Introduction. “I that please some, try all”: Shakespeare this time

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Triumph, my *Britain*, thou hast one to show,
To whom all scenes of *Europe* homage owe.

He was not of an age but for all time!

(Ben Jonson, “To the Memory of My beloved, the Author, Mr. *William Shakespear*”)¹

When Ben Jonson celebrated Shakespeare’s timeless appeal in the prefatory materials to the *First Folio* edition of the Bard’s works, he used the language of conquest. Because Shakespeare’s plays had managed to break free from the limitations of his “age,” Britain had triumphed over the rest of Europe. There’s a bit of a paradox here. The British Shakespeare prevailed over his rivals by creating works that transcended the specific time and place of their making. In creating art that represents the universal essence and experience of humankind, Shakespeare had scored a victory for Britain by erasing Britishness in his works.

In the ensuing four centuries, Shakespeare has become an almost ubiquitous presence in the cultures not just of England, America, and the West, but of the world. Given the historical fact that Shakespeare’s theater (from 1599 until its unfortunate conflagration in 1613) was presciently named the Globe, it seems particularly appropriate for us to consider the global and trans-historical reach of Shakespeare’s works not only with respect to the creation and study of theater, literature, and art, but also in relation to our changing perspectives on leadership, politics, and social justice.

Shakespeare criticism of the past 50 years or so has insistently challenged Jonson’s kind of praise. In the first place, it has questioned the very idea that any work of art can be disassociated from the specific historical circumstances—political, economic, cultural—out of which it emerges. Moreover, twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers have also critiqued the very notion of a universal humanity that transcends cultural or linguistic differences. The reality, many have claimed, is that universalizing notions of “man” or of the “human” experience have reflected the values and ideologies of Western white patriarchy. As a correlate to this, critics have also argued that claims for the “greatest” art (Shakespeare, Dante, Michelangelo, etc.) as

timeless have in reality served to canonize a narrow range of works, usually by Western white men. From this perspective, the idea of “timelessness” has functioned to reinforce the dominance in the world of patriarchal and Western values. Shakespeare, after all, was a required part of the curriculum in colonial schools in both India and South Africa. “Tri’umph, my Britain,” indeed.

It is worth pointing out, however, that at the very moment that Shakespeare scholars were rightly demystifying facile assumptions about the Bard’s supremacy, they were also reaping the professional benefits of their particular appropriations of his work. They themselves helped to inflate the Shakespeare name and industry. Indeed, whatever one may think about Jonsonian celebrations of Shakespearean exceptionalism, since Shakespeare’s death his works have continued to be performed, imitated, consulted, referenced, adapted, and appropriated across a remarkable range of disciplinary and artistic practices across the globe. In the United States, for example, Shakespeare was the intellectual backbone for the development of theater and culture from the Republic’s very inception. As James Shapiro has noted, Shakespeare was performed and referenced across the centuries in defense of a wide variety of political standpoints: Ulysses S. Grant was cast as Desdemona in a Union camp rendition of *Othello*; *Othello* was used by both abolitionists and anti-miscegenation activists (including John Quincy Adams) to support their viewpoints; and both Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth made explicit reference to Shakespeare’s works (*Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, in particular) defending their positions on secession.² In the past 50 years, the Shakespeare phenomenon has only grown. The “Globe to Globe” festival, created in tandem with the 2012 Olympics in Britain, was one sensational manifestation of his ubiquity, as theater companies across the world staged, in their native languages, their particular visions of Shakespeare’s plays, including a Maori *Troilus and Cressida*, a Hindi *Twelfth Night*, and a Japanese *Coriolanus*. From Hollywood to the BBC to Bollywood, film and television adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays have also proliferated in recent years, as have adult, young adult, and graphic novels more or less loosely based on his stories and characters. In this context, one might be tempted to sympathize with Terence Hawkes’s assessment of contemporary Shakespeare as an

International Superstar: an undeniably ‘modern dress’, shape-shifting, boundary-blurring Bard who, anchored strategically in his home town, nonetheless readily breaks those bonds, to float vacuously up and away as a force for a nebulous and undefined freedom: his stock-in trade the dispensation of gaudy pop-star favours; peace, tolerance, and love, to be pinned promiscuously to the chests of the self-applauding. This Shakespeare somehow comes to be equated, less with a firmly grounded Englishness, than with a cloudy, portable, one-size-fits-all, transatlantic Goodness.³

