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# THE MIRROR OF LIFE

How Shakespeare conquered the world

By Jonathan Bate

**I**n 1612, around the time that Shakespeare was beginning to work in collaboration with John Fletcher, perhaps as prelude to his retirement, the young dramatist John Webster wrote a preface to his tragedy *The White Devil* in which he expressed his “good opinion” of the “worthy labours” of his peers in the art of playmaking: the grandiose style of George Chapman, the learning of Ben Jonson, the collaborative enterprise of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, and “the right happy and copious industry of Mr Shakespeare, Mr Decker, and Mr Heywood.” Shakespeare’s plays are thus praised for being plentiful in number and skillfully executed. He is placed in the company of Thomas Dekker and Thomas Heywood, two other prolific and highly professional writers who made their living from the stage. But he is mentioned after four writers who, while equally professional and industrious, were better connected to the court and the gentry—Chapman, Jonson, Beaumont, and Fletcher. Four years later, in the spring of 1616, Beaumont and Shakespeare died within a few weeks of each other. Beaumont became the first dramatist to be honored with burial in the national shrine of Westminster Abbey, beside the tombs of Geoffrey Chaucer (the father of English verse) and Edmund Spenser (the greatest poet of the Eliza-



bethan era). Shakespeare was laid to rest in the provincial obscurity of his native Stratford-upon-Avon. That same year, Ben Jonson became the first English dramatist to publish a collected edition of his own plays written for the public stage. He was much

mocked for his presumption in doing so, especially under the title of *Works*, suggestive of an edition of a classical author such as Vergil or Horace. Webster learned many of the tricks of his trade from Shakespeare, but if he had been asked which of his contemporaries would achieve immortality and come to be regarded as the greatest playmaker since the ancient Greek tragedians, he could as well have plumped for either Jonson or the team of Beaumont and Fletcher. Or possibly even Chapman.

We now think of Shakespeare as a unique genius, the embodiment of the very idea of artistic genius, but in his own time, though widely admired, he was but one of a constellation of theatrical stars. How is it, then, that when we reach the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Shakespeare’s fame has outstripped that of all his peers? Why was he the sole dramatist of the age who would eventually have a genuinely international, ultimately a worldwide, impact?

One of the ways in which writers endure is through their influence on later writers. Jonson

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intuited this in his dedicatory poem to the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare's collected plays, in which he described Shakespeare as a "star" whose "influence" would "chide or cheer" the future course of British drama. Once the Folio was available to, in the words of its editors, "the great Variety of Readers," the plays began to influence not just the theater but poetry more generally. The works of Milton, notably his masque *Comus*, were steeped in Shakespearean language. Indeed, the young Milton's first published poem



was a sonnet prefixed to the second edition of the Folio, in which Shakespeare was said to have built himself "a live-long Monument" in the form of his plays. Shakespeare was Milton's key precedent for the writing of his epic *Paradise Lost* (1667) in blank verse rather than rhyme. Even later seventeenth-century poets who were committed to rhyme, such as King Charles II's poet laureate, John Dryden, acknowledged the power of Shakespeare's dramatic blank verse. As an act of homage to "the Divine Shakespeare," Dryden abandoned rhyme in *All for Love* (1678), his reworking of the Cleopatra story.

The London theaters were closed during the years of civil war and republican government in the middle of the seventeenth century, and the years after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 were characterized by a somewhat schizophrenic attitude toward Shakespeare. On the positive side, he was invoked for his inspirational

native genius, used to support claims for English naturalness as opposed to French artifice and for the moderns against the ancients. In a sweeping *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), Dryden described Shakespeare as "the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul." He brushed off charges of Shakespeare's lack of learning with the memorable judgment that "he needed not the spectacles of Books to read Nature."

Contemporaneously with Dryden, the learned Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, praised Shakespeare for his ability to enter into his vast array of characters, to "express the divers and different humours, or natures, or several passions in mankind." Yet at the same time, the courtly elite had spent their years of exile in France and had come under the influence of a highly refined neoclassical theory of artistic decorum, according to which tragedy should be kept apart from comedy and high style from low, with dramatic "unity" demanding obedience to strict laws. For this reason, Dryden and his contemporaries took considerable liberties in polishing and "improving" Shakespeare's plays for performance. According to the law of poetic justice, wholly innocent characters should not

be allowed to die: Nahum Tate therefore rewrote *King Lear* with a happy ending in which Cordelia marries Edgar. Tate also omitted the character of the Fool, on the grounds that such a figure was beneath the dignity of high tragedy.

