ROBERT
McCRUM

SHAKESPEAREAN

On Life & Language
in Times of Disruption

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PART ONE, 1564–2016:

'Who's There?'

Shakespeare then and now. How he's always modern, and why we turn to his 'book of life' in years of crisis and disruption.

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Prologue

'WAS THIS THE FACE?'

The Portrait of a Young Man, 1585

1.

Through the darkness, under a brilliant spotlight, the enigmatic portrait of the anonymous young man glows like an icon in the dining hall of the Cambridge college where I grew up. After more scrutiny, this late-Tudor treasure, painted on wood, will furnish two dates – *Aetatis suae 21 Anno Domini 1585*, the sitter's age, plus the year in which he was posing – and a sombre, transgressive motto, *Quod me nutrit me detruit*, meaning, 'That which nourishes me also destroys me.'

The young man's costume is rich and fashionable, a gorgeous midnight-black velour doublet, cut to flash some peachy silk, and studded with exquisite gold buttons. His expression is confident but opaque. Pausing in front of this eye-catching scholar, we might be drawn to his face, framed by that androgynous mane of auburn hair. His lips are full and sensual. Do they express a smile? Possibly we are still guessing. Is there, in those dark-brown eyes, at once fearless and provocative, a challenge or an invitation? Perhaps he doesn't know, either. The shadow of his beard and that wispy moustache tells us he's barely out of adolescence. In the England of 1585, his inky costume alludes to Machiavellian thought, atheism and fashionable melancholy. *Quod me nutrit me detruit*. What unrequited love does this effeminate youth refer to? What existential torment? Who is he, and what are his circumstances?

Slowly, as we study this inscrutable image, he comes into focus as a university scholar, born in 1564, the same year as William Shakespeare. Further investigation, which now morphs into informed guesswork, even wishful thinking, yields an Elizabethan high-flyer, a godless poet, a homosexual, a secret agent – and finally, a name.

The most famous playwright in Elizabethan England, Christopher Marlowe is still remembered for the lyrical rhetoric of

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‘Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?’, and perhaps for revolutionizing English theatre. Familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries as ‘Kit’, he is the author of poems like ‘The Passionate Shepherd to his Love’, and plays such as *Dr Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*. Yet, more than four centuries on, Marlowe and his work can seem as antique as oil-paint on wood.

This ‘putative portrait’ is an image I grew up with. My father, Michael McCrum, was the senior tutor of Corpus Christi College when, in 1954, an undergraduate brought him some dusty pieces of scrap he’d rescued from a skip, an obscure picture of a young man in sixteenth-century dress, which he thought might be of interest. ‘Since Marlowe was born in 1564,’ my father later recalled, ‘the dates fitted, and the Latin motto seemed appropriate. So it was possible that this was a portrait of the playwright, an alumnus of the college. We took the picture to our resident medievalist, who insisted that it should be cleaned and restored.’

Since then, although there has been no further proof of identity, the picture, which hung for many years in the college hall, has become the accepted likeness of Christopher Marlowe. It’s a haunting work of art, widely reproduced, that acts as a poignant reminder of a life cut short by sinister violence. Marlowe’s melancholy image also suggests a greater truth: namely, that the deeper we enter this singular universe, the more remote it becomes. Indeed, it’s chiefly the language and literature of Renaissance England which links us to a society so distant, strange and potent as to be simultaneously enthralling yet unknowable.

This anonymous portrait, which is almost contemporary with the year of Will Shakespeare’s hasty wedding to Anne Hathaway, provokes many questions. None is bigger than this: how is it that one sixteenth-century English writer no longer enjoys even a fraction of the acclaim he knew in his prime, while another continues to speak to us, from day to day, almost as our contemporary? Today, Marlowe and his work are familiar mainly to specialists. The dangerous aesthete, who is a perennial topic of conspiracy theory, remains a tantalizing source of academic speculation, whereas Shakespeare will always be . . . Shakespeare.

2.

My question is: how did this happen? Why does Shakespeare live on as one of us, not merely in Britain, but across the globe? Posterity is fickle, and literary afterlives capricious, but

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Shakespeare's universal fame is spectacular and unprecedented. What is his secret as a vibrant part of modern culture, as well as a touchstone of English, American, and even the world's literature? How did a young man who grew up in rural Warwickshire, who did not go to university, who forged his early career paying Marlowe the sincere tribute of imitation, and who died at the age of fifty-two, far from court or cloister, become not merely 'Shakespeare' but also the global icon for something far more influential: namely, that quality we call 'Shakespearean'? What follows is a highly personal inquiry into the making, and perpetual remaking, of the greatest writer who ever lived, in relation to his time and our own. This investigation explores the paradox that, where Marlowe subordinated much of his art to his life – and is remembered accordingly – Shakespeare sublimated experience through art: in his plays, indeed, art and life become inextricable and timeless.

