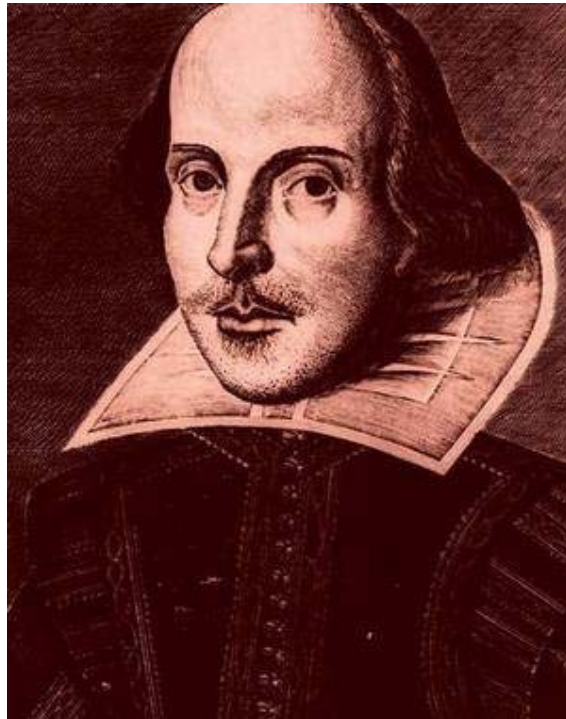


**The remarkable thing about Shakespeare is that he really is very good, in spite of all the people who say he is very good.**

**--Robert Graves**



[Google Shakespeare](#) is a very cool site where you can search all his works for words, quotes, etc.

OTHELLO by William Shakespeare

<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/s>

If you're Australian, perhaps you know why I have a sudden renewed interest in this play. If you're not, I'll tell you. The first Aboriginal actor to ever play the part of the Moor is coming soon. That's a compelling story in itself, and it made me want to read the original, which I'd never done before.

So I fell into the role of uppity redneck, and aren't we the worst kind, by reading the text in its original form without footnotes. Note how I played into a racist stereotype there, but with far less subtlety or mastery than the Bard would have used.

Of course I didn't understand everything I read. But I understood enough. Shakespeare always knew the difference between drama and melodrama, and that

holding an audience's rapt attention had to be his primary goal as he spoke his words on the stage night after night. So he never wasted words.

We remember "to be or not to be," for example, partially because it's less than a page. I taught it to a parrot who wouldn't know a fardle if it bit him on the tail feathers. Hit your mark and move on. Leave the audience stunned but not browbeaten. Make them think and enjoy the thinking.

The themes here are the usual Shakespearean themes. What emotions drive us, why should they, why should they not, what is the measure of a person. Some horrible jealousy and self-doubt. A bit of racism, obviously, since Othello is a blackfella in a white world.

There are also a large number of passages in this play where the language just gave me goose bumps. Or some other metaphor more worthy which I simply can't think of. Damn, what that man did with words! There's nobody better, which shouldn't come as much of a surprise when you consider how long his writing has endured.

When I put on my teacher hat, I'm aware that many students think nobody really loves Shakespeare, but we're just being all arty because Shakespeare was quite the intellectual. Yes, he was conversant in the philosophical plane, but in OTHELLO, he refers to sex as making the beast with two backs. He was "from the wrong side of the tracks," you might say. It's why his greatness pissed off the elite which modern students mistakenly think he belonged to. We're not being arty here. We're being human.

So yeah, to put it another way, he knew about the various and sundry forms of prejudice that exist, and that's it's not all black and white, and that I'd choose a phrase like "black and white" because Othello's black and everybody else in the play is white. You know we do our best writing when we care about our subject matter. Shakespeare always cared, just like when he sat down and wrote OTHELLO.

I'm also aware that, to Shakespeare the actor, Iago was just a damn fun character to play. That dude was so wicked in his manipulation. Most authors who try to create a similar character end up comically over the top and downright stupid. Iago's the gold standard of evil.

(To be truly evil, you can't think of yourself as evil. That little fact has gotten lost in much modern writing. In MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, Don John did refer to himself as "a perfect villain." But only because what he sees as his true character is what society sees as villainous. He wasn't embracing evil, but rather sincere nonconformity. Furthermore, since Shakespeare marketed MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING as a comedy, we can't take everything in it seriously. No pun intended.)

Shakespeare the author, of course, speaks through every character and no character. But I also have a little hobby of deciding which character Shakespeare the actor speaks through. In this case, Iago, most definitely. Shakespeare the actor was a damn lot of fun to hang around with, and he's probably the reason Shakespeare the writer was able to see so much without his head exploding.

