

# Culture-blind Shakespeare



# Culture-blind Shakespeare:

*Multiculturalism and Diversity*

Edited by

Maryam Beyad and Ali Salami

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INTRODUCTION:  
RELOCATING THE EAST AND THE WEST  
IN SHAKESPEARE

MARYAM BEYAD AND ALI SALAMI

“All the world’s a stage” is one of the most speculative and thought-provoking lines from Shakespeare. The ambiguity of this phrase has puzzled critics and readers over the ages. Is the stage what the superficial eye sees? Do all activities take place backstage? Are we all merely enacting a role, and gradually “strut out, and heard of no more?” Are we doing and speaking what is demanded of us, not “speaking the language of the heart?” Are we puppets in the hands of the governing class? Such queries, obscurities, and enigmas surround the plays of Shakespeare, and this is exactly what has enchanted readers for generations, and in different parts of the world.

Shakespeare’s plays have survived and surpassed historical times, and broken geographical boundaries and cultural walls. The themes, characters, and plots appeal to all, hypnotizing readers both in the East and the West. He is one of the very rare writers—perhaps we would dare to say the only writer—who is “not of an age, but for all ages.” We often ask ourselves: Who was Shakespeare? Is he merely a writer who has created scores of characters, none overlapping, each unique and lifelike? Is he a sage, a philosopher, a historian, or has he deconstructed history and presented his monarchs with diverse passions, stripping them of their monarchical clothes, presenting them within the ordinary realm of everyday life?

In his plays, we are neither reading the story of a king nor of a queen; rather, we are encountering an ordinary person with the mask of a monarch; behind the mask is a person like us, full of passions, weaknesses, and drawbacks; inconsistent, indecisive, and arrogant. Reading and rereading his plays are like the rotations of prisms, a work we handmade as little children with cardboard and broken glass, every rotation giving a new spectrum. So is the case with Shakespeare. Every reading and analysis offers diverse views to individual readers; critics in all the

different ages have presented new glimpses of his plays. Even though the plays were written with critical attitudes to the Tudor and Stuart dynasties, despite alterations he made to the historical records, they were tailored to fit perfectly within the framework of the renaissance, producing a chain of responses of “pity and fear,” engaging the attention of readers, involving them emotionally to the extent that a play like *King Lear* appeals more as the story of a broken-hearted father than a failed king, a play in which the leading theme of “ingratitude” strikes a deep chord in its readers when a father raises his hands to the sky and exclaims:

You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need.  
You see me here (you gods) a poor old man,  
As full of grief as age, wretched in both!  
If it be you that stir these daughters’ hearts  
Against their father, fool me not so much  
To bear it tamely. (2.4)

We need, however, to acknowledge and appreciate the role of the translators since they are largely responsible for globalising the plays of Shakespeare, thus enabling non-English speakers to know and understand them. To quote the German writer Goethe, “I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men ... I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations ... national literature is now a rather unmeaning term, the epoch of world literature is now a rather unmeaning term, the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everywhere must strive to hasten its approach” (Damrosch 1-2).

However the popularity of Shakespeare cannot and should not be attributed only to translations or film adaptations. The dialogue, the soliloquies, and the philosophical meanings behind them are undoubtedly thought-provoking and in most instances a mirror held up to reality. We often see ourselves in these lines, since Shakespeare is addressing humanity, not any particular individual; his concern is the human and their predicament, and what they make out of their own life. Without being didactic or instructive, without being critical and offensive, he is able to bring to our attention those flaws and weaknesses that otherwise may go unnoticed, even by ourselves. How did he manage all this? His panoramic and acute world vision—sometimes cynical—and “his comprehensive soul” (in Rawson 2004, 165) perhaps made all this possible. Rather than distancing himself from his work and his characters, he actually stepped into each life like a phantom hovering around them and like an artist



putting colour and vitality and breath into the otherwise dull human portraits.

What amazes and has amazed readers through the centuries is the writer's academic background and the product of his works. Many have strived to prove that the works were not written by Shakespeare but fortunately were all proved wrong. "Whilst other dramatists can only gain attention by hyperbolic or aggravated characters ... Shakespeare approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful; the event which he represents will not happen, but if it were possible, its effects would probably be such as he has assigned ... he has not only shown human nature as it acts in real exegeses, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed" (qtd. in Tomarken 1991, 116).

This collection of essays is a tribute to the writer, poet, philosopher, and political analyst who remains alive for his readers, a living writer speaking to us, constantly warning us against the pitfalls of human folly, hypocrisy, and obsession with power. With absolute surety we can vouch that he is the messenger of peace and love, who strove towards a world devoid of war, hatred, and animosity.

Divided into three parts, this volume deals with a diversity of issues on culture and multiculturalism. In part one, titled "Shakespeare and Diversity," the contributors discuss diverse approaches to Shakespeare. For instance, in "The Once and Future Bard: Shakespeare and King Arthur," Gabriel Schenk argues that Shakespeare and Arthur are linked partly because they are natural companions—kingship, brotherhood, and power dynamics are important aspects of both the Arthurian legend and Shakespeare's works and both have important places in the British national consciousness. In addition, he argues that although Shakespeare did not write about Arthur, Victorian Arthurian writers in particular were influenced by the works of Shakespeare, using his style of language to convey a sense of "high" art and archaism, whilst retaining popular appeal.

