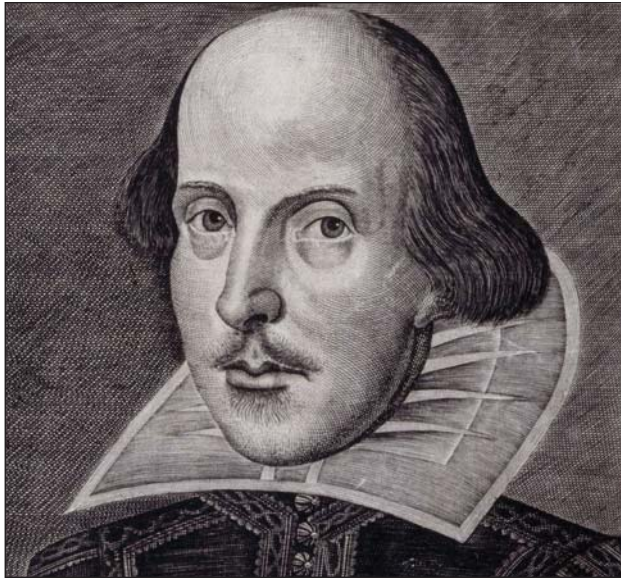


Some of the portraits purported to be Shakespeare currently on display at the Yale Center for British Art.



## Shakespeare: Engaging portraits ...

Colleen Shaddox

*Note: Shakespeare is the master of language. Not only were the Bard's words beautiful, they were often innovative – the first written appearance of many words and phrases still commonplace in English. The following story contains 20 phrases lifted from Shakespeare. Some are quite obvious. Others are so much a part of our lexicon that you may not know Shakespeare was the source. All 20 are listed on page 15.*

In the salad days of summer, Shakespeare escapes the classroom and plays in band shells, on plywood stages, in parks and on the beach. The faithful spread their blankets in a mysterious wood where bickering fairies cast spells on foolish mortals. Or perhaps they delight in Richard III's relish for naked villainy; the rhapsodic pledges of star-crossed lovers; or Falstaff's enthusiastic embrace of life – and any woman who will have him. Some performances will be magnificent. There will also be Hamlets who forget their lines, Lears who drop their Cordelias, and at least one production of Julius Caesar set in a malt shop with an Elvis impersonator in the title role. William Shakespeare, who survived the closing of London's theaters alternately by the plague and by religious bullies, will survive even these.

His eternal summer has been going on for more than three centuries and shows no signs of fading. He is in a position unequalled in Western culture. His collected works, along with the Bible, are the standard library we take with us to our hypothetical desert islands. We are supposed to like Shakespeare; a knowledge of his work is as much part of a standard education as history or geography. (Actually, more Americans can quote part of Hamlet's to be or not to be soliloquy than can find North Dakota on a map.) But he is as much pop as high art. His phrases are part of our lexicon. His characters are part of our culture. His stories are transformed again and again into new offerings, from West Side Story to *The Lion King*.

### The blast of war blows in our ears

Our affection for Shakespeare is so great, that we are full of sound and fury when we think him abused.

For Elm City Shakespeare Artistic Director James Andreas, action is eloquence, and the prime evil is forgetting that Shakespeare is theater. "People put off by Shakespeare were probably taught Shakespeare at a desk by somebody who loved to tell them about the meter," he says.

For Harold Bloom, "new historicism" has led to the murder most foul of great literature. Bloom, Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale, is author of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, a bestseller that is both a monument and guide to the playwright's work. Bloom objects to attempts to explore modern sociopolitical concerns through the plays. When New York Public Theater Artistic Director George Wolfe staged an acclaimed *Tempest* in which Prospero was a colonial oppressing a Caribbean Caliban, Bloom, who is seldom tongue-tied, declared, "This is theater for the mentally defective. Take me home!" Though Wolfe was in earshot, Bloom has no regrets. "It was unforgivable," he says of the production.

The Chandos Portrait currently on display at Yale's Center for British Art (YCBA) may be an authentic life portrait of the author. But detractors have been scandalized by the dark-eyed Shakespeare whom they found too Semitic or too Continental to possibly be the great English playwright. The exhibit also contains portraits, far too recent to be authentic, that address these concerns by depicting Shakespeare with decidedly Anglo-Saxon features and dressed as a member of the aristocracy, which he certainly was not.

### I can nowhere find him like a man

But who, really, was William Shakespeare? The YCBA exhibit *Searching for Shakespeare*, explores that very question through a collection of original texts and documents, Elizabethan objects and "contender portraits," all believed at some time to represent the true image of the playwright. The collection of primary sources was assembled by the National Portrait Gallery in London. YCBA is the only venue where the show will travel. Yale exhibit curator Elisabeth Fairman said that the strength of the uni-

versity's own Shakespeare holdings, which will stand in for some texts the Brits considered too precious to loan, convinced the National Gallery to send the show to New Haven.

Records tell us that Shakespeare was a glovemaker's son born in Stratford-on-Avon who as a teen married a widow eight years his senior and three months pregnant. He moved to London, presumably leaving his wife and children at home, became a successful actor/playwright and supported the family through his talents, his share in his own acting company and various astute business deals. (Like Shylock, he was a moneylender.) He retired to Stratford in prosperity and commissioned a gentleman's coat of arms. He left a considerable estate. His will is on display at YCBA, where visitors can peer at his curious bequest to Mrs. Shakespeare of his "second best bed."