The more formal classicism of Jonson and the courtly romances of Beaumont and Fletcher answered more readily to the Frenchified standards of the Restoration theater. Actors, though, were demonstrating that the most rewarding roles in the repertoire were the Shakespearean ones. Thomas Betterton (1635–1710), the greatest player of the age, had enormous success as Hamlet, Sir Toby Belch, Henry VIII, Macbeth, Timon of Athens, Lear, Falstaff, Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, and Othello (some of these in versions close to the original texts, others in heavily adapted reworkings). Playhouse scripts of individual plays found their way into print, while the Folio went through its third and fourth printings. By the end of the



century, Shakespeare was well entrenched in English cultural life. But he was not yet the unique genius.

Thomas Betterton's veneration for the memory of Shakespeare was such that late in his life he traveled to Warwickshire in order to find out what he could about the dramatist's origins. He passed a store of anecdotes to the poet, playwright, and eventual poet laureate Nicholas Rowe, who wrote "Some Account of the Life of Mr William Shakespeare," a biographical sketch published in 1709 in the first of the six volumes of his *Works of Shakespeare*, the collection that is usually regarded as the first modern edition of the plays. Rowe's biography offered a mixture of truth and myth, calculated to represent Shakespeare as a man of the people. It tells of how young Will was withdrawn from school when his father fell on hard times, how he then got into bad company and stole deer from the park of local grandee Sir Thomas Lucy. The resulting prosecution forced him to leave for London, where he became an actor and then a dramatist. Rowe's account is a symptom of how every age reinvents Shakespeare in its own image. The road from the provinces to London was a familiar one in the eighteenth century—Samuel Johnson and David Garrick walked it in real life, Henry Fielding's Tom Jones in fiction. Shakespeare served as exemplar of the writer who achieved success, and an unprecedented degree of financial reward, from his pen alone. The Earl of Southampton may have helped him on his way in his early years, but he was essentially a self-made man rather than a beneficiary of court and aristocratic patronage. For writers such as Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson, struggling in the transition from the age of patronage to that of Grub Street professionalism, Shakespeare offered not only a body of poetic invention but also an inspirational career trajectory.

If we had to identify a single decade in which the "cult of Shakespeare" took root, in which his celebrity and influence came to outstrip that of his contemporaries once and for all, it would probably be the 1730s. There was a proliferation of cheap mass-market editions, while in the theater the plays came to constitute about a quarter of the entire repertoire of the London stage, four times what they had been hitherto. The promotion of Shakespeare was driven by a number of forces, ranging from state censorship of new plays to a taste for the shapely legs of actresses (who by this time were permitted on the stage) in the cross-dressed "breeches parts" of the comedies. The plays were becoming synonymous with decency and Englishness, even as the institution of the theater was still poised between respectability and disrepute.

David Garrick (1717–79), the actor who may

justly be claimed as the father of what later came to be called "Bardolatry," arrived in London at a propitious moment. Shakespeare was growing into big business, and the time was ripe for a new star to cash in on his name. As in many a good theater story, Garrick's first break came when he stepped in as an understudy and outshone the actor who normally took the part. This was followed by a more formal debut, again of a kind that established a pattern for later generations: the revolutionary new reading of a major Shakespearean part. For Garrick, it was Richard III (for Edmund Kean in the next century, it was Shylock). Garrick's naturalism and eye for detail made the tragic acting of his predecessors seem crudely melodramatic. After this, there was no looking back. Garrick did all

the things we have come to expect of a major star: he took on the full gamut of Shakespeare, he had an affair with his leading lady (the gorgeous and talented Peg Woffington), and he managed his own acting company, supervising the scripts and directing plays while also starring in them. It was because of Garrick's extraordinary energy in all these departments that he not only gave unprecedented respectability to the profession of actor but also effectively invented the modern theater.

It was in the art of self-promotion that Garrick was unique. His public image was secured by William Hogarth's vibrant painting of him in the role of Richard III, confronted with his nightmares on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth Field. The most frequently engraved and widely disseminated theatrical portrait of the eighteenth century, this iconic image simultaneously established Garrick as the quintessential tragedian and inaugurated the whole tradition of large-scale Shakespearean painting. Hitherto, the elevated genre of "history painting" had concentrated on biblical and classical subjects. With Hogarth's image—created in the studio, though influenced by Garrick's stage performance—Shakespearean drama joined this august company.

