

# Shakespeare

## A Beginner's Guide

Ros King



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*For Tam and Ray*



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# Introduction: Why Shakespeare?

Yet, do thy worst, old Time. Despite thy wrong,  
My love shall in my verse ever live young.

(Sonnet 19)

Shakespeare's plays and poems have survived both in print and on the stage for four hundred and fifty years. He is probably the most performed and reprinted poet and dramatist of all time. More than that, his work has encouraged constant quotation, reinvention, reinterpretation, translation, and rewriting since it first appeared; and not just in England or in Britain but across the world. My aim in writing this book is to explore some of the reasons for this, and also the reasons why, for many people, 'Shakespeare' is a daunting hill to climb. This book is for people who enjoy Shakespeare and want to think about the reasons for that. It is also for people who have been put off him, by reputation or through the dreariness of having to mug up on selected scenes for the purposes of school examinations. I want to consider the plays and poems for their sensory and emotional qualities – for pace and movement, sound and rhythm – and for the social, ethical problems they present.

The cultural significance of Shakespeare means that he is too important to be left to the experts. And it is not the job of this book to give easy answers for 'beginners'. Any attempt to do so would be to falsify his work and, paradoxically, would make it appear *more* rather than less difficult. I hope that I can persuade readers not to run from the difficulties they will find, or to

dismiss them as simply the product of a different time or an archaic and outdated language. Rather they should be embraced as deliberate features of the language that demand our emotional response, and create the sense of human interaction that speaks to us across centuries despite enormous cultural changes. I am trying to describe how the plays work, not to nail down what they mean.

My aim is to offer observations on the ways Shakespeare structures his plays, and techniques for approaching his language. Throughout, I shall be using and demonstrating a multi-dimensional approach, which combines literary analysis, cultural history, and performance history, with practical performance considerations, and audience/reader responses. There are therefore a number of case studies of individual plays and poems dotted through the book; these should be read as demonstrations of dramaturgical close-reading techniques that can also be applied to other works by Shakespeare. It is not my intention to provide plot summaries or introductions for each of the plays in the canon, since these are readily available elsewhere.

In fact, even very young beginners can be experts in the issues that are explored in the action of these plays. Primary school children understand perfectly the kinds of parent-child and sibling relationships shown in *King Lear*. They enjoy the insults that Lear's loyal servant Kent, disguised as Caius, throws at the mealy-mouthed Oswald, and they relish the horror of the eye-gouging scene, all while being able to relate these events thoughtfully to their own experience of bullying in the playground. They also instantly recognise that the main story is a version of *Cinderella* – not feeling, as an adult might, that this could devalue a work revered as one of the greatest classics of world literature.

I hope to show that the plays are not well served by teaching, criticism, or performance that offers 'right' answers – but that does not mean that there are no wrong answers. We are of

course free to make any personal and private interpretation of Shakespeare that we like. But if we wish to make those interpretations public we need to judge their validity. Has our interpretation done justice to the play's structure, or has it closed it down? Are we offering our readers and audiences a rich or a restricted version of the play? This book will offer tools to help readers tell the difference. It will also debunk a number of myths, both about Shakespeare as a person and a writer and about the received meanings of some key plays. And it will place Shakespeare's career and works in the context of play-writing and play-production in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century London.

Shakespeare has become a surer livelihood for the countless theatre companies and film-makers who now perform him than most still-living playwrights. He is also relied upon to breathe life into less compelling work by politicians, writers, copy-editors, and advertising agents, who quote him, frequently without fully understanding the implications of what they are saying. When the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher quoted 'Shakespeare' as saying 'to thine own self be true ... Thou canst not then be false to any man' (*Hamlet*, 1.3.78–80) she seemed blissfully unaware that the words are not a product of Shakespeare's genius or knowledge of human nature. Rather, they constitute a familiar proverbial saying, chosen by the dramatist to be spoken by the character Polonius, a prime minister and skilful politician in a corrupted court.

A few scenes after he speaks these lines (and here is where Shakespeare's brilliance as a dramatist lies), we will see him with one Reynaldo, a shadowy character who appears in no other scene in the play. He orders Reynaldo to follow his son to Paris and to spy on him, not stinting to play a few dirty tricks if necessary to get information. We may laugh at Polonius's apparently harmless forgetfulness in this scene, and enjoy being insiders in

his scheme, but the effect is chilling. This little scene, too often cut in performance, demonstrates that surveillance is normal in this court. Twice in the course of the play, Polonius will conceal himself as a spy. It is this that gets him killed. The irony of Shakespeare's choice of proverb is that as spymaster, Polonius is truest to himself and to the king his master when he is most *untrue* to others. For someone in Mrs Thatcher's position, quoting this character ought to be regarded as distinctly risky. The fact that no one either on her own side before she made the speech, or on the opposition benches afterwards, thought to remark on this unfortunate choice of erudition simply demonstrates our pressing need to rethink our approach to drama. Shakespeare's plays aren't collections of aphorisms for moral instruction; they don't tell his audiences what to think. Instead, the arrangement of his plays – the way in which he plots his storylines, and the parallels, the puns, and the echoes that run through them – encourages his audiences and readers to question what they hear and see.

