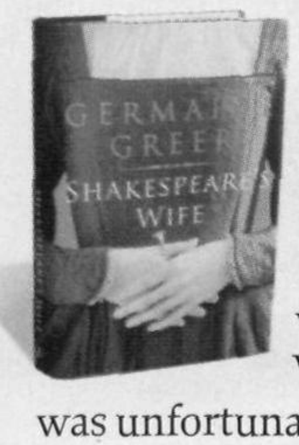
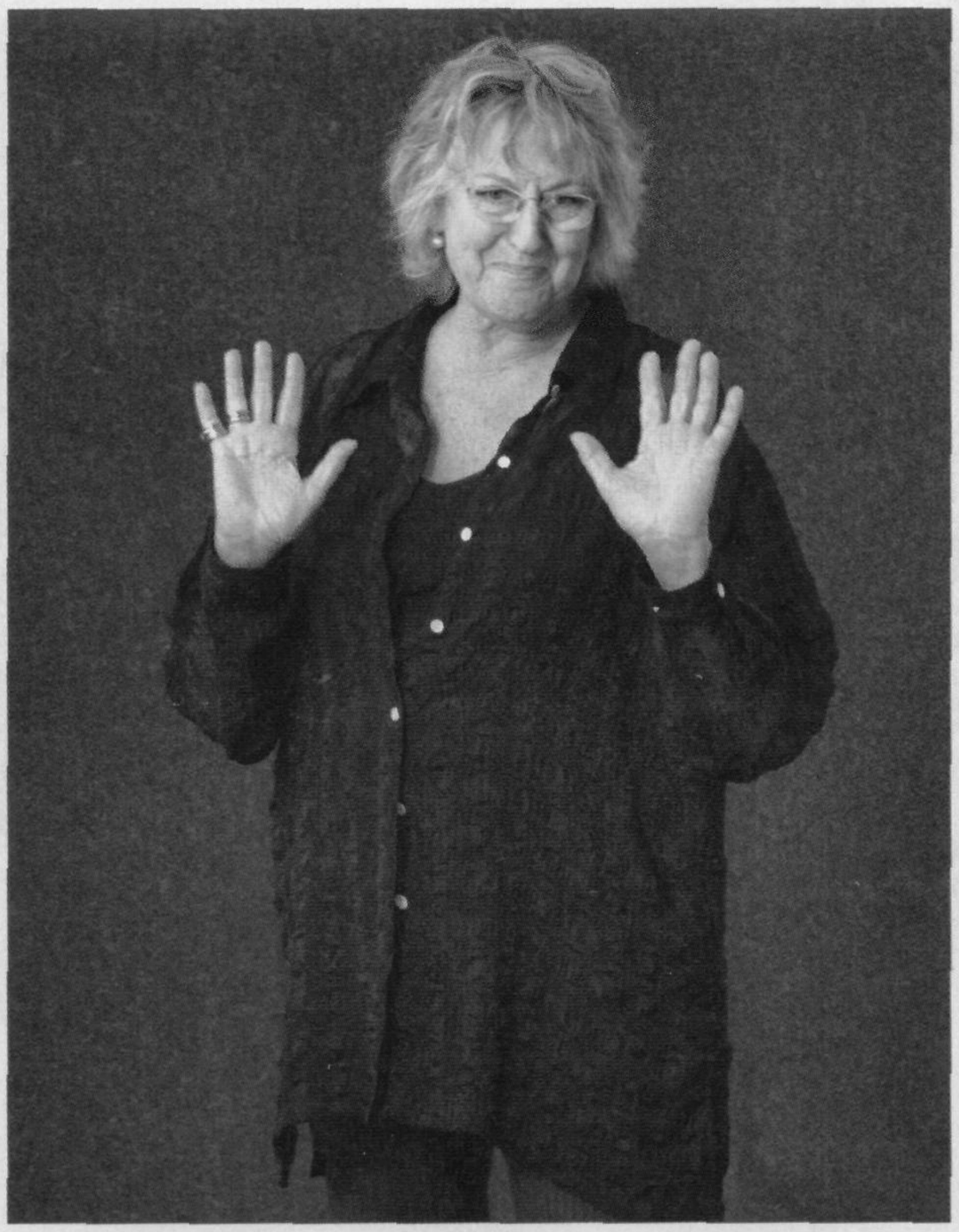
BOOKS

Rethinking Anne. A new biography questions the conventional wisdom on Shakespeare's much-maligned wife