In "The Failure of Faith in *Hamlet*," Maryam Beyad and Hossein Torkamannejad combine the reading strategies of New Critics and the philosophies of St. Augustine and Martin Luther, i.e. theologians who, in the writers' opinion, deeply affected Shakespeare's Christian mentality. They argue that Hamlet appears initially in the play as a relatively faithful and conventionally pious Christian figure, whose benign Christianity gives way to his relentless tendency to depression and cynicism. This failure of faith has largely been attributed to the malign influence of the late King's ghost. By reference to overt clues in the text, they further argue that the ghost—contrary to his own claims—has in fact returned from hell rather than purgatory. Hamlet's eventual disintegration of faith finally reaches a

climax when, at a critical moment, he chooses to spare Claudius's life while he is praying, not out of pity or Christian compassion, but out of an uncannily Mephistophelian turn of his religious beliefs.

In “Crushed with a Plot: On the Uses of Witchcraft in Shakespeare’s Dramatic Structures,” William Badger pays particular attention to the structural implications of witchcraft and cursing in *Richard III*. As though the eponymous Richard is himself responsible for shaping and giving form to the drama, “prologue-like” he tells the audience of his planned treason: “Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous / . . . To set my brother Clarence and the King / In deadly hate, the one against the other” (1.1.32–35). This speech sets the trajectory of the play and conditions the audience’s expectations for its unfolding at least until its climactic moment. For Richard, the sphere of the supernatural, of malign prophecies and witchcraft, productively connects to and overlaps with the sphere of treason. The writer demonstrates that both spheres were useful to Shakespeare for the production of plot and the proleptic anticipation of dramatic structure.

In “Much Ado in the Subplot: Vision of Ideal Marriage in *Much Ado About Nothing*,” Masoud Ghafoori and Mina Ghafoori argue that the energetic interaction between Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* is often more than not relegated to the status of a subplot and is interpreted as a sign of love between the two from the beginning of their encounter. But, if their quarrels and repartees are taken seriously, we would come to the realisation that there is no solid ground for the commonplace belief that they love each other at the beginning as well as at the end. Nevertheless, things change through the play and bring these two disdainful enemies so close together that they agree to marry at the end. The authors argue that, for Shakespeare, marriage is not just a stage in life, or the result of blind passion and love at first sight, as is the case with Hero and Claudio.

In “Language Functions in *The Tempest*,” Hossein Pirnajmuddin and Omid Amani examine language functions as theorised by Roman Jakobson in *The Tempest* in order to cast light on the process of identity fashioning of the characters, particularly Prospero, in terms of the modality of operation and the relative significance of different language functions—referential, phatic, emotive, poetic, metalingual, conative—in the text of the play. For instance, the authors discuss the significance of the dominance of the phatic function in the opening scene of the play. Also, central to their analysis is the relevance of the Jakobsonian model of linguistic communication to issues of theatricality and rhetoric as strategies of identity fashioning.

In “The Fantastic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,” Hossein Fathi and Mohsen Rezaeian argue that, in the play, Athens and the world of fairies are separate; however, they merge and influence each other in certain ways. Addressing the play in terms of Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of “the fantastic,” they argue that Todorov proposes that the fantastic, a subjective term, stands between the two literary genres of the uncanny and the marvellous, and that in this play the realm of fairies, being essentially a dream world, imprints its influence on the world of reality. Through the portrayals of contrasts between the two worlds, Shakespeare tries to present the dream state, where dreams are regarded as a dependable source of vision.

In “Ambivalence and Mimicry in *The Tempest*,” Ali Salami and Amir Riahi discuss what is possibly the last play written by the Bard, seeking to delve into the manifold binary colonial representations of Caliban produced by the white colonists. Then, by using Homi K. Bhabha's theories of “ambivalence” and “mimicry,” they indicate how the ideology of colonialism cannot successfully achieve its aim to marginalise and otherise Caliban, explicating the ambivalence embedded in colonial discourses.

In “Gender Differences in Teaching *Hamlet* to Iranian EFL Students,” Amir Ghajarieh and Zuraidah Mohd Don discuss the challenging task of teaching *Hamlet* to Iranian students and focus on its cultural elements by selecting a group of 16 English-majors, with which they discuss a list of extracts from the play.

In “The New Woman and the Oriental Tropes as Portrayed in the Iranian Film *Tardid* Based on *Hamlet*,” Shekufeh Owlia shows how Iranian director Varuzh Karim Masihi wrote and directed his version of *Hamlet* in 2009, winning the Crystal Simorgh in the category of best adapted screenplay of the year at the Fajr Film Festival. In adapting the play, he depicts contemporary Iran in transition, from traditional values to a modern society. The plot focuses on Siavash Ruzbehan, whose father is said to have committed suicide as a result of which his mother intends to marry his uncle. The protagonist, who realises how similar the recent events in his life are to Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet*, feigns madness and desperately attempts to escape his doomed fate with the help of his Armenian friend Garo and his cousin Mahtab, with whom he is in love. The contributor highlights the existing similarities and differences between this Persian adaptation and the original play, laying particular stress on the fact that some of Karim Masihi’s attempts at integrating folkloric elements into the plot’s structure render a distorted image of contemporary Persian society.

