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Shakespeare After 400 Years

SHAKESPEARE is not a dead poet who lived long ago, but a breathing spirit thrusting himself into our everyday lives. In all countries of the world, in all languages, Shakespeare continues to speak profoundly to mankind.

His poems and plays have made him an immortal in literature, but not because they are scholarly. He knew human life and human passion intimately, and told about them in a sensitive, lively and intelligible way.

Shakespeare, like us, lived in troubled years. Between 1564 and 1616 much of Europe was ravaged by war, cruelty, self-seeking, loneliness and thoughts too strong to be expressed by ordinary people.

He could not have chosen a more exciting or inspiring time to arrive in London. The whole country was in a state of transition, in a fever of nationalism. The people loved and were loved by their unparalleled Queen, Elizabeth, their seamen had sailed strange seas, showing the flag in parts of the world till then not known, education was spreading through newly established schools, and there was sprouting a new civic conscience about the needs of the poor. The middle class was emerging, capitalism was trying its wings, and every week brought changes and discoveries.

Shakespeare came upon the stage at a time when a blending force was needed. Eight of his ten history plays present a sequence of wars in Europe and the civil war at home, covering a century of intrigue and armed rebellion. These hearty tales of adventure and glory were calculated to inspire Elizabeth's people in their new role as a world nation.

Life and thought were speeding up among the generality of the people. There were essayists, even as today, holding forth against tobacco, alcohol, the habits of young people and the dress and primping of women. Control of traffic on the streets was a problem: a writer of that time said "In every street, carts and coaches make such a thundering as if the world ran upon wheels." Men, women and children crowded the streets so that owners had to strengthen their houses to keep them from being pushed down.

Physical glories were relatively rare, but the spirit of art and of language was fertile. It was an age when

Titian was painting his "Entombment", Veronese his "Calvary", Tintoretto his "Paradise", Caracci his "Fishing", and Rubens, Van Dyck and El Greco were painting their incomparable works.

It was Shakespeare who put into words, in dramatized form, the feelings, hopes, fears, frustrations and triumphs of the people of that Age.

What was going on

We of the twentieth century believe that we are living through a more tempestuous era than ever afflicted the world before, but let us set against our experiences those spanned by the half century of Shakespeare's life, and we cannot be so sure. Look at these great events:

War: The Wars of the Huguenots; England lost Calais to France; Ivan the Terrible ravaged Russia; the Turks besieged Malta; war of liberation in the Netherlands; Pope Pius V organized a Holy League against the Turks; the Turks were defeated at the battle of Lepanto, the greatest naval battle since the fleet of Antony and Cleopatra was beaten by Octavian 1,600 years before; the massacre of St. Bartholomew; Netherlands provinces joined together to drive out the Spanish; the Moors defeated the Portuguese in the Battle of the Three Kings; the Spaniards invaded Portugal; the Spanish Armada was defeated and scattered by the English fleet; the Edict of Nantes ended the French civil wars of religion; the Japanese invaded Korea; the Irish rebelled under Hugh O'Neill; Polish troops intervened in Russia's "time of troubles" and were thrown out after three years.

Exploration and colonization: Manila, Philippine Islands, founded by the Spanish; Martin Frobisher sailed in search of the Northwest Passage; Sir Francis Drake sailed around the world; Sir Humphrey Gilbert took possession of Newfoundland in the name of Queen Elizabeth; Sir Walter Raleigh claimed Virginia for the Queen; Virginia Dare, the first white child born in America; the Marquis de la Roche obtained from Henry IV of France a commission to conquer Canada; Samuel de Champlain sailed up the St. Lawrence as far as La Chine Rapids, discovered the St. John River

and Lake Champlain, and brought a colony to settle and found Quebec; Port Royal founded in Nova Scotia by the French; first schools in Canada founded, at Trois-Rivières and Tadoussac.

