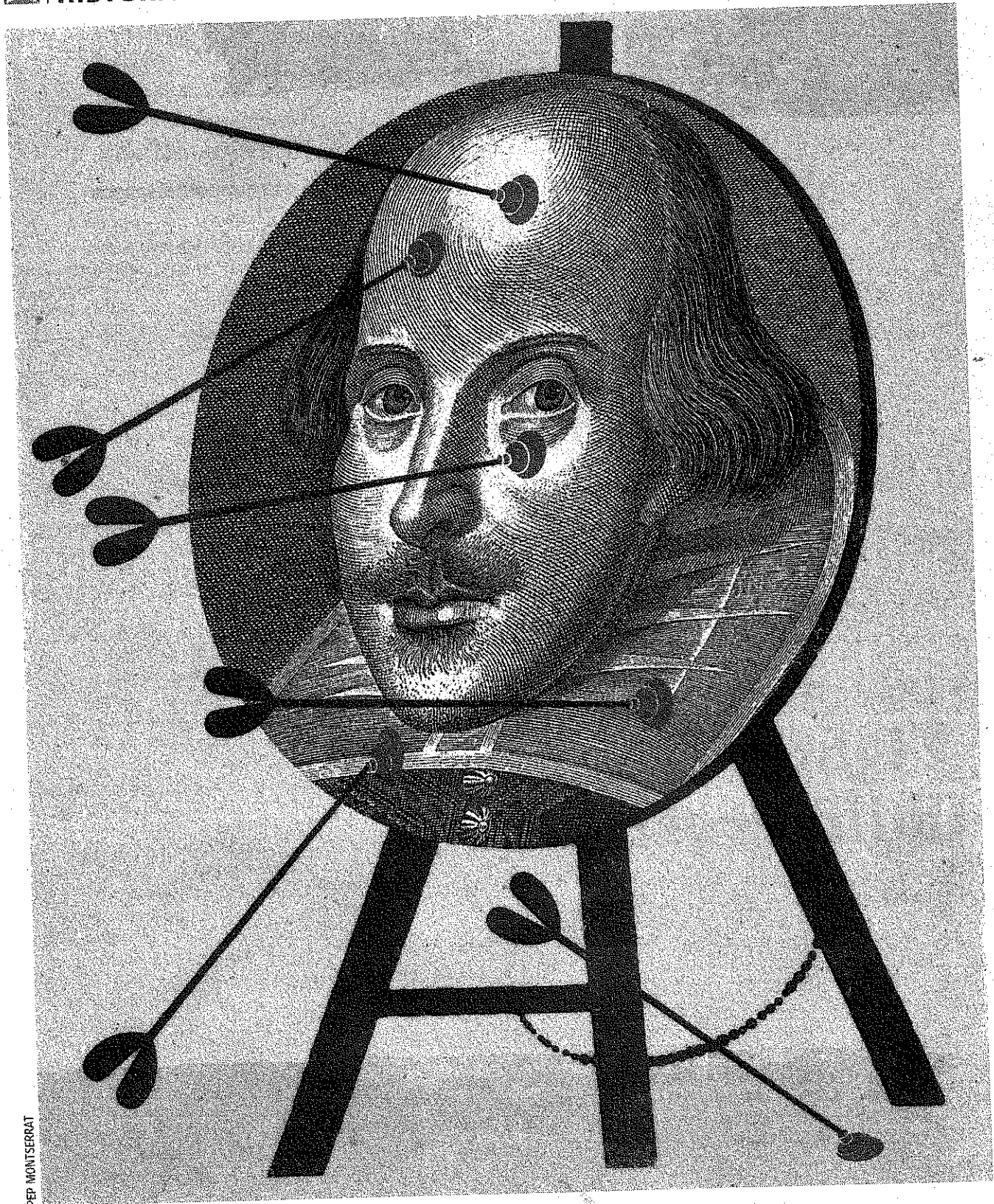


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PEP MONTERRAT

# As You Dislike It: The Anti-Bard Club

## Shakespeare died 400 years ago this week, but his famous critics live on



IN DAVID LODGE'S 1975 NOVEL "Changing Places," a group of university professors play a party game called Humiliation, competing to see who has read the fewest great works. A professor of English literature is in the lead, having declared his ignorance of Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha," when Harold Ringbaum, a man with "a pathological urge to succeed," declares that he's never read "Hamlet." The more he insists, the more the others scoff—until Ringbaum angrily swears a solemn oath to the fact, by which time everyone is stone cold sober with embarrassment.

Ringbaum's faux pas neatly sums up Shakespeare's towering presence in modern culture—underlined by the tempest of celebrations marking the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death, which falls on Saturday. His reputation exists on a plane separate from other writers. With apologies to a speech from "Richard II," Shakespeare himself has become a precious stone set in a silver sea of words.