“The Bard Goes to the East: Shakespeare in Iran” is an essay by S. Habib Mousavi and Babak Rajabi, who take a trip down through history to see exactly when Shakespeare found his way into Iran. Hence, they leaf through some pages of the history of the Qajar Era, the period when the translation movement bloomed, in order to locate the persons who presented Shakespeare to the Iranians. The writers mostly focus on Naser al-Mulk, Hovannes Khan Mosā’ed and the Russian influence.

In “Iranian *Hamlet*: Cultural Elements in Mohammad Charmsheer’s Adaptation,” Zakarya Bezdoode shows how Iranian director Mohammad Charmsheer, in his extreme adaptation of *Hamlet*, endeavoured to include so many Iranian cultural elements that it is difficult to say the play is not Iranian. It is preferably called extreme, in that it has lost its Western and English background and turned into an Iranian work of art. These elements create a spectrum from language through music to some technical devices like costume, light and sound effects. The author seeks to delineate how Charmsheer brought changes to the play, thereby arguing that he Persianised *Hamlet* in two ways: emphasizing those aspects and motifs of the play that overlap Iranian culture, and projecting Iranian culture onto it.

The panoramic plethora of responses to Shakespeare by Western and Eastern critics is strongly indicative of the fact that the Bard crosses all nationalities and deserves to be called a global writer. That is why he is easily appreciated, manipulated, translated, adapted, and interpreted by everyone, everywhere.

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# **PART I**

## **SHAKESPEARE AND DIVERSITY**



# THE ONCE AND FUTURE BARD: SHAKESPEARE AND KING ARTHUR

GABRIEL SCHENK<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare is, arguably, England's greatest writer, but he does not belong to England alone; he crosses national and temporal boundaries.

Another figure who crosses national and temporal boundaries is King Arthur. Like Shakespeare, Arthur has a long-lasting appeal and is a national icon of England and Britain, but has also become popular and well known in other countries. The two figures share a level of indistinctness and mystery. Shakespeare's historicity is far more certain than Arthur's, who is a legendary figure with very little historical basis, but there is still uncertainty about many aspects of Shakespeare's life, including key facts such as his exact birth date and what he looked like. Besides, the authorship of his plays has famously been questioned and debated. As Bill Bryson writes, Shakespeare "is at once the best known and least known of figures" (2008, 7). Shakespeare, like Arthur, is an unstable identity. Arthur has been rewritten and reinterpreted by every author who has tackled his story. Similarly, Shakespeare and his work are constantly being reinterpreted with every new critical analysis or dramatic performance. In *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1990), Gary Taylor argues that Shakespeare does not have a single unified identity, but instead the idea of who Shakespeare is has been reinvented multiple times throughout history, according to cultural and literary tastes.

Some writers have related Arthur and the associated characters such as Merlin, or more broadly the canon of Arthurian literature, to Shakespeare. There are four ways that this has been done. Firstly, by treating Shakespeare as a contributor to the Arthurian legend, drawing on the scant references to Arthur and related characters found in his canonical works. Secondly, by arguing that Shakespeare was influenced by Arthurian texts even in works that seem to have no connection to the legend. Thirdly, by attributing the Arthurian play *The Birth of Merlin* to him, and fourthly, by using fiction to make Shakespeare the writer of an

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford University.

Arthurian play. This last approach has been attempted honestly—through the medium of a novel—as well as dishonestly, as forgery. This essay will outline and analyse these inter-literary approaches in order to demonstrate how far-reaching Shakespeare’s influence is—felt even in a subject matter he barely wrote about. Shakespeare crosses literary traditions as much as times and national boundaries.

The first category in which writers draw on Shakespeare’s contribution to the Arthurian legend is limited when only the canonical works are included, as they contain only two references to Arthur and two to Merlin, the magician of Arthur’s court. In *I King Henry IV* (3.1), Hotspur describes how angry Glendower makes him when he speaks at tedious length about the supernatural and of “the dreamer Merlin and his prophecies.” Here, Merlin exemplifies what Hotspur dislikes about Glendower—they are comparable because both are prophetic Welsh magicians. Merlin’s inclusion suggests that he was a reasonably well-known example for Shakespeare and his audience. Merlin is also referenced in *King Lear* (3.2) when the Fool makes a prophecy about Britain descending into chaos, partly based on similar lines from “Merlin’s Prophecy” in George Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesie*.<sup>1</sup> The fool ends his soliloquy by saying, “[t]his prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time.” Again, Merlin is only used as an example of a prophesier, and Shakespeare does not explore the character or any element from the legend in his reference, besides stating that Merlin gives prophecies. These two mentions of Merlin are still enough to warrant Shakespeare an entry in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia* (1996), however, in which J. Paul McRoberts cites the lines as evidence for an “Arthurian influence on Shakespeare” (416).

