as Shakespeare's or regarded as highly as the novels of some of his worthy contemporaries.

No Shakespeare scholar I, I have to guess Shakespeare was popular enough in his day as actor, playwright, poet, and theatre manager to maintain visibility and commercial theatrical success (when he wasn't conniving other business ventures, according to the scuttlebutt): I've never gained the impression, though, that in his day and prior to his death WS was regarded as "the greatest poet the language has ever boasted". Many fine poets and playwrights had to die first, the determination of Shakespeare's status required a temporal sequence amounting to nothing less than years and decades, and it's now the commonplace we all know it to be courtesy of our undergraduate or graduate or post-graduate training.

If the body of Shakespeare's work were all of a piece as his accomplishment in Titus Andronicus, Senecan tragedy would be much more popular today than we find it (else it might have transmogrified by now into Senecan comedy), Webster's career would sport an appealing blossom, and The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi would be as popular as A Midsummer Night's Dream and Hamlet.

We know WS didn't stick with Seneca, though, his career path took a turn from Webster's. Shakespeare's career path took a turn from Marlowe's, for that matter, and WS in fact went on to earn his partial reputation as a Tudor toad for the villainy he perpetrated upon Richard III, as recent accounts of forensic science suggest.

If I have a point here to make, it might only be to argue that no one writes Literature. No one writes Literature, no one has ever written "Literature", not The Bard Hissself, not (gasp) Dante, not Virgil, not Homer, and not anyone: the ability to declare and decree, ordain, commit, and instantiate Literature is forever beyond each generation's living writers (and its reviewers, critics, publicists, and professors of literature): Literature can never be perpetrated, and if history is any reliable guide, Literature is practically beyond the competency and the capability of each generation even to assess contemporaneously.

"Literature" is a judgment and assessment than can only be rendered by posterity, should one arrive. Contemporaries and their living writers can register initial responses indicating perception of literary quality and distinction, but contemporaries and living writers never occupy the position to deem any work of whatever accomplishment "Literature": the writer's extinction comes first, the writer is never permitted to hear "Literature" breathed once over one slim volume.

We know full well that I have every reason to drown myself cold in the Graveyard of the Atlantic for posing such things: undeterred, I address my contemporaries before accepting any invitation to swim: read anyone, anyone, anyone but Shakespeare.

Leave Shakespeare alone. He endures and persists, his works are praised and read regardless. But stop reading, stop consulting him for one decade, one brief decade. Leave Shakespeare alone. Read his contemporaries instead: read poor Kit Marlowe, who merits by accomplishment to be heralded our “man of decade and century” for his abattoir vision and for all his professional and private concentration upon political and epistemic megalomania, wars of religion, espionage; read John Webster, read Ben Jonson, read Beaumont and Fletcher, read Thomas Kyd. If you're partial to Eliot, take half his advice and read Dante instead of Shakespeare, you will lose nothing for the effort: or ignore Eliot and read Cervantes, read Rabelais or Machiavelli or Montaigne. But do not read Shakespeare: he can be ignored, and as his value endures, he can be consulted with joy and relish ten years hence.

The time gives its proof: our time's out of joint, rash deeds are required of us all.

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