I will argue that today, in finding so many points of relevance and sympathy, we are closer than ever to Shakespeare and his world. His name conjures a universe of characters, poetry, scenes and ideas undergoing constant reinterpretation by audiences, actors and artists across the world, for more than four hundred years. It's through the dialogue of these incessant metamorphoses that, now more than ever, this 'Shakespeare' is as much a part of our time as of his. Moreover, it's as our contemporary that he remains modern, a writer with whom we inevitably engage, often not knowing precisely how or why. I am also concerned to examine the mystery of that transaction, by anatomizing the nature of the dialogue Shakespeare always sponsors with those, like me, who attend his plays or read his poetry, poised between the two worlds of then and now.

To write *Shakespearean*, I have immersed myself in the Elizabethan age of Marlowe and Shakespeare, although this remains a moving target. Pre-modern, and on the cusp of change, it does not always answer to the kinds of biographical inquiry we are used to. There are tantalizing gaps in the record of both lives, and in the many mysteries surrounding their work. Plays, players, and playwrights had neither the recognition nor the status they enjoy today. Yet both men left behind a treasure house of poetry and prose. Accordingly, I have grounded my argument in black and white – the words on the page – those surviving texts from a world now otherwise lost.

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These words remain as fraught with significance as ever. In his essay, ‘Shakespeare Four Hundredth’, the scholar and critic George Steiner once wrote:

> The words with which we seek to do him homage are his. We look for new celebration and find echo. Shakespeare has his mastering grip on the marrow of our speech. The shapes of life which he created give voice to our inward needs. We catch ourselves crooning desire like street-corner Romeos; we fall to jealousy in the cadence of Othello; we make Hamlets of our enigmas; old men rage and dodder like Lear.

Steiner acknowledged that he was only echoing ‘the din of commemoration’. If you exclaim, ‘How noble he was in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable,’ he conceded, you are simply quoting. But the question remains: is his genius a sufficient explanation for the reverence towards Shakespeare? Yes, of course. But how was it – to address the matter another way – that he became, and still becomes, ‘Shakespearean’?

To start with, there are his arresting first lines, which always dive in at the deep end.

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One

‘THE BOOK OF LIFE’

When sometime-lofty towers I see down razed.
Sonnet 64, 3

1.

‘Who’s there?’

Bernardo the watchman’s terror-struck challenge in the opening line of *Hamlet* signals an emergency. It’s a question which reverberates throughout the drama that follows, alerting the audience to something life-threatening at stake. More universally, it is a question for everyone in dramatic and disturbing times. With so many dangers on hand at every turn, ‘Who’s there?’ becomes a chyron for the way we live now. Spontaneous expressions of fear will become the first clue in my search for the meaning of *Shakespearean*, a quest that starts with the new millennium.

Not one thousand days into the twenty-first century, the sky came crashing down. For a few apocalyptic hours, on 11 September 2001, the earth itself seemed to explode in fire and fury. With hindsight, the inferno at the foot of Manhattan, a snapshot of American trauma televised across the world, became the fiery emblem of millennial catastrophe. Worse still, these upheavals were being experienced, in various iterations of chaos and disruption, throughout many different countries across the world. Once upon a time, in 1989, we had been instructed in ‘the end of history’. Now we were living with a time ‘out of joint’, and a history which seemed to fast-forward so precipitously that we could scarcely draw breath before the next crisis, still less make sense of what was happening. As I write, in the shadow of Covid-19, these first twenty-one years of the twenty-first century have become long decades of imminent dread, an age of profound anxiety, a state of mind Shakespeare would understand.

Against a backdrop of the Internet boom, the biggest communications revolution in five hundred years, 9/11 morphed

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into the war on terror, which in turn inspired the invasion and then the horrors of the war in Iraq, the tortures of Abu Ghraib, and the medieval atrocities of ISIS. Then, just as the next US election seemed to offer new hope for change in the skinny, rhetorical figure of Barack Obama, the roof fell in, almost literally, with the bursting of the American housing bubble, and the 'credit crunch' of 2007–8. In *1Q84*, his 2011 novel, the writer Haruki Murakami captured the mood of the moment: 'Everyone, deep in their hearts, is waiting for the end of the world to come.'

For a while, Obama's silver oratory was able to spin an elevated narrative line, until even his words were not enough. Other great communicators – from Bill Clinton to Nelson Mandela – withdrew, or fell silent. In the past, it would have been the voices of the world's leaders who provided the most comfort. Now, it seemed, there was only a rogues' gallery of rabble-rousers, a jarring and raucous Babel, while the economies of the West set about rebuilding their shattered banking systems.

As the Obama presidency stumbled to an end in race riots, there was at least the prospect, for progressives, of the first woman president in the Democratic candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton. Simultaneously, on the other side of the Atlantic, the daily news was unfolding in more traditional ways. In Scotland, a knife-edge referendum on independence confounded many pollsters when the Scots decided, by a clear margin, not to leave the United Kingdom. For a moment, we could begin to breathe again.

History and hubris are cousins, however. After the Scottish vote, having barely broken a sweat during the Brexit referendum, the British political class went to bed on the night of 23 June 2016 secure in the expectation that there would be no change to the status quo. In the first of many rude awakenings that year, the next morning brought the news that a fiercely committed majority of insular Britons wanted to 'take back control'. By the end of the day, the prime minister had resigned. Within weeks, a new government was in power, the old order in the dustbin of history, and the progressive commentariat dumbfounded.

Not since its army of redcoats marched out of Yorktown to the tune of 'The World Turned Upside Down' in 1781 had the British establishment suffered such a humiliating defeat. In the bitter aftermath, 'Brexit' became the shorthand for a universal expression of utter incomprehension: a profound national dismay about Britain's prospects, with almost nobody – apart from a few

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deluded Brexiteers – having any clarity about the future, in an angry clash of tribes.

Lack of certainty was one thing. Unthinkable outcomes were something else. In November 2016, Mrs Clinton's failure to reach the White House was, for democrats in the United States, a seismic political event commensurate to the UK's Brexit vote. On college campuses across America, a generation of young voters phoned their parents, wept, threw up, suffered panic attacks, and launched a tsunami of tweets, a harbinger of things to come.

On Friday 20 January 2017, at the inauguration of the new president, this bafflement reached to the very top. When the former host of *Celebrity Apprentice* concluded his first address to the American people, a raw expression of domestic 'nativism', ex-president George W. Bush turned to his neighbour on the podium and muttered, 'That was some weird shit.'

Henceforward, the headline news, in Britain and America, throughout Europe and across the developed world, was the growing recognition of a deeper and more pervasive disruption – to some 'the new normal' – that seemed to threaten the established order of things. Worst of all, for many, even once-familiar paths into the future seemed obscure and uncertain.

This was especially true in the bitterly disputed world of climate change, whose debates became turbocharged by the appearance of Greta Thunberg. After 2015, the Paris Accord, which had seemed to offer a glimmer of hope for the future, was rejected by US republicans, but vindicated by some apocalyptic weather conditions in 2018–19. Elsewhere in the public arena, there was only confusion and mistrust. Finally, amid the cacophony, there was a familiar voice, one that seemed to understand our predicament, a voice of vision and clarity that offered a secure narrative line through the constancy of its focus on states of risk: the words of William Shakespeare.

2.

As it turned out, Shakespeare had already anticipated this moment of disruption in sonnet 64:

> When I have seen by time's fell hand defaced
> The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,
> When sometime-lofty towers I see down razed,
> And brass eternal slave to mortal rage,
> When I have seen the hungry ocean gain

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Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,
Increasing store with loss and loss with store;
When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or state itself confounded to decay;
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate:
That time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

Not only had Shakespeare already painted a picture of a world in terrifying flux; further, he'd addressed many multiplying anxieties in the words of the king in *2 Henry IV*, 'O, God! That one might read the book of fate, And see the revolution of the times [3.1.44–6]'.

Amid a rising sea of troubles, as every generation in society came to terms with the challenges of the present, from populist nationalism to 'Fake News' and #MeToo, the plays of William Shakespeare were once again finding an audience in answer to the needs of the moment. Some two hundred years earlier, the great American critic Ralph Waldo Emerson had saluted Shakespeare as the author of 'the book of life', and a sublime master of literary omniscience: 'What mystery has he not signified his knowledge of? What office, or function, or district of man's work, has he not remembered? What sage has he not outseen?' Bewildered progressives today, possibly resistant towards such quasi-ecstatic sentiments, could still share the idea. After 2016, 'Shakespearean' became a buzzword that surged back into the language in two senses:

1. *Adjective*, 'relating to William Shakespeare or his works'; and
2. *Noun*, 'an expert on or student of Shakespeare's writings'.

Those were Romantic terms, coined by Keats and Coleridge, poets for whom Shakespeare was a secular god. In our peculiar emergency, however, both meanings are more practical, speaking to a new kind of desperation. In May 2020, the actor Robert De Niro, in conversation with BBC TV's *Newsnight*, seemed at a loss to describe American politics. Finally, he exclaimed, 'It's like Shakespearean, the whole thing,' to summarize the crisis as he saw it. 'So Shakespearean', an unexamined cultural shorthand, has now become a strangely comforting assurance that says, 'You are not alone.' For some contemporary readers, the work collected in

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Shakespeare's First Folio does indeed become such 'a book of life'. The questions we have to address are: how does he execute this consolation? Why does he never fail to speak to us? Whence is he always so modern? And, finally, what holds the key to his enduring sympathy?

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Two

'TO BE, OR NOT TO BE'

If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.
Hamlet, 5.2.166

1.

Shakespeare revels in the dramatic present. No fewer than three of his plays begin with 'Now'. He will always confront the most overwhelming questions, and come to our rescue in many guises, but imminence is his default position. This is Elizabethan: Shakespeare's age lived in the 'now', from sunrise to sunset. 'The readiness is all,' says Hamlet. All or nothing is a challenge the playwright celebrates in resonant antitheses. 'To be, or not to be', his most famous dramatic opposite, is at once Anglo-Saxon, existential, and direct. Such immediacy is a constant thread in the tapestry of thought and language that will become Shakespearean.

Was it the accident of his birth in Elizabethan Warwickshire that awoke him to the drama of everyday life? Was it here that he learned to extract many nuances of meaning from the quotidian detail of the turning world? At some point, growing up in Stratford, or moving to London, he discovered the wellspring of great drama: imminent peril. In his imagination, this would blossom into a lifelong dialogue between risk and originality, a creative exchange the writer seems to have kept to himself. We will never know. In the words of Jorge Luis Borges, the man remains an enigma, being simultaneously 'many, and no one'.

What was he like? This question, so important in the twenty-first, has little traction in the seventeenth century. Yet, despite the paucity of evidence, there is a striking unanimity among contemporary witnesses. Almost all the references to 'the man Shakespeare' concur on his decency, plain dealing, discretion, and politeness, none of which hint at the kind of dark side that might assist in our understanding of plays such as *Richard III*, *Macbeth* or *King Lear*. Long ago, at the beginning of his career, he had been

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described, under duress, by the writer Henry Chettle as 'civil' and 'upright', known for his 'honesty' and 'facetious grace of writing'. In *Brief Lives*, compiled during the Restoration, the gossip John Aubrey reports him to have been 'a handsome, well-shaped man, very good company, and of a very ready and smooth pleasant wit'. Crucially, in a clue to his astonishing output, Aubrey described him as 'not a company keeper'.

We can, nonetheless, place this elusive figure in a historical landscape. The Shakespeare who came of age during decades of crisis, dread and disorder, speaks to every generation that finds itself *in extremis*. England's national poet and playwright has long been known for his extraordinary hold over our thoughts and feelings, especially in dark times. It has been remarked that that we don't read Shakespeare; he reads us. But what does this mean, exactly? Is it enough to say that the solace of great literature becomes uniquely crystallized in his 'book of life', through the mystery of his art? What is the secret of his strange, uncanny empathy, and where the key to his insights? How and why is his work so evergreen?

Perhaps, if he had struck just one note – political or merely historical – as the author of *King John*, or *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare might have seemed a bore. The macrocosm can only hold an audience for so long. It's in the minutiae of the particular – the quotidian, and the personal – that he excels. At the opening of *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio counsels Antonio, who's worrying about his marital prospects and future trading losses, with an archery image drawn from childhood:

> In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft,
> I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight
> The selfsame way, with more advised watch
> To find the other forth, and by adventuring both,
> I oft found both.
> [1.1.140–44]

Or consider this moment in *Love's Labour's Lost* when Moth, a page to Don Armado, advocates 'brawling in French' as the open sesame to the heart of 'the country maid, Jaquanetta':

> To jig off a tune at the tongue's end, canary to it with your feet, humour it with turning up your eyelids, sigh a note and sing a note, sometime through the throat as if you swallowed love with singing

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> love, sometime through the nose as if you snuffed up love by smelling love, with your hat penthouse-like o'er the shop of your eyes . . .
> [3.1.10–20]

Shakespeare knows that's a zinger. Later, in the same scene, Don Armado, who is possibly based on Sir Walter Raleigh, will salute Moth's 'sweet smoke of rhetoric [3.1.61]', an in-joke that acknowledges a new smoke Shakespeare has richly inhaled. Here, in this scene, he does what the great masters of our literature always do: he speaks to his audience as if for the first time, with images that strike deep.

From my own personal history I know that, in states of psychological need or distress, Shakespeare's can become the voice to which we listen. In July 1995, I was poleaxed in my sleep by something the doctors would call 'a right hemisphere haemorrhagic infarct' – in plain English, a stroke – and pitched into an acute left-sided paralysis. At first, in the aftermath of this massive disruption, my writing arm happily unimpaired, I completed a worm's-eye view of this experience, *My Year Off*, 'rediscovering life after a stroke'. During convalescence, the *Complete Works* became my book of life. Almost the only words that made sense were snatches of Shakespeare, and next – as I began to recover – longer passages from *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, and especially *Hamlet*, the play that rarely fails to supply a kind of running commentary to the inner dialogue of the self.

In retrospect, I rediscovered Shakespeare through ill health, and the slow return to wellness, to the point where, reflecting on Prospero's haunting valediction – 'every third thought shall be my grave' – one of many strange and memorable lines from *The Tempest*, I found the title for a sequel to *My Year Off*, to which, in turn, *Shakespearean* has become a coda. Just as *Every Third Thought* sponsored a reconciliation with issues of life and death, so rereading Shakespeare can be a revelation. Virginia Woolf, who once compared this experience to discovering an informal autobiography, launches into an ecstatic celebration of this quality in her *Diaries*:

> I read Shakespeare *directly* I have finished writing. When my mind is agape and red-hot. I never yet knew how amazing his stretch and speed and word-coining power is, until I felt it utterly outpace and

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> outrace my own . . . I could say that Shakespeare surpasses literature altogether, if I knew what I meant.

In any rereading, some of Shakespeare's most direct and powerful lines come in simple old English monosyllables. 'To be, or not to be,' is equalled by King Lear's 'Let me not be mad,' and Ira's sign-off (in *Antony and Cleopatra*): 'we are for the dark.'

I, too, had become familiar with 'the dark'. The human animal lives at the epicentre of its own life, especially when it falls ill. In this condition, Shakespeare's eerie intuition is deeply consoling. When, as a long-term convalescent, each day becomes a reminder of human frailty, Shakespeare's extraordinary power to connect with his audience's perplexity, and to evoke a thrilling sense of mystery in the human predicament, inspires a mixture of reverence, awe, and fascination.

For me, this became a prolonged internal dialogue. If I could no longer travel, or move at will, as before, then at least I could make journeys of the mind, within Shakespeare's 'book of life'. The buzzword of my recovery was 'plasticity'. One definition of 'plasticity' describes the phenomenon as 'the capacity for continuous alteration of the neural pathways and synapses of the living brain and nervous system in response to experience or injury'. Putting it another way, 'plasticity' is about cerebral adaptability, the kind of unconscious responsiveness that occurs in any rereading of Shakespeare. This is the experience Henry James celebrates in his 1907 introduction to *The Tempest*:

> The artist is so steeped in the abysmal objectivity of his characters and situations that the great billows of the medium itself play with him, to our vision, very much as, over a ship's side, in certain waters, we catch through transparent tides, the flash of strange sea-creatures.

I now have three editions of the *Complete Works*, and each bears the impressions of much study: coffee and wine stains, torn folios, ghostly pencil marks and turned-down corners. During twenty years of recovery, I slowly transformed a knowledge of the plays I had read at school into a wider acquaintance with the Shakespeare canon, and joined the 'Shakespeare Club', a dedicated play-going circle whose outings I will intermittently refer to throughout these pages.

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The first recorded meetings of this fraternity began in 1999 with *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Hamlet*. Since then, in the course of more than one hundred productions, we have seen at least nine *Dreams*, eight *Tempests* and *Twelfth Nights*, seven *Lears*, five versions of *Much Ado*, and four *Caesars*. We have also watched no fewer than a dozen *Hamlets*, variously starring David Tennant, Rory Kinnear, Jude Law, Benedict Cumberbatch and Andrew Scott. By chance, this was good timing. Not until the late twentieth century were London theatregoers able fully to experience the sensation of the Elizabethan playhouse. If you ask how we might become contemporary Shakespeareans, one answer might be: go to the Globe.

2.

In June 1997, as a correspondent for the *Observer*, I attended the gala opening of Shakespeare's Globe, the fulfilment of a dream first dreamed by the American showman P. T. Barnum. The play selected for the inauguration of the new theatre was *Henry V*, a reliable paean of patriotic pride. On that first night (actually, it was an afternoon) in Southwark, the play's performance roused the locals' collective unconscious. There was, for instance, an extraordinary moment during this inaugural production when time seemed to stand still.

Everyone remembers the Prologue's 'O for a muse of fire . . .' Less famous, towards the end of Act Two, there's the scene that shifts to the French court. Enter the king of France, the Dauphin, and assorted French dukes, gorgeously caparisoned in blue velvet, and preening in arrogant Gallic splendour:

> Thus comes the English with full power upon us,
> And more than carefully it us concerns
> To answer royally in our defences.
> [2.4.1–3]

The reaction from the pit was instinctive. At the entrance of 'that sweet enemy' the French, everyone hissed.

Here, at the intersection of past and present, the historical and the everyday, Shakespeare suddenly became a powerful contemporary voice. Actors and directors understand his ability to get under the skin of his audience, and experience the alchemy by which his words and characters continue to exert a grip on our collective unconscious. They experience it as a mix of ancient and

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modern, memory and sensation. When Andrew Scott played Hamlet in 2017, he told the *Observer* that he wanted to make the production 'a play that would ignite our fourteen-year-old selves. The big thing was to try to speak the language in as conversational way as possible.' Similarly, in *Balancing Acts*, the director Nicholas Hytner writes: 'The reason to do [the plays] is to discover them as if for the first time, and to confront the competing claims of then and now . . .' Hytner relishes that challenge. 'To perform his plays,' he writes, 'is to invite universal participation.'

Is it this 'universal participation' that unlocks Shakespeare's magic? Four centuries of Shakespearean performance supply many kinds of response, many of them contradictory. In 2018, as one answer, Hytner launched his innovative Bridge Theatre, opposite the Tower of London, with a sell-out production of *Julius Caesar* which conscripted a younger audience into its exhilarating crowd scenes. Hytner repeated this *coup de théâtre* in 2019 with a witty, transgressive production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that bewitched the imaginations of its teenage groundlings. The Shakespeare Club, remembering some awkward school productions, was dazzled by Hytner's vision.

It's possibly at this juncture that some elements of the audience might prefer to head for the hills than endure another moment of madness in the Athenian or Danish courts. They will find themselves in good company. Prominent bardo-phobes include Tolstoy, Thomas Carlyle, and D. H. Lawrence, with George Bernard Shaw a crotchety nay-sayer. What's Polonius to them, or they to Polonius? Who cares for Ophelia? Or Gertrude, Claudius and Horatio? If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, so be it. 'Alas, poor Yorick.'

For some readers, indeed, the rest is silence. For others there will be excruciating memories of Shakespeare in the examination hall. If that's the case, then the world of *Shakespearean* is not your oyster. Who can ever be comfortable with conventional wisdom, and what thoughtful person wants to be part of an idolatrous cult?

Equally, if you question Shakespeare's authorship of the texts reproduced in the First Folio (some thirty-six plays* and two long poems), and if you believe they were written by Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, or the Earl of Oxford (even, in one theory, by Elizabeth I), then you might be advised to stand not upon the order of your going, but to go at once. You will find yourself in good company. Sigmund Freud, Mark Twain, Henry James, and Charlie

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Chaplin, together with some contemporary British actors such as Vanessa Redgrave, have all questioned Shakespeare's identity and authorship.

