Shakespeare's Universal Appeal Examined

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Britain's greatest playwright has been embraced by every age and every nation. On the anniversary of the Bard's birth and death, Jonathan Bate explains why the world has claimed him for its own.

"After God," said the 19th-century novelist Alexandre Dumas, "Shakespeare has created most." No other body of writing in the history of world literature has been peopled with characters and situations of such variety, such breadth and depth. No other writer has exercised such a universal appeal.

My first date with my future wife was a production of Richard III in Romanian. We didn't understand a word of the dialogue, but the atmosphere in the little theatre in Manchester was electric. I have seen a mesmerising Titus Andronicus in Japanese and another that came straight from the townships of post-apartheid South Africa. One of the most influential modern books on the plays, entitled Shakespeare Our Contemporary, was by a Polish Communist. During the Iran-Iraq war, a general spurred his tanks into battle by quoting from Henry V. Half the schoolchildren in the world are at some point exposed to Shakespeare's work.

But what is the source of the universal appeal of this balding middle-class gentleman, born in a little Warwickshire market town in the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth? Why would the world's newest country, South Sudan, choose to put on a production of Cymbeline? Or Sunnis and Shias opt to relocate the story of Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad? What is it about Richard III that appeals to Brazilians, or Othello to the Greeks?

When his collected plays were published a few years after his death in the weighty book known as the First Folio, his friend and rival Ben Jonson wrote a prefatory poem claiming that Shakespeare was as great a dramatist as the classicists of ancient Greece and Rome, and that one day "all scenes of Europe" would pay homage to him. This proved prophetic: Shakespeare did indeed exercise a decisive influence on the cultural and political history of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, shaping key aspects of the Romantic movement, the Revolutionary consciousness, the rise of nationalism and the nation state, of the novel, the idea of romantic love, the notion of the existential self, and much more. In the 20th century, thanks to translation and film, that influence spread around the world.

Jonson's poem described Shakespeare in two contradictory ways, and in that
contradiction is to be found the key to his universality. He was, says Jonson, the "Soul of the Age," yet he was also "not of an age, but for all time." Shakespeare recognised that human affairs always embody a combination of permanent truths and historical contingencies (in his own terms, "nature" and "custom"). He was "not of an age" because he worked with archetypal characters, core plots and perennial conflicts, dramatising the competing demands of the living and the dead, the old and the young, men and women, self and society, integrity and role-play, insiders and outsiders. He grasped the structural conflicts shared by all societies: religious against secular, country against city, birth against education, strong leadership against the people's voice, the code of masculine honour against the energies of erotic desire.

Yet he also addressed the conflicts of his own historical moment: the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism and feudalism to modernity, the origins of global consciousness, the conflict between new ideas and old superstitions, the formation of national identity, the growth of trade and immigration, the encounter with a "brave new world" overseas, the politics of war, new attitudes to blacks and Muslims, new voices for women and children.

Shakespeare endures because with each new turn of history, a new dimension of his work opens up before us. When King 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, leading the Polish critic Jan Kott to compare it to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and inspiring both the Russian Grigori Kozintsev and the Englishman Peter Brook to make darkly brilliant film versions.

Because Shakespeare was supremely attuned to his own historical moment, but never wholly constrained within it, his works lived on after his death through something similar to the Darwinian principle of adaptation. The key to Darwin's theory of evolution is the survival of the fittest. Species survive according to their capacity to adapt, to evolve according to environmental circumstances. As with natural selection, the quality that makes a really successful, enduring cultural artifact is its capacity to change in response to new circumstances. Shakespeare's plays, because they are so various and so open to interpretation, so lacking in dogma, have achieved this trick more fully than any other work of the human imagination.

Shakespeare's life did not cease with the "necessary end" of his death 398 years ago on April 23, 1616. His plays continue to live, and to give life, four centuries on, all the way across the great theatre of the world.

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