Yet over the centuries, a surprising roster of famous writers and celebrated personages has picked quarrels with the Man from Stratford. Though complaints about the Bard have run the gamut from the moral to the artistic, one type is almost unique to him. I call it WAMS, or the What-About-Me Syndrome.

Among the first to suffer its ravages was Shakespeare's friend, fellow dramatist and eventual British poet laureate Ben Jonson. He seems never to have recovered from watching his Roman play "Sejanus His Fall" bomb while Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" became an instant hit. Three years after the Bard's death, Jonson could proclaim, "I loved the man and do honour his memory," while simultaneously dismissing his work with the words, "Shakespeare wanted [that is, lacked] art."

Two later poet laureates took it upon themselves to rescue Shakespeare from his alleged lack of artistry by writing new, improved versions of his plays. William Davenant decided that "Measure for Measure" worked much better when combined with "Much Ado About Nothing." John Dryden, reworking "Troilus and Cressida," said that someone had "to remove that heap of Rubbish, under which many excellent thoughts lay wholly bury'd."

It was "King Lear"—with Lear's madness, Gloucester's blinding and Cordelia's murder—that seemed to trouble Shakespeare's early critics the most. To safeguard English sensibilities, yet another poet laureate, Nahum Tate, offered up his talents. He gave "King Lear" a happy ending, restoring Lear to mental health and marrying Cordelia off to Edgar.

Tate's adaptation was such a crowd-pleaser that the original disappeared from the stage for more than 150 years. Americans remained wedded to happy "Lear" until Edwin Booth insisted on staging the original in 1875.

While some WAMS sufferers tried to save Shakespeare from himself, others questioned whether the Bard was worth saving at all. On Sept. 29, 1662, London diarist Samuel Pepys watched "A Midsummer

Night's Dream," "which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play." In true Pepysian style, he found solace in the dancing and "some handsome women."

Voltaire (1694-1778), who didn't share Pepys's weakness for pretty faces, denounced "Hamlet" for being so absurd one might think it "the fruit of the imagination of a drunken savage." Still, the French philosopher loved and hated Shakespeare equally, having translated his works into French (with the usual perverse meddling and "improvements").

One of the most advanced cases of WAMS belonged to Leo Tolstoy. Rereading Shakespeare in old age, the Russian writer of "War and Peace" declared that the plays made him feel "repulsion, weariness and bewilderment." In an essay published in English in 1906, Tolstoy insisted that anyone who praised "Lear" had to be delusional.

Four decades later, George Orwell wrote that Tolstoy was being "willfully blind" for reasons that had little to do with literature. Orwell couldn't help speculating whether Tolstoy's attack was merely projection. After all, he noted, the similarities between King Lear and the great Russian novelist are uncanny, from their renunciation of public life to their final flight into the countryside "accompanied only by a faithful daughter."

Tolstoy wasn't alone in suffering from a myopia induced by WAMS. President John Quincy Adams, an enemy of slavery, was nevertheless unmoved by Desdemona's death "because her passion for [Othello] is unnatural; and why is it unnatural, but because of his color?"

Like Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw took exception to Shakespeare's lack of proper moral purpose, "his complete deficiency in that highest sphere of thought." He took Shakespeare to task for being "an ordinary sort...a narrow-minded middle-class man"—an observation perfectly suited to the mind of a middle-class socialist such as Shaw.

With a similar lack of irony, Virginia Woolf complained that Shakespeare had a habit of throwing in a "volley" of words to disguise "when tension was slack," while for T.S. Eliot it was an unaccountable emphasis on mothers that made "Hamlet" an "artistic failure."

Since then, outright Shakespeare haters have largely faded from view, but WAMS still endures. The distinguished Shakespearean actor Ian McKellen surprised fans last year by telling them not to "bother" reading Shakespeare and just to see the plays staged.

Could the critics have been bullied into silence? That is certainly the view of the main character in Arthur Phillips's 2011 novel "The Tragedy of Arthur," who declares: "I have never much liked Shakespeare...I wonder if there isn't a large and shy population of tasteful readers who secretly agree with me." The current Broadway hit "Something Rotten" includes a song called "God, I Hate Shakespeare," which takes aim at the "twits" who "prattle on about his great accomplishments." Do audiences quietly agree that, as the song has it, "He's a hack"?

If the Bard showed up to mark the anniversary of his death, it's hard to say how he would answer his critics. Perhaps he would counsel modesty, reminding them that even the greatest writers are "such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

### **Tolstoy despised Shakespeare. Three poet laureates tried to rewrite him.**

# Szekspir by Any Other Name Is Still the Bard of Avon

By Andrew Dickson

Four hundred years after the death of William Shakespeare, on April 23, 1616, he remains as celebrated as ever. Festivities to commemorate the playwright's life and work are planned everywhere from Germany to Shanghai. The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., has sent a flock of First Folios—the earliest collection of Shakespeare's plays, now one of the most valuable books in history—to alight in every U.S. state.

