

Free biography on toward a universal understanding: william shakespeare and the w...

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



With the exception of the Bible, no literary work has had a greater impact on Western culture than the plays of William Shakespeare. The celebrated “Bard of Avon” captured the human condition, revealed the inner-workings of the human heart and the conflicts of the psyche like no other author in history. Countless lines and soliloquies from Shakespeare’s plays today stand as hallmarks of the English language and have been translated into every known spoken language. The themes of his greatest works - love, power and deception - continue to resonate in the present, making timeless, cautionary tales out of MacBeth, Hamlet and Henry V, among others. It has been said that when Shakespeare set out to write a play, he envisioned how it would appear to his audiences in the artificial “world” of the Globe Theater. Perhaps this unique perspective gave him insight into how his richly textured stories would translate in the world at large.

Seen from the modern era, it can be easy to forget that much of what Shakespeare wrote was concerned with themes and concerns that were quite commonplace in his day. His remarkable ability to interpret these themes within a much broader context is what makes him the greatest author in the English language. “Where (Shakespeare) was unique was in the vigor and invention with which he turned traditional ‘themes’ into living drama” (Bate, 97). That

drama has had a universal appeal that continues to make Shakespeare so popular on the modern stage and such a rich source of material for producers who seek to reinterpret him. It is remarkable to think, 400 years later, that people like Shakespeare were educated in a limited, even stifling atmosphere of repetition and religion (Potter, 36). But it was in this

environment that young Shakespeare's protean intellect and imagination were fostered.

The family of Shakespeare's father, John, was one notable for having distinguished themselves in a kind of 17th-century civil service. However, no such inclination manifested itself among John Shakespeare's sons, including young William (Potter, 36). John Shakespeare served in the office of bailiff, which may have given William a rich source from which to draw his serio-comic use of legalistic language. It is interesting to note that the death in 1580 of a woman named Kathleen Hamlet, who drowned in the Avon River, was the source of a trial over whether she deserved Christian burial, it having been debated whether she had committed suicide or simply fallen in and died (Potter, 49). Given his family background and exposure to the Elizabethan legal/judicial system, it is unsurprising to find Shakespeare investing his plays with legal language. Others thought so, too. "The two lawyers who write 'The Law of Property in Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama' found that Shakespeare's use of legal language was by no means exceptional in the drama of the period, and can often be traced directly to his sources" (49).

Shakespeare's art drew as much from the superstitions and legends of Elizabethan England as it did from the comedy inherent in the often absurd application of legal principles found in the era. Queen Elizabeth I herself was assumed to have had a fiery temper because she had red hair. Spilling salt (or pepper) was considered ill luck because the two spices were so expensive and hard to come by at the time. The existence of the supernatural and otherworldly was widely accepted, a folk tradition that

finds rich expression in most of Shakespeare's memorable plays, including MacBeth, with its "three weird sisters" and Banquo's ghost, and Hamlet, with the looming, ghostly presence of Hamlet's murdered father.

Shakespeare's employment of these phantasms is evocative of commonly held superstitions, but they are also richly allegorical and symbolic presences.

It is interesting to note that the world may have been deprived of such complex and provocative literary allusions had it not been for the influence (and wealth) of William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke, Shakespeare's great patron and a man to whom the world owes much. The artist/patron relationship is one that could be traced back hundreds of years before Shakespeare, to pre-Renaissance Italy. In Elizabethan England, such patronage was an accepted and natural relationship, one which benefited both parties and society in general. "Patronage and the relationship of the patron with those he patronized was a very personal relationship. As one author has written, 'the Jacobean aristocracy belong to a political world that still adheres to the ethic of the feudal contract'" (O'Farrell, 78). There are many examples of the deep and abiding friendship that existed between Shakespeare and Herbert. Shakespeare, upon hearing that the Earl had invested in, and embarked upon a partnership in the nascent Virginia Company of London, wrote to "W. H.," wishing him good fortune in his new venture. Thus, both men benefited from a mutually enriching relationship, though the precise nature of "enriching" had different meanings for Shakespeare and Herbert.

Clearly, Herbert, scion of one of the great aristocratic families of England,

had no need of material enrichment. Yet Shakespeare could bestow a kind of fame and renown that even the Herbert dynasty's great wealth and power could not secure. It was to " Mr. W. H." that Shakespeare dedicated his sonnets, W. H. being an individual whose identity has been hotly debated over the centuries (Rolfe, 1905). It is now widely accepted that those initials do indeed stand for " William Herbert." That Shakespeare is referring to Herbert when he writes, "(His) outward shape, though it most lovely be; Doth in fair robes a fairer soul attire" (Rolfe, 1905). Clearly, Shakespeare found in his patron a man of great inner and outer attractiveness, and thus worthy of such expression in these now famous lines.

William Shakespeare is generally revered as a figure of such towering greatness, of such unapproachable talent, that it is easy to forget that he was, like any great artist, the product of a particular time and place. All writers translate their backgrounds into some greater context, yet Shakespeare did so with such magnitude and with such universal meaning that he stands alone, still today, as the greatest of all chroniclers of the human saga. The news today is replete with tragedy, and with examples of human greed, violence, courage and vision, all of which provide an apt background upon which to draw conclusions, and a modern understanding, of that which Shakespeare expressed with such profound depth and understanding. " All the world's a stage," Hamlet declares, and it is upon this stage that the great truths expressed in Shakespearean tragedy and comedy continue to help shape and define our efforts to understand the best and worst of human nature.

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