So here's my advice. Swing by the URL below. It contains all of Shakespeare's writing, free, plus a large number of lesser authors whose names also begin with the letter S. Click on OTHELLO. Start reading. If you just don't get it, well, that's okay too. He didn't write in the language we use these days. But maybe, just maybe, like me, you'll really dig it. If you never bought a single one of my books but you read some Shakespeare, I'd be pretty damn happy about it.

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JULIUS CAESAR by William Shakespeare  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/s>

Encouraged by my ability to read these plays, I simply had to return to my newfound source of literary riches.

One thing I always loved about STAR TREK is its prediction that, in the future, everybody will quote Shakespeare. This play is a rich source of such quotes, along with such everyday pop culture staples as "It's Greek to me" and Perry White muttering "Great Caesar's Ghost."

What makes a democracy choose to become an empire instead? If its citizens would rather empower a benevolent despot, is that okay? Will he stay benevolent? Of course these aren't relevant questions today, cough cough choke puke, but Shakespeare felt like building a play around them. It gave him a platform for some seriously butt-kicking dialogue and acting, so it's just extremely great stuff that's a thrill to read and undoubtedly even more thrilling to see performed.

I've mentioned this before. Shakespeare the writer is every character. But what about Shakespeare the actor? I could research such things, since there are historical records, but I don't want to. It'd spoil my fun. JULIUS CAESAR is very much an ensemble piece. Who's the most prominent character? It's not Caesar, since he gets croaked early on, although perhaps Shakespeare the actor would portray him anyway. But I hope not.

Act III, Scene II. I first read the play almost 30 years ago, and this is the part that's stuck with me through the years. Marc Antony, until then a minor character with no more sense than to be Caesar's laptop, gives his famous speech. You know the one.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears! I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him." Then he goes on to speak so highly of the honor of the conspirators, and his words enrage the mob to hate those conspirators to a degree that just makes you say, "Whoa." Saying one thing and meaning another, and everybody gets the other, to a degree that I just can't do justice to.

If I wrote a play like this, which is of course impossible, and I had to choose from all those great parts, I'd take Marc Antony. I love Brutus for his honor and Cassius for his oiliness, and both got many great lines. The part where it looked like they

were gonna throw down and get jiggy brought my redneck backside to attention. But that one fiery speech by Marc Antony is electric. I can't write like this and I can't act at all, but if I could, I'd be Marc Antony.

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MACBETH by William Shakespeare

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Lemme come at this from a very strange place, which is Shakespearean comedy. Which this is not. In his comedies, he loved to do this thing where the audience knows something that the characters do not. Thus, whilst the characters stress and prance and fret and freak, with as much drama as humanly possible, we giggle our bottoms off because we know what they do not. When I show one of these DVDs in class, even after seeing it 20 or so times before, I laugh so hard my eyes water. Same as my students, and you know their English isn't as good as yours or mine. Shakespearean comedy is that universal.

MacBeth. We know things the characters do not. We have to keep a close eye on who is and is not on stage, which can be kinda tricky when reading rather than watching but well worth the effort. But if we do that, we very quickly realize why this is one of his most famous. Things are happening that we the audience know about but the characters on stage don't, and we're just moved and all that. Hundreds of years after he died, Shakespeare's writing can move us that way. That's why we revere him instead of Herman Schwartz, for example.

For me, there is also Shakespeare's extremely wicked sense of humor, thrown in at the most inappropriate places, which is why I love it so. Appropriate humor is so blase. Here, inappropriate humor is awesome. Nasty, wicked, make me giggle and annoy Jan because she's trying to do some real work or something. Billy Shakey was marrying his comedic with his dramatic and rocking the house.

Language. Oh yeah. He'd already given England the best it had ever seen, and yet he was raising the bar. I love an author who knows how to use his words. We have too few of them.

Okay, pop culturists. Let's look at this here. "Something wicked this way comes." Not bad. But only one small bit of the bits of witchcraft that Shakespeare used to very powerful effect in this play. "Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble." Followed by some very nasty shit that only Shakespeare could write. I think we know more of witchcraft from this play than from anything else witchie, but we just don't know that we know. And this, meanwhile, in the context of the play, is but a brief aside and Shakespeare having fun. You really oughta read the rest of what he wrote here.

