



1991

## Review Essay: Richard Dutton, *William Shakespeare: A Literary Life*

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### Recommended Citation

Gentrup, William F. (1991) "Review Essay: Richard Dutton, *William Shakespeare: A Literary Life*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 12 , Article 32.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol12/iss1/32>

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## BOOK REVIEWS

to Spenser studies. As a concise examination of the genre in Spenser's works, the book offers a learned and thoughtful perspective, but not the last word, on Spenser's pastoral.

Steven Max Miller

Millersville University of Pennsylvania

Richard Dutton, *William Shakespeare: A Literary Life*, St. Martin's Press, 1989, xii, 180 pp., biblio., index, \$35.00.

Not a conventional biography, this book focuses on Shakespeare's professional career: his life as a poet, playwright, and shareholder in the Globe theater. It is little concerned with his immediate family, education, property investments, or private relationships. Instead it treats subjects and issues such as the status of actors and the acting profession; patronage; censorship; topical allusions; coterie vs. public drama; rivalry between the major companies; Shakespeare's earnings and other business details connected with the dramatic professions; and his choice of dramatic subjects and style compared to the choices of his contemporaries, especially Ben Jonson. In fact, one of the questions Dutton, author or editor of several books on Jonson, contemplates is why Shakespeare worked "in modes and styles so different from those adopted by his younger rival" (xi). This treatment of Shakespeare within the context of other playwrights and their various responses to the theatrical marketplace is one of the more interesting topics of the book.

This treatment of Shakespeare is also why the book will be useful primarily to undergraduates who tend to read Shakespeare in a vacuum, and who have never heard of Middleton, Marston, or Beaumont, much less read them. This book will expand their conception of Shakespeare as a romantic genius and allow them to see him as a consummate working professional affected by the practical exigencies of his craft and the business of satisfying paying customers at the court or Bankside. While it is, of course, impossible to state the precise effect of, for instance, the dimensions of the Globe theater on the plays, Dutton takes such information and explores its repercussions in a balanced and impartial fashion. For example, Shakespeare's steady income as an actor, playwright, and shareholder allowed him to get by writing approximately two plays per year, compared to the average of as many as six for most playwrights. Dutton suggests that this comparatively light work load gave Shakespeare an advantage over his rivals by allowing him to compose for quality rather than quantity, a privilege Ben Jonson also acquired after he received the court masque commission.

Graduate students and general readers who may require a brief, clearly written account of Shakespeare's professional background will also benefit immensely from Dutton's book. But it is probably fair to say that to Shakespeare specialists or scholars most of the information will be very familiar, especially to those who have read E. K. Chambers's classic work in this area, which is Dutton's major source. Granted, discussions of these subjects may also be found in prefatory matter of the major anthologies of the plays, but what is found in summary form there is discussed and judiciously weighed here.

One of the most appealing features of the book is its balanced presentation and dispassionate analysis of various sides of an issue. The book and the series to which it belongs (*Literary Lives*, published by St. Martin's Press) qualify the historicizing tendency of the school of criticism that makes the individual author only one of a huge array of factors and influences that determine the creation of a literary text. The "death of the author in literary studies," proclaims the book jacket, echoing Mark Twain, is "an exaggeration."

I definitely recommend this book for students. I intend to require mine to read it.

William F. Gentrup  
Arizona State University West

George Parfitt, *John Donne: A Literary Life*, St. Martin's Press, 1989, viii, 140 pp., biblio., \$35.00

This study examines John Donne not as a single figure but "as a multiple made up of the interaction of personality with the shaping qualities of the modes in which he is working and the specific circumstances which bear upon his adoption of these modes and not others" (71). Ambition, in Parfitt's view, is the link that connects Sir Thomas Egerton's secretary and Ann More's husband and the Church of England priest. This addition to the *Literary Lives* series (which traces the outlines of writers' working lives in light of professional, publishing, and social contexts) provides a good overview of Donne's career, although it often does so at the expense of a problematizing analysis or an engaging critique. Parfitt states his objections both to the ahistoricism of John Carey's Catholic-dominated study and to the possible reductivism of Alan Sinfield's materialistic criticism; however, despite the fact that he wants to see the poems as "energetic concentrations of experience" (31), he ends up stressing the social contexts of these opportune experiences in ways that almost bypass their literary importance.