McRoberts does not cite Shakespeare’s reference to Arthur. The first of these references is found in *Henry IV* (2.4.32–3), when Falstaff sings two lines, “[w]hen Arthur first in court ... And was a worthy king,” quoted from a ballad about Arthur and Lancelot, composed shortly before Shakespeare’s play was written in 1595. The lines are comically interrupted by an instruction to empty a pot of urine and this context suggests that Arthur, or at least the ballad’s lines about him, is at best trivial, and at worst only fit for the toilet. The second reference to Arthur is given in a more elevated context. In *Henry V* (2.3), a hostess remarks that the recently deceased Falstaff is “not in hell: he’s in Arthur’s / Bosom, if ever man went to Arthur’s bosom.” The hostess is either misquoting or deliberately altering the image of the Bosom of Abraham, referring to a

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<sup>1</sup> This was first noted by the English philologist Walter Skeat (1896).



place of comfort in the afterlife from Judeo-Christian scripture.<sup>1</sup> Arthur's Bosom suggests an earthly resting place for Falstaff that is in contrast to the overtly religious Abraham's, and this difference makes the location appropriate for the vain, fat character.

The Hostess's remark—like so many other lines from Shakespeare's works—has a long afterlife. In David Jones's modernist poem *In Parenthesis* (1937), a Welsh character killed in the trenches of the First World War is said to sleep "in Arthur's lap," and Jones's note cites Shakespeare as the source (Jones 2010, 155, 220). One of Jones's aims in *In Parenthesis* was to combine different literary sources in one complex narrative. Used here, Shakespeare's words bring Welsh and English literary strands together—Jones primarily draws on Welsh sources for his depictions of Arthur, but by using Shakespeare, Jones combines an English playwright with a figure from Welsh legend comforting a Welsh soldier in death.

Another writer, T.H. White, uses the line to bring Shakespeare into the Arthurian literary tradition. In White's *The Book of Merlyn* (1941, published 1977), the line is quoted in an overview of Arthur's long-lasting cultural fame. Shakespeare is included in a list of "reliable witnesses" who write about Arthur's final resting place, along with Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, and Tennyson (White 1996, 810). Falstaff going to Arthur's rather than Abraham's bosom is, for White, Shakespeare's "contribution" to the legend (811). The company White puts Shakespeare in is revealing. Whilst Spenser and Tennyson both wrote long Arthurian works, Chaucer, Milton, and Wordsworth barely wrote about Arthur at all, although the last two poets had intended to write epic treatments of the legend.<sup>2</sup> In citing writers like Shakespeare who are the cornerstones of the English literary canon, White makes the Arthurian legend seem more important and integral to English culture than it might otherwise if he had only cited Spenser and Tennyson. The fact that Shakespeare and other writers only mention Arthur briefly does not matter. White is essentially "name dropping" Shakespeare in order to elevate his subject.

The second category consists of writers who connect Shakespeare and Arthur together by arguing that Shakespeare was influenced by Arthurian writings in his work. The earliest example of such a writer is, probably, the folklorist Alfred Nutt, who in 1900 argued that Shakespeare is indebted to Arthurian romances in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "It is evident," writes Nutt, "that Shakespeare derived both the idea of a fairy

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<sup>1</sup> See Luke (xvi, 22–3).

<sup>2</sup> See Taylor (1996, 36).

realm reproducing the external aspect of a medieval court, and also the name of his fairy king from medieval romance, that is, from the Arthurian cycle” (1990, 11). The link to Arthur is tenuously based on the association between Arthur and the fairy world of medieval romance, rather than on anything unique to the Arthurian legend that is used in *Midsummer*.

A later academic, A. Kent Hieatt, argues that Shakespeare was influenced by Arthurian literature in a more direct way; specifically, by the account of Arthur’s military victories against the Roman empire, and subsequent rejection of Roman rule in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* (1485), which Hieatt believes Shakespeare “may have been reacting against” when he wrote *Cymbeline*, in which King Cymbeline achieves military victories against Rome but chooses to accept Roman rule (1988, 176). In addition, Hieatt argues that Spenser unfavourably compares Cymbeline’s subservience to Rome with Arthur’s conquering of it, and supposes that Shakespeare may have wanted to reverse this preference so that Cymbeline’s approach is favoured over Arthur’s. The last bit of evidence Hieatt uses is that both Arthur and Cymbeline deal with Roman authorities called Lucius (Emperor Lucius for Arthur; General Lucius for Cymbeline), and that this name is not mentioned in Shakespeare’s recognised sources is either a coincidence or suggests that he took it from Malory. Hieatt admits that his argument “needs further confirmation,” and there is no evidence that Shakespeare had even read Malory (189). But his theory is nevertheless valuable for attempting to link Shakespeare to the Arthurian legend in a more substantial way than other writers such as Nutt and White have managed.

Shakespeare’s contribution to the Arthurian legend would be dramatically increased if he wrote or co-wrote *The Birth of Merlin*, an Arthurian play from the seventeenth century, and those who argue to that end belong to this essay’s third category of approaches to Arthur and Shakespeare. The plot of *Merlin* follows three separate strands: matters at court, involving a war between the Britons and the Saxons; concerns about marriage for a nobleman’s two daughters; and a clown’s comedic quest to find the father of his sister’s baby. The play’s link to the Arthurian legend emerges towards the end when Merlin is born as a fully formed, bearded adult. Arthur himself enters the stage for Merlin’s concluding speech as an apparition from the future, and Merlin prophesies that Arthur will be a famously glorious king.