Rulers and dynasties: Mary, Queen of Scots, married Darnley; Darnley caused Rizzio, favourite of Mary, to be murdered, and was himself murdered by Bothwell; Mary married Bothwell; Mary abdicated in favour of her son, James IV; Mary, convicted of participating in a plot against Queen Elizabeth, was executed; Suleiman the Magnificent of the Ottoman Empire killed in battle; Catherine de Medici died; Oliver Cromwell born; revolt and execution of the Earl of Essex; Queen Elizabeth died and was succeeded by James VI of Scotland as James I of England; Sir Walter Raleigh convicted of plotting to dethrone James and imprisoned for 13 years; commission appointed to investigate union of England and Scotland; Guy Fawkes' plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament; plantation of Ulster, forfeited to the Crown by the rebellion of Tyrone; beginning of the Romanov Dynasty which was to rule Russia until the 1917 Revolution.

Science and invention: Invention of the screw lathe, the lead pencil, the decimal system, the knitting frame, the wind turbine, and the revolving stage; discovery of dibbling wheat to increase yield; Galileo's treatise on terrestrial magnetism and electricity; Galileo expounded the principle of the pendulum and the first law of motion; the telescope made; Galileo discovered the moons of Jupiter; discovery of logarithms by Napier; use of triangulation system in surveying; William Harvey expounded his theory of the circulation of the blood; Galileo was directed not to hold or teach the Copernican system.

Art and literature: Michaelangelo died; Montaigne published his essays; Spenser's "Faerie Queene" published; authorized version of the Bible; *Don Quixote*, satirical romance by Cervantes, published; Bacon's *Essays* published; John Milton born.

Expanding ideas: Poland changed from hereditary to elective monarchy; public debates on religion thrown open to all faiths in India; reform of the calendar by Pope Gregory XIII; all Japan became politically united; Akbar the Great of India instituted reforms in administration and introduced universal religious toleration; plan proposed to establish a universal Christian republic in Europe; Elizabethan Poor Law, charging the parishes with care of needy persons; Treaty of Vienna gave equal status to Protestants and Roman Catholics; a royal charter granted certain religious freedom in Germany.

Scanning this brief sample of the events in Shakespeare's turbulent and yet progressive age we no longer wonder at the fact that what he wrote is relevant today.

A man of his age

Shakespeare was a practising theatre craftsman, a busy actor and author, and a shrewd business man.

Just like most writers in our own day, he was not writing for posterity but for people of his time, to make a living, and to meet a deadline. Ford Madox Ford remarks in *The March of Literature* (Dial Press, New York, 1938): "Only two writers, Virgil and Shakespeare, in a millennium and a half, can be noted as having made large fortunes. Virgil acquired his by way of gifts. Shakespeare, by exploiting his own gifts as a theatrical producer, stands before us not merely as the greatest of poet-playwrights but as the first Anglo-Saxon big business man."

Some people think that it remained for our enlightened age to give Shakespeare due recognition, but that is not so. In addition to great popular favour and the applause of the court he had the satisfaction of seeing nearly half his plays done into print. *Hamlet* was a best seller, published at least five times during the poet's lifetime. In 1623, seven years after his death, the first complete edition of his plays was published. This, called the most important secular book in English literature, was issued by his fellow-actors.

Shakespeare's works quickly crossed the frontiers of countries and the boundaries of language. A great poem by Shakespeare remains a great poem in whatever language it is printed.

This is not to say that Shakespeare has been without detractors. Count Leo Tolstoy, a great Russian writer and thinker, said that Shakespeare "is not merely no genius but is not even 'an average author'." George Bernard Shaw's sharp tongue said: "With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare when I measure my mind against his". Dr. Thomas Bowdler issued an expurgated Shakespeare which met with no acceptance but did give rise to the expression "to bowdlerize" as a term of ridicule of censors and improvers.

A master of words

Those who care most for Shakespeare value him in the first place for his use of language, his verbal music.

Shakespeare was a master of all moods. He could thunder like the guns on D Day, and then in a twinkling he could turn to words so soft that they would not break a soap bubble. But in the proud full sail of his great verse he moved with the stream of common speech. He did not drag in unusual words like peacock's feathers to decorate a fowl's tail. There is no sign of strain or out-of-character acting when his players speak in great poetry. As Dryden wrote of him: "All the images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily; when he describes anything you more than see it, you feel it too."

Shakespeare found the words to express our deepest secrets. His skill in placing one syllable beside another gives us acute pleasure. He put life into his plays not

only with the magic of words but of thought, with an ear to the appeal of ideas as well as to the sounds of things.