The climax of Garrick's career in Bardolatry was the Jubilee that he organized in commemoration of the bicentenary of Shakespeare's birth. The event took place in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1769, on the occasion of the opening of a new town hall, a mere five years later than the anniversary it was supposed to mark. The Jubilee lasted for three days, during which scores of fashionable Londoners descended on the hitherto obscure provincial town where Shakespeare had been born. Here began the literary tourist in-

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dustry: local entrepreneurs did good business in the sale of Shakespearean relics, such as souvenirs supposedly cut from the wood of the great Bard's mulberry tree. Not since the medieval marketing of fragments of the True Cross had a single tree yielded so much wood. The Jubilee program included a grand procession of Shakespearean characters, a masked ball, a horse race, and a fireworks display—though in true English fashion the outdoor events were washed out by torrential rain. At the climax of the festivities, Garrick performed his own poem, “An

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Ode upon dedicating a building, and erecting a statue, to Shakespeare, at Stratford-upon-Avon,” set to music by the leading composer Thomas Arne. In the manner of a staged theatrical “happening,” Garrick had arranged for a member of the audience (a fellow actor), dressed as a Frenchified fop, to complain—as connoisseurs of French literary taste had complained for generations—that Shakespeare was vulgar, provincial, and overrated. This gave Garrick the opportunity to voice his grand defense of Shakespeare. Although the whole business was much mocked in newspaper reports, caricatures, and stage farces, the stunt generated enormous publicity for both Garrick and Shakespeare across Britain and the continent of Europe. The Jubilee did more than make Stratford-upon-Avon into a tourist attraction: it inaugurated the very idea of a summer arts festival.

In an age when orthodox religion was facing severe challenges, the cult of Shakespeare was becoming a secular faith. Thanks to the enthusiasm of poets, critics, and translators such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and John Keats in England, J. W. von Goethe and the Schlegel brothers in Germany, Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas in France, the grammar-school boy from the edge of the forest of Arden became the supreme deity not just of poetry and drama but of high culture itself.

From the initial reception of *Venus and Adonis* through the dedicatory material prefaced to the First Folio, Shakespeare was renowned by his contemporaries above all for his wit, his mastery of language. He lived in an age when English was undergoing a huge expansion, sucking in new words from all over Europe and beyond, and he worked in a profession wholly reliant upon the memorable use of language. Like all his poetic contemporaries, Shakespeare had a profoundly figurative imagination. It is a truth universally acknowl-

edged that Shakespeare's gift of poetic invention surpassed that of any writer before or since. Sometimes, though, the art of Bardolatry has led to excessive claims. So, for instance, Shakespeare is sometimes said to have coined more new English words than anyone else, with the possible exception of James Joyce. This is not true. The illusion of his unique inventiveness in this regard was created by the tendency of the *Oxford English Dictionary* to cite examples from him as the first usage of a word. That was because of his ready availability when the dictionary was created at the end of the Victorian era. Now that we possess large digitized databases of sixteenth-century books, it is easy to find prior occurrences for many supposed Shakespearean coinages. And yet the list of Shakespearean neologisms remains impressive. He gave us such verbs as “puke,” “torture,” “misquote,” “gossip,” “swagger,” “blanket” (Poor Tom's “blanket my loins” in *Lear*), and “champion” (Macbeth's “champion me to the utterance”). He invented the nouns “critic,” “mountaineer,” “pageantry,” and “eyeball”; the adjectives “fashionable,” “unreal,” “blood-stained,” “deafening,” “majestic,” and “domineering”; the adverbs “instinctively” and “obsequiously” in the sense of “behaving in the appropriate way to render obsequies for the dead.”<sup>1</sup> Many of Shakespeare's coinages are not new words but old words in new contexts (such as the application of “manager” to the entertainment business, with *Midsummer Night's Dream's* “manager of mirth”) or new compounds or old words wrested to new grammatical usage.<sup>2</sup> Although twenty-first-century electronic databases diminish the extent of Shakespeare's actual coinages, they immeasurably enrich our sense of the astonishingly multivalent, polysemous quality of his language.

Shakespeare's enduring appeal cannot, however, be said to rest solely on his linguistic virtuosity, nor on the proposition—favored by some of today's politically minded critics—that he achieved world domination simply because of the power of the British empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As he recognized himself, human affairs always embody a combination of permanent truths and historical contingencies, of—to use the terms of his age—“nature” and “custom.” At one level, he is “not of an age, but for all time.” He works with archetypal characters, core plots, and perennial conflicts, as he dramatizes the competing demands of the living and the dead, the old and the young, men and wom-

<sup>1</sup> Only in the eighteenth century did the word come to connote “excessive deference”—perhaps as the very result of Richard III's feigning performance of the word.

<sup>2</sup> “Lord Angelo dukes it well in his absence” is a good example of the latter in *Measure for Measure*, and in *Macbeth*, “I'll devil-porter it no further” offers compounding and grammatical conversion in the same instance.



en, self and society, integrity and role-play, insiders and outsiders. He grasps the structural conflicts shared by all societies: religious against secular vision, country against city, birth against education, strong leadership against the people's voice, the code of honor against the energies of erotic desire. But he also addressed the conflicts of his own historical moment: the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism and from feudalism to modernity, the formation of national identity, trade and immigration, the encounter with new worlds overseas, the shadow of foreign powers. He was restricted by the customs of his age, notably when it came to the subordination of women, but at the same time he was prophetic of future ages. Despite the inferior position of most women in his society and the fact that the convention of his theater meant that female parts were played by young men, he gives a remarkable degree of freedom and mental agility to his women.