When the play was published in 1662, it had Shakespeare’s and William Rowley’s names on the title page, but it was only performed for the first time in 1622, when Rowley was still alive but six years after Shakespeare had died. By the time it was attributed to Shakespeare, he had

been dead for forty-eight years. This fact alone makes it doubtful that Shakespeare did collaborate with Rowley on the play, unlike the product of another possible collaboration, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which was performed during Shakespeare's life and is generally considered to be written in part by him. In the case of *Merlin*, his name may have been added to the title page for commercial reasons only, but this is only one possible theory—early theatrical historians did not question Shakespeare's authorship of the play, and a small number of recent critics argue that the title page attribution is genuine. Mark Dominik's 1991 study of the play argues that it is probably "about four parts Shakespeare diluted with five or six parts Rowley," and the "internal evidence" of the play—plot, language, and style—points to a collaboration, albeit a collaboration in which "the two writers are merged together in a hybrid form" (9). Dominik is almost alone in arguing for Shakespeare's involvement in the play, however, and his argument, whilst detailed, is flawed. As Joanna Udall writes, Dominik "falls into the trap of assuming that insignificant parallels of theme and expression, when collected together, amount to proof of common authorship," and "he does not apply the negative test by checking his findings against those from other plays" (Udall 1991, 29).

Even if we do not think that Shakespeare was one of the authors of *Merlin*, the existence of the play at least demonstrates an interest in dramatizing the Arthurian legend in a period close to Shakespeare's life. In fact, at least five Arthurian plays were performed in Shakespeare's time along with nearly sixty other Arthurian texts, some republished but most completely new (Nastali and Boardman 2004, 19–31). The figure of Arthur had, therefore, cultural relevance in this period. The figure also had political weight during James's reign—the king referred to himself as a new Arthur, intending to unite the whole of Britain like Arthur in some versions of the legend, and this symbolic comparison between James and Arthur was made by other as well (Udall 1991, 90–7). Arthur was not as popular a figure as he would become in the nineteenth century, but he was far from obscure. There were, furthermore, many available texts to base an Arthurian play on, including Shakespeare's primary source for his historical plays, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which contains a section on Arthur's reign.

Although there is controversy regarding Shakespeare's involvement in *Merlin*, the possibility that Shakespeare *could* have written an Arthurian play is not controversial at all. In 1795, William Ireland attempted to take advantage of the possibility that Shakespeare could have written about the Arthurian legend by producing a play, *Vortigern and Rowena*, claiming it was a newly discovered Shakespearian work. The play is not about Arthur

or his court, but it does feature Arthur's predecessors, as well as his father Uther Pendragon, drawn from Holinshed and Geoffrey of Monmouth. Ireland's claims were met with early scepticism, and the play was quickly exposed as a forgery, but the idea of Shakespeare writing an Arthurian play did not fade away, and more recent writers have explored this idea in fiction. These writers belong to the fourth category analysed in this essay.

Philip R. Craig's *The Woman Who Walked into the Sea* (1991) features two academics who have discovered a new Shakespeare play about King Arthur. The play is incidental to the main plot of the novel, which is about the murder of one of the scholars, and the protagonist's quest to find the killer, but there is some discussion about the significance of such a play early in the novel. As one character remarks, the discovery of such a play makes sense, as "for the last thousand years everybody and his dog, except Shakespeare, has written about King Arthur. Shakespeare wrote about Romans and Italians and about Scotsmen and Lear and the War of the Roses and about this and that, but never about Arthur. I've always wondered why not" (10). The protagonist searches for other links between Shakespeare and Arthur, finding the two references to Merlin from *Henry IV* and *King Lear*, as well as a reference to *The Birth of Merlin*. He leaves doubting "whether Shakespeare wrote about anyone in Arthur's court *but* Merlin" (42). Strangely, he does not come across the references to Arthur in *Henry IV* and *Henry V*; it is likely that the author did not know about them. The decision to make the lost Shakespearean play specifically about Arthur may, therefore, simply be motivated by a feeling that Shakespeare *should* have written about Arthur, considering how important he is in British legend.

Craig does not explore the idea of a Shakespearean play about Arthur in detail. But in the same year the novel was published, Westmont College in Montecito staged a play about Arthur with dialogue constructed entirely from quotations from Shakespeare's plays. For the writer John W. Sider, the Arthurian legend was "the biggest single omission of traditional materials in Shakespeare," and by re-cutting old dialogue he could fix this apparent omission as authentically as possible, in a sense collaborating with Shakespeare to produce something new.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Phillips is another writer who created an Arthurian play by Shakespeare. Unlike Sider, Phillips did not use lines from Shakespeare's previous work, but instead tried to imitate the playwright's style as accurately as possible. The play is called *The Tragedy of Arthur* and was published at the end of the 2011 meta-fictional novel of the same name.

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<sup>1</sup> See Brandes (1991).

The novel takes the form of a fake memoir about the author's relationship to his father and twin-sister Dana, given as an introduction to the play. In the memoir, Phillips believes that the play was forged by his father, although Dana insists that it really is by Shakespeare, and that the novel is inconclusive regarding the play's authenticity. The reality outside the novel is that the play, like the memoir, is entirely fictional, although convincingly written by Phillips in the style of one of Shakespeare's early historical plays.

Phillips may have based his fake Shakespearian play on Arthur because, like Craig, he identified a gap in Shakespeare's list of subjects. Phillips draws from the account of Arthur in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and his *Tragedy of Arthur* fits naturally alongside *Lear* and *Cymbeline* as a pseudo-historical account of an ancient British king. He may also have been thinking of Ireland's *Vortigern* forgery, as well as the controversy surrounding *The Birth of Merlin*, when choosing a suitable theme for a play with an uncertain link to Shakespeare. Claire M. Busse speculates that Phillips chose Arthur simply because Arthur and Shakespeare fit together as fellow cultural icons, each with uncertain historicity, but she concludes that Shakespeare is "the real interest" in the novel (2012, 109). It is certainly true that Phillips is primarily focused on dissecting Shakespeare's mythical status as the greatest writer in the English language, but that does not mean that he is uninterested in the figure of Arthur, and how both Arthur and Shakespeare are not just figures to be written *about*, but can be written *through* in order to understand ourselves and our concepts of humanity.

One of the ideas that Phillips explores is the notion that art can imitate life, and vice versa. In every draft of the novel, Phillips says, the play always came first, so that he could write the book chronologically—as the memoir is about finding the lost play, it makes sense to have written the play first.<sup>1</sup> Starting with the play also meant that Phillips could explore some of the same ideas raised by his version of Shakespeare in the play, so that the lives of the characters in the supposedly real memoir could mirror the lives of the fictional characters in the play. The similarities within the two forms are highlighted by Phillips early in the memoir in a section where he outlines a section of the play which mirrors plot points in the memoir:

If my father did not distort our family life to forge this play, I am left with the uncomfortable possibility that we have lived a distorted version of

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<sup>1</sup> See Law (2011).

Shakespeare's imagination, which, ridiculously enough, is what one Shakespearologist claims: we are all the Bard's inventions. (60)

This "Shakespearologist" is Harold Bloom, who argues in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998) that many of Shakespeare's characters have inward, psychologically complex personalities that have formed our modern conception of what it is to be human. Later on, Phillips calls Bloom's thesis "maximalist and insane" (2011, 117), but the reception of Arthur's character in the memoir does suggest at least some level of support for Bloom's idea. For Phillips, Shakespeare may not have invented us, but his characters, including (in this case) Arthur, enable us to think about ourselves. As Phillips tells Dana in the memoir, "Shakespeare was the greatest creator of Rorschach tests in history," because our interpretations of his characters tell us more about ourselves than they do about the writer's intentions (94). Phillips's interpretation of Arthur's character is that he has "bipolar disorder," a modern diagnosis that, another character points out, would not have occurred to Shakespeare or his contemporaries: "they would have called him excessively humorous," and contemporary audiences would probably have focused on how Arthur was a "failed king" instead (190–1). Both readings emphasise Arthur's personal characteristics over his actions—whether a psychological evaluation or a comment on his ability to fulfil his role as king—as if Arthur were a real person who could exemplify human conditions for us.

Arthur also encourages Phillips to think about human behaviour in a way that closely relates to his own situation. The memoir spans a version of Phillips's life from childhood to the time of publication, and in one early section, Phillips, who is fifteen, is beaten up by school bullies. His sister, Dana, consoles him by conflating Arthur's difficulties in the play with Arthur Phillips's own difficulties in his life. "You don't know war," she says. "Here's what you know: girls, school, [and] getting into trouble" (27). This description is supposed to explain the character of Shakespeare's Arthur, but could of course apply to either Arthur, suggesting that the King Arthur of Shakespeare's play is fundamentally the same as the Arthur Phillips of the memoir. In addition, Dana believes that Shakespeare's Arthur can model the behaviour of her own Arthur: she recites Arthur's rallying war speech from the play and tells her brother, "You could do that ... You could figure out how to be a hero when you have to" (28).

Arthur is, furthermore, an ideal figure to think through ideas about personality and wider human conditions with. Some medieval writers of French romances and Welsh hagiographies used Arthur as the example of a flawed king and petty human, only to be subdued by a saint's power,

thereby reinforcing ecclesiastical authority over secular rule. Writers from the mid nineteenth century onwards have used Arthur to think about an increasingly rich array of topics related to the human condition. For Victorian poets Alfred Lord Tennyson and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Arthur could exemplify ideal manhood and heroism, whilst the early twentieth-century poet E. A. Robinson used Arthur to explore the nature of human madness and bad leadership, while the later twentieth-century novelist T. H. White used Arthur to think through ideas about why humans go to war. The idea of Shakespeare writing about Arthur makes sense, therefore; not only because Arthur is an important part of British legend whose absence is notable in Shakespeare's body of historical plays, but also because Arthur has so often been used to think through other ideas, and (as Phillips's novel illustrates) this makes Arthur a natural addition to Shakespeare's cast of characters, who are also often used to think through ideas about human identity.

Phillips's *Tragedy of Arthur* synthesises Arthur and Shakespeare by exploring what an Arthurian play by Shakespeare would look like, as well as how it might be read, rather than simply mentioning the possibility of such a play, or trying to make Shakespeare a contributor to the Arthurian legend through tenuous links to his canonical works. The other writers discussed in this essay have not engaged with the idea of a link between Shakespeare and the Arthurian legend as fully as Phillips, but they nevertheless provide some insight into the two figures. Some writers, such as T.H. White and David Jones, use Shakespeare to incorporate Arthur into wider literary and cultural traditions. Academics such as Dominik, Nutt, and Hieatt argue that Shakespeare was to some extent influenced by Arthurian literature, and although their claims are debatable, their work demonstrates at least the genuine possibility that Shakespeare did refer to elements of the Arthurian legend in his writing.