## **Shakespeare's time and place**

Shakespeare was writing at a very difficult period in English history. The state religion changed numerous times in his and his parents' lifetimes, not only back and forth between Catholicism and reformed religion, but between different shades of reformation. The reign of Elizabeth I, from 1558 to 1603, was longer than that of any other English monarch with the exception of Victoria and Elizabeth II. But it was far from secure. The ever-present threat of invasion came to a head in 1588 with the Spanish Armada, and again, though less famously, in 1599. Factions at court jockeyed for influence over the queen, while economic and religious unrest in the country both caused and was prompted by state repression.

We can be sure from the multitude of conflicting texts on religion and politics that still survive from that period that not all Elizabethans thought the same way. Social change would be impossible if societies were monolithic, and the period saw the beginnings of ideas and institutions that, for better or worse, have come to shape the modern world. Some hundred years before the formation of the Bank of England Shakespeare and his father were money-lenders, a role vital to the functioning of capitalism; a number of his business associates were members of the Virginia Company, formed to plant colonies in north America; Elizabethans were consciously trying to develop both their standards of manufacture and their capacity for trade. It was also a time that valued argument, that saw the beginning of the scientific, rational method of thought, and which had seen so many rigidly imposed religious changes in forty years that the only pragmatic way forward was to embrace a more secular politics.

Despite a hardening by the turn of the century of the idea that the monarch enjoyed divine right, there was an established tradition in England that he or she governed by counsel. Provided the subject was suitably handled, it could be useful to hear difficult matters discussed, whether in serious contexts such as sermons, or university disputations – the formal oratorical method whereby students progressed in their degrees – or in the playful forum of dramatic entertainment. It was the context and the treatment more than the content that determined whether any particular speech or play was regarded as seditious.

In the course of this book, we will see that the storylines for Shakespeare's plays are almost invariably borrowed from existing stories. But his practice of putting multiple stories together in ways that cross geographical time and space, using closely observed and vividly drawn characters to stage conflict and differences of opinion, creates complexity, which throws those opinions into question. Shakespeare's history plays compress or

expand the course of historical events, and are filled with anachronisms. Non-historical characters such as the Bastard in *King John*, or even Queen Margaret who, though real enough, was historically not present in any of the scenes in which she appears in *Richard III*, comment freely, sometimes outrageously, on the action.

Thus, under the guise of fantasy, or remote or ahistorical history, Shakespeare is able to explore social and political problems, which would otherwise be forbidden to him. He can also tap in to the *potential* of human behaviour, rather than being bound by historically specific conventions. It is this that both enables him safely to explore some of the hot political issues of his time, and leaves the door open for later generations to read the plays in the light of later experience, both personal and cultural.

## Theatre and the world

The concept that ‘All the world’s a stage/And all the men and women merely players’ was already ancient when Shakespeare penned that line for the melancholy traveller Jacques in *As You Like It* (2.7.139–40). The idea that the gods look down and observe the actions of men as a play, and that different individuals or sections of society can also look at each other in this way, is found repeatedly in classical Greek and Roman literature, which in turn supplied a ready image to be employed in the literature of Shakespeare’s time.

Thus, in a poem contemplating the perils of greatness, Shakespeare’s contemporary, John Davies of Hereford, a moral poet and teacher of handwriting to the nobility, compares his own ‘mean’ or middle station in life to being a spectator in a theatre, leaning on a pillar – then often regarded as a symbol of inner strength or fortitude – amongst a crowd or ‘press’ of people in the middle gallery:

... like a looker on a tragedy  
 Within the middle room, among the mean,  
 I see the fall of state and majesty  
 While 'mongst the press t'a pillar sure I lean;  
 So see I others' sorrows with delight,  
 Though others' sorrows do but make me sad;  
 But plagues to see, which on our selves might light,  
 Free from their fall, makes nature, grieving, glad.

(John Davies, *Wit's Pilgrimage*, 1605)

Davies pits his own thoughts and feelings against those he sees enacted on the stage. He is probably correct; we enjoy watching misfortune when it reinforces our own sense of security. We feel empathy for these 'people' playing out their lives in front of us, even though we know it is a fiction; we watch the actors present the characters, yet the act of watching encourages us to think about what we would do in a similar situation; we are sad while knowing that we have no reason to be sad about a fiction, even one based on true events; we might sympathise with the characters while simultaneously appraising the actor's skill. We will be engaged by the story; we may even be implicated in it, when villains like Richard, Duke of Gloucester in *Richard III* or Iago in *Othello* take us into their confidence and spark our enjoyment in their plots and murders. At the same time, that constant physical consciousness of ourselves (the pressure of the pillar) reminds us that our lives are separate from what we see depicted, and enables us to maintain a sceptical distance. This ambivalence is important, and distinguishes the theatrical experience on the stage from theatrics in everyday life, where, for example, we might be swept along for real by a demagogue's oratory, becoming pawns in that individual's personal ambitions.

