In Love with Shakespeare

Nearly 400 years after his death, William Shakespeare remains a reigning king of popular culture.

By James R. Andreas, Sr.

Harold Bloom, a literature professor at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, argues in his 1998 best seller, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, that William Shakespeare was the world's first writer to portray characters as realistic human beings who are capable of change. According to Bloom, Shakespeare's characters, after nearly four centuries, continue to generate as much popular appeal as they do scholarly interest. Another literary scholar, Jan Kott, refers to Shakespeare as "our contemporary" because his plays never go out of style. The plays of Shakespeare have been in almost continuous production, in one form or another, since the author's death in 1616. This four-century run keeps William Shakespeare as much a king of contemporary popular culture today as he was in his own time.

In March 1999, *Shakespeare in Love*, a fictional portrayal of the playwright, won seven Academy Awards, marking the culmination of a decade of successful film productions based on his works and life. These films were created by a who's who of Hollywood actors, directors, and writers. The costumers and set designers for these films re-created a variety of settings representing everything from Shakespeare's own age to present-day Seattle. The Shakespearean blockbusters of the 1990's, director Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995) and director Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), starred Laurence Fishburne as the tormented Othello and Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes as the "star-cross'd lovers." Actor and director Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) and *Hamlet* (1996), director Trevor Nunn's dark interpretation of *Twelfth Night* (1996), and director Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999) were also well-received films of the decade. More Shakespeare films were scheduled for 2000, including a musical adaptation of *Love's Labour's Lost* set in the 1930's and a futuristic version of the thriller *Titus Andronicus*.

The popularity of Shakespeare at the end of the century was not limited to the screen, however. He remained a favorite of intellectuals, who often refer to him as the Bard, the greatest of master poets. Shakespeare's plays continued to be a mainstay of literature curriculums in secondary schools and were constantly produced on the local theater scene. In the 1990's, Shakespearean festivals and theater companies around the world drew millions of people to hundreds of productions annually. A replica of Shakespeare's own Globe Theatre opened in 1997 on the original site in London. Since the new Globe's first season, hundreds of thousands of people have trooped to this open-air theater to experience Shakespeare's panorama of human comedy and tragedy performed within the theatrical conventions he helped to create. *Shakespeare's popularity in his own age*

Evidence of the original success of Shakespeare's plays appears in the court records of Queen Elizabeth I, who reigned in England from 1558 to 1603, and in the diaries of Philip Henslowe, an Elizabethan theater manager. Historical documents, however, reveal few details about Shakespeare himself, except that he was raised in the small town of Stratford-on-Avon, England, lived most of his adult life in London, worked as an actor, and wrote poetry for rich patrons. This lack of information led a number of scholars to question whether a lowly actor could have written so knowledgeably about subjects as lofty as royalty and the law, but most experts dismiss these doubts. Almost all literary scholars agree that William Shakespeare produced the most impressive body of dramatic writing in the history of world literature.

The sketchy biographical details about Shakespeare's life allowed the writers of *Shakespeare in Love*, Tom Stoppard and Marc Norman, to improvise. They present a young Will suffering from an unlikely bout of writer's block after some early successes with such comedies as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. But Viola, a young noblewoman who violates class and gender conventions by pursuing a Ukrainian actor to act in a London theater company, provides the romantic inspiration for Shakespeare's first tragedy and the most famous love story ever written, *Romeo and Juliet*.

In spite of the fictional premise of *Shakespeare in Love*, the film is based on either generally accepted assumptions about the playwright's life or well-documented details about Elizabethan theater. The movie refers to Shakespeare's probable alienation from his wife, Anne Hathaway, the shameful reputation of London's theater district, Shakespeare's competition with the successful playwright, Christopher Marlowe, and the Puritans' criticism of the "immoral" theater. The film also captures the immense popularity of Shakespeare's plays and of the Globe Theatre. The innovative design of the Globe allowed audience members to see and hear easily. The stories of balconies wrapped around the stage and a ground-level, open-air "pit" where patrons stood. Although the theater held an estimated 3,500 people, no member of the audience was more than about 55 feet (17 meters) from the performance space. During Shakespeare's association with the Globe, when London had a population of only about 250,000 people, nearly 1 million patrons attended productions at the theater.