**W**hether set or written in the past, all great plays speak to present times. In Shakespeare, topical allusion is rare—the odd flattering glance at

Queen Elizabeth, one conspicuous nod to the Earl of Essex—but the sense of the fictional world on-stage as a mirror of the real world beyond the auditorium is pervasive. In *Hamlet*, for example, the prince is delighted when he hears the news that the players have returned to Elsinore. He greets them as personal friends. Some of the theater enthusiasts among the courtiers of Queen Elizabeth and then King James, such as the Earl of Southampton, the Earl of Pembroke, and the Earl of Montgomery, would have greeted Shakespeare and his fellow actors in the same way. The circumstances of the fictional acting company at Elsinore reflect those of the real company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, that first put on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Their highest priority is to be available on demand for court performances, if necessary reshaping their repertoire in response to a particular demand, as when Hamlet asks for a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines to be inserted into their tragedy. While waiting to be summoned to the palace, they perform regularly nearby, trying out each new play in the court of public opinion. They are an all-male company, whose teenage apprentices play the female parts. Their business at the box office faces a range of

challenges, from state censorship to closure because of plague to rival attractions and in particular a fashionable new company consisting entirely of highly trained schoolboys.

Given that the players in *Hamlet* are in part a witty self-representation of Shakespeare's own acting company, it is fair to assume that Shakespeare himself believed, as Hamlet does, that actors are "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time." According to contemporaneous dictionaries, an abstract was "a little book or volume gathered out of a greater," "an abridgement, epitome, summary, compendium, short course, or discourse." In an age of long sermons, interminable homilies, and closely printed treatises on ethics and politics, plays provided a crash course in the way of the world, an instantaneous mirror of manners and of life. The weighty folio volumes of *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ire-*



*Titania Awakes, Surrounded by Attendant Fairies, Clinging Rapturously to Bottom, Still Wearing the Ass's Head*, by Henry Fuseli © Kunsthau Zurich/Bridgeman Art Library



land gathered by Raphael Holinshed and others were anything but brief, and in a fraction of the time it would have taken to read them—and at a fraction of the cost of buying the book—Shakespeare's players, as they moved from the Rose to the Theatre to the Curtain to the Globe, offered the London public an abridgement and compendium of the nation's history.

Their dramatized "chronicles" of times past—whether English, British, European, ancient Greek, or Roman—were also mirrors of the present. All productions were "modern dress," with

just the occasional period detail, such as emblematic togas to represent classical Rome. The kings, dukes, and ladies in the plays would have looked impressively courtly not least because their wardrobe

consisted in part of the secondhand clothes of courtiers: often when aristocrats died, they would bequeath items of clothing to their servants, who would sell them to the players. From his reading and his firsthand experience of submitting his work for the approval of the Master of the Revels, then performing at court, Shakespeare learned the language and manners of courtiership, and his characters came to speak and to gesture, as well as to be dressed, in the manner of monarchs and their entourage. A Duke of Buckingham or Earl of Pembroke in the audience might have seen himself mirrored in one of his ancestors in the chronicle plays. King James, who claimed descent from Banquo, would have watched the Scottish play with close attention. And the followers of the Earl of Essex, who liked to consider him the modern Achilles, would have found rich food for thought in Shakespeare's deconstruction of the Achillean code of chivalry in his *Troilus and Cressida*, written soon after

Essex's dramatic fall from Queen Elizabeth's favor.

**S**ince the 1700s, the cult of Shakespeare has been closely bound up with the idealization of Queen Elizabeth I. Consequently, his plays often have been set beside the poetry of John Donne, the gentleman-like virtues of Sir Philip Sidney, the global circumnavigation of Francis Drake, the colonial enterprise of Sir Walter Raleigh, and the defeat of the Spanish Armada: these, it has been said, were the fruits of England's golden age. The reality is that Queen Elizabeth inherited, and Shakespeare grew up in, a divided and vulnerable nation. The Spanish threat and the Irish problem would not go away. The queen's tactic of not marrying was a highly effective way

of keeping open a range of possible alliances, but by the 1590s it had created severe anxiety about the succession to the throne. In the period when Shakespeare was writing his plays, the queen and her ministers had come to rely more and more on coercion, threat, and surveillance in order to maintain authority.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of his career, writing in collaboration with John Fletcher, Shakespeare turned his direct attention to the moment that shaped the historical context of his own life: Henry VIII's decision to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn (or Bullen) in the hope of siring a son to succeed him on the throne of England, an act of high political risk that eventually had consequences for the spiritual life of the entire nation. When Shakespeare's father, John, was born, there was no church other than that of Rome. When Shakespeare was born, there was a new state religion, the Church of England. When Shakespeare's father was born, he owed a subject's obedience to the king but a soul's obedience to God via the pope. During Shakespeare's youth, successive popes excommunicated the Queen of England and licensed her assassination. Drastic measures were taken to protect her safety.

