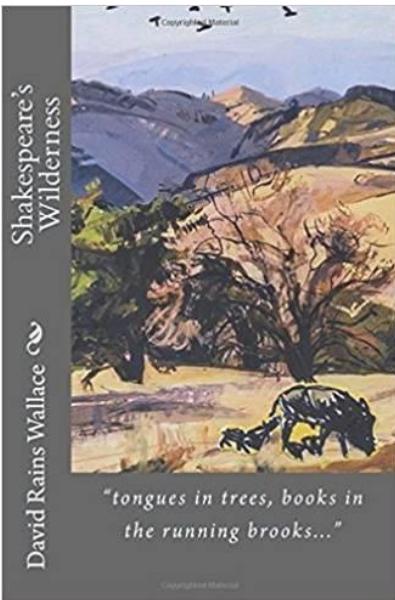


Shakespeare's Wilderness by David Rains Wallace. 2017.

Book Review by Patricia Keeney



An exhaustive and complicated exploration of wild places in the Shakespeare canon, David Rain Wallace's privately published volume is insightful and imaginative, involving meticulous research that tracks off on its own wilderness paths. Along these, the reader wanders intrigued, slightly lost but trusting, and finally emerges, gratified yet surprised by the connections made including many to Edward de Vere as Shakespeare.

Although not expressly written to address the authorship issue, *Wilderness* ultimately asks the question: 'were Shakespeare's vivid evocations of the 'untamed' imagined or experienced? If imagined, could William of Stratford, who never travelled further than London, have possibly invented them with such convincing detail? If experienced, they surely fit much better into the peregrinations of the 17th Earl of Oxford than they

do William of Stratford, the traditionally accepted author.

Exploring the derivation of 'wilderness,' word and idea, this award-winning American naturalist takes us back to its Anglo-Saxon root in the noun 'wildeor' meaning 'wild beast.' He goes on to discuss the varying images of wilderness in early western literature through *Boewulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with excited scholarship and the imagination of a poet thrilled by the way word history reveals cultural history. In the Renaissance, while wilderness generally shrinks further out of sight, an old dynamism lingers in Shakespeare, "a folkloric groundwater...[beneath] the sparkling dialogue, gorgeous imagery and snappy plots." By the time of the Enlightenment, Alexander Pope applauds the originality of Shakespeare and Samuel Johnson enthusiastically distinguishes between a conventional "garden" writer and the much wider ranging "forest" writer that Shakespeare is.

At the heart of the Wallace's study is Ted Hughes's phenomenal book *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. In Wallace's words, Hughes was "the main post-war British exponent of restoring mythic relationships with wild nature." And, I would add, with the cosmos at large. Hughes was a myth-maker extraordinaire, writing versions of creation – animal, human and divine – on an almost Blakean scale. Raised on the Yorkshire moors, Hughes's sense of the wild was deeply rooted in England's Anglo-Saxon past. For him, Shakespeare's language ("despite its Elizabethan ruff") was far closer to the "vital life of English than anything written since."

Hughes sees Shakespeare as a shamanic figure who attempted a "ritual reconciliation" of England's great cultural and religious schism by creating a "literary Tragic Equation" first worked out in the narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and then in the plays. The Great Goddess, for Hughes, is nature herself, the force and source of life worshipped in the earliest forms of religion. Hughes argued further that she has long been suppressed by the Great God of orthodox religion, the lawgiver, the controller who curtails instinct. In Shakespeare's time, he says, the Great Goddess lingered ghost-like in Catholicism's Madonna, threatened constantly by the rise of Puritanism.

For Hughes, the drama of *Venus and Adonis* - prudish Puritan youth rejects passionate love goddess who turns ravening boar and gores him to death - animates most of the canon, the boar becoming Shakespeare's shamanic animal, the symbol of his "visionary awareness." Hughes goes on to illustrate how Shakespeare's Tragic Equation is played out through his ritual dramas (and comedies) from *All's Well That Ends Well* through *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Lear* and *The Tempest*.

Here we approach Wallace's core idea that the work of strong writers grows over its creative life to build "a consistent, recognizable persona." As a poet, Hughes's unique vision - like the visions of Blake and Van Gogh - was profoundly animated by nature, seeing through it to the informing reality behind its myriad manifestations, a nature opening infinitely in image and dream. For Wallace, this "primal phenomenon," is akin to the shamanic.

Hughes's identification of the Tragic Equation in Shakespeare is influenced by his own fraught involvement with Sylvia Plath. Wallace's analysis of this relationship is both fearless and fascinating, suggesting that Hughes spent his final years writing his extraordinary Goddess book because he found a strong

connection to his own life story, a desperate one of creative/destructive unions and suicidal wives: “handsome young hunter who attracts a kind of goddess, who resists her ... undergoes a ‘death in life’ [and is] ‘reborn,’ painfully and unwillingly as a kind of goddess-destroying monster.”

Wallace points out that Hughes in his Goddess introduction actually declares that “blood jet autobiographical truth” is what decides the value of a truly mythic work.” Informed no doubt by his own turbulent psycho-drama, Hughes looked to the canon for the equivalent in Shakespeare.