The exhibit also includes a portrait of Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton, who posed in fashionable lace with curls cascading over his shoulder. The earl, to whom several works are dedicated, was Shakespeare's patron -- or what you will. Shakespeare's sexuality has historically been the subject of conjecture/gossip, as has his religion. Some scholars believe he was secretly Roman Catholic, hardly politic for an actor reliant upon Tudor goodwill. The definitive answers are unknown and probably unknowable. After all, we do not even know what Shakespeare looked like.

The heart of the exhibit examines the claims of "contender portraits" to represent the writer's actual likeness.

"His appearance is intriguing to us, and why is that?" asks Fairman. "Because his text has survived."

Fairman believes that The Chandos Portrait is the most likely image to have been created from life. The painting has the iconography we associate with Shakespeare: the high forehead, beard and deep-set eyes. The sitter is a man in his late thirties or early forties who looks soulfully out from his portrait. His full lips might be subduing a smile. His dress is plain, except for a single gold earring that lends some Bohemian cred.



Scott Freeman as Prospero and Liz Gray as Miranda in Elm Shakespeare's 2003 production of *The Tempest*. Bottom row of photos by Judy Sirota Rosenthal.

## Shakespeare in New Haven

**The Elm Shakespeare Company. Edgerton Park.** August 10-September 3. Shows start at 8 pm. Donation suggested. The Bard's *Much Ado About Nothing* alternating with a swashbuckling retelling of *Robin Hood*. See Theater listings for the schedule or visit [www.elmshakespeare.org](http://www.elmshakespeare.org).

**Yale Center for British Art.** *Searching for Shakespeare.* Through September 23. Free. Never-before assembled texts, Elizabethan objects and portraits attempt to shed light William Shakespeare, the working actor, playwright and aspiring gentleman. See Tours, Talks & Films for special programs or visit [www.yale.edu/ycba](http://www.yale.edu/ycba).



## ... and enduring works of drama

The date of the work makes it believable as a life portrait, says Fairman, as does the dress, right for an Elizabethan of Shakespeare's station, and the provenance. Unfortunately, much of the paint is worn away. "There's nothing left to x-ray," she says. The British curator of the show speculated that the work's bad condition may be a sign of authenticity. It is possible that paint was worn away by admirers who wanted to touch the late great playwright's image as a pilgrim might touch a relic.

### The play's the thing

Shakespeare's plays have worn much better than his perhaps portrait.

"It's great theater. It's everything that great storytelling should be. It's epic and literate, and the dilemmas are dilemmas that we're all familiar with," says Andreassi, of Elm Shakespeare Company, which is in its 11th summer. This season's offering is *Much Ado About Nothing*, a love story with witty verbal sparring. (Or perhaps witty verbal sparring with a love story.) Andreassi had spent his summers traveling to perform Shakespeare, a routine that became difficult with a family. It struck him that he was packing off to destinations very much like the park across the street from his house, Edgerton.

He formed a company and staged *The Tempest* in the park, hoping to get 2-300 people to come out for free Shakespeare under the stars. When he drew audiences of 1,000, he knew he had something. Elm Shakespeare's early days fortunately coincided with a renewed Hollywood interest in the Bard. Leonardo DiCaprio was *Romeo*; Kenneth Branagh was *Henry V*; and Shakespeare was in love. All of this, Andreassi said, worked together with a lovely venue and timeless stories to give the new company a boost.

It was important to Elm's mission and its viability to do outreach to schools. Andreassi says that whereas adults expect children to find Shakespeare difficult to access, kids immediately warm to the plays. "The language falls into place when you see it on stage," he says. Shakespeare is so vital to the education of American chil-

dren that the National Endowment for the Arts sponsored a three-year initiative, "Shakespeare in American Communities," to ensure that the next generation is exposed to quality performances. Productions at Long Wharf and Yale Repertory theaters were sponsored by the initiative.

When the American Shakespeare Festival Theater reopens in Stratford, Connecticut, the venue will need to book a wide variety of shows and events to be viable. But Ivan Kronenfeld calls those "the stuff on top of the cake. The cake here is Shakespeare, and school kids seeing Shakespeare." Koerner Kronenfeld Partners have contacted with the city to revive the theater. Once a thriving institution that saw the likes of Christopher Plummer and John Houseman take the stage, the Stratford theater has fallen into disuse. At this writing, the theater has no electricity. Kronenfeld's partner, Carl Koerner, says that they hope to be producing plays indoors by spring of 2007 and outdoors much sooner. The partners were willing to take a chance on the theater in part because of its namesake, William Shakespeare.

"He is the best," says Kronenfeld. "I don't think anybody who knows anything really disagrees with that."

"He's still got a hot play," adds Koerner.

Success for the theater will not mean having top stars performing at the theater again, but reading biographies of famed actors in *Playbill* who talk about their start at the American Shakespeare Festival Theater, says Kronenfeld.

For Andreassi, the ultimate acting challenge is repertory—a single company of actors performing a variety of plays on different nights. This year Elm Shakespeare will delve into rep for the first time when it alternates nights of *Much Ado* with *Robin Hood*. The company will act a liberal adaptation of a 1916 verse script with lots of fight choreography. He hopes that *Robin Hood* may draw in an audience who wouldn't normally go to a Shakespeare performance but may be seduced into coming back the following night to see one.

Shakespeare, Andreassi believes, is for everyone. While the Bard may be best known for his exquisite language and

sad stories of the death of kings, he also had a gift for low comedy. "He's immensely human," he says.

### So many of his shadows thou hast met

Shakespeