

toes to curl, or make the pit of your stomach go suddenly cold, or cause the eyes to water involuntarily? Isn't "Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang" a magical line? Why do you read poems? Do you ever read them for the sheer pleasure of it, when they aren't assigned in class? Do you like poems?

I wish Helen Vendler would consider these questions. It's never too late to fall—or refall—in love with poems. And falling in love with them, being struck dumb by them, is the necessary first step in coaxing them open.

## Shakespeare's Fictional Life

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*The Late Mr. Shakespeare: A Novel*

by Robert Nye

New York Arcade, 1999

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Reviewed by Micah Stern.

This hefty novel, written in a sprightly prose, is a great deal of fun—a good read, a diversion, an entertainment. It is a grab bag of legends, rumors, gossip, scholarship, jokes, literary criticism, quotations, lists, catalogs, songs, proverbs, leg-pulls, remedies, recipes, bawdinesses, old wives' tales, allusions, and illusions. It purports to be a life of Shakespeare by a fellow player. In fact Shakespeare's life merely provides a peg on which the narrator of the book, Robert Reynolds (is the family name an anagram suggesting we should identify R Nye with Old S?), alias Pickleherring, hangs the richly embroidered if fraying cloak of his own life story.

Pickleherring is an aged comedian who at times dresses up in women's clothes and rents a room in a brothel owned by a man who strayed from *Measure for Measure* into the pages of this book, Pompey Bum. He alternates rummaging through his memory and his boxes of notes on Shakespeare with watching the whores through a peephole and conversing with his eponymous landlord. He was a posthumous child, born after his father's death, who found his way in the world by meeting Shakespeare, the player and playwright, and being recruited as a child actor by him. He begins writing his *Life of William Shakespeare* during the plague of 1665 and finishes it when faced with the conflagration of the Great Fire of London. It is this circle of death and destruction that makes the rollicking book compulsively readable. It shakes the spear of life at the spectre of death.

Pickleherring's life of Shakespeare is no mere contribution to knowledge or idle pastime but a matter of life and death—for the narrator, at least, and potentially for us. He says as much, in an iambic pentameter line, on page 93

"I play my pipe to prove I am not dead." This statement makes clear that the author is not attempting biography but salvation, of a kind, and offers a glimpse into his method.

Why the *late* Mr. Shakespeare? Not only is that the title of the book but the phrase occurs repeatedly in the text. The answer, I think, can be found in the quotation from Edmund Spenser's "The Tears of the Muses" that serves as an epigraph for the novel, "Our pleasant Willy, ah! is dead of late." Death, in this quotation, is described as a temporary state. Pickleherring writes to undo that temporary state, to prove Shakespeare is alive even while accepting that he is now the late Mr. Shakespeare. The fact that Spenser's line, dating from about 1590, seems early to refer to the late Mr. Shakespeare, the historical Shakespeare, is beside the point. The historical Shakespeare is not merely dead of late but dead and gone. It is the poetic Shakespeare, replete with sexual puns, who is alive no matter how late the world might say he is, that interests Pickleherring.

In part this means that Shakespeare has become his writings, the greatest outburst of eloquence in English, certainly, and probably in any language. But what the world makes of this outburst of eloquence and does with it shifts from time to time. At the time when Pickleherring ostensibly wrote, for instance, Shakespeare's work was not held in high esteem. Pickleherring, given to repeating himself, states his aim, historic and poetic, on p. 117

I write to prove that I am still alive, and that so is Mr. Shakespeare. It is much to be deplored that people nowadays find it convenient to look down their their enlightened noses at him. I know the modern taste calls him vulgar and crabbed, an uncouth spirit. I say his day was good, and that it will surely come again when the French fashions that swept into England with King Charles I have gone out again.

It is hard to suppress the thought that Robert Nye, the author of this book, whose "principal calling is poetry" as the dust jacket tells us, is writing to protest the place of poetry, that is Shakespeare, in our own time, with its preference for "a newfangled classicalism" reminiscent of the frenchified decorum and correctness, the academicism, of the Restoration, if not its total marginalization of poetry, so that it waits, like a whale under water, ready to flood the page. This would explain Nye's hostility to those who pursue the Shakespeare authorship question, attributing their theories to snobbery because he thinks their unwillingness to accept the inexplicable is an unpoetic attempt to explain the inexplicable away. I think he is mistaken about that, but sympathize with his natural aversion to what might appear to be a smug and deadly rationalism.

This novel is not a book to turn to if you are looking for the facts of Shakespeare's earthly existence. It is instead a prose reminder of the saving grace of poetry. As such, it is a tribute by one English poet to the well-spring

of English poetry, the genius of the language, call it Shakespeare, and proof that, contrary to exaggerated reports of its death, it is not only very much alive but kicking.