Paging Mrs. Shakespeare

Mrs. Shakespeare: The Complete Works
By Robert Nye. Sinclair-Stevenson, London 1993.

Reviewed by Warren Hope, whose article, "The Singing Swallow: Sir John Davies and Shakespeare," appeared in the last issue of TER.

An American actress, while rehearsing the part of Desdemona, once announced to the other members of the company that if she had been the real Desdemona she would have cracked Othello's skull. This statement has a ring of truth similar to the one that rises from the pages of Robert Nye's novel, *Mrs. Shakespeare.* Nye does not quarrel with the traditional attribution of the plays and poems and fully accepts the historical facts of Shakespeare's life as they have come down to us. But he realizes that the historian's craft often leaves us in a darkness that the storyteller is free to disperse. He reinterprets the life of Shakespeare by looking at and recording that life from the point of view of Anne Hathaway Shakespeare. The result is an entertaining and engaging romp that may get us no closer to the historical Shakespeare but gives us much to chew on, so far as the relations between truth and poetry, and women and men, are concerned.

These relationships open the book:

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" he inquired politely.
"No thanks!" I said.
You should have seen the look he gave me.

This brief conversation is placed at the beginning of Mrs. Shakespeare's week-long visit to London, her only visit to London, in celebration of her husband's thirtieth birthday—a visit that is not recorded anywhere except in the pages of this novel. The conversation is echoed at the story's close:

"Your eyes," he declared, "are nothing like the sun."
"Oh thanks!" I said.

These bits from Shakespeare's sonnets and Anne Hathaway Shakespeare's reactions to them frame the story of Shakespeare's maturation as a poet through sexual experience. The first phrase—based on the use of comparison, the foundation of metaphor, and addressed to a male (the Earl of Southampton, according to Mrs. Shakespeare)—is rejected by the poet's wife. The second phrase—a denial of comparison and metaphor and addressed to a woman—is accepted with irony if not sarcasm. In this way,

Robert Nye asserts and demonstrates, rather than argues, that woman is the judge of man in much the same way that truth is the standard by which poetry is to be judged—and that man and poetry by these standards are frequently found wanting. Mrs. Shakespeare makes this position explicit when she apologizes to her reader for taking so long to get to the heart of her story:

> I have no magic wand. I have only the goose-quill of truth.
> That's the difference between me and Mr. Shakespeare, as between truth and poesy.
> I cannot cut corners.
> I have to tell it to you as it was.
> I spell it all out. I explicate it. I do not make grand word-noises for your pleasure.

"Grand word-noises" for the pleasure of the Earl of Southampton is what Mrs. Shakespeare seems to think of what Shakespeare wrote while seeking a patron—with the emphasis on the pay—when the theaters were closed in 1592 because of the plague. *Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece,* and some of the sonnets are credited with raising Shakespeare from a hack revising other people's plays to a dandy and a financial success. These works and this success are set in an exclusively male world, devoted to snobbery and homosexual liaisons as well as Platonism and intellectual adventuring. All that matters less to Mrs. Shakespeare than her recipe for hare soup.

Still, it is the week-long visit to London and the way it was spent—playing sexual parts in a luxurious bed—that allowed Shakespeare to move out of that exclusively male world to write the sonnets to the "dark lady" and the plays for which he is remembered. That memorable bed is what allows Nye one of his slyest reinterpretations of Shakespeare's life. The infamous "second-best bed" left to Anne Hathaway in her husband's will becomes a witty and affectionate in-joke between lovers rather than an insult. Any bed would be at best second to the one they enjoyed together in London.