An International Superstar he has indeed become, and in many cases this stardom is closely linked to corporate profit. And yet, one should hesitate before acceding to this deflating skepticism. In a now notorious statement, Harold Bloom claimed some years ago that “he [Shakespeare] has become the first universal author, replacing the Bible in the secularized consciousness.”⁴ We may wish to resist Bloom’s affirmation of Shakespeare’s universality, echoing Jonson’s, and yet the comparison of his collected works to the Bible is worthy of further consideration. The “Old” and “New” Testaments have permeated and continue to permeate Western and non-Western cultures, regardless of what one thinks of these works. They have been interpreted, reinterpreted, and overinterpreted in different times and different places; they have been historicized and de-historicized; some affirm that these texts reveal universal truths, some that they do not; but they have penetrated the language(s) of believer, agnostic, and unbeliever across the globe. It is difficult, in other words, to speak and think apart from these texts, whatever inherent value we choose to assign to them.

From this perspective, Bloom’s analogy—absent his vision of one set of texts agonistically replacing another—may indeed be of use. Shakespeare’s ascent to global stardom is due to any number of factors, including the undeniable success of his plays in Elizabethan and Jacobean England; his canonization in the English literary tradition; the hegemonic drive of Western white culture manifested most clearly in British colonialism; the identification of Shakespeare with high-brow culture in the United States and other English-speaking countries; the integration of his works—to this day—in secondary schooling; the appropriation of his works by Hollywood and Broadway; and, of course, ongoing affirmations of his unique excellence as poet and playwright. But whatever the reasons, it cannot be denied that Shakespeare and his plays—the stories and especially his characters—have become a part of the “language” that increasing numbers of “us” across the globe speak, even if we’ve never read a word of his. Hamlet’s “to be or not to be”; Romeo’s and Juliet’s yearnings; Macbeth’s nihilism; Lear’s sorrows; Othello’s self-doubt; Richard III’s gleeful dastardliness. From South Africa, to Japan, to Italy, to India, to the United States, they have become shared reference points frequently accessed to define, interpret, re-interpret, or gain perspective on our own experiences. This is neither good nor bad, nor does it imply that the experiences in question are universally shared. Indeed, perhaps the very openness of Shakespeare’s plays to a multiplicity of readings and meanings may have something to do with their susceptibility to appropriation. Like the Scriptures, Shakespeare’s works have traveled through time not because they are timeless, but because they so often seem timely to particular groups at particular moments. Whatever inherent value an individual may wish

to assign to these texts, people across the globe have chosen and continue to choose to appropriate Shakespeare as part of the language they speak.

This anthology, too, is a kind of appropriation of Shakespeare, insofar as his works serve as a springboard for analyses, reflections, and critiques of contemporary leadership, politics, and culture across the globe. While not advocating Jonson's or Bloom's claims about Shakespeare's timelessness or universality, we believe that there is a heuristic value in participating in the ongoing investigations and conversations that his plays continue to stimulate. Huang and Rivlin remind us that the work of appropriation "is valuable—not for reinstating Shakespeare as some kind of universal translator—but for generating sites of discussion between otherwise strongly divergent frameworks of understanding."⁵ In this anthology, those diverse frameworks include currently polarizing debates about authoritarianism, populism, and democracy; immigration, national boundaries, and local identities; gender and race; and sexual aggression against women. All of these, in different ways, deal with the extreme pressure placed recently upon the very ideas of truth and facts. Of course, we should not look to Shakespeare's works for answers to our questions or problems. "It is precisely in revealing the limits of our truth claims," writes one critic, "that Shakespeare remains significant."⁶ But if his works can provoke constructive dialogue about the problems that haunt us today, then they can perhaps help us achieve a greater and more empathic awareness of the desires, motives, and prejudices that lead us and others to construct competing truths. This kind of awareness, of course, is fundamental to good leadership.