What then, asks Wallace, is the autobiographical “blood jet” truth that provides the mythic beat driving Shakespeare’s work? Surely it isn’t to be found in the scanty biographical evidence we have on William of Stratford. Wallace spends some pages documenting that threadbare material to show how the literary reputation of small-town William was solidified through the *First Folio* and the Stratford Monument, burgeoning ultimately into pure Bardolatry with David Garrick’s Shakespeare Festival of 1769. Since then, the paucity of biographical fact has inspired biographers “like a blank canvas,” says Wallace, to invent the abundant lives of Shakespeare that we now have in print.

With zestful irony, Wallace intersperses his study of Shakespearean wilderness with his own American experiences in (variously) New England, Yellowstone National Park and in California where, for instance, he becomes aware of crows – once rustic now urban – summoning up that mythic Trickster figure of Hughes’s most famous black bible, Crow and also the well-known “upstart crow” reference to Shakespeare of Robert Greene. In this context, this bandit bird represents both the wiliness of the Stratford man’s dual nature as “exploited writer” and “exploiting actor-impresario.”

In a chapter called “Lord Boar,” Wallace reminds us that de Vere was first seriously posed as Shakespeare by English schoolmaster Thomas Looney in 1920 in his book, *Shakespeare Identified*. Noting that de Vere matches Hughes’s concept of Shakespeare as “elemental misfit,” he tells us ironically that wild boars were actually introduced to the California by hunters during same period - the 1920s - that many saw the boars as “unruly interloper[s]” and that they were “disdained by the establishment.” Adding to this linkage, Wallace points out that farm-boy William would have known only the domestic pig but that de Vere, both through his continental travels and in his heraldic identity, clearly knew the wild boar. Wallace continues that Hughes’s boar was the goddess in

her most basic form – a “mobile tub of a brood-sow...[which] has supplanted all other beasts as the elemental mother.”

Pushing the connections, Wallace compares shamanic dreams and visions in the Shakespeare canon and in “de Vere’s known poetry,” visions that manifest what Borges called Shakespeare’s “sacred horror.” Indeed, Wallace argues that de Vere’s continental tour itself could have been a kind of vision quest and refers to the Adriatic voyage that Mark Anderson conjectures went as far as Delphi and the enigmatic mysteries of the oracle in *The Winter’s Tale*.

For Wallace, de Vere was “Adonis-like in his youth...and attracted the era’s Great Goddess embodiment, Queen Elizabeth... [vacillating] between adoration and impudence...[his] Tarquin side emerged as he rejected his wife, plotted against the Queen’s allies, and impregnated her maid, Anne Vavasour.” Hughes’s Goddess model illustrates how the Tragic Equation imbues most of the Shakespeare canon.

Wallace then calls on another nature writer and leading twentieth century Oxfordian, Charlton Ogburn, who points out that “Shakespeare was the first in English Literature to find solace and rewards in nature. As a poet of nature, he has never been excelled.” For Ogburn, the poet of *Venus and Adonis*, exhibits an “unprecedented empathy for non-human life,” noting that Shakespeare identifies more with Adonis’s randy stallion...breaking away to chase a mare than he does with the prudish young demigod.”

Ogburn’s interpretation, as Wallace notes, flies in the face of “the Stratfordian convention of borrower-genius William coolly contriving ... narrative poems simply to establish his reputation.” Rather, they are the expression of someone who knows nature emotionally, someone who might well have written in “totemic kinship” with non-human life.

Wallace enthuses specifically over five stanzas that stop the action in *Venus and Adonis* to concentrate on the plight of a fleeing hare ... ” as though the poet himself were fleeing ... as de Vere dodged danger and attack all his turbulent life.” Wallace declares rightly: “Many Shakespeare protagonists [under siege] threw away land, wealth, and status as he did.”

Echoing the thought of certain other scholars, Wallace wonders how the author Shakespeare -- so sympathetic with the hunted, so acutely attuned to wild nature -- actually survived the rough and tumble of the Elizabethan Age? The answer, he suggests, is that he did not survive it intact (as de Vere did not), except by becoming the great tragic poet of the mature plays, where, even here, the feeling for wild nature softens the drumbeat of horrors in the likes of Macbeth or Lear. Citing passages from these plays, Wallace points out that de Vere, not William of Stratford knew the wilderness they described, knew Scotland and Dover (as Hughes knew the Yorkshire moors that infuse so much of his poetry).

Hughes suggests that his own reading of Shakespeare “might form... a new kind of Shakespearean production ... a single Titanic work ... the story of the mind exiled from human nature ... the story of Western Man ... [looking for] a substitute for the spirit-confidence of the Nature he has lost.” For Wallace, Shakespeare’s real “sea change” and the locus of his true sympathies is one that, like Caliban, speaks “the poetry of the natural world,” a speech only possible when one associates “wealth with death and the loss of it with life.” William’s story does not follow that course. Edward de Vere’s does.

Wallace’s book clearly argues for a greater appreciation of the depth to which poets like Shakespeare, Hughes and even Plath let “wilderness” into their works. A recent film like *The Shape of Water* warns of the risk we increasingly take in suppressing elemental forces. Wallace has clearly translated “wilderness” here into the engine driving the works of the author Shakespeare, convincing us that his life, therefore, embraced its own undeniable wilderness.

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