If, however, you stay with *Shakespearean*, in the chapters that follow I will attempt to elucidate a narrative line, based on a conjectural chronology of the plays, to achieve three principal objectives: first, I want to connect these complete works with audiences past and present, old and new. Second, my argument will strive to enlist the experience of these plays in performance to explore the secrets of literary inspiration, the magic of creativity itself. Finally, I want to vindicate the claim that Shakespeare's words and ideas are part of our shared humanity. All these themes will be animated by the catalyst of risk and originality to be found on almost every page of his *Complete Works*. This is a story, the tale of a 'book of life' that's now four hundred years old.

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> Other poets display cabinets of precious rarities, minutely finished . . . Shakespeare opens a mine which contains gold and diamonds in unexhaustible plenty, though clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities, and mingled with a mass of meaner metals.

More succinctly, Johnson declared the *Complete Works* to be a mirror to 'the manners of life'. In 1769 these, and many other, Shakespearean sentiments coalesced in a belated national celebration of Shakespeare's genius. This was the work of Johnson's friend and contemporary, David Garrick. Some five years after the bicentenary of the poet's birth, the actor led a group of bardolaters to launch a 'Shakespeare Jubilee' in Stratford. On 5 September 1769, Garrick stepped forward to declaim an appropriate verse:

> Here Nature nurs'd her darling boy,
> From whom all care and sorrow fly,
> Whose harp the Muses strung:
> From heart to heart, let joy rebound,
> Now, now, we tread the sacred ground,
> Here Shakespeare walk'd and sung!

The main Jubilee stage was an octagonal wooden amphitheatre, the Rotunda, erected nearby on the banks of the Avon, the scene of a public banquet, a costume ball (to which James Boswell came as a Corsican chief), and finally a dazzling firework display. Inevitably, the Englishness of the setting took a hand. On the second morning, it began to drizzle, and then to rain in earnest. Suddenly the 'soft-flowing Avon' threatened the Rotunda, which teemed with crowds sheltering from the downpour. Garrick would not be distracted. He delivered his Jubilee Oration in a melodramatic manner, culminating in a *coup de théâtre* where he pulled on the gloves – the very gloves! – that Shakespeare was said to have worn on stage.

By the third day of this bizarre occasion, many had fled both the weather and the bombast. Thereafter, Stratford became what it is today, the focus of a Shakespeare relics industry – gloves, mugs, sweetheart rings, bookmarks, neckties, and even pieces of 'Shakespeare's chair' (the fridge magnets came later). The *Gentleman's Magazine* published a fine engraving of the Birthplace, the house on Henley Street, but piously demurred from identifying the room in which 'Shakespeare first drew breath'.

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This was ludicrous, but influential. The buzz surrounding these antics inspired Garrick to put together *The Jubilee*, a spin-off to cash in on the publicity, recycling the festival's expensive costumes. Not coincidentally, Garrick had the perfect venue on hand, his brand-new Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, which opened its doors to the public in November 1769. Garrick had hatched *The Jubilee* during a London-to-Stratford coach trip with the painter Benjamin Wilson, and used it, shamelessly, to play to the gallery. Instead of a theatrical performance such as his much-admired *Richard III*, Garrick offered a glittering procession of nineteen 'scenes from Shakespeare', including the great actor-manager as Benedick in a tableau from *Much Ado About Nothing*. The show ended with Garrick's 'Ode to Shakespeare' and an exhilarating chorus in which, if the stage directions can be believed, 'Every character joins in the chorus &c., and the Audience applaud – Bravo, Jubilee, Shakespeare forever!'

Throughout the Augustan age, Shakespeare's characters became part of the national conversation. 'How many a time,' writes Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park,* 'have we *to be'd* and *not to be'd* in this very room.' She also describes Edmund Bertram observing: 'We all talk Shakespeare.' To which Henry Crawford, the fashionable and dangerous bachelor, responds: 'Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is part of an Englishman's constitution . . . one is intimate with him by instinct.'

2.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, three prominent Romantics – Coleridge, Keats and Hazlitt – further transformed traditional ways of reading Shakespeare, finding undreamed-of depths of psychological meaning in the 'imagination'. For the obsessive Keats, who declared himself 'very near agreeing with Hazlitt that Shakespeare is enough for us', the *Collected Works* became 'a book of life'.

Shakespeare had become a universal theme. Blake, Turner and Millais looked to Macbeth, Mercutio and Ophelia almost as obsessively as Berlioz and Verdi exploited *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*. In Britain, he became co-opted as an unofficial sponsor of the civilizing mission. Together, Shakespeare and the British Empire became the global production on which the sun would never set. Imperialism translated his most memorable characters –

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