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Words, words, words

by Amit Majmudar

On the Bard’s four-hundred-year legacy.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE
400th Anniversary Facsimile Edition

Shakespeare’s First Folio

Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories & Tragedies, Published According to the Original Copies

British Library

Rizzoli Electa
A rule of thumb in linguistics gives any language a thousand years. At that point, linguistic drift will have made the mother language nearly incomprehensible to its descendants. That drift is inexorable, a feature of language itself, in spite of the best efforts of an Académie française or a priestly caste. That average lifespan, a millennium in the sun, accounts for slower and faster rates of change. A language is “dead” when living voices cease to reshape it.

Literary language moves more slowly. Speech patterns change rapidly, eliding syllables and switching consonants. The future can speak the same language in the same place and still sound foreign to the past. The *v* sound of medieval Church Latin was unknown to Ovid and Virgil. A few hundred years ago, English speakers consistently pronounced the -*ed* at the end of verbs in the past tense as an extra syllable, like *pronounced*.

Clips abound on Youtube of Shakespeare recited with the original pronunciations. The texts of the plays, barnacled with clarifying notes, studded here and there with half-remembered, often-quoted bits, are more comprehensible in any case than much contemporary poetry—though this may be deceptive. A great deal has changed since the Lord Chamberlain’s Men strutted and fretted their hour upon the stage. We read Shakespeare a century before the midway point of our drifting, shifting language’s lifespan. These four-hundred-year-old plays, by this time next century, will be only half-intelligible even to the few who make time for them.

It is possible—given the way technology has quickened history, the cultural shift away from long-form reading, the screen’s preference for spectacle over dialogue, estrangement from art coded as “white” or “European,” and a measurable drop in attention spans—that Shakespeare will be even less intelligible. Some snippets and phrases may survive without attribution, almost as clichés, like “wear my heart on my sleeve” or “wild-goose chase.” His stories—which, in many cases, have their own charm—may reincarnate in new forms, as they have already done in Charles Lamb’s retellings for Victorian children, or in forgettable Hollywood popularizations like *She’s the Man* or *Get Over It*.

Yet I have always felt that the story’s not the thing. *Pace* Hamlet, not even the play’s the thing. Hamlet the prince, *Hamlet* the play, the play within the play, the Ghost, Elsinore, Denmark, the great Globe itself: language was always the thing that all those other things were made of.
A blessing, then, that we are still close enough, for now, to know and love this writer in the original English. (Translations into contemporary—read: simplified—language abound, a running crib for English-class summaries.) What is to be found in abundance here is not to be found elsewhere, in spite of the writer’s having gathered disciples in every subsequent generation.

Some have shared his feel for historical forces as manifested in individuals; Oswald Spengler pored over Shakespeare’s Histories in his last years. Others have had his predilection for the over-the-top scene, absurd on the face of it but believable in the moment; the young Victor Hugo wrote a whole manifesto exalting wild-eyed Shakespeare over buttoned-up Racine. You can find witty banter in Oscar Wilde and witty monologues in George Bernard Shaw, puckish fantasy in early verse Ibsen (like Peer Gynt) and worldly groundedness in later prose Ibsen. Maybe Beckett has some of Shakespeare’s playfully dead-serious devotion to language, though certainly not his exuberance. Regardless of where you find one or two of his virtues, you never find them, as you do in Shakespeare himself, all in one place.

To praise Shakespeare is also to praise his audience. Not just the one that filled the Globe during his lifetime, but the subsequent generations, too, that have cherished and preserved him, that have commented on him and imitated him. There is a whole anthology that could be assembled of the world’s great writers and critics, for four centuries straight, thinking their way through passages or plays of Shakespeare. A second anthology could assemble four centuries of writers channeling him: from Dryden’s rewrite of Antony and Cleopatra, through Melville’s runs of blank verse in Moby-Dick, to Tom Stoppard’s comedic transfiguration of two minor speaking roles from Hamlet.

That such a profound, complex, metaphorically chockablock, downright hectic writer gained fame at all is a compliment to the audience of his day. Consider how Antony describes himself: “I,” he begins,

> who with my sword Quartered the world and o’er green Neptune’s back

With ships made cities . . .