Nye is not so much putting forward a reinterpretation of Shakespeare as stating a view of poetry and the world—and doing so with great energy and fun. While he is able to make the scraps of Shakespearean biography leap up and move about, his Shakespeare is limited by those very scraps. The dating of the sonnets, for instance, causes the dancing skeleton of Will Shakspere of Stratford to falter. Sonnet 2, which urges a young man to marry and have a child, begins with the words, "When forty winters shall besiege thy brow." I am not the first person to hear in those words a way for the poet to say to the recipient of the poem, the Earl of Southampton, according to Nye, in effect, "When you are my age." Will Shakspere was not forty until 1604—a

full decade after the events depicted in this novel, when Southampton had been married for years and was no longer a beautiful and charming youth. If we consider that "William Shakespeare" was the pen name of Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, however, "Shakespeare" was forty in April 1590, when the Earl of Southampton was engaged to Oxford's eldest daughter.

Shakespeare is for Nye what Richard II was for Shakespeare—a jumping-off point for a work of fiction. *Richard II* owes much to the historical Richard, of course, but what he left out is as telling as what he put in. Queen Elizabeth herself is said to have felt she was depicted in Shakespeare's portrayal of that sad monarch. Richard was also something of a self-portrait for Shakespeare. Similarly, Nye's Shakespeare is a fictional version of an historical figure, but also a stand-in for a contemporary figure and something of a self-portrait. The publisher of this novel writes of its author, "His principal calling is poetry, and his *A Collection of Poems 1955-1988* was chosen by six separate critics as one of their Books of the Year." Nye is not only a poet himself but has been associated with other poets who think of poetry as a way to discover and tell the truth about life. Two of these poets are Robert Graves and Laura Riding. There can be little doubt that Nye has his Mrs. Shakespeare express Laura Riding's mature and hostile view of Robert Graves's work when she writes of Shakespeare:

> In his world women are kept in bonds by men, either as virgin goddesses or as whores.
>
> I say that he should have been dumped into the river with the dirty laundry for such things, dressed as a woman and beaten for his published pretences to potency, and pinched by fairies for his sinful lust and his manifold sins against love.

But it is Nye's direct experience of poetry that gives this novel its authority and authenticity. Mrs. Shakespeare writes:

> One time, I remember, I was dreaming of a song and he began to sing it.
>
> I thought at first that I must have been humming it, or drumming out the rhythm with my fingers, and he had heard me and given voice to the tune and words.
>
> But he had not heard anything, he assured me.

Nye's *A Collection of Poems* includes "The Same Song":

> You dream a song and I begin to sing it
> In a false voice, and so the song is ruined

That was word-perfect in your head. In anger,
You tell me to be silent. 'Still, how strange
That you should sing the same strange song I'm dreaming.
Perhaps I hummed or drummed it? and you heard.'

No, music, I've no natural explanations.
You did not sing—but I have mocked your song
In broken accents, for my own amusement.
One day with a true voice I'd like to tell
How sometimes we catch breath and sing together
The same strange song, knowing we need no other.

Fiction is a way of understanding life and the world and offering that understanding to others. The dramatic monologue of Robert Nye's *Mrs. Shakespeare* dresses abstractions in lively Elizabethan clothes and tells of the uneasy marriage between truth and poetry in a voice that is marked by uncommon sense, frankness, and vitality. It is a thought-provoking entertainment that should not be missed.

Books in Brief

Shylock
by John Gross. Simon and Schuster, 1993.

John Gross's book does double duty for readers by looking at the dramatic character of Shylock from Elizabethan through modern times, delineating four centuries of theatrical performances, audience responses, and critical theories throughout the world. Equally important, Gross limns the play's background—and foreground—viz-a-viz Renaissance literature and social events. Finally, he provides readers with the most wide-ranging and knowledgeable examination of the play's legal underpinnings this reviewer has encountered. This Shylock Variorum may be the forerunner of a new type of scholarship, one that peers at dramatic characters through time and across the grain of source material, theater performance, and critical theory.

Aside from being an excellent read, *Shylock* allows us to look at this Shakespearean archetype from a myriad of perspectives; in fact, as many as the imagination can bear. Occasionally, the sheer number that Mr. Gross thrusts upon us breaks up the narrative with the multi-colored light of a very