Shakespeare lived in a world of government spies, Catholic conspiracies, supposed Catholic conspiracies that were really secret-service frame-ups, and public executions of traitors. In 1584, the queen's Privy Council, their eye cast anxiously on the claim to the throne of Elizabeth's Catholic cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots, instigated a "Bond of Association for the Preservation of

<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the only literary composition to survive in Shakespeare's handwriting is a scene for a play that was never performed and with which he had very limited involvement. It seems to have been sometime around the turn of the century that the Lord Chamberlain's Men obtained the script of a play about Sir Thomas More that had not been staged, due to political objections from the Master of the Revels, who licensed all performances. Shakespeare contributed a skillful scene in which More quelled a rioting crowd through the force of his rhetoric. In a characteristic balancing act, he managed both to animate the ordinary people in the crowd with colorful detail (thus Doll says that More's care for the people is witnessed by his having "made my brother, Arthur Watchins, Sergeant Safe's yeoman") and to argue in More's voice on behalf of both empathy with the dispossessed (in this case, immigrants) and respect for the order of the state ("For to the king God hath his office lent/Of dread, of justice, power and command,/Hath bid him rule, and willed you to obey"). This was not enough to make the play acceptable: "Leave out the insurrection wholly, with the cause thereof," demanded the Master of the Revels, with the result that it languished in manuscript until the nineteenth century, when a scholar realized for the first time that here were a few precious pages in Shakespeare's fluent, barely punctuated hand. Contrary to the expectation established by Hemings and Condell's observation, in the preface to the First Folio, that when Shakespeare handed his manuscripts over to his acting company there was barely a crossing-out, the scene from Sir Thomas More reveals him in the process of having second thoughts even as he composes.

## SHAKESPEARE LIVED IN A WORLD OF GOVERNMENT SPIES, CATHOLIC CONSPIRACIES, AND THE PUBLIC EXECUTIONS OF TRAITORS



Her Majesty's Royal Person," whereby they vowed "to pursue to utter extermination all that shall attempt by any act, counsel, or consent to anything that shall tend to the harm of Her Majesty's Royal Person, or claim succession to the Crown by the untimely death of Her Majesty; vowing and protesting in the presence of the Eternal and Ever-living God to prosecute such persons to the death." The Bond, to which thousands of Englishmen signed up, specifically called for vengeance in the event of the queen's assassination. The world of oaths and factions, plot and counterplot, murder and seizure of the throne, vengeance and blood, in Shakespeare's tragedies and histories should be understood in this historical context.

The public drama naturally had enormous propaganda potential. A play such as Christopher Marlowe's dramatization of *The Massacre at Paris* that had occurred on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572 was a perfect vehicle for inflaming the people against murderous popish tyranny and also creating sympathy for London's population of exiled Huguenot Protestants. But the drama had equal and opposite subversive potential. In 1597 an order went out for all the playhouses to be demolished as a result of Nashe and Jonson's "lewd and mutinous" *The Isle of Dogs*, which had been staged at the Swan. Had the order been carried through, Shakespeare's career would have been cut short well before he wrote many of his greatest plays. As it was, the Privy Council relented, though for a time performances were restricted to the two trusty troupes, the Lord Chamberlain's and the Lord Admiral's Men. But plays

touching on politics, religion, and international relations always retained the element of risk. The archives of the Revels office are punctuated by entries that reveal the censorship process at work: "this is too insolent, and to be changed" scribbled against a speech, or the note "I did refuse to allow a play of Massinger's because it did contain dangerous matter, as the deposing of Sebastian King of Portugal by Philip the Second and there being a peace sworn twixt the Kings of England and Spain." A passage about York usurping the crown through popular incitement appears in

the original published version of the play that became *Henry IV Part 2*, but not the Folio text. References to Irish rebellion are toned down in the same play, and Macmorris's plea on behalf of the Irish nation is absent from the 1600 Quarto of *Henry V*. The deposition scene is absent from the first three editions of *Richard II*. Passages concerning rebellion seem to have been removed from *Henry IV Part 2*. Shakespeare had to change the name of Oldcastle to Falstaff so as not to tarnish the memory of a famous proto-Protestant martyr.