**He died 400 years ago but lives on in dozens of languages. Wherefore art thou Lounio? In China.**

Even in Stratford-upon-Avon, the redoubtably English market town where Shakespeare was born and died, the party will have an international flavor: Rumor has it that rival deputations from Stratford, Ontario, and Stratford, New Zealand, are scheduled to attend.

This seems a fitting enough tribute to a man who is almost certainly the most translated secular author in history. But it raises a fascinating question: Is Shakespeare still Shakespeare if you're doing it in Afrikaans, or Bengali, or Zulu? Is the man whom the Polish call "Szekspir" and the Chinese "Shashibiya" even the same guy?

In the English-speaking world, the view appears to be a decisive "no." Last fall the Oregon Shakespeare Festival created a furor with its plan to commission modern-English versions of 36 plays. People descended on the festival's Facebook page to protest. "Shakespeare was a poet," one fulminated. "Translating Shakespeare is getting rid of Shakespeare." The esteemed Columbia professor James Shapiro lamented that modern

English would water down the full-flavored Bard to the linguistic equivalent of Bud Light. The argument seemed to be that Shakespeare only ever makes sense in the original—"verily's," "wherefores" and all.

I wonder: For the past five years I've been trekking the globe attempting to trace the playwright's influence on different cultures, and it has struck me repeatedly what a tiny piece of the picture English-speaking Shakespeare now is. Though the numbers are hard to verify, the British Council estimates that up to half the world's schoolchildren study Shakespeare in some form, and there are reckoned to be 10 million-plus Chinese teenagers reading scenes from "The Merchant of Venice" in Mandarin each year.

Millions more, perhaps billions more, encounter Shakespeare in everything from Bollywood spinoffs to Japanese manga. Charles and Mary Lamb's 19th-century English "Tales From Shakespeare," which put the plays into short-story form, has been translated countless times, and—though originally intended for children—remains hugely popular among readers of all ages.

Are these mere pale imitations, faint reflections of an irreducibly "authentic" original? I'd argue not. For a start, translation keeps the plays alive. While we in the United Kingdom and North America hunt through footnotes and CliffNotes, attempting to get our heads around a 400-year-old language we no longer quite comprehend, translators are free to make Shakespeare into a contemporary author who addresses local cultures and concerns.

An Urdu "Hamlet" from 1898 called "Khoon-e-Nahak" ("Unjustified Killing") has a Gertrude who is poisoned with milk rather than wine, out of respect for its Muslim context. In the 1920s the great South African politician Solomon Plaatje rendered "The Comedy of Errors" and "Julius Caesar" into Setswana as part of a campaign to prevent the indige-

nous language from disappearing. Such adjustments are a major reason the plays have become entwined with so many different cultures.

Shakespeare himself, who lodged for a time with a French family in Bishopsgate and translated from sources in Latin, ancient Greek and Italian, would surely have approved. He even had fun with the idea: "Henry V," that supposedly stirring hymn to English patriotism, includes a scene partially in French.

Of course, translation is never easy. Many languages have no obvious equivalent for iambic pentameter, and it is a brain-bending struggle to render in another tongue the intricate daisy-chains of meaning that fill even humdrum Shakespearean lines. In China, to aid pronunciation Romeo is often called Lounio, and Hamlet is

Hamleite. In several languages, the most famous monosyllables in English literature, "To be, or not to be," are impossible to translate; there is simply no way to re-create the all-important pun (the blunt "to stay alive" versus the philosophical "to exist"). The best that the great Chinese scholar Liang Shiqin could come up with was: "Do we exist or not, after death?" Apparently it doesn't sound much better in Mandarin.

Yet there are compensations. I once spent an afternoon in Berlin with a translator whose Hamlet was banned for subversiveness by the East German authorities. The job of translation was near-impossible, he sighed, fascinating and frustrating all at once. But he was particularly proud of one moment in his 1971 "Ein Sommernachtstraum" ("A Mid-

summer Night's Dream"). It came near the end of the actor in which the gang of hapless laborer performs the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, the legendary lovers whose star-crossed liaison is defeated by the wall that divides their families. The usual German translation for "the wall" is "die Wand." But this translator went for "die Mauer," which in the divided Germany of the time brought to mind a very significant Wall—the one that bisected Berlin. Even so, the performance went ahead, he told me with a grin. In translation, some things are gained as well as lost.

*Mr. Dickson is the author of "Worlds Elsewhere: Journeys Around Shakespeare's Globe," out this month from Henry Holt.*