

Paul EDMONDSON-Stanley WELLS, Eds., *The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, 368 pages.

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Published in the wake of the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's death, *The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography* focuses on Shakespeare's life, yet from a different vantage point. There is a long tradition of biographies about Shakespeare, either as sections or as separate works, which starts with John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* (1669-96), and continues with Nicholas Rowe's *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear* (1709), Alexander Pope's *The Works of Shakespear* (1723-5), Samuel Johnson's *The Plays of William Shakespear* (1765), Edmond Malone's *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespear* (1790), John Payne Collier's *New Facts Regarding the Life of Shakespear* (1835), Lee Sidney's *The Life of William Shakespear* (1898), Frank Harris's *The Man Shakespear and his Tragic Life-Story* (1909), E. K. Chambers's *William Shakespear: A Study of Facts and Problems* (1930), A. L. Rowse's *My View of Shakespear* (1996), Samuel Schoenbaum's *William Shakespear: A Compact Documentary Life* (1987), Stanley Wells's *Shakespear: A Life in Drama* (1997), Jonathan Bate's *The Genius of Shakespear* (1998), Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespear Became Shakespear* (2004), James Shapiro's *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespear?* (2010), and many more. Up to now, Shakespeare biographies have tried to form an organic unity from the several bits and pieces on Shakespeare's life, the majority of which, however, consist of legal entries that are years apart from each other. The existence of myths about Shakespeare's life, based on hearsay, rumours, and deductions, have further complicated to write an accurate biography about Shakespeare. What is more, successive biographies from the 18th century onwards have piled onto each other not only new evidences but also new fictions that resulted from either contemporary circumstances or the biographer's own life.

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In an effort to give new insights to Shakespeare and Theatre Studies, Edmondson and Wells have edited several articles about people who were close to Shakespeare in his own lifetime. The contributors who have written these articles consist of the following eminent Shakespeare scholars: Michael Wood, David Fallow, Catherine Richardson, Cathy Shrank, Katherine Scheil, Lachlan MacKinnon, Greg Wells, Graham Holderness, Germaine Greer, Rene Weis, Tara Hamling, Stanley Wells, Carol Chillington Rutter, David Kathman, David Riggs, Andrew Hadfield, Susan Brock, Andy Kesson, John H. Astington, Bart van Es, Alan H. Nelson, Duncan Salkeld, Emma Smith, Lucy Munro, Paul Edmondson and Margaret Drabble.

Rather than wrestling to connect parts of Shakespeare's life, *The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography* outlines the network of people around Shakespeare. Family members, friends and associates, whose biographical entries are usually far more detailed than that of Shakespeare, enable the reader to comprehend the atmosphere in which Shakespeare was living.

The book starts with a short General Introduction (p. 1-7), written by the editors, which outlines Shakespeare's biography, elaborates on the problems regarding the balance between "narrowly documented evidence" and "speculation" while writing biographies (p. 5), and introduces the forthcoming chapters.

Following a pattern of starting with the nearest and moving on to the farthest, *The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography* consists of three parts: Family (p. 9-143), Friends and Neighbours (p. 145-229), and Colleagues and Patrons (p. 231-328). Each part has a short introductory section which gives brief information about the Early Modern understanding of concepts like family, neighbourhood or business life. These are followed by outlines of the forthcoming chapters and their relation to the respective topic. Similar to the general arrangement of the parts, each part starts with the member of the group who is the closest to Shakespeare and gradually the chapters move towards the member with whom Shakespeare had less connection. Apart from making use of legal entries, archaeological findings or contemporary works about rural or urban life, each chapter also gives a critical survey of how the biographies of respective members of Shakespeare's circle have developed within years.

In the first part of the book, which encompasses eleven chapters, biographies of his mother, father, siblings, wife, children, grandchildren and cousins elaborate on the domestic and public life of the people who were

near in blood to Shakespeare. Thereby, the first part is about “[t]he closest members of the Shakespeare circle” and “cover[s] four generations” of family life (p. 9). Ranging from family connections to possible daily routines, the chapters focus on the rural and urban life in Stratford-upon-Avon. These, on the other hand, give clues about Shakespeare’s possible domestic life and his relationship with these family members in his private life.

In the second part, six chapters focus on Shakespeare’s relationship with people outside his family. Biographies of his family friends, school friends, landlords, neighbours and beneficiaries elaborate on Shakespeare’s preferences in letting people into his private life, as the people from his immediate social sphere form a threshold between the private and public self of Shakespeare. Focusing on “personal connections” (p. 145), the chapters give clues about Shakespeare’s networking skills and his social life both in his hometown Stratford-upon-Avon and his workplace London.

In the third and last part of the book, eight chapters focus on biographies of fellow dramatists, fellow actors, his patrons, his collaborators and the editors of his First Folio. The part gives a vivid picture of the working space of Shakespeare and the relationships among its components. For instance, these chapters illustrate and point out how Shakespeare built his “professional life” on “strong friendships” (p. 231). Thus, the biographies of colleagues and patrons outline the mutual effect of Shakespeare’s relationship with these and help to understand his dramatic and professional development.

In the concluding Closing Remarks (p. 329-334), written by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells and the Afterword (p. 335-339), written by Margaret Drabble, the hardships of writing biographies through “documentary evidence” and “myth” are re-emphasized (p. 331). Yet, all of the three scholars agree that the book gives “fresh insights” (p. 334) to Shakespeare and Theatre Studies. After reading the biographies of people who knew Shakespeare within and without the dramatic profession, the reader will “come to know Shakespeare himself better” (p. 339). Thus, *The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography* forms indeed “*An Alternative Biography*,” giving full credit to its subtitle, as speculative discussions regarding Shakespeare’s life are substituted by biographies of people around Shakespeare.