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How Shakespeare Lives Now

by [Stephen Greenblatt](#)



Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh/Bridgeman Images
John Martin: Macbeth, circa 1820

Shakespeare's death on April 23, 1616, went largely unremarked by all but a few of his immediate contemporaries. There was no global shudder when his mortal remains were laid to rest in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. No one proposed that he be interred in Westminster Abbey near Chaucer or Spenser (where his fellow playwright Francis Beaumont was buried in the same year and where Ben Jonson would be buried some years later). No notice of Shakespeare's passing was taken in the diplomatic correspondence of the time or in the newsletters that circulated on the Continent; no rush of Latin obsequies lamented the "vanishing of his breath," as classical elegies would have it; no tributes were paid to his genius by his

distinguished European contemporaries. Shakespeare's passing was an entirely local English event, and even locally it seems scarcely to have been noted.

The death of the famous actor Richard Burbage in 1619 excited an immediate and far more widespread outburst of grief. England had clearly lost a great man. "He's gone," lamented at once an anonymous elegist,

*and, with him, what a world are dead,
Which he revived, to be revived so
No more: young Hamlet, old Hieronimo,
Kind Lear, the grievèd Moor, and more beside
That lived in him have now for ever died.*

William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, was so stricken by the actor's death that months later he could not bring himself to go to the playhouse "so soon after the loss of my acquaintance Burbage." It was this death that was publicly marked by him and by his contemporaries, far more than the vanishing of the scribbler who had penned the words that Burbage had so memorably brought alive.

The elegy on Burbage suggests that for some and perhaps even most of Shakespeare's contemporaries, the real "life" of the characters and their plays lay not in the texts but in the performances of those texts. The words on the page were dead letters until they were "revived" by the gifted actor. This belief should hardly surprise us, since it is the way most audiences currently respond to plays and, still more, to film.

There was also a social dimension specific to the age. A grand aristocrat like William Herbert could acknowledge his acquaintance with a celebrity actor like Burbage (though his father was a carpenter) far more readily than he could show a connection to a social nonentity—a bourgeois entrepreneur and playwright without Oxbridge honors or family distinction—like Shakespeare. A hidden connection may all the same have existed: William Herbert is one of the perennial candidates for the sonnets' "Mr. W.H." But it would not do to display it in public.

Though Shakespeare's theatrical artistry gave pleasure, it was not the kind of pleasure that conferred cultural distinction on those who savored it. He was the supreme master of mass entertainment, as accessible to the unlettered groundlings standing in the pit as to the elite ensconced in their cushioned chairs. His plays mingled high and low in a carnivalesque violation of propriety. He was indifferent to the rules and hostile to attempts to patrol the boundaries of artistic taste. If his writing attained heights of exquisite delicacy, it also effortlessly swooped down to bawdy puns and popular ballads.

In *Twelfth Night*, one of those ballads, sung by a noisy, festive trio of drunkard, blockhead, and professional fool, enrages the censorious steward Malvolio. "Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?" he asks indignantly, to which he gets a vulgar reply—"Sneck up!"—followed by a celebrated challenge: "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?" Shakespearean cakes and ale may have been beloved by the crowds drawn

to the Globe, but they were not fit fare for the champions of piety or decorum. The pleasure they offered was in indefinable ways subversive.

It was not until seven years after his death that Shakespeare's comedies, histories, and tragedies were gathered together by his friends John Heminges and Henry Condell in an expensive edition, dedicated to William Herbert and his brother, that first laid claim to their status as high culture. And it was only then, in his commendatory poem to the volume, that Ben Jonson for the first time evoked a larger landscape in which to understand the significance of Shakespeare's career, one that would make it appropriate for a nobleman to acknowledge a connection to a middle-class writer of popular plays. "And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek," Jonson wrote, "I would not seek/For names; but call forth thund'ring Aeschylus,/Euripides, and Sophocles to us." These immortals could worthily bear witness to the greatness of Shakespeare as a tragic playwright; as for his comedies, Jonson added, these surpass everything "that insolent Greece or haughty Rome/sent forth."

Jonson made Shakespeare into a global artist. Not in the sense that he imagined his work was or would ever become famous outside of England, but that he insisted it could bear comparison with the best that the world of letters had ever brought forth. Even if nothing in Shakespeare's personal circumstances—his birthplace, parentage, education, affiliations, and the like—bore recording, he was nonetheless a national treasure. "Triumph, my Britain," Jonson proclaimed, "thou hast one to show,/To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe." To this proud boast he added the famous line: "He was not of an age, but for all time!"

The enduring and global success of Shakespeare's work is due in part to his willingness to let go of it, a willingness perhaps conveyed by titles like *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *What You Will* (the subtitle of *Twelfth Night*), and *All's Well That Ends Well*. It is as if he were refusing to insist upon his own identity and proprietary claim. It goes without saying that Shakespeare was a genius who left his mark on everything he touched. But there is also a strange sense that his characters and plots seized upon him as much as he seized upon them.

Even at this distance in time, Shakespeare's greatest contemporary playwrights, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, both seem directly and personally present in their work in a way that Shakespeare does not. In the case of Jonson—too eager to display his scholarly mastery over his source materials, too bound up with the drama of his own life, and too anxious to retain absolute control over his own finished work—that presence is explicitly avowed in a variety of prefaces, prologues, and authorial interventions, with the result that his work, though splendid, seems entirely of a particular time and place and author.