In 1599 severely dangerous matter was published in the form of a history of the reign of Henry IV by Sir John Hayward, a follower of the queen's restless favorite, the Earl of Essex, in which it was argued that Richard II's weakness as



a ruler was sufficient justification for Henry Bullingbrook's seizure of the throne. The book was suppressed, but its aura of subversion clung to Shakespeare's dramatization of the same material: the day before Essex and his followers attempted to seize the court, in February 1601, they commissioned a performance of *Richard II* at the Globe, as if to prepare Londoners for the removal of an anointed but ineffective monarch.

Shakespeare's political beliefs are as elusive as his religion, his sexuality, and just about everything else about him that matters. Precisely because he



was not an apologist for any single position, it has been possible for the plays to be effectively reinterpreted in the light of each successive age. In the four centuries since his death, he has been made the apologist for all sorts of diametrically opposed ideologies, many of them anachronistic—we should not forget that he was writing before the time when toleration and liberal democracy became totemic values. But the political appropriation of him is true to his own practice: he, too, was a great trader in anachronism. He took the political structures of ancient Rome and mapped them onto his own time and state with fascinating effect. *The Rape of Lucrece* is set at the moment of transition from monarchy to republic; *Coriolanus*, during the republican era; *Julius Caesar*, at the pivotal moment when a crown is offered and refused but the republic collapses anyway. *Antony and Cleopatra* ends with the beginning of empire, and *Titus Andronicus* fictionalizes the Roman empire in decay, approaching the time when the great city will be sacked by “barbarian” hordes from the north. *King Lear* and *Cymbeline* find echoes of the modern in the matter of ancient Britain. The history plays speak to both the generations before Shakespeare and his live audience. Several other plays use contemporary Italy as a mirror. Humanist learning and mercantile travel meant that the eyes of the Elizabethans were open to alternative forms of government other than the hereditary monarchy they experienced at home. They had great admiration for Venice, regarding that island city-state as a model of anti-papal modernity and trading prowess. Venice had no monarch but a sophisticated oligarchic system, which was observed by English travelers and absorbed by readers such as Shakespeare by way of Lewis Lewkenor’s translation of Contarini’s *The Government and Republic of Venice* (an important source for *Othello*).

Not so long ago, it was commonplace for historians to assert that republican thought had no following in England until well into the seventeenth century—that the intellectual conditions that made the Cromwellian republic possible emerged only a few years before the extraordinary moment when the English chopped off their king’s head. Recent scholarship has shown that this was not the case: republican discourse, if not overt republican polemic, was widespread in Shakespeare’s time. So, for instance, the anti-imperial Roman historian Tacitus was read and discussed and admired as the most dispassionate of historians, whose work combined moral insight into the behavior of political actors with an assessment of their value as governors. Several of Shakespeare’s plays may by this light be described as “Tacitean.” The flavor of Tacitus is wonderfully

captured in Justus Lipsius’ dedicatory epistle to his edition of the *Annals*: “Behold . . . a theatre of our modern life. I see a ruler rising up against the laws in one passage, subjects rising up against a ruler elsewhere. I find the devices that make the destruction of liberty possible and the unsuccessful effort to regain it. I read of tyrants overthrown in their turn, and of power, ever unfaithful to those who abuse it.” This could equally well serve as a conspectus of Shakespeare’s history plays and political tragedies.

The association of Shakespeare with Tacitism is especially interesting because it aligns him with the Earl of Essex. Henry Savile, the first English translator of Tacitus, became provost of Eton through Essex’s patronage, and there were a number of other Tacitean scholars and apologists in his circle. Shakespeare’s patron, Southampton, was a follower of Essex, so it must have been a political gesture on Shakespeare’s part to dedicate to him *The Rape of Lucrece*, a highly Tacitean account of the tyranny of Tarquin and the establishment of the Roman republic. Shakespeare’s most explicit contemporary political allusion is a flattering reference in one of the *Henry V* choruses to Essex’s military expedition against the Irish. The commissioning of the performance of *Richard II* on the eve of the Essex rebellion suggests that the Tacitean faction still considered Shakespeare to be effectively their house dramatist in the last years of the old queen’s reign. But with his usual cunning, Shakespeare somehow managed to throw off the association: Essex was executed for treason, and Southampton was sent to the Tower, but the players got away with a reprimand. They claimed that they had put on the show only because they had been well paid to do so.

