

St. Petersburg Times Oct. 2000

Mrs. Shakespeare: The Complete Works

By Robert Nye

Arcade. 216 pp. \$23.95

A moderately reliable source tells us Shakespeare died on his 52nd birthday in 1616 after a bout of all-night drinking with fellow playwrights Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton. Seven years later, two members of his theater company published one of our genuinely priceless books: the First Folio, the first complete Shakespeare.

Now, seven years after its British publication, America can sample Robert Nye's lark idea of a second priceless work from 1623: the private journal of Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, whom he married at 18 when she was 26 and three months pregnant with their daughter, Susanna.

Nye's premise has Susanna giving Anne a blank book which she now fills with remembrances of the poet and particularly of her only visit to London, a week-long romp with her husband in 1594.

Nye stays true to scholarly surmise that Shakespeare left Stratford in the 1580s, took menial jobs for the Lord Chamberlain's company, began reworking other men's plays, then penning his own while making shrewd investments, and finally retiring to Stratford in 1611, leaving his wife to cope with his absence for most of their marriage while he thrived professionally and enjoyed a spirited bachelor existence. Upon his death, he bequeathed Anne the odd gift of his "second-best bed." Nye attempts to clear up the mystery of that gift, but all in Anne's own good time.

On the way there, she drops inadvertent evidence that she is responsible for many of his lines, including some from *The Winter's Tale*, *Much Ado*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Hamlet* and the 94th sonnet. Sonnet 145, with its play on Anne's last name, Nye has Shakespeare writing expressly for her, implying she is the "dark lady" the final 28 sonnets concern.

But it's those first 126 poems, the ones written for a mysterious "Mr. W.H.," almost certainly a patron, that propel the events of Nye's fictional journal. What could exist between these two men? Anne asks, Shakespeare shows, and the result becomes the week-long highlight of Anne's life and the cheap joke Nye's book, sadly, boils down to.

Anne Hathaway, as Nye conceives her, offers the young playwright little ground for much beyond a week of exotic sex. She despises poetry, has never read his work, never entered a theater, can't stand wordplay. When he asks to read her something he's written, she says, "Not tonight, I have a headache." She holds in contempt the very thing her husband lives for, deploring how poets spend their time "admiring the lineaments of their own minds."

How much less, then, this book is than it could have been. Nye could have made Anne the model for Rosalind, as the Gwyneth Paltrow character in the far better *Shakespeare in Love* becomes the model for *Twelfth Night's* Viola. Instead, if she provides the prototype for anything, Anne has the tongue of Kate the shrew and the mind of Touchstone's dim-witted country wench Audrey.

Anne is exactly the kind of wife a creative and sensitive man would need to leave. She even offers in one entry a recipe for hare soup that itself would make someone bolt for London.

How invaluable it would be to have a journal, fact or fiction, written by an intimate sympathetic to Shakespeare's nature. Nye, however, sets his sights infinitely lower, singing the tune of our times, the cynical cheap shot, and tries merely to mold clay feet beneath the tallest literary giant the world has produced. If you were married to his Anne, you'd stay out all night drinking too.