Some present day script writers strive to achieve that which arouses fear, and produce only what is monstrous. When Shakespeare indulged in monstrosities it was not for the sake of their monstrosity but for their contribution to the story. When he calls up the three witches or a deformed creature like Caliban he convinces us that if there were such beings they would so conduct themselves.

His skill in transforming human character and action into art created a world of unforgettable people and phrases.

Human activities are not mere ant-like rushings to and fro. The characters are motivated by passion, reason, interest and habit, and we are made to acknowledge that their actions and sentiments are, from those motives, the necessary result. Often, like Oedipus, they do not know their own promptings, but stumble toward their fate unconsciously. Yet they are revealed to the audience by what they say, by their manner of saying it, by their silences, by their actions and by what others say about them.

A vigorous author

Shakespeare wrote vigorously without letting the effort show. He scattered the seeds of things, the principles of character and action, with a cunning hand, yet with a careless air. He rolled the genuine passions of nature on his tongue, and put them into sentences carved with powerful wit. But he was a realist, too. He tidied up. Life is not all pure drama.

Shakespeare was not a great original thinker. Few poets are — that is not their business. What he did was to give point to the things inside people and bring them out into the open. Someone has said that “Shakespeare initiated nothing, but he brought all the abortive beginnings of others to a triumphant conclusion.”

To all his magpie appropriations he added from his own experiences and the tales of wonder of the brave new worlds which Elizabethan sea-dogs were discovering.

One source must be mentioned: Montaigne's *Essays*, which seem to have suggested the character of Caliban and Gonzalo's description of an ideal commonwealth used by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*. It was Montaigne himself who wrote in one of his essays: “I gather the flowers by the wayside, by the brooks and in the meadows, and only the string with which I bind them together is my own.”

The Sonnets, the most disputed of all collections of poetry in the English language, have given sleuths and biographers years of puzzlement. No ordinary sensitive reader can doubt that these sonnets have roots in a real and painful experience, with their references to the “dark lady”, a disdainful brunette, but their bio-

graphical content is immaterial. They are to be judged by their poetic value.

Judgment is given by the *Harmsworth Encyclopedia* in these words: “in the estimation of the majority of competent judges they constitute the highest achievement of the human mind in the region of pure poetry.”

A man for our age

In a period when the most urgent need is the need to get to know ourselves and the other people of the world, Shakespeare can help.

He does not give absolute rules of conduct which we can apply as cure-alls, but his principles stand and his characters speak to us. Johann W. von Goethe, the eminent German dramatist, paid him this striking tribute: “All the anticipations I have ever had regarding man and his destiny, which have accompanied me from youth upward often unobserved by myself, I find developed and fulfilled in Shakespeare's writings. It seems as if he cleared up every one of our enigmas to us, though we cannot say: Here or there is the word of solution.”

Though we have progressed in science and invention, in speed of communication and in ease of life, human nature is much what it was. The aristocrats, tycoons, soldiers and common people are of the same sort today as then. We still struggle against tides of we know not what strength and violence. We still seek the national stability that will enable us to prosper physically and expand mentally and achieve morally. The way to success is foreshadowed for any nation in Hastings' lines on England in *Henry VI*:

“... knows not Montague that of itself
England is safe, if true within itself?”

About reading Shakespeare

New entertainment, new instruction, new illumination; the quaint, the curious and the unexpected: all these leap up at you from nearly every page of a Shakespeare play. Even if you are not looking for anything particular in Shakespeare you will find something.

One does not need a specialist's knowledge of the plays or of the Elizabethan Age to enjoy Shakespeare. If an occasional word or allusion is lost, and a particular bit of poetical dialogue remains obscure, the reader may still get the cream of the play by reading it for no other purpose than to take pleasure in it.

One thing keeping people away from his works is that they have been lectured and expounded almost to death. William Hazlitt, the nineteenth century essayist, remarked: “If we wish to know the force of human genius we should read Shakespeare. If we wish to see the insignificance of human learning we may study his commentators.”

When we read a play by Shakespeare effectively we stage it on the platform of our imagination. We can

do so because he takes us so completely into his confidence. The characters may be puzzled and fooled, but the members of the audience never are.

A particular device which Shakespeare uses to keep the audience a step ahead of the procession of the play is the soliloquy, a speech by a person quite alone, who weighs rationally, yet with passion, opposing values and drastic alternatives.

