



Our American Cousin

BY JOHN F. ANDREWS

C. Janssen portrait courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library; Montage by W. Jason Levinson



In April 23rd we'll celebrate Shakespeare's Birthday—number 425 for those who keep count—and throughout the country people will gather to commemorate the poet Ben Jonson declared “not of an age but for all time.”

In Southern California, schoolchildren will be bouncing by the busload to see the Bard performed alfresco in the late Will Geer's Topanga Canyon Theatricum Botanicum. In Montgomery, audiences will revel in what Tony Randall has called the most sophisticated new theater complex in North America, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. Here in Washington, patrons of the Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger will bestow its annual “Will Award” on actor Kevin Kline. Meanwhile, from

PROGRAM NOTE

Frontline: The Shakespeare Mystery airs Tuesday, April 18 at 9 p.m.

People as diverse as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sigmund Freud and Charlie Chaplin refused to believe that William Shakespeare or Shakespere of Stratford-on-Avon could be the true author of all the masterpieces that bear his name. *Frontline* investigates the controversial theory that the 17th Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere, a poet and intimate friend of Queen Elizabeth I, was the real playwright.

one coast to the other, Shakespeare societies will host Elizabethan feasts, ballet troupes will tiptoe to Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, opera companies will intone Verdi's *Otello*, and supper clubs will offer their renditions of such modern classics as *West Side Story* and *Kiss Me, Kate*.

Yes, it'll be a busy birthday and it will remind us once again that whatever else he may be, William Shakespeare is a firmly established American institution. For more than two centuries now Shakespeare has been our nation's most frequently performed playwright. In our schools and colleges he remains a staple—if not indeed *the* staple—of any humanities curriculum worthy of the name. In our daily rounds he continues to serve, in the words of one public television executive, as an “indispensable guide to the mileposts of life.” And even in the most recent updating of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, he still accounts for far more entries than any other source. Columnists and speechwriters have long known this, of course, and some of their sharpest observations derive from felicitous variations on Shakespearean coinages. Thus a few years ago when George Will wrote a piece on the late George Meany's objections to the BBC Shakespeare series, his commentary bore the headline “Labor's Love Lost.” And a veteran gardener was recently heard to remark that anyone who calls a rose by any other name is probably pruning one.

Whether we realize it or not, we all speak Shakespeare every day of our lives. When we note that a well-intended law or regulation is “more honored in the breach than the observance,” we are applying—or, more accurately, misapplying—a phrase from *Hamlet*. When we inscribe “What Is Past is Prologue” on our National Archives building, we are dignifying a minor line from the play that is traditionally considered to be Shakespeare's farewell to the theater. Often without registering it, we find ourselves speaking, if only momentarily, in the accents of a Portia or a Polonius, a Macbeth or a Mercutio.

Alongside the Greek classics and the King James Bible, Shakespeare's words and works offer a repository from which cultivated Americans have been drawing, in one way or another, for as long as there have been English-speaking peoples on these shores. Folks have been brushing up their Shakespeare for quite some time.

It is virtually certain that Cotton Mather, one of the most redoubtable figures in colonial Massachusetts, was the original owner of a Shakespeare First Folio now in the Princeton University Library. Several signers of the Declaration of Independence had editions of Shakespeare in their studies. Both as a general and our first president, George Washington was fond of Shakespearean plays in the theater. John Adams regarded Ulysses' speech on degree in *Troilus and Cressida* as a statement in support of the Federalist party's views on social and political order. Thomas Jefferson valued Shakespeare as a source of wisdom and moral philosophy. And most nineteenth-century Americans would have agreed with Ralph Waldo Emerson's observation that Shakespeare was “an unrecognized god among men.” Comparing Shakespeare to other great literary figures, Emerson noted that “he was inconceivably wise, the others conceivably.”

Abraham Lincoln was a particularly avid reader of Shakespeare, and he was meditating on the assassination scene in *Macbeth* less than a week before his own murder—ironically in a theater with a Shakespearean bust atop its proscenium and at the hands of an actor who had appeared in *Julius Caesar* only

five months earlier. With what rapt attention that soon-to-be modern Brutus must have listened as he heard Cassius say “How many Ages hence/ Shall this our lofty Scene be acted over/ In States unborn and Accents yet unknown?”

Among our twentieth-century presidents, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy all had deep understanding of Shakespeare. Doubtless our First Thespian in the Oval Office was gratified by the response when he asked the American people whether he was “To be or not to be” president. And last November, when the stock market greeted his successor's election with a string of skittish sessions, there must have been some nervous brokers who asked, with Duke Theseus, “How easy is a Bush supposed a Bear?”

No doubt Shakespeare has had a profound effect on American culture. But in fact there is an even more significant reason for us to consider Shakespeare an integral part of our heritage. The future playwright was just embarking on his career when Sir Walter Raleigh and his companions attempted to establish the first English colony on Roanoke Island in the late 1580s. Shakespeare was probably completing *Antony and Cleopatra* when more fortunate settlers founded Jamestown in 1607. And he was borrowing from a fresh account of what we now call the Bermuda Triangle when he depicted Caliban's island in *The Tempest* around 1610. A full decade before the Mayflower Pilgrims came ashore in 1620, Shakespeare was already incorporating this “brave New World” into the world of his plays.

It was Shakespeare's generation that established the English-speaking tradition in North America. It was Shakespeare's contemporaries who gave us our basic concepts of law and government. And though Shakespeare himself never crossed the Atlantic, he would certainly have been a familiar figure to many of those who did. Why should we consider such Elizabethans as Sir Francis Drake and Captain John Smith to be part of our history, yet feel reluctant to claim the Bard of Avon as one of our forebears as well?

Most of today's British citizens derive from ancestors who chose to stay at home during the age of colonial expansion that began in Shakespeare's lifetime. But does that give them any greater kinship with Shakespeare than the descendants of Shakespeare's more adventurous countrymen who sailed to America? Of course not. So let's quit thinking of Shakespeare as the quintessentially British playwright he seems to many Americans to be. As Robert MacNeil's *The Story of English* reminded us a couple of years ago, many linguists now believe that the nearest present-day equivalent to Shakespearean speech is preserved, not in the British Isles, but on an island in the Chesapeake Bay. Interestingly enough, the people who live there talk no more like today's Englishmen than like most of today's Americans.

It's time for us to appropriate our own portion of the unique legacy that is Shakespeare and proclaim him the first great writer of English-speaking America. Let's celebrate this April 23rd as the birthday of a newly acknowledged fellow citizen. And let's start treating Shakespeare the same way we treat our other major American authors—as a playwright whose works are best appreciated by those who feel at home with him. ▴

The former editor of Shakespeare Quarterly, John Andrews is now producing a complete 20-volume edition, The Guild Shakespeare, for the Literary Guild.