

# Cultural Daily

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## Why Does Shakespeare Still Compel Us?

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, April 23rd, 2014

Four hundred years after his death at the age of 52, Shakespeare still intrigues, transports, mystifies, frustrates and beguiles us as no other writer, before or since. In an age where all of us want to stay young forever, W.S. seems to have found the secret. “I have immortal longings in me,” he wrote in *Antony and Cleopatra*. What about his work works this way?

Each era, and each culture, invents its own Shakespeare and grapples with this question. Over the past 50 years, he has been known as our contemporary ([Jan Kott](#)), the inventor of the modern mind ([Harold Bloom](#)), and the creator of the language we speak ([Frank Kermode](#)). Indeed, Shakespeare leaned forward to invent sounds our lips still form today – words like *addiction*, and *published* and *whirly-gig*, and phrases ranging from “all that glitters is not gold” to “wild goose chase.” He gave us, what is, to my mind, the best curse ever: “Thou whoreson Zed, thou unnecessary letter!”

One of the reasons Shakespeare’s work endures is that it is infinitely adaptable. Here are three of my favorites:

Orson Welles’s 1965 film *Chimes at Midnight*. Welles cut and pasted Falstaff’s character arc from five plays and turned it into a whole, with a great battle scene in the middle, edited like a Bach fugue. (Here’s the first reel, the rest is on YouTube.)

Czech puppet cinema artist Jiří Trnka’s 1959 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. (Here’s the beginning, the rest is on YouTube.)

*Forbidden Planet*, the 1956 MGM science-fiction cinemascope spectacular, adapted from *The Tempest*. (Here’s the trailer.)

Although his work can be interpreted in many directions, W.S. himself bedevils us as a figure of drama, and we make him a character in movies, novels and plays. [Anonymous](#) is just the latest in a line that stretches back through *Shakespeare in Love* to episodes of *Dr. Who*, Neil Gaiman’s comic *Sandman*, and Edward Bond’s play *Bingo*.

Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote in his fable *Everything and Nothing* that before or after dying, Shakespeare “found himself in the presence of God and told Him: ‘I who have been so many men in vain want to be one and myself.’ The voice of the Lord answered from a whirlwind:

‘Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one.’”

Some fictions about Shakespeare dramatize the possibility that he did not exist, or that someone else wrote his plays. This is the least interesting thing about the man or his work. Shakespeare would not have considered himself a worthy subject of drama. Writers do not merit serious consideration in his plays – they are either innocent lovers, like Orlando pinning his doggerel verses on tree-trunks in *As You Like It*, or neurotic plotters who use words as tools, as Hamlet does in the play he writes to expose his step-father’s crimes.

There is a great mystery at the heart of Shakespeare, and that mystery is the reason we keep coming back to him. But that mystery is not one of personality or authorship. The reason we keep returning to Shakespeare is because of the mysteries inherent in who we are, and how his texts reveal something of ourselves. Shakespeare remains unique at being able to unite the most cerebral, high-minded language with words that are as emotional and body-centered as you can get. How well he knows that the heart compels the head: “Go to your bosom, knock there, and ask you heart what it doth know” (*Measure for Measure*).

Those who question his authorship – or even his very existence – reveal something touching and vulnerable about all of us: that we are frightened by the possibility of knowing ourselves too well. Shakespeare has been, and is, us. Which is why his works will continue to transport us, and why we’ll never tire of venturing to their undiscovered country.

*Top image: Shakespeare by Barry Novis, posted with kind permission of the artist.*

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