"THOU CAM'ST TO BITE THE WORLD": SHAKESPEARE AS PROVOCATEUR

In recent decades, it has become almost a truism in leadership studies that leadership requires—and thrives upon—storytelling.⁷ The creation of narratives is an inherently human impulse, one which defines and is defined by the civilizations out of which those narratives arise. It can hardly be surprising, then, to find that master storytellers occupy prominent positions in society, helping to further define and even transform the ways we think about ourselves, our cultures, and our leaders. Since Shakespeare has been anointed as one such master, scholars of leadership, history, and politics have frequently turned to his works, just as have creative artists and literary scholars. Our word "leader," in fact, derives from the Old English *līðan*, or "to travel." In its original meaning, a leader is a traveler who guides his followers along a shared journey. If Shakespeare is a kind of time traveler, then we may perhaps also view him as a leader who, for a host of complex and sometimes contradictory reasons, has become one important point of reference in our progress toward an always uncertain future. Albeit in vastly different contexts, we continue to

choose his stories and characters as conduits to meaning, as provocations to read ourselves. A provocation is literally a “calling forth”; it is what the best leaders do when they manage to stimulate in their followers a new or renewed sense of purpose and identity, and in so doing, to stimulate them to action that can change the world for the better. This anthology responds to Shakespeare’s provocations as calls to know ourselves and our diverse social, political, and cultural contexts more fully (though always imperfectly) and to consider what kinds of people we need as leaders to enact that knowledge constructively.

There is much more nuance that we might derive from the complexity of Shakespeare’s works than simple character studies of fictional (or fictionalized) leaders. The plays also offer critiques of social movements and policy decisions and lay claim to arguments for social justice, toleration, and citizen participation. Further, the afterlives of those works—modern films, television series, and stage productions—convey political and social perspectives that seek to reorient Shakespeare’s original language and ideas within a contemporary framework, often reshaping words and values to reflect more critically on the global contexts of the twenty-first century.

It therefore behooves scholars of leadership to take a broader approach to the vastness and heterogeneity of the Shakespearean canon; in this volume, we advocate for the many “Shakespeares” that lay claim to political and social relevance across the globe, from Japan, Kashmir, and Nigeria, to England and the United States. The “Shakespeares” we engage here may require us to consider the original contexts of Shakespeare’s England, drawing connections between the historical milieu of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and our own; other “Shakespeares” will include looser modern appropriations into film, stage, and television of the original plays and translations and modifications of text and performance into different languages and cultures. In our approach to Shakespeare’s works, we not only examine the examples offered to us by the central figures of the plays, but we also engage with the multiple discourses and meanings encoded in the texts and productions of the plays. We make use of literary analysis and historical context in order to suggest how the ideas and perspectives articulated in these works are still relevant to contemporary socio-political debates, and we use the evidence of these “Shakespeares” to provoke reflection on the nature of politics and leadership that might be undertaken by both leaders themselves and those who choose—or refuse—to follow them. In his introduction to *Presentist Shakespeares*, Terence Hawkes urges scholars not to neglect the principal reason for our engagement with compelling works of literature from the past:

We can never, finally, evade the present. And if it’s always and only the present that makes the past speak, it speaks always and only to – and about – ourselves. It follows that the first duty of a credible presentist criticism must be to acknowledge

that the questions we ask of any literary text will inevitably be shaped by our own concerns, even when those include what we call ‘the past’.⁸

In this spirit, our anthology aims—perhaps with somewhat unorthodox transparency—to engage Shakespeare with questions that reflect our urgent concerns. That said, this volume is not a manual or guide for using Shakespeare to conduct leadership training nor a key to unlock a mysterious “Shakespearean style” of leadership. Rather, we appropriate Shakespeare in order to carry on his commitment to holding, “as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature” (*Ham.* 3.2.21–2), to seeing ourselves more clearly.⁹ It is never easy to do so, and in this sense, the Bard can “bite” as he pricks us into a sometimes-painful consciousness.

We have arranged this anthology into four sections—“Performance,” “Truth,” “Resistance,” and “Freedom”—intended to highlight problems or issues of topical relevance that Shakespeare’s plays and their adaptations can help us reflect on. In the first section (“Performance”), our authors interrogate the relations between politics, rhetoric, performance, and power. Is power always “performed,” and in what ways might such performances be evaluated as constructive or toxic? In Caldwell’s reading, *Richard II* provokes us to think about the relationship between performance, leadership, and civic activism, while Farrar examines *Macbeth*’s evocation of linguistic equivocation or dissembling as relevant to our understanding of political “theater” today. Kaufman also addresses the problem of politics and performance in *Coriolanus* (and a recent film adaptation) by considering what role personal sincerity and integrity should have in establishing an affective and effective relationship with one’s followers.