The influence has certainly worked the other way, particularly in Arthurian stage plays. The archaic diction of an Arthurian pantomime from 1863, for example, is closer to Shakespeare's language than Malory's, and in the script *Merlin* almost exactly repeats the line of the Second Witch in *Macbeth*.<sup>1</sup> Henry Irving's production of *King Arthur* from 1895 also draws on Shakespeare in its dialogue; the speech in which Guinevere urges a knight to "put up thy sword" recalls *Othello* as well as the King James Bible, and the villainous Mordred is partly modelled on Shakespeare's Iago. He implies that Guinevere knew of Lancelot's secret

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<sup>1</sup> "[T]he pricking of my thumbs / Informs me something human this way comes": Bough (1.1., 6). In *Macbeth* the line is "[b]y the pricking of my thumbs, / Something wicked this way comes" (4.1).

love, but, when asked by Arthur to elaborate, he replies evasively “I’ll not answer that,” giving a similar answer to Iago after implying that Desdemona has been unfaithful.<sup>1</sup> The Shakespeare-style language effectively conveys a sense of antiquity, but it is not so old or so alien to the stage that it is hard to follow for most audiences, as Malory’s language may have been.

We are in danger of making too much from too little if we speculate about why Shakespeare did not write more extensively on the Arthurian legend, assuming that *The Birth of Merlin* is falsely attributed to him. It may be that he felt the subject had been comprehensively written about by Malory and other writers and that he had nothing more to add. It may be that he did not feel he needed to write about Arthur; the main themes of most versions of the legend—kingship, betrayal, brotherhood, family bonds—are, after all, explored in detail in his other plays. From his references to Arthur in *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, we may even surmise that Shakespeare thought the Arthurian legend was trivial and unworthy of serious attention. We might also guess that he was more interested in Merlin than Arthur. These are only guesses and possibilities, however. What is clearer is that writers have returned to the idea that Shakespeare and the Arthurian legend are, or should be, or could be, linked together—not only because they are two British icons that make an appealing couple for nationalistic and cultural reasons, but also because, as Arthur Phillips’s work demonstrates, they both have the potential to teach us about ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Carr (III. 1, 48). Compare to Shakespeare, *Othello*, when Iago implies that Desdemona has been unfaithful: “OTHELLO: By heaven, I’ll know thy thoughts. / IAGO: You cannot . . . (3.3.11. 183–4). Carr, (IV. 3, 63): Othello: “keep up your bright swords” (1.2.1. 60): “[t]hen said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword” (Matthew 26:52).



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*KING LEAR:*  
TRAGEDY OF A DUBIOUS POST-  
REFORMATION EPISTEMOLOGY

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**Introduction**

*In answer, the news of the Gospel is that extraordinary things happen ...  
Lear goes berserk on a heath but comes out of it for a few brief hours every  
inch a king.*

—Frederick Buechner

The above quotation is from a book titled *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* by Frederick Buechner published in 1977. As it may reflect, it is a struggle to give a new reading of the Gospel by analysing it on the basis of literary criteria and generic divisions. It may be said that it draws attention to new issues about the nature of the Gospel and how a the fundamental ethical Christian notion of redemption through life and death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ can be expanded or, in a broader sense, can be applied to that found in the so-called secular works of literature produced at the time of Renaissance. This illuminates one's struggle to reach truth through the occurrence of something miraculous, or better to say an epiphany, that happens to them only after adopting a new epistemological viewpoint.

In that sense, one like King Lear, as the quotation asserts, can be interpreted as a figure who is successful in surpassing misconceptions and doubts and finally in becoming a true king, or in religious terms the emblem of divine truth; a figure whose inwardness of character, scepticism and improper cognitive criteria at early stages in the play

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represent in the best way the age of Shakespeare and the conflicts he had in bringing Gospel and Law into reconciliation. This also reflects on the uncertainty of the degree to which one could be successful in adopting the proper epistemological tools that would aid them in coming up with the existing paradoxes in the reconciliation of the two.

But what were those conflicts mentioned above? How could such a sudden shift take place in case of the epistemological concerns of the age? And why can a tragedy like *King Lear* be considered as grounds for dealing with such conflicts and their consequences? The answer to all these questions seems to lie in the fact that Shakespeare was born in the age of religious controversies; and the debates revolve around the religious issues coming into being as a result of the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism at that time. The way they affected all aspects of the lives of English people by questioning fundamental things can help to provide a comprehensive answer. In fact, the age was so obsessed with the Reformist movements that, at many points, radical deviations from traditional Christianity resulted in the formation of unbridgeable phenomenological and ethical gaps, which doubled the feeling of confusion and impasse. It was under such conditions that Shakespeare was brought up and, according to *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* (86), his non-conformist parents and their sympathy toward Catholic values, and the way they were treated by the new majority, must have affected him and his new system of belief. This can be felt in his tragedies, especially *King Lear*, in an oblique manner when the audience will find a sense of uncertainty in approaching matters (88) and also greater tolerance in dealing with the so-called treachery of the old Faith.