The equator and prime meridian becoming cuts of his sword, the sea’s surface resembling the skin of the Roman sea-god’s back, that skin green so it evokes an as-yet-unsettled field, the hulls and masts of Antony’s ships resembling buildings and towers of a city that he founds there: all this in a single subordinate clause, embedded in a multi-line, enjambed verse sentence. This is one of the key paradoxes of Shakespeare: he managed to become and remain popular while writing, especially in later plays like Coriolanus, what many of us would consider “difficult” poetry.

Four hundred years might make some lines seem stranger and more difficult than they were at the time. In the twenty-fifth century, no doubt, scholars will be baffled that anyone could follow the rapid-fire allusiveness of hip-hop lyrics. But time is only one of the gulfs separating Shakespeare’s
audience from us. His metaphors, unlike hip-hop’s epigrammatic rhyme-cascades, demand leap after leap of analogical and abstract thinking.

Maybe people in the past really were better at processing complicated language. That is not out of the question. In our era, people are accustomed to seeing intricate images, and in motion at that. The Shakespearean stage was bare by comparison and had to be clothed with language. With less to distract their eyes, Shakespeare’s audience, educated and uneducated alike, relied more on their ears for the equivalent of “special effects.” What need for word-images or elaborate metaphors on the part of a screenwriter? What need to process them on the part of a twenty-first-century Netflix subscriber? Just as a loss of sight makes the sense of hearing acute and nuanced, visual overload may have caused our collective ear to atrophy from disuse.

Still, no viewer today can notice every last detail in a CGI rendering of Peter Jackson’s Minas Tirith, or any other onscreen world. Not all the data makes it through to the mind. Maybe Shakespeare’s “groundlings” regarded his language like that—they caught some of his (poetic) special effects at the first viewing, some more on the second.

Regardless of the explanation, his popularity reveals something wonderful about the populace that loved him. The most linguistically distinctive dramatic writers, in our era and country, are prose poets of the curt back-and-forth, like Aaron Sorkin or David Mamet. Theirs is often brilliant work, but, like Hemingway in fiction, they foreclose more possibilities than they exploit. They are always efficient, never effusive. The murderers in Macbeth trade a staccato volley of words, too. But Shakespeare never fetishized that one effect into a whole style. He possessed all the effects and chose among them as his material required.

It may be disheartening to some, then, that Shakespeare himself moved away from verbal high jinks toward the end of his career. The First Folio’s latest play, chronologically, was Henry VIII—a historical spectacle, heavy on fancy costumes. Real cannons were fired off. Shakespeare, much like the courtly masque writers of his day, dialed down the metaphors and descriptive language. The simple blank verse seems a reversion to an earlier phase of development, a change so striking that it reads like some early collaborative play from his desk drawer, lightly reworked for the occasion. Those cannons, with their mindless and brutal spondees, shouted down the poetry. Spectacle made the shoestring-budget razzle-dazzle of speech seem old-fashioned. The poet-playwright retired to Stratford-upon-Avon shortly afterward. At a later performance, those cannons made the Globe’s thatched roof catch fire; the stage of Shakespeare’s triumphs burned to the ground.

The astonishing number of words that Shakespeare added to the language speaks to the newness and plasticity of English at that time, particularly at the desk of a poet so many-minded. The more embryologically “early” the cells, the more pluripotential they are, capable of
differentiating into more than one structure and function. Words were like that, down to their spellings—Shakespeare’s contemporaries wrote his name eight different ways, not counting variants that appear only once.

The playwrights were feeling their way through new forms and modes, too. The Earl of Surrey’s translation of the Aeneid, published in 1557, is generally considered the first example of English blank verse; Shakespeare’s formal weapon of choice was less than a decade older than Shakespeare himself. The same year saw the publication of Tottel’s Miscellany, which gave a recently introduced Italian form, the “sonnet,” wider circulation. In this respect, Shakespeare shows a surprising similarity to contemporary American poets, most of whom work in a relatively novel form, free verse, whose present shape in English would have been unrecognizable to Shakespeare and Shelley alike. Contemporary poets are also extremely likely to study each other and their immediate predecessors. The Italian novellas that gave him some of his plots were relatively recent imports, part of the Italian cultural pollination; Matteo Bandello’s story of “Romeus and Juliet” was first translated in 1562. Shakespeare used the second edition of Holinshed’s Chronicles for plays such as Macbeth and Cymbeline, and that book came out in 1587. The plays themselves owe much to a community of collaborators and rivals, most of whom knew each other personally. Shakespeare’s tragic masterpiece of 1606 turns out to be a rewrite of someone else’s 1594 play with the same characters: The True Chronicle History of King leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella has a happy conclusion and gives us end-stopped blank-verse lines from first scene to last, though with no Fool and no Edgar subplot. Thomas Kyd bequeathed Shakespeare the template of the revenge tragedy; Christopher Marlowe demonstrated how to stage history.

Whose history? British history and the history of the classical world, two sectors that, today, interest only a small fraction of people. This is another way we are drifting away from Shakespeare. Less and less knowledge can be taken for granted. In Antony and Cleopatra, I notice, Octavian is introduced by that name only in the stage directions. Every character refers to him as “Caesar,” even Cleopatra, who elsewhere refers to her love affair with the older, recently assassinated Caesar. No distinction or clarification is made anywhere in the spoken lines, at least not in the First Folio. Theater-goers in early seventeenth-century London had to have known that Cleopatra had slept with Julius, while this Caesar, the one onstage, was the future Augustus. We are well on our way to forgetting the cultural background that made these plays watchable.

They will remain readable, though, for some time yet. The page allows plenty of time to parse the denser passages, and annotated editions can help. Yet as I learned when I ventured recently into the new facsimile reproduction of the First Folio, overseen by Adrian Edwards of the British Library and published by Rizzoli, you can still make your way through the original texts.1

Shakespeare shows a surprising similarity to contemporary American poets.
It was seven years after Shakespeare’s death, in 1623, that the strength of his oeuvre prompted the heavy investment of producing the First Folio. Complete with its author’s portrait and imported French paper, the Folio was big, pricey, deluxe, like one of today’s coffee-table books. The honor can hardly be understated: in Shakespeare’s day, no other writer of stage entertainments had ever merited such a format, which was generally reserved for the works of the theologians. (Compare the fate of a playwright like Edward Albee, the publication of whose complete works began in 2004; today, a little over seven years after his death in 2016, one scarcely hears of him.) Everyone involved in the project seems to have realized they had witnessed something rare, powerful, worth preserving.

The Folio can be hard going at first, even for a lover of Shakespeare on a third reading of a play. Typographical idiosyncrasies add up—a word like “serve” is printed as ferue—and the scene divisions often lack any indication of place. Antony and Cleopatra lacks scene divisions entirely. Over time, though, the eyes accustom to the small letters, double columns, and archaic spellings. You may start to visualize the plays in a new way, especially after the location indicators have vanished. Figures flow into a spotlighted emptiness, congregate briefly, eloquently, sometimes violently, then flow away. This is especially the case during battle scenes. I wonder whether the shuffle and hustle of scenery-switching might have been less disruptive back then, whether the plays were experienced with a minimum of pauses, as surge after surge of speech.

Most Shakespeareans would insist that these plays ought to be watched, that these voices ought to be embodied. Shakespeare himself might well have agreed. But reading Shakespeare offers its own insights into the theatrical illusion that is life. “These our actors,/ As I foretold you,” Prospero says, “were all spirits and/ Are melted into air, into thin air.” That “foretold” is telling: The Tempest, often thought to be Shakespeare’s valedictory play, comes first in the Folio. It opens the book and presides over the remainder of the plays. Prospero’s farewell speech, with its bittersweet feel for unreality and transience, leads into the rest of the comedies, with their happily concluded marriages.

So much has been written about Shakespeare over the centuries that it feels redundant to praise him. This is a writer, after all, who has been compared to God the Creator and has had a religiously inflected word, bardolatry, coined to describe the devotion he inspires. I could point out the places where his praises have been hyperbolic. His supposedly panoptic understanding of human nature, for example, lacks any striking examples of murderous, theologically motivated zealots, though that sort of human being has deformed much of modern life. His gallery of characters lacks mystics, too, estranged from the world by nothing but faith. But correcting the critical hyperbole misses the point: to generation after generation, Shakespeare has given the impression of inexhaustibility.

The closest we get to an otherworldly mystic is probably Prospero, who squanders a kingdom over his study of books of sorcery. Notice the nondenominational nature of his magical fixation. It had to be that way: religion was no less contentious in Shakespeare’s day than it is now. Elizabethan
agents hunted Catholic priests as they hunted foreign spies or traitors. (Some have speculated that Shakespeare himself was a Catholic, and that the “bare ruin’d choirs” of Sonnet 73 refer to the monasteries dissolved by Henry VIII.) That reticence about religion, though, didn’t just keep him out of trouble at the time. I suspect it kept him popular in a gradually secularizing Europe, too. Milton wanted to create a work that would hold, in his language, the place that Virgil’s and Homer’s held in theirs. In that bid for centrality, he settled on retelling a Bible story. It seemed the right choice at the time. He probably never imagined an England less than half Christian, as it is today.

Praise of Shakespeare is everywhere, but so is criticism. Voltaire considered Hamlet “gross and barbarous,” and Tolkien felt Shakespeare had debased the folklore of elves. In most cases, critiques of Shakespeare become inadvertently self-revelatory. George Bernard Shaw went about it as a satirical gadfly, tweaking Victorians for their reverence. Yet his last play—a puppet play, Shakes versus Shav, in which the two argue over which of them wrote better plays—suggests he may not have understood his own level relative to Shakespeare’s. As a valedictory play, it says as much about Shaw as The Tempest does about Shakespeare. King Lear’s highest-profile critic, the elderly Tolstoy, demonstrated his own limitations as a reader as well as the hectoring, fanatical streak he increasingly exhibited in old age.

Shakespeare reveals what occupies your mind.

Positive or negative, what you say about Shakespeare reveals what occupies your mind. If you are a writer yourself, it reveals what you seek to learn from him, and how you place your work in relationship to his. If I were a dramatist, I might have focused on how efficiently he portrays characters and tells stories. A historian might have studied how he transfigured Plutarch and Holinshed—or perhaps mapped the role of the British Empire in the global spread of Shakespeare’s reputation. Instead, because I am a practicing poet, I have focused on his use of language and his audience’s reception of it—all tinged with some anxiety about his work’s becoming incomprehensible in the future. Those choices are telling; inferences about me, mostly correct ones, can be made from them. He holds the mirror up to each one of us. Maybe that comparison with God was justifiable after all. Your reflections on Shakespeare, too, are a reflection of you.

Every year, Shakespeare sleeves himself into hundreds of actors around the world. They speak his words. Part of the secret of his longevity is how he welcomes the living to collaborate. He provides the scaffolding for the talents of directors, set designers, and performers. This was Homer’s secret in the classical world, too, as hundreds of rhapsodes bore his work into the countryside, and urban dramatists like Aeschylus turned “slices from Homer’s banquet” into tragic trilogies. That tradition died out in time. The Royal Shakespeare Company survives, for now, thanks to Arts Council England, a few charitable foundations, and—until social-media pressure forced them to part ways—British Petroleum. Not theatergoers.
Theatrical performance, albeit generously subsidized, is the more obvious way in which Shakespeare lives on. But he has also scripted, in ways direct and indirect, generations of writers after him. The oeuvres of major nineteenth-century English poets each hide at least one unstageable, unreadable blank-verse play. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats all had a go at the form. Byron and Tennyson produced more than one such dud. Many of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues can be read as excerpts from unwritten Shakespeare imitations; *In fair Verona, where we lay our scene* explains why so many of these blank-verse monologues take place in an imaginary Italy.

I myself have heard the siren song of Shakespearean emulation. I self-published my first poetry collection when I was seventeen years old, and the latter half of the book consists of two unabashedly Shakespearean blank-verse plays, complete with monologues and a sardonic character who speaks in prose. My Shakespeare knockoffs turned out far better than anything I wrote for the next five or so years.

