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One Woman in Her Time

In the Shadow of the Globe
Michelle Cameron
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Review by [Gilbert Wesley Purdy](#)

In one of his best known passages, Shakespeare reminds us, in the character of Jacques, from the play *As You Like It*, that:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.

In this spirit, Michelle Cameron has given us her first book of poetry, *In the Shadow of the Globe*, a verse play, of sorts, on the life of the Bard of Avon. The characters are Shakespeare himself and the supporting cast that formed the theatrical world through which he moved.

The volume is a history play, then. Most of the characters are historical, several fictional. All of their lives are imagined. The premise is well conceived and capably executed. Mary Burbage, sister to the Burbages who owned the Globe Theater, is more or less the main character.

As in all such plays, including Shakespeare's, the raw material for the characters Cameron depicts is the stuff of her own life and the world around her. This accounts for the fact that, while she has clearly done some homework on the historical period, the tone is contemporary. She has wisely been frugal with period references and phrasing.

Just as wisely, she has made no attempt whatsoever to compete with Shakespeare as playwright. The stories the characters unfold are quotidian, decidedly not dramatic.

The plays themselves are seldom referred to. They are a backdrop.

The Bard—perhaps by design, perhaps not—speaks most of the quotable lines. He wistfully recalls his son Hamnet:

...his high-toned tootling
from a tiny whistle I'd carved—
shaping his sweetness on the summer air.

He carries the whistle with him in his pocket. When the plague strikes, he trims his conversation (in a particularly nice touch on Cameron's part):

the innkeeper turns on me,
sudden and demands:
have you buried anyone of late?
I mention sad Tim not,
fearing sleep in an open field.

All of this is nicely paced. No character is confused in his or her role.

Not that death has all of the stage. Love and sex play a much greater role. Food is often on the mind. Shakespeare remembers how, during his first roll in the hay with Anne Hathaway:

sleep coming jointly,
made us think our dreams
were also shared in common

In Cameron's version, Anne being left so constantly behind in Avon, while her husband spent the theater season in London, quite properly suggests that matters did not turn out that way.

But however wise it may have been not to try matching lines with the greatest English playwright—or with any, for that matter, from the bombastic Elizabethan stage—there is still the need to find substitutes that work for a reader today, and Michelle Cameron's book is not as happy in this regard. Much of the time her book reads like a primer of late 16th century daily life. The characters are too explicable, their emotions too proportionate.

Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" does not roast him on the spit. She is not the same woman about whom he wrote (in sonnet 81):

Thou art as tyrannous, so as thou art,
As those whose beauties proudly make them cruel.

We have nothing more than a single off-hand line to show us the clamor of their love. They sleep together in a hot passion for a time. His sonnets to her, in *In the Shadow of the Globe*, are described as if they were all filled with sweet praise. She leaves him, taking with her his immortal lines.

For this reason, the most effective characters in the volume are two of the more minor: Will Sly and Will Kemp. As was the custom, Sly played women's roles as a youthful apprentice actor. As he passes the age at which he can play these roles, he has become an angry, gay, gambling alcoholic. We find him courting Burbage's dowry and housekeeping as he binges on all of his passions.

Will Kemp, the clown, improves upon his lines and upstages the actors with impromptu sight-gags. He has his own professional wisdom as well:

there's no ribaldry without the joke's butt,
someone must needs serve as reverse to contentment,
the one who moans
when others hold their sides with mirth.

His rewrites make him unpopular with the playwright. A battle ensues, and Kemp decides to go solo. During a farewell celebration put on by the mayor of London, Will admits to having doubts about the wisdom of his choice but marches bravely onward.

These two characters have all the poignancy of internal contradiction. Mary Burbage only gains it when Sly adds wife-beater to his qualities and she turns away the gentle advances of Shakespeare, her heart's desire, nonetheless.

A word is in order about a couple of anachronisms. In "Clown Disrobing," Will Kemp speaks of unlacing his shoes. Shoes tied with laces would not be invented for some two hundred years. Buckles or hooks were the rule. On a subtler note, in "Stolen Night," Shakespeare and Mary

Burbage have a tryst in Southampton's private gardens. The Bard tells the reader that he never expected:

that our hands would work magic,
clothes slip way as though cast by spell

Women and men often had intercourse in such settings. But women never removed their clothes unless they were about to engage in intercourse in private chambers. They wore far too many layers of clothing ever to get them back on should the romantic moment be unexpectedly interrupted—too many to take them off even if they felt there was no chance of being interrupted. Women, however, wore no panties. The custom, in such instances, was for the gentleman to unfasten his codpiece, to flip up the woman's dress and undergarments onto his outstretched arm, while she was pressed against wall or tree, and thus to do the blissful deed.

Whatever *In the Shadow of the Globe* may lack, however, there is a good deal that is present in it that the reader will appreciate. Nearly 200 pages bustling with above a dozen characters is an ambitious undertaking. Michelle Cameron has generally acquitted herself well.