Yet, what Shakespeare does in *King Lear* is much more complicated than it may appear at first glance, and it needs much study to reveal the artistic and theatrical hidden aspects that are only significant when pondered historically and read in relation to the conflicts mentioned above. To be more specific, Shakespeare is able to manipulate the available historical materials in a quite innovative manner so as to represent the complexity of the new post-Reformation world and also to fulfil the demand for depicting how, in their present lives, the English people were to reshape their epistemology to enable themselves to deal successfully with "nature," which seems to have been reborn because of the ethical and religious matters in transition, the strange new world and the "opacity of the other" people (Curran and Kearney 2012, 362). But how does Shakespeare manipulate his historical materials so as to provide his audience with a panoramic view? Undoubtedly, to do so he needs to put aside pre-assumptions, or better to say any religious bias, and also find

new theatrical techniques and strategies that would in the best way represent the success or the tragic failure of his characters in grasping the true epistemological tool.

The most important thing Shakespeare does to fulfil this is adding a subplot to the story of the pagan *King Lear* of England, who reigned some eight centuries before Christ, which he took from Holinshed's *Chronicle* and the play *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his Three Daughters, Gonerill, Ragan, and Cordella*, produced by an anonymous Catholic playwright in 1595. The subplot, very close to what Sidney records in his *Arcadia*, is the story of Gloucester and his two sons Edgar and Edmund. Linked to the main plot, this subplot enhances the tragic effect of the whole play and is in fact a device in the hands of Shakespeare to deal with the contemporary concerns of his society in a more effective manner. As a matter of fact, such a complex plot blends the pagan context of the main historical story with the Catholic and Protestant references provided in the different points of the play by Shakespeare, and makes for a synthesis that results in the formation of the totality of *King Lear* as a tragedy depicting the dubious post-Reformation epistemology prevalent in English society. In order to focus on the totality of this tragedy with such a target, it seems necessary to focus on the way the pagans, Catholics and Protestants are blended, and Shakespeare's genius in taking advantage of them.

It can be said that the pre-Christian context of the play serves as the basis through which Shakespeare succeeds in creating a theatrical past, in which the present time for his contemporary audience is the future for the characters (Munro 2011, 104). This temporal distance is what helps Shakespeare in the first instance to record everything in a rather objective manner and to suspend every assumption that the audience may have about the ethical motifs or the logic of the characters in dealing with the tragic things they face. In this context, no Christian issue or belief, whether Catholic or Protestant, can be taken as what controls the characters and their actions. So, through this strategy, Shakespeare reduces the probability of hasty judgments by the audience about the characters' motifs, and this will consequently renew their sense of perception as they find it necessary to look for a new and more valid epistemology to justify the way the characters think and act, and what brings about their tragic downfalls. Yet, when the audience starts analysing the characters during the play, it will be revealed that they must go beyond the pagan basis—or, better to say, the theatrical appearance—crafted by Shakespeare, as the whole thing on the stage comments indirectly on both the Catholic and Protestant systems of belief in an objective manner. They must also be

approached in a new light so as to avoid any tragic flaw in the present day—the context of post-Reformation England—to grasp a more panoramic view of the truth. How some of the most important pagan references in the play are manipulated by the playwright to comment on the Catholic and Protestant beliefs, so as to create the necessary synthesis in the mind of the audience, will be discussed.

The issue of “nature” has been discussed by many critics in the case of the pagan context in *King Lear* and the way Shakespeare reads it in relation to Christianity. There are many references to this notion in the play. For example, at the beginning, Edmund addresses “goddess Nature” and asks for help (1.2.1), and there is also much emphasis on the natural order of the universe and how the unnatural weather that beats Lear and his madness is the outcome of the unnatural things done by Goneril and Regan. According to Peter R. Moore, in order to understand the meaning of “nature” in this play, one should have in mind that it signifies two different things: “both humanity’s sinful state of nature after the Fall, and also God’s law of nature,” which Edmund’s “goddess nature” with its pagan connotations seems to have opposed (2006, 175). Based on this quotation, a kind of paradox emerges—why does Shakespeare speak about the pagan “goddess nature” that stands in opposition to Christian God’s law of nature and order in the play and put no distance between the pagan and the Christian? It is because he wants to emphasise the how one, whether a Catholic or Protestant, and their unnatural or immoral behaviour in life and adoption of a wrong conduct according to an imperfect ethical and epistemological tool, can lead to misinterpretation as well as misconception. In this sense, it is Edmund’s mistaken understanding of the universal or cosmic order and laws that forces him to behave in that manner. In the same way, Lear’s misunderstanding of the natural order and mechanism of the divine truth and his improper criteria for judging his three daughters, opposing God’s justice, benevolence and wisdom, bring about all the chaos and his madness. As a matter of fact, his madness as well as the storm at the climax of the play are quite symbolic and, by highlighting them, Shakespeare says that when a person’s cognitive tools are not powerful enough to give them true knowledge of both the inside and the outside world all orders will be shattered in their eyes and they enter a state of psychic imbalance or madness.

Based on what was discussed above, it seems necessary to elaborate more on the issue of madness and the way Shakespeare relates it to the issue of religion and epistemology, so as to construct a cluster of meanings that portray what he had in mind. In fact, what makes Lear mad is the “ingratitude of his daughters,” which is “heightened to cosmic proportions” in