



# Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being

*By Ted Hughes*

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## Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being By Ted Hughes

This critical work on Shakespeare attempts to show his complete works - dramatic and poetic - as a single, tightly-integrated, evolving organism. Identifying Shakespeare's use in the poems "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece", of the two most significant religious myths of the archaic world, Hughes argues that these myths later provided Shakespeare with templates for the construction of every play from "All's Well that Ends Well" to "The Tempest". He also argues that this development, in turn, represented his poetic exploration of conflicts within the "living myth" of the English Reformation. The claim is a large one, but Hughes supports his thesis with a painstakingly close analysis of language, plots and characters.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

For English poet Hughes, Shakespeare was "a prophetic shaman of the Puritan revolution," his plays mythic reenactments of the holy war between Catholic and Puritan fanaticism. This arcane, often farfetched study maintains that the Bard tapped into the "source myth" of Catholicism in *Venus and Adonis*: the myth of the Great Goddess and her sacrificed god. In *The Rape of Lucrece*, Shakespeare mined the rival source myth of Puritanism: the enraged Jehovan god who abhors the Goddess for her presumed treachery or whorishness. In this highly speculative analysis, Hughes follows the workings of these two interlocking myths through Shakespeare's plays, whose overall trajectory, he argues, is an attempt to escape from tragic destiny to secular freedom. In *King Lear*, according to Hughes, Shakespeare reinvented an ancient Egyptian cosmology to illuminate the distorting ethos of the English Reformation. And from *Cymbeline* to *The Tempest*, he argues, the Bard used the Gnostic myth about the Female who represents the hero's own soul. Hughes's ambitious critique will appeal primarily to devotees of myth and Jung.

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From Library Journal

This is one of the most remarkable books on Shakespeare to appear for some time. Hughes begins by analyzing *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, suggesting that the two myths that inform these poems--of the hero who rejects the goddess and is killed in return, and of the god who destroys the goddess--form a fundamental mythic and symbolic pattern that underlies Shakespeare's later plays, beginning with *As You Like It* and incorporating all the great tragedies and romances. The reader has to be prepared to follow Hughes, the noted British poet (*Wolfwatching*, LJ 12/90), through some fairly obscure mythological twists and turns, but it is almost always worth it. Every page is lit up with some insight that makes one think about the plays in a new light. Scholars may be irritated by the lack of documentation (no bibliography, few footnotes, no index), but this is literary criticism of the sort we need.

- *Bryan Aubrey, Fairfield, Ia.*

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About the Author

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was born in Yorkshire. His first book, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was published in 1957 by Faber & Faber and was followed by many volumes of poetry and prose for adults and children. He received the Whitbread Book of the Year for two consecutive years for his last published collections of poetry, *Tales from Ovid* and *Birthday Letters*. He was Poet Laureate from 1984, and in 1998 he was appointed to the Order of Merit.

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