



## The Genius of William Shakespeare

In a small Chapel in rural Warwickshire a man is buried with three other members of his close family, in front of the altar. There is a rhyme on his headstone containing a curse on those who would disturb his bones. Why are he, and his words, still important today four centuries after his death?

William Shakespeare, Bard of Stratford, was the son of a glover, small-time landowner, part-time civic councilor and sometime sheep-rustler. These are the inauspicious beginnings of a genius who still dominates the theatre and whose radical ideas still have resonance today on the global stage.

Shakespeare understood power. He knew the effect it has on people, for good or for ill – lessons which many of our leaders in government, business and society still need to heed. He understood people, both men and women; indeed Sigmund Freud based many of his archetypes on the wide range of Shakespearean characters. It can be said that we understand ourselves and the people around us through William Shakespeare.

In *Henry IV Part II* he had the line 'Uneasy is the head that wears the Crown;' correctly identifying the insecurity of many individuals in power. In *Romeo and Juliet*, he created a fable about festering feuds between 'tribal' families. In the Merchant of Venice he creates a villain in Shylock that many people can relate to, who provides a rational justification for his actions. In Othello, villainy lies not with the murderer but in the insinuating words of Iago. How do we cope with people who are 'other'? Othello is an outsider, not because of the colour of his skin but his identity as a Moor of North Africa – that is, a Muslim. In the Scottish play, Lady Macbeth entreats unnatural powers on the battlements, to remove her gender, her feminine nature, in order to find the strength to commit murder, to kill a King. Today, our whole understanding of gender continues to evolve.

Many people may say that Shakespeare stole stories liberally from the histories and medieval literature, as well as the Greek and Roman Classics. So he did, but he put them in a form and a language which is as powerful, meaningful and current, as it was when his plays were first performed. We are still playing with Shakespeare, putting it into new contexts, as in Baz Lurhmann's glorious *Romeo + Juliet*.

We know very little of the man himself. It was an age when many works of art

were unsigned. The first portfolio of his work was not put together during his lifetime; it was his friend and peer, Ben Jonson, who collated the work and appended Shakespeare's name to it, several years after his death.

This gives some credibility to the argument that this man of Stratford was not the author of his plays. Shakespeare lacked a University education and how could he know so much about the English Court and – and foreign courts?

A lot of this argument arises from simple class snobbery with a fig-leaf of pseudo-historical analysis. My own theory is that the answer to the riddle is to be found during Shakespeare's lost years, after he left Warwickshire and his wife and children to pursue his ambitions as a player, an actor of the day, in London.

After several years he set up a Theatre company and a Playhouse in Shoreditch. How did he get that money? Certainly, not from his father, or from his own apprenticeship in the glover's trade. The major paymasters at that time were the State and the Catholic Church.

Decades later, Aphra Behn was known to have been employed as a spy in the Dutch Court at Antwerp for Charles II, before turning her hand to play-writing. I believe that Shakespeare was also employed as a spy and he traveled to Milan, Verona and Venice. As a Player, he would have had ready access to these courts, and as a spy he would have learned the subtle arts of observation, subterfuge and collection of information, all of which would be of benefit in his future writing.

In the courts of that time, the class structures and protocols of aristocratic hierarchy were rigidly enforced, particularly at Court. As a 'low-born' Player, Shakespeare would not have attracted much attention. Complete obeisance was expected and demanded of a 'low-born'; you could not be seen to look upon persons above your station in life. It would be a natural thing to learn to observe unobtrusively, you could not perform your role otherwise. As a spy, Shakespeare could have memorised conversations and documents by translating them into rhythmic forms, like the iambic pentameter of his plays. It would have been far too dangerous for him to write anything down.

Shakespeare may also have been allowed privileged access through his mother's family connections, the Ardens, who were noted Catholics. In this way, I believe, Shakespeare received his education and political knowledge as well as his money.

In Hamlet we see two Players, Rosencratz and Guildenstern, deeply involved in the political machinations, albeit as tragicomic pawns, and a Play as a key device in Hamlet's vainglorious plan. I wonder it that is a case of William Shakespeare taking a bow before us?

I was convinced of Shakespeare's authorship when I saw a performance of Henry V part I performed in his native Warwickshire dialect and I saw and heard how the language came alive. These are not the words of a university-educated Southerner. Recently the talented actress Maxine Peake, used her glorious

Mancunian to great effect in the role of Hamlet. I was also privileged to see a King Lear performed in pure 'Saif Laindon' rap-style in Lambeth, to a very non-traditional audience. It sang to us in a way that I found both moving and inspiring. The iambic pentameter of *de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum* has found a renewed currency amongst the rap generation.

I love the clarity and musicality of the classical Shakespeareans like Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud, but there is something to be said for finding new ways of expressing the form.

Shakespeare is important both historically and in the world today, but I would argue that the real importance lies in the art of his work, the art of entertaining people. That is, for me, the true genius of William Shakespeare.

*John Llewellyn James is a poet and a member of Fermanagh Writers*

Shakespeare is buried in [Holy Trinity Church](#), Stratford-upon-Avon