Aristocracy and royalty also patronized Shakespeare's plays at the royal palaces of Whitehall and Hampton Court. *The Bard for all time*
Ben Jonson, a rival playwright in the Elizabethan theater, declared Shakespeare the "soul of the age" and "wonder of our stage." Jonson compared Shakespeare favorably to the great poets and playwrights of ancient Greece--Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes--as well as to England's own Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400), author of The Canterbury Tales, and Edmund Spenser (1552?-1599), author of The Faerie Queen. Jonson also claimed that Shakespeare was "not of an age but for all time." The rival playwright's assessment proved to be accurate.

Shakespeare's importance and the strength of his popular appeal can be measured, in part, by how often people turned to his plays for inspiration and ideas--even when they did not entirely approve of his recreations. In every period since Shakespeare's death, his plays have been excerpted, spoofed, "fixed," or otherwise amended. Writers have even supplied the tragedies with happy endings. In the late 1600's, British playwright James Howard reconceived Romeo and Juliet as a comedy, keeping the lovers alive at the end of the play. In the early 1800's, Thomas Bowdler "sanitized" the plays in a volume called The Family Shakespeare. Bowdler changed or omitted words that he believed were inappropriate for children. This kind of editing, or "bowdlerization," as it came to be known, was never popular with scholars, but it did have the beneficial effect of extending the audience of Shakespeare.

Musicians borrowed from the playwright's work and, in turn, contributed to his popularity. Composers transformed his poetic language into scores for operas, ballets, and orchestral music. Other composers used Shakespeare's poetry and the songs he wrote for some of his plays as the lyrics of short recital pieces. An evolving popularity

Shakespeare's enduring popularity is also apparent in how well his work weathered the evolving conventions of theater and the shifting expectations of the public. During some periods, people venerated him as the greatest writer who ever lived. During other times, he was attacked as a "natural," but ungainly genius whose plays failed to conform to standards of decency and good taste. No matter how much the public opinion varied, however, people found they could not ignore Shakespeare's work.

When England's Puritan-controlled government displaced the monarchy in 1649, London's theaters were shut down and remained closed until the restoration of the king in 1660. Nevertheless, underground performances of Shakespeare's "skits" were commonplace during the period of Puritan rule. In the 1700's, female actors, rather than young boys, were allowed for the first time to perform women's roles, a circumstance that considerably boosted the popularity of Shakespeare's plays, particularly among male patrons.

Intellectuals of the 1700's criticized Shakespeare's work as being "rude" or "vulgar"--not because of his themes--but because his plots did not follow the popular doctrine of the "classical unities." According to this literary convention, the playwright should restrict the action of a play to a single place and time period. The romantic poets of the early 1800's, on the other hand, celebrated Shakespeare's relatively humble origins and idolized him as the natural, unschooled, and spontaneous genius of romantic lore. Their praise helped transform the playwright into an "author," and many people came to regard the plays primarily as texts rather than transcripts for dramatic performances.

Changes in British theater productions also contributed to the perception of Shakespeare as an author. In the 1800's, plays were not performed in open-air theaters, but in large halls similar to modern theaters. In these new settings, playwrights of the time created spectacular spectacles that relied on elaborate and cumbersome sets. In order to produce Shakespeare plays that met the prevailing taste of theatergoers, directors stripped down Shakespeare's original dialogue. As a result, the complex characters and poetic language were overshadowed by spectacular sets depicting, for example, the military skirmishes in Henry V or the naval battle in Antony and Cleopatra.

The theater conventions of the 1800's ultimately affected public perception of Shakespeare in two ways. The "special effects" robbed the plays of their rich language, so that audience members did not need to be actively engaged in listening and responding to the players on stage. Also, the high price of spectacle resulted in the staging of fewer Shakespeare plays and higher ticket prices, restricting attendance to more affluent audiences. The spectacle, consequently, relegated the playwright's words to the printed page and cost Shakespeare his popularity among the common people. Shakespeare and the scholars

Intellectuals began to consider his work "theater of the mind" rather than of the stage. They deemed King Lear and other plays unperformable and accessible only through the written word. With this change in thinking, British scholars in the second half of the 1800's transformed Shakespeare--the highly popular, but rude, scandalous, and even "vulgar" playwright--into an elite cultural icon. They upheld the image of Shakespeare the author as an authority in all matters literary, cultural, and moral. They used his plays to promote British culture and the English language throughout the world.