Shakespeare sometimes wrote in direct flattery of Queen Elizabeth, as in the epilogue to a court performance on Shrove Tuesday 1599. And the *Virgin Queen* is almost certainly the immortal phoenix of the mysteriously beautiful poem that has become known as “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” published the same year as the Essex rebellion. But when the old queen finally died in 1603, Henry Chettle expressed surprise that Shakespeare did not “drop from his honied Muse one sable tear” in her memory. Although there seems not to have been a published elegy, Shakespeare did perhaps reflect on the end of the era and the uncertain times to come in Sonnet 107, with its reference to the “eclipse” of the “mortal moon” (in classical mythology, the moon was associated with Diana the virgin huntress—and Elizabeth in turn was associated with her).

The new king, James I, who had held the Scottish throne as James VI since he had been an infant, immediately took the Lord Chamberlain’s Men under his direct patronage. Henceforth they would be the King’s Men, and for the rest of



Shakespeare's career they were favored with far more court performances than any of their rivals. There even seem to have been rumors early in the reign that Shakespeare and Burbage were being considered for knighthoods, an unprecedented honor for mere actors—and one that in the event was not accorded to a member of the profession for nearly three hundred years, when the title was bestowed upon Henry Irving, the leading Shakespearean actor of Queen Victoria's reign.

The King's Men were given the status of Grooms of the Chamber. Each sharer in the company was given four and a half yards of red cloth from the Master of the Great Wardrobe for the occasion of the new king's ceremonial procession through the city of London in March 1604. In August of that year, they had to close their theater and spend eighteen days literally "waiting" in attendance at Somerset House during the visit of a special envoy from the king of Spain, while a peace treaty was being thrashed out. This moment of suspension was an important turning point in Shakespeare's career. Elizabethan Shakespeare was a war poet: the Armada and the campaigns against the Spanish in the Netherlands had overshadowed his whole career. Jacobean Shakespeare was a peace poet: of course he still wrote battle scenes, which were always good box office, but a play such as *Coriolanus* is equally interested in the question of what happens to a man of action in time of peace. A Scottish king working in harmony with the English court brings peace at the climax of *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline* ends with a peace treaty, and *Antony and Cleopatra* concludes with Octavius becoming Augustus and promising to fulfill his prediction that "The time of universal peace is near." James liked to see himself as a modern Augustus, at once the bringer of peace across Europe and the founder of a new empire ("Britain," in contrast to Elizabeth's "England"). Shakespeare's Jacobean plays resonate with the new king's preoccupations: in *Macbeth*, the Gunpowder Plot, witchcraft, the lineage of Banquo, the practice of "touching" subjects to cure them of scrofula, known as the King's Evil; in *Lear*, the need to unite Britain and the dire consequences of its division; in *Cymbeline*, Britain as a new Rome and the talismanic Welsh port of Milford Haven, where Henry Richmond landed at the dawn of the Tudor dynasty; in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, royal children and dynastic liaisons.

Shakespeare's insights into the dynamics of royalty and power are such that, whoever is king or president or prime minister, one or more of the plays will always strike a resonance with the times. Shakespeare endures because with each new turn of history, a new dimension of his work opens up before us. When George III went mad,

*King Lear* was kept off the stage—it was just too close to the truth. During the Cold War, *Lear* again became Shakespeare's hottest play, its combination of starkness and absurdity answering to the mood of the age, inspiring the Polish critic Jan Kott to compare it to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* in his influential book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1962) and both the Russian Grigori Kozintsev (1969) and the English Peter Brook (1971) to make darkly brilliant film versions.

Early in 1934, when the French Socialist government was close to collapse, a new translation of *Coriolanus* was staged at the Comédie Française in Paris. The production was perceived as an attack on democratic institutions. Clashing pro- and anti-government factions shut down the auditorium. Shakespeare's translator, a Swiss, was branded a foreign fascist. The prime minister fired the theater director and replaced him with the head of the national police, whose artistic credentials were somewhat questionable. What are we to conclude from this real-life drama? That *Coriolanus*' contempt for the rabble makes Shakespeare himself into a proto-fascist? How could it then have been that the following year the Maly Theatre in Stalin's Moscow staged a production of the same play that sought to demonstrate that *Coriolanus* was an "enemy of the people" and that Shakespeare was therefore a true socialist? Shakespeare was neither an absolutist nor a democrat, but the fact that both productions were possible is one of the major reasons why he continues to command our interest.

