

Hook, Sidney - The Hero in History - A Study in Limitation and Possibility

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Writing in 1880, William James banteringly asked Herbert Spencer whether he believed that if William Shakespeare had not been born at Stratford-on-Avon on April 26, 1564, the convergence of social and economic forces would have produced him elsewhere; and whether, if Shakespeare had died in infancy, another mother in Stratford-on-Avon would have delivered "a duplicate copy" of him? "Or," he teasingly continues, "might the substitute arise at Stratford-atte-Bowe." Fourteen years later Engels answers all these questions affirmatively for Napoleon and other great historical figures. In principle he answers them affirmatively for Shakespeare, too. The sole qualification he insists on is that the substitute might be a little better or worse rather than an exact replica.