In the second section (“Truth”), the chapters share a concern with the knowability and value of truth or facts in the public arena. Russell examines *Macbeth* and two recent adaptations of the play (the film *Scotland, PA* and the television series *Breaking Bad*) in the context of the often false prophecies about the American Dream promulgated by politicians, while Roden examines the truth-telling “wise fools” in *King Lear* in order to question our contemporary readiness to receive facts. Dressel develops this theme in her readings of *Othello*, Boyle’s scientific writings, and current political discourse by reminding us that truth is always mediated by language and rhetoric.

In the third section (“Resistance”), the focus will be on strategies for resisting abuses of power. For Landis, *Much Ado About Nothing* sheds light on the problem of belief posed by women’s claims of sexual aggression in the #MeToo movement. Mukhopadhyay traces how Shakespeare has been appropriated by the film *Haider* (an adaptation of *Hamlet*) to call attention to the oppression of Kashmiris by India and Pakistan, while Motoyama and Konno explain how the founding of a Shakespeare theater in provincial Japan

has served to affirm local cultural identity against the hegemonic pressures of the central government.

The chapters in the fourth section (“Freedom”) explore some ways in which Shakespeare’s works can be explicitly or implicitly associated with the dismantling of physical, mental, or cultural boundaries. The collaboratively composed *Sir Thomas More*, according to Bezio, resonates with our times in appealing to the common humanity of immigrants to England and to freedom of conscience in the face of ego-centered leadership, while Carrig calls attention to *Twelfth Night*’s interrogation of traditionally defined and restrictive conceptions of gender. Kofoworola, finally, traces translations and adaptations of Shakespeare in Nigeria as instances of liberating forms of appropriation in a post-colonial context.

There is, inevitably, significant overlap among these groupings of chapters, since none of these sections’ topics or themes can be fully considered apart from each other. However, it is our hope that they can serve as a reminder of the central and urgent questions Shakespeare’s works might inspire us to address. “Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born / To signify thou cam’st to bite the world” (3H6 5.6.53–4), claims King Henry to the future Richard III shortly before the latter stabs him.¹⁰ The line, spoken by the titular king to the future tyrant Richard III, is particularly relevant in an age when despotism and tyranny—the hallmarks of Richard III—are on the rise. We may understandably resist identifying Richard with Shakespeare, but this anthology implicitly argues that we engage with Shakespeare most productively if we imagine him as a “biting Bard” whose incisive and inciting works continue to provoke a globally diverse community of creative artists, readers, thinkers, scholars, and theater-goers who believe in making the world a better place. In this spirit, we conclude our anthology with a light-hearted, biting “dramatic epilogue” that revisits many of the collection’s principal concerns, while reminding us that Shakespeare always also meant to entertain.

NOTES

1. Ben Jonson, “To the Memory of My beloved, the Author, Mr. *William Shakespeare*,” in *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. Published According to the True Originall Copies. Unto which is Added, Seven Plays, Never Before Printed in Folio. The 4. Edition*, by William Shakespeare (London: H. Herringman, E. Brewster, and R. Bentley, 1685). Introduction title quotation taken from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (4.1.1), ed. J. H. P. Pafford (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1963).
2. James Shapiro, *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020).
3. Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2006), 19.
4. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 2.

5. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 10.
6. John J. Joughin, ed., *Philosophical Shakespeares* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.
7. See Kristin M. S. Bezio and Kimberly Yost, eds., *Leadership, Popular Culture and Social Change* (Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar, 2018); Michael Harvey, "Leadership and the Human Condition," in *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership*, ed. George R. Goethals and Georgia L. J. Sorenson, New Horizons in Leadership Studies (Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar, 2006), 39–45; Bert Alan Spector, "Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory More Fully Considered," *Leadership* 12, no. 2 (2016): 250–60; Kim Nehls, "Leadership Education: The Power of Storytelling," in *Leading in Complex Worlds*, ed. JoAnn Danelo Barbour, Gloria J. Burgess, Lena Lid-Falkman, and Robert M. McManus (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 63–77; Frank Shushok Jr. and Scott H. Moore, "Reading, Study, and Discussion of the 'Great Texts' of Literature, Philosophy, and Politics as a Complement to Contemporary Leadership Education Literature," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 3, no. 4 (2010): 71–80.
8. Grady and Hawkes, *Presentist Shakespeares*, 3.
9. Edition cited: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006).
10. Edition cited: William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI Part 3*, eds. John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Thomson Learning, 2001).

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