For the essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Shakespeare was a British hero worthy to be "worshipped." For the poet Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the Bard was the token of the highest "seriousness," for which British culture yearned. The great Shakespearean scholar of that period, A. C. Bradley (1845-1933), wrote Shakespearean Tragedy, in which he extols...
the highvirtue and irreproachable morality of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Bradley's book, which remains required reading in most modern Shakespeare courses, overlooks the various heroes' heinous crimes in favor of their courage and resolve to overcome all obstacles to their ambitions.

During this period, Shakespeare's plays and poetry entered the curriculum of most English-speaking schools around the world. According to Shakespeare scholar Charles Frey of the University of Washington in Seattle, teachers for more than 100 years offered Shakespeare as the definitive model of correct English, effective public speaking, and high morals. Some educators used abridged collections of his plays, such as Tales from Shakespeare (1807) by Charles and Mary Lamb, to supply young people, especially girls, with properly edifying instruction. This approach resulted in "Shakespearophobia," the fear of Shakespeare experienced by many English-speaking schoolchildren. Even in the 1990's, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and Hamlet--tragedies that emphasize the "high seriousness" of literature--remained the plays most often studied in middle and high schools. State-of-the-art Shakespeare

In spite of Shakespeare's uncertain reception in the classroom through much of the 1900's, performances of his plays experienced a revival as new technologies--motion pictures, radio, television, computers, and the Internet--led to breakthroughs in artistic expression. Shakespeare's work was easily translated into silent films because the plays had been produced through much of the 1800's as visual spectacles. Filmmakers created scores of adaptations from a wide range of the plays, most notably a silent Othello (1922), starring Academy Award-winner Emil Jannings, and a Hamlet (1920), starring female Danish film star Asta Nielsen in the male role of the melancholy Dane. Radio performances and sound recordings of the plays were commonplace until the rise in popularity of television in the mid-1900's. Television producers in the 1950's stripped down and adapted Shakespeare's plays to fit the format and time limitations of commercial television. Notable TV productions included the "Westinghouse Theatre" presentation of The Taming of the Shrew, featuring actor Charlton Heston as Petruchio, and the "Hallmark Hall of Fame" presentation of The Tempest, starring Lee Remick, Roddy McDowell, and Richard Burton.

In the 1990's, the computer proved to be a viable medium for enhancing Shakespeare's popularity and even the next staging ground for his plays. Discussion groups on his life and work sprouted online, and Web sites cropped up on every conceivable Shakespearean subject--his life, the Globe Theatre, staging conventions, and research about what works were the actual creations of Shakespeare. Other sites offered production schedules for the many Shakespeare festivals around the world. Production companies, such as Castle Rock Entertainment and New Line Cinema, successfully generated interest in Shakespeare films with online presentations of film trailers, summaries of the plays, interactive features, and biographical information about Shakespeare geared toward younger audiences. The theatrical and academic possibilities for the new medium represented what Shakespeare himself might have called a "sea change" in the way people consume and digest theater and literature. A perfect example of new theatrical forms and media influencing the performance of Shakespeare's plays is Luhrmann's slick repackaging of Romeo and Juliet as an action film and the release of the movie trailer as a rock video on MTV.

Shakespeare's plays have in many ways lent legitimacy to these new media. Film, radio, television, and the Internet have, in turn, helped restore the plays to the author's original intention--that the words be spoken and heard, not just read. Ralph Cohen of James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, describes Shakespeare's language as "ear candy." The plays were written for audiences--that is, listeners--not merely for spectators. Radio broadcasts, records, cassettes, and CD's of Shakespeare's plays, not to mention "talkie" films and television, helped restore the public's appetite for live performances of the plays. Even though the dialogue is written in verse and the vocabulary of Elizabethan English, the beauty of the language is irresistible to most audiences. As a result, most filmmakers retained Shakespeare's original words, even if they shortened the text or adapted the story to a modern setting. The Bard for all people

Beyond the brilliance of the language, the plays remained popular because Shakespeare filled the stories with characters whom people have loved, admired, pitied, and despised for centuries. In some cases, a favorite play emerged to represent the prevailing tastes and the social and political circumstances of the age. In the late 1600's and early 1700's, when the institution of slavery existed throughout the Western world, the most popular Shakespeare play was Othello, a story of an African man who rises to prominence in a white man's world. The romantics of the early 1800's favored Hamlet--brooding, shrewd, and melancholy. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, when the British Empire was at its height, the public preferred Henry V, which displayed the pageantry of a king who united the various peoples of Great Britain and extended imperial domains beyond its shores. In the late 1900's, Shakespeare's most popular play was the comedy A Midsummer Night's Dream, perhaps because of its grotesque humor and sexual ambiguities.