Emulation and modeling are a part of every poet’s development, including Shakespeare’s own; an artistic failure will seem derivative, an artistic success will seem a renewal. But Shakespeare may well be uniquely dangerous as a model. The Bard’s work is simply too familiar. Everyone can see, in embarrassing detail, exactly where, how, and by how much you fall short. This may be why Shakespeare’s more successful imitators, like Schiller and Pushkin, wrote their blank-verse plays in languages other than English. It might well be wise for beginner poets to model their styles after lesser-known or foreign talents of the past, not just the old standbys. Better to write your way out from under Ariosto or John Clare than this lionized genius taught to every high-school student in the country. Learn from less-familiar geniuses, and your emulation need not suffer from constant juxtaposition. It may even come off as original.

I know I shouldn’t track his style too closely, but sometimes—guilty pleasure—I try my hand. He rights me, shocks my heart back into rhythm, enlineages my blood. Soliloquy, ventriloquy, I feel him willing me into a poet as I speak. I love this empire English, this vampire of a tongue, not for its own sake but because he spoke it. Sometimes I write blank verse because I miss him, but it’s a strengthening exercise as well: I know the massive, motive Globe that he is can make whoever touches him a fresh Antaeus of the language. Just to move the way he moves, unsheathe his blade and roll the moonlight down it—why not write like that forever? Let him prompt me from the wings until I am no less a speaking part than any player he gave lines to, life to? If faith and art would merge with what they love, my hand is happiest when it’s his glove.
Is there such a thing as the exhilaration of influence?

Imitating Shakespeare as a teenager, though, I felt no “anxiety of influence.” Is there such a thing as the exhilaration of influence? I will never forget how empowering it felt to pay him creative homage. My voice came out louder and more confident when I tried to echo him. I got the same feeling of ecstasy—of “standing outside” myself—as I did when I discovered the act of reading itself, as a boy, spirited out of my life and into the story. I look back on my teenaged apprenticeship very fondly. Writing blank-verse five-acters under the sign of the Swan of Avon: that was how I discovered my love of writing poetry. I don’t think I have ever felt freer as a writer than when I was doing those Shakespeare impressions. The French Romantics attested to something similar. They gained access to hundreds of words that had been considered inappropriate for the stage, dozens of effects that seemed ill-suited for poetic art. Shakespeare gave the early Romantics, in several countries, permission to imagine and write exuberantly.

That aspect of Shakespeare will survive, gloriously intact, through any linguistic and cultural drift. A few centuries from now, his English will be as vaguely recognizable as Chaucer’s; a few centuries after that, and Othello may well be as inscrutable in the original as Beowulf. But his example will always show us what is possible, and that is what writers at any stage of their careers can emulate. He was game to attempt anything—comedies, histories, and tragedies, as the Folio classifies them. He was game, too, to voice anyone, whether a woman dressed as a man, or a black man in love with a white woman, or a Jew among Gentiles, or a weaver with a donkey’s head, or a spirit on an island, or a king, or a fool. Yes, he was an Englishman of his century. But depending on the play, he was also a medieval Scottish porter, an ancient Roman soldier, a gentleman of Verona. We are told he acted onstage the role of the Ghost in Hamlet: the disembodied progenitor, the goad of all the action to come. Maybe that word—play—is the crucial one, in all its meanings. He never took himself too seriously. That is why puns pop up in his most intense exchanges, and why comic scenes intermingle with tragic ones. That is also why it is still impossible to pin down anything autobiographical, not even in the seemingly first-person Sonnets. He originated confessional poetry—only he wrote it from 1,223 different perspectives. He could put on a clown show at the edge of an abyss; he could make the butt of the joke say something heartbreaking enough to quench the laughter. Whatever he wrote, he deflected attention away from himself. The freest writer in all of literature, he was never limited by his identity because he was never limited to his identity. That is why reading him, and learning from him, feels like shaking free of shackles. He shows us how to find universality: become the universe.

1. Shakespeare’s First Folio: 400th Anniversary Facsimile Edition: Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories & Tragedies, Published According to the Original Copies, edited by Adrian Edwards; Rizzoli, 928 pages, $135.
Amit Majmudar’s forthcoming books include the hybrid work *Three Metamorphoses* (Orison Books) and a collection of literary essays called *The Great Game* (Acre Books).

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