BY WILLIAM LEE ADAMS



HISTORY HAS BEEN cruel to Anne Hathaway. For centuries, scholars and journalists have vilified her as a homely wench to whom William Shakespeare was unfortunately shackled. As the dominant story goes (and it is just a story for, as with so much of Shakespeare's life, there is little primary source material to back up the biographers' narratives), 26-year-old Anne coaxed 18-year-old William into a careless roll in the hay. Her pregnancy forced their marriage and young Will fled the misery of Stratford-upon-Avon for London, where he promptly became the world's greatest playwright. Citing the omission of Anne's name from his will, academics have happily spun tales that she mothered a bastard, had affairs with her brothers-in-law and even seduced a Puritan preacher.



Defender *In her contentious but convincing new work, Germaine Greer dares to suggest that Shakespeare respected his wife*

In her daring new biography, *Shakespeare's Wife*, Shakespearean authority Germaine Greer seeks to right the wrongs done to Anne. Through documentary evidence and close readings of Elizabethan texts, she re-embeds Anne's life in its social context to deliver the first systematic rebuttal to Anne's detractors. What emerges is a provocative, well-reasoned set of hypotheses that suggests Shakespeare drew inspiration from, and even loved, his other half.

Greer, one of the most influential feminist thinkers of the 20th century and author of *The Female Eunuch*, writes that envy and fear have driven the naysayers: "The possibility that a wife might have been closer to their idol than they could ever be, understood him better than they ever could, could not be entertained." This contentious tone colors much of her discussion. Greer argues that upon marriage Anne had not passed "her sell-by date"—the average Elizabethan woman married at 27—and that as a landholder she could gain little by seducing a "penniless teenage boy, with nothing to his name but a grammar school education." Religious mores render the femme fatale interpretation even more unlikely. Had she entrapped an unwilling innocent in God-fearing Stratford, Anne would "have found herself up before the Vicar's Court in less time than it takes to sow a wild oat."

Following that great tradition of Shakespearean biographers, Greer's theories come thick, fast and unencumbered by hard proof. Greer postulates that Anne and William designed her pregnancy to jump-start the complicated marriage negotiations between their families. She envisions an independent Anne who, after William's departure, brought her three children through harsh winters, plagues and food shortages, and prospered as a maltmaker and moneylender. Anne, not William, purchased and restored New Place, the grand home to which he would eventually retire. Although the Shakespeares lived apart most of their married lives, Greer rejects the notion of estrangement. Sixteenth century laws criminalized "living away from a wife." Greer reasons that if William did abandon Anne, and she did not denounce him, she must have been protecting him.

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Thankfully, Greer spares us a one-dimensional portrait of a strong, self-sufficient woman: she exposes Anne's vulnerabilities, too. She accepts that on some level Anne yearned for her husband and feared his infidelity. Anne knew, says Greer, that London streets "were full of whores, from the sleaziest to the most glamorous," and that prostitutes might ensnare him as he passed through their red-light districts. People returning from London carried gossip that William was free with his favors, and a homosexual. The publication of *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare's decidedly erotic poem and his biggest claim to fame among his contemporaries, disrupted her quiet life. Neighbors likely sneered that Anne inspired the poem's "desirous older woman" with a boy husband.

Shakespeare's Wife is as much a social history as a biography. In some of its most fascinating passages, Anne becomes the vehicle to convey Elizabethan rituals and beliefs. During her labor, midwives likely drew the curtains and lit the fire: bright light, they thought, might drive a laboring Anne insane, and locals construed the birth of her twins as the result of "inordinate sexual desire." When Anne's son died at age 11, perhaps of cerebral palsy, mourners carried his body through town on a tabletop. Respectful townspeople laid down their tools as the procession, led by Anne, passed.

Other scholars will no doubt snicker at Greer's theories—particularly her final assertion that Anne financed the posthumous publishing of Shakespeare's "First Folio," which included 36 plays, 18 of which had not been published before, like *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*. But Greer's conjecture, founded on careful research, probably contains more truth than the commonly accepted prejudice does. The poet of marriage may very well have understood what his wife endured, and her devotion to him: "In his plays women are shown time and time again to be constant in love through months and years of separation," Greer writes. Anne "may have been the model." By giving Shakespeare's wife a voice and rescuing her from caricature, Greer achieves that for which all Shakespearean scholars strive: she brings us closer to the Bard himself. ■

GERAINT LEWIS—WRITER PICTURES