Finally, Michael's hobby. Shakespeare the writer was everybody. Shakespeare afterwards was known as the writer, producer, director, and by this point an actor who had to be the star, therefore he was MacBeth. Since all female roles were

portrayed by men back then, and since he gave Lady MacBeth some awesome dialogue, and since he had long hair, I think he could've played Lady MacBeth on stage, but I doubt he did. He was MacBeth. That was easy.

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HAMLET by William Shakespeare

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I refuse to repeat all the quotes, quips, cliches, popular pop culture bits, and all that other stuff he gave us with this particular play, because there are far too many. But I do know that such things are better in context than without.

I first read this in high school and found it difficult. Much later, I watched the film in the theater with Mel Gibson in tights and found it equally difficult. So, in this latest reading, I just assumed it'd be the most difficult Shakespearean play I'd tackled thus far. And damn, I am stupid! This was the most easily readable of them all. It's no wonder The Fonz performed it on an American sitcom long ago. I marvel that I was so damn stupid before.

To pick a single Shakespearean play, any play at all, and call it your favorite is just a very stupid thing to do. But if I felt like being so stupid, this might be the one.

As an added bonus, read A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY by Kurt Vonnegut. His analysis of this play, complete with his goofball drawings, is spot-on accurate in fewer words than I or anybody else has ever used. Bravo!

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KING LEAR by William Shakespeare

<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/s>

I saw Akita Kurosawa's film RUN, which is loosely based on this, when it was in theaters. I enjoyed bits of it immensely but for the most part had no idea what the heck was going on. Or so I remember. It's been a while. All these years later, why not read the original for the first time?

This is a play that really should be performed by talented Shakespearean actors, due to the inherent drama and because some emoting would give me context for the words I don't understand. No annotated text here, remember. Nonetheless, great great stuff. I understood enough. A bit too plot-driven at times, but nobody cares. It's Shakespeare, dammit! Showcase some genius and bite my bare bodkin.

I've also heard its title character referred to as Mad King Lear. Sure, why not? Not so obvious at first, perhaps not so true at first, but before all is said and done he's just wiggling out and it's fine by this old madman. Many great lines for the motley

fool, of course. Shakespeare's humor moves from witty to base to subtle to cutting as quickly as a fool can leap and prance about.

Shakespeare did like to use parallel plots from time to time. Lear thought ill of the daughter who loved him most, whereas Gloucester trusted the son who was a bastard as well as a Bastard.

Shakespearean insults. This has more per page than anything I've reviewed thus far.

My little game. Oh, I guess the Bard had to portray the lead character in this one, but there were plenty of good parts to go around.

Have you noticed how little I summarize plots and characters and such? That's because you can read Cliff's Notes in the library. Nah, I just give you the general impressions of a Scotch-Irish redneck in Asia whose sanity is still in question. It's more fun that way. Shakespeare wrote something for everybody. Even me.

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THE TAMING OF THE SHREW by William Shakespeare

<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/s>

My introduction to Shakespearean comedy, back when I was a sophomore in high school. I thought it was quite funny then. 1978, if I had to guess. How will I feel about it now? Let's find out, shall we?

A drunk passes out, two lords with a touch of the redneck argue about who has the best hunting dogs, and a nasty and elaborate practical joke is played. That's just what happens before Act I, and I was already enrapt.

Shakespearean comedies are funny on many levels. Intellectual humor, gross humor, and everything in between. You know to expect that, and you're never disappointed.

The merry battle of the sexes. I read that in a teaching handout somewhere, I think. Yeah, it's here. When audiences left this play in Shakespeare's day, I have no doubt some men and women argued about who heads the household. He made tongues wag, and people wondered why he stirred up so much controversy, and they watched his plays to find out. Score! They were never disappointed, by the way, so that's another SCORE! To da hoop, baby! Slam dunk it and take it to da house!

Shakespearean puns. If a character says a word with two meanings, and he means one thing, the listener assumes he means the other. Sometimes deliberately, to crack wise, and sometimes not. Hamlet used this to devastating effect. Well, it's in this play too, in abundance, along with some more of those wonderful insults. It's fast-paced, well-peopled, quite accessible, well worth a watch or a read.

Oh, and my hobby. Shakespeare the actor surely chose to be Petruchio, the tamer of

the shrew. Damn, he said some things that'd get any man killed if he wasn't treading the boards whilst clad in tights.

Things I don't agree with, for the record, and things that'd probably make my lovely little lady cat smack me into next week. I betcha that, like me, Shakespeare wouldst thinkst "battle of the sexes" was mule dung. So he made some folks giggle at it. Why the hell not?

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