Hamlet's soliloquy that starts "To be or not to be" is the most famous speech in modern literature, with an appeal that neither repetition nor parody can destroy. "Because," says H. Peterson in *The Lonely Debate* (Reynal and Hitchcock, New York, 1938) "it dramatizes for each one of us the baffled individual in the agony of indecision."

How important the soliloquy is to the success of *Hamlet* is indicated by the fact that Christopher Plummer, playing the part in the BBC production in the old castle at Elsinore in 1963, worked on it continuously for twelve hours.

A man to quote

The ultimate test of literary merit is survival, which is the index to majority opinion. While the great military conquerors are but ashes in an urn, Shakespeare is still moving and breathing in his writings, in our everyday talk, and in the life of the world.

It is not easy to go for a day without quoting him, because there are not many subjects of importance that he does not touch upon in glowing phrases.

Hamlet gave us: flaming youth, in my mind's eye, to the manner born, the primrose path, it smells to heaven, there's the rub, method in his madness, brevity is the soul of wit, cudgel thy brains, more matter and less art, neither a borrower nor a lender be, this mortal coil, yeoman's service. "Pomp and circumstance" came from *Othello*, with a dozen more; "the dogs of war" from Julius Caesar; "hearts of gold, give the devil his due," and "he has eaten me out of house and home" are from *Henry IV*; "make assurance doubly sure" and "the milk of human kindness" came from *Macbeth*; and so on through the other plays: merry as the day is long, laid on with a trowel, an ill-favoured thing, but mine own, what's in a name? a fool's paradise, elbow room, every inch a king, the wheel is come full circle, throw cold water on it, play fast and loose, the main chance, a nine days' wonder, a spotless reputation, something in the wind, one touch of nature makes the whole world kin; and so on and on. There are 4,000 quotations and extracts in the *Dictionary of Shakespeare Quotations* by D. C. Browning (Everyman's Reference Library, 1953).

Hundreds of books have taken their titles from Shakespeare: Crack of Doom, Tomorrow and Tomorrow, All Our Yesterdays, Brief Candles, The Undiscovered Country, Rosemary for Remembrance, Dear Brutus, Not in Our Stars, Strange Bedfellows, Brave New World, The Web of Life, Gaudy Night, The World My Oyster, Valiant Dust, and so on.

These phrases and titles came from the mint of Shakespeare's creative genius fresh, entertaining and alive, and they remain so today.

A man for all ages

Shakespeare's plays were not only for his own age and ours, not for one nation or language, but for all humanity. He planted one leg of his compass in the Elizabethan era and then with the other swept the whole circumference of Time.

His plays will endure because they embody undying states of mind. They hold before us, now and forever, a conception of human dignity, a sense of the importance of human passions, and a vision of the amplitude of human life. All this is embodied in Hamlet's assertion: "What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god."

Shakespeare gives us lessons in capsule form applicable to today's problems. *King Lear* may be taken as a tragedy of filial ingratitude, or it may be taken as a lesson that if you throw away your weapons some less scrupulous person will pick them up. A new viewpoint about *Hamlet* is given in *Outlines of Shakespeare's Plays* (Barnes & Noble, Inc., New York, 1945). Three men of different temperaments are faced with the task of avenging the death of a father. How will each man solve the problem? Hamlet, the man who thinks without acting, delays; Laertes, the man who acts without thinking, plunges; and the two tragic figures perish on the same poisoned sword, leaving the kingdom to Fortinbras, the cool-headed, balanced man who plans and acts in due proportion and at appropriate times.

There are, too, lessons of tolerance. *Cymbeline*, *A Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* are comedies of reconciliation and forgiveness and the restoration of lost happiness.

The 400th anniversary

This year all England is going Elizabethan in celebration of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth.

A hundred foreign ambassadors will raise their national banners at Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23rd in honour of a poet whose plays are done in scores of languages. Canada is sending its world renowned Stratford Festival Company to perform three plays at the Chichester Festival Theatre.

All of this is in honour of a man who found the answers to questions that other men did not yet know existed, even to questions being asked four centuries after him. They are questions about human character and purposes, and he gave answers vital to know in one of the world's decisive hours.