On June 16, 2006, a production of *Titus Andronicus* directed by Yukio Ninagawa opened at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, as part of a festival in which Shakespeare's complete works were staged in the course of a year. *Titus* is a dramatization of the bloody and inexorable logic of revenge in a militarized world where the highest value is placed upon the code of honor. For Shakespeare and his original audiences, imperial Rome was synonymous with such a culture; the Ninagawa production powerfully aligned the play with samurai codes of behavior (twenty years earlier, the same director had achieved a similar cultural translation in an internationally acclaimed staging of *Macbeth*). This *Titus* was an abstract and brief chronicle of several eras at once: Ninagawa followed Shakespeare in skillfully collapsing several phases of ancient Roman history into one (primitive, republican, imperial, decadent), while at the same time spectators were conscious of both Shakespeare's sixteenth-century England and the enduring influence of samurai Japan. But the play also resonated with the present: at the same time in Iraq two American soldiers had their throats slit in revenge for the death in an air strike two weeks earlier of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of



Al Qaeda in Iraq. According to the Mujahedeen Shura Council, this ritualized act of vengeance was carried out personally by al-Zarqawi's successor—just as Titus exacts revenge with his own remaining hand. As long as we have wars, rape, codes of honor, and violent acts of revenge, Shakespeare's tragic vision will go on being contemporary. As long as we continue to be fascinated by human relationships—children rebelling against parents, mothers struggling to let their sons grow up and break free, best friends falling for the same girl, servants and counselors who are wiser than their masters, ordinary people using jokes as a way of deflating those in authority—his comic vision will also remain alive.

People are not really killed on the Shakespearean stage—nor do people speak highly rhetorical five-beat iambic pentameter verse lines in real life. Thus, there can be no such thing as an entirely naturalistic staging of Shakespeare. (Stylistically, the kind of drama from which he is furthest is soap opera—though, gloriously, for all the fine language and exotic settings, many of his plots and themes inhabit the same realm as those of the soaps.) Every production has to maintain a delicate balance between creating the illusion of reality and self-consciously acknowledging the theatrical process. Shakespeare loved that duality, which is why one of his favorite devices is what critics call “metadrama”: plays-within-the-play, impersonation and dressing-up, allusions to the world as theater and life as acting, direct addresses to the audience, choric figures who are both inside and outside the action.

In Shakespeare's world, character is not predetermined. People become themselves through action, dialogue, the process of thinking. Drama is a basic tool for discovery of the self, achieved through exile, disguise, soliloquy, and scenic counterpoint. For Shakespeare, value is not absolute. It depends upon reflection, as when a person's “virtues shining upon others/Heat them, and they retort that heat again/To the first giver” (*Troilus and Cressida*). Shakespeare's theory of human relativity is made possible by his dramatic medium, by double plots, contradictions between word and action, and the constant presence of a questioning audience.

In our journey through life, a character's journey through a play, do we find a core of “self” or do we make ourselves up as we go along? In Shakespeare, those with pre-written scripts find their plotted stories disrupted: Prospero, Angelo, the men in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Shylock, Bertram, Leontes, Henry IV, Coriolanus, Lear. The powerful exception is Prince Hal/Henry V, who always remains ruthlessly in control of his master plan even as he gives the impression of being

just one of the boys. Those who improvise are the characters who most excite Shakespeare (and us): Hamlet, Falstaff, Lady Macbeth, Beatrice, Rosalind, Viola, the Bastard in *King John*, Mercutio, Cleopatra, and in their darker way Richard III, Edmund in *Lear*, and Iago. Those who cannot adapt to change inspire our pity (Richard II, Othello). At the deepest level, Shakespeare's most successful characters are the best actors.

“Shakespeare's plays,” wrote Dr. Samuel Johnson in the preface to his edition of 1765, “are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveler is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolic of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design.” In Athens in the fifth century before Christ, tragedy and comedy were strictly separated. Tragedy concerned the downfall of great men and women, larger-than-life figures, kings and queens, mythical heroes and anti-heroes—Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Oedipus, Hercules, Medea. Comedy was filled with ordinary people: petulant fathers, unruly wives, clever servants, young lovers on the make. Arbiters of taste have a tendency to shelter themselves under the wings of tradition. For this reason, literary theorists from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century regarded the practices of the ancients as rules to be obeyed rather than examples to be admired. In Shakespeare's lifetime, Sir Philip Sidney wrote with lofty disdain of the “mongrel tragi-comedy” that was the staple fare of the London stage.

Johnson's preface to Shakespeare was written in a spirit of English empiricism that did not worry itself about neoclassical rules. “There is always an appeal open from criticism to nature,” he says: Shakespeare's plays are great for the very reason that they mingle joy with sorrow and high with low. They may not conform to the model of the ancients, but they are true to life. The fall of the mighty is only part of the picture. Even Shakespeare's severest tragedies have their comedians: the Porter in *Macbeth*, Lear's Fool. Even his happiest comedies have their malcontents: Jaques in *As You Like It*, Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*. We might even say that all Shakespeare's plays are tragicomedies, and that is one of the principal reasons why his drama is, as Dr. Johnson also recognized, “the mirror of life.” And why it remains so vibrantly alive on page, stage, and screen some four centuries after his death. ■