Playacting is nevertheless an intrinsic part of being human. Even within minutes of being born, babies are able to interact with other humans by mimicking their facial movements,

frowning or smiling, and particularly, it seems, sticking out the tongue. As the child grows, this predisposition to imitation becomes conscious playfulness, and delight in games of make-believe. And yet because it is fiction, and therefore easily categorised as falsehood, playacting poses a moral problem. It straddles a fault-line in moral philosophy and human behaviour. On the one hand it is a mechanism for learning about the world, and for making our societies work. On the other, it can be seen as both coercive – a tool for social constraint, or behaving in the ‘right’ way – and subversive, immoral, and duplicitous. Shakespeare exploits these tensions to the full.

## **Case study: *The Tempest***

All Shakespeare’s plays – even his English history plays – are set in a kind of nowhere-land outside geo-historical time and space. Sometimes this place amounts to pure fantasy – like the island in *The Tempest*, which is supposed to be somewhere in the Mediterranean between Naples and Tunisia but is simultaneously an island in the Caribbean. Inspired by accounts of a shipwreck which took place off the coast of Bermuda in 1610, and by travellers’ tales from exotic places beyond Europe, the island is peopled by strange creatures and spirits, who have been brought into subjection by the magus Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan. The play’s action concerns Prospero’s revenge on his usurping brother, Antonio, who is travelling with the King of Naples when their boat comes within reach of the island. With the assistance of his slave spirit Ariel, Prospero whips up a magic storm, which apparently wrecks the boat, scattering the courtiers at different points round the island.

The fantasy island and its illusionary storm, quite isolated from the ‘real’ world, becomes the ideal place for a political exile, his spirit slaves, and a motley selection of shipwreck

survivors from all social classes to play out conflicting ideas of power and of government. The king's brother, assisted by Antonio, plots an assassination, apparently not considering the futility of doing so when they are stranded far from the kingdom he wants to inherit; Prospero's slave, the monster Caliban, is only too ready to assist the king's butler in his attempt to become lord of the island, though all they achieve is to end up in a bog reeking of horse piss; the king's chief adviser, meanwhile, waxes lyrical on the beauty of the island and the social benefits of a utopian republicanism. Since the characters are so unaware of what is happening to them, Shakespeare is able to present both the violence and the impractical idealism with an undercurrent of humour, encouraging our critical and amused dissent from most of the opinions expressed. All the characters are shown to have their blind spots and weaknesses.

The play is also a love story between Prospero's daughter and the king's son, and an apparent tale of reconciliation; Prospero, his daughter, and the other Europeans all go home, and the island is left to its original inhabitant, Caliban. Importantly, though, the end is no fairy tale: difficulties still seethe under the surface, and Prospero still loathes his brother. Caliban vows to seek for grace, now he is about to be alone in his island kingdom; yet the beautiful young Miranda, Prospero's daughter, playing her young prince at chess, lovingly excuses what she thinks is his cheating at the game with the worrying jest that were he to 'wrangle' for a 'score of kingdoms', she would 'call it fair play' (*The Tempest*, 5.1.174–5). One can only speculate on how they will rule once they inherit the throne.

Thus a play written at the very beginnings of the European colonial enterprise can still speak to us beyond the end of that process. One of the most memorable recent productions seen in England was from the Baxter Theatre in South Africa, and drew on the country's experience of having a brutal colonial past brought to a flawed and difficult present through a determined

process of ‘peace and reconciliation’. The production used vivid tribal spirit dances to conjure the magical otherness of the island, and presented the king’s party in nineteenth-century European dress. The dignity of an aged African Caliban (John Kani) leaning on his crutches as he turned to face his future as a free man at the end of the play was a powerfully evocative image of the issues, embodied in the actual history of the actor, as a veteran of apartheid South Africa. Shakespeare could never have conceived that production, yet it captured both the social and political dynamics of the play, and allowed the performers to express a truth about themselves. As a result it communicated powerfully with its audiences.

The way Shakespeare structures his plays, with multiple characters being put through variations on the same story, and making different choices, combined with his use of word-play and pun, poses ethical questions concerning human social interaction. This is the reason why the plays are not limited by the culture of his own period. They are open systems, inviting input from their audiences. Their nuanced complexity, created through their language and structure, makes them rewatchable, rereadable, reinterpretable; we notice different things on each repeated encounter; they appeal differently at different stages in our lives and to different cultures and periods. And that is why this book will be about structures and processes, not meanings.