The celebrity of most Shakespeare plays, however, was never confined to a particular era because the playwright carefully chose stories with long-lasting appeal. He riffed through famous literary sources--the plays of Euripides and Sophocles, Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, the 100 stories of the Decameron by Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), and the 100 stories of The Talmud. Even Shakespeare's plays are influenced by and influence other works.
-1375)--as well as "news"stories of the 1500's and 1600's. From these materials, Shakespeare created stories and characters that address issues as relevant to current audiences as they were to the theategoers of Elizabethan England.

In Romeo and Juliet, the young characters discover the perils of love in a world dominated by the concerns of adults. Racism motivates, at least in part, Iago's plot to destroy the title character in Othello. In Measure for Measure, amoralizing ruler demands sexual favors from a young woman in exchange for her brother's life--a circumstance that people today identify as sexual harassment. Through the title character of King Lear, Shakespeare explores the tyranny of self-serving authority and the potentially disastrous expectations of parents and children towared one another. The Tempest, in which a shipwrecked man rulesover the inhabitants of an enchanted island, addresses issues that include the politics of empire and colonial control. In all of these cases, Shakespeare's characteristic refusal to arrive at firm or satisfying solutions perpetuates the appeal of the plays.

Even the lighter fare of Shakespeare's plays continue to be relevant. The 1999 film version of A Midsummer Night's Dream aptly underscored the play's theme, articulated by actor Kevin Kline in the role of Bottom the Weaver: "to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together now-a-days." Two pairs of lovers, one of whom is played by Calista Flockhart of television's "Ally McBeal," run off into the woods near Athens, the citadel of reason, to escape the stern influence of parents and society. They are subjected to the fancy of the fairy king and become--as Puck, the fairy trickster, exclaims--the "fools" of the immortals. The play is updated to Tuscany, Italy, in the 1800's, and the addition of bicycles multiplies the confusion that love introduces to young people on their own in the world for the first time. Universal Shakespeare

Because of the relevance of these themes, Shakespeare's work is generally regarded as "universal"--that is, his plays are for all people in all times. Most contemporary scholars, however, prefer to characterize his plays as durable, versatile, and widely applicable. Like all great writers, Shakespeare chose story lines with themes that translate well into cultural contexts other than his own. This adaptability made possible director Richard Locrine's chilling film rendition of Richard III (1995). Locrine uses the original language of the play but recasts the English monarch of the 1400's as a Nazi leader in a fictional England of the 1930's. In Looking for Richard (1996), actor and director Al Pacino interprets the monstrous monarch as a forerunner of the modern mafia boss. The durability, versatility, and applicability of Shakespeare's work also allowed authors like all major scholars and writers. Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor to successfully appropriate The Tempest in their novels Tar Baby and Mama Day. These qualities allowed Jane Smiley to re-create the story of King Lear in her 1992 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel A Thousand Acres. Because Shakespeare's themes translate into other cultural contexts, Kate and Petruchio from The Taming of the Shrew still rage against and tame each other in a Seattle highschool in the film 10 Things I Hate About You (1999), and actor Ethan Hawke discovers there is something as rotten in New York City as there ever was in Denmark in an updated Hamlet scheduled for 2000.

Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) claimed that Shakespeare's definitive talent was "negative capability." He had the ability to suppress his own individuality in order to see the world as each of his characters might see it. In the 1990's, a new generation of actors assumed these roles, and audiences discovered not only the distinct voice of each character, but a voice for their own time. To the latest generation of teen-agers, Romeo became a teen idol in the person of Leonardo DiCaprio. For people who learned to view the world differently after decades of challenges to racial prejudices, Laurence Fishburne became the definitive Othello. For people perplexed by the challenges of modern relationships, Calista Flockhart embodied the confusion and comedy of romantic endeavors as Helena in A Midsummer Night's Dream. These and Shakespeare's other extraordinary characters continue to reveal the author's genius and justify his renown as the greatest and most popular writer of the millennium.

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