Shakespeare seems to have felt no comparable desire to make himself known or to cling tenaciously to what he had brought forth. The consequence is that it is not really necessary to know the details of Shakespeare's life in order to love or understand his plays. This does not mean that Shakespeare was not present in every moment of his work. On the contrary, his vocation obliged him to use his personal experience, and his mastery of his medium meant that he managed to use an uncanny amount of it, mixing it with what he had read and observed and digested.

He was an expert—perhaps the greatest expert the world has ever known—in what the brilliant English anthropologist Alfred Gell called “distributed personhood.” Gell’s interest was exclusively in visual representations, paintings, sculptures, and the like. But the core of what he discovered in the analysis of Polynesian tattoos or Malangan carvings may be found as well in literature: the ability of an artist to fashion something—Gell called it an “index”—that carries agency, his own and that of others, into the world where it can act and be acted upon in turn.* A part of the personhood of the creator is detached from his body and survives after he or she has ceased physically to exist. Transformed often out of recognition, feared or attacked or revered, these redistributed parts live on, generating new experiences, triggering inferences, harming or rewarding those they encounter, arousing love.

Shakespeare created out of himself hundreds of secondary agents, his characters, some of whom seem even to float free of the particular narrative structures in which they perform their given roles and to take on an agency we ordinarily reserve for biological persons. As an artist he literally gave his life to them.

We speak of Shakespeare’s works as if they were stable reflections of his original intentions, but they continue to circulate precisely because they are so amenable to metamorphosis. They have left his world, passed into ours, and become part of us. And when we in turn have vanished, they will continue to exist, tinged perhaps in small ways by our own lives and fates, and will become part of others whom he could not have foreseen and whom we can barely imagine.

On April 23, 2014—the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth—a company of actors from London’s Globe (the modern reconstruction of the Elizabethan playhouse) embarked on a two-year tour with the ambition of performing *Hamlet* in every country of the world. The project makes vivid what has already been happening for a very long time. Shakespeare’s works have been translated, it is estimated, into more than a hundred languages. They have profoundly shaped national literary cultures not only in Great Britain and the United States but also of countries as diverse as Germany and Russia, Japan and India, Egypt and South Africa.



Shakespeare; drawing by David Levine

A few years ago, during a merciful remission in the bloodshed and mayhem that has for so many years afflicted Afghanistan, a young Afghan writer, Qais Akbar Omar, had an idea. It was, he brooded, not only lives and livelihood that had been ruthlessly attacked by the Taliban, it was also culture. The international emblem of that cultural assault was the dynamiting of the Bamiyan Buddhas, but the damage extended to painting, music, dance, fiction, film, and poetry. It extended as well to the subtle web of relations that link one culture to another across boundaries and make us, each in our provincial worlds, feel that we are part of a larger humanity. This web is not only a contemporary phenomenon, the result of modern technology; it is as old as culture itself, and it has been particularly dense and vital in Afghanistan with its ancient trade routes and its endless succession of would-be conquerors.

Omar thought that the time was ripe to mark the restoration of civil society and repair some of the cultural damage. He wanted to stage a play with both men and women actors performing in public in an old garden in Kabul. He chose a Shakespeare play. No doubt the choice had something to do with the old imperial presence of the British in Afghanistan, but it was not only this particular history that was at work. Shakespeare is the embodiment worldwide of a creative achievement that does not remain within narrow boundaries of the nation-state or lend itself to the secure possession of a particular faction or speak only for this or that chosen group. He is the antithesis of intolerant provinciality and fanaticism. He could make with effortless grace the leap from Stratford to Kabul, from English to Dari.

Omar did not wish to put on a tragedy; his country, he thought, had suffered through quite enough tragedy of its own. Considering possible comedies, he shied away from those that involved cross-dressing. It was risky enough simply to have men and women perform together on stage. In the end he chose *Love's Labour's Lost*, a comedy that arranged the sexes in distinct

male and female groups, had relatively few openly transgressive or explicitly erotic moments, and decorously deferred the final consummation of desire into an unstaged future. As a writer, Omar was charmed by the play's gorgeous language, language that he felt could be rendered successfully in Dari.

The complex story of the mounting of the play is told in semifictionalized form in a 2015 book Omar coauthored with Stephen Landrigan, *A Night in the Emperor's Garden*. Measured by the excitement it generated, this production of *Love's Labor's Lost* was a great success. The overflow crowds on the opening night gave way to ever-larger crowds clamoring to get in, along with worldwide press coverage.

But the attention came at a high price. The Taliban took note of Shakespeare in Kabul and what it signified. In the wake of the production, virtually everyone involved in it began to receive menacing messages. Spouses, children, and the extended families of the actors were not exempt from harassment and warnings. The threats were not idle. The husband of one of the performers answered a loud knock on the door one night and did not return. His mutilated body was found the next morning.

What had seemed like a vigorous cultural renaissance in Afghanistan quickly faded and died. In the wake of the resurgence of the Taliban, Qais Akbar Omar and all the others who had had the temerity to mount Shakespeare's delicious comedy of love were in terrible trouble. They are now, every one of them, in exile in different parts of the world.

Love's labors lost indeed. But the subtitle of Omar's account—"A True Story of Hope and Resilience in Afghanistan"—is not or at least not only ironic. The humane, inexhaustible imaginative enterprise that Shakespeare launched more than four hundred years ago in one small corner of the world is more powerful than all the oppressive forces that can be gathered against it. Feste the clown at the end of *Twelfth Night* sings a farewell ditty:

*A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
But that's all one, our play is done.*

For a split second it sounds like it is all over, and then the song continues: "And we'll strive to please you every day." The enemies of pleasure beware.

1. *

Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory (Oxford University Press, 1998). [↩](#)