

The Bedside, Bathtub, & Armchair Companion to Shakespeare

Dick Riley

Pam McAllister

Continuum International Publishing Group (Jul 15, 2001)

Unknown \$39.95 (304pp)

978-0-8264-1249-2

To borrow one of the author's own metaphors, this guide removes the literary "straitjacket" from the Shakespeare canon. Through careful, thoughtful, and objective illumination of the work, the man, the time period, and the people and places that inhabit the plays and poems attributed to William Shakespeare, as well as the world inhabited by Shakespeare himself, Riley and McAllister have compiled, perhaps, the most concise, yet all-encompassing, book on the Bard to date.

The greatest appeal here lies in the humorous, literate, sometimes irreverent, and always knowledgeable interpretation and synopsis of the entire dramatic canon, presented play by play. Included with each play are likely sources, as well as notable features, productions, and performances. Interspersed throughout are examinations of significant characteristics of the man and the work attributed to him.

From an objective look at the authorship problem to Elizabethan holidays to a brief discourse on fools (Shakespearean and otherwise), *The Bedside Companion* is nothing if not thorough. It offers an insight into the world that surrounded these works and brought them to light. People, places, origins of words, and relevant ideas of the time period are all emphasized, including, for instance, the great vowel shift that began shortly before Shakespeare's day and continued throughout his life. In essence, what we hear in Shakespeare's words today was not what was heard 400 years ago.

The role of women in Elizabethan society is another topic deftly presented. Similarly, the explanation of the power structure of the period and how it was brokered adds measurably to understanding Shakespeare's attempt to entertain in the Elizabethan world. Any reader will walk away from this book with an accessibility to the Bard's writings that very few works can offer.

Preceded by guides to Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes, this is the third companion written by Riley and McAllister. The authors have tailored a book to explicate the work and life of the greatest writer of the English language and to please two distinct audiences—the playgoer and the literary scholar—at the same time. This would seem to be a fool's venture, yet, as Shakespeare's plays have taught us, the fool is often endowed with more wisdom than the wisest of men.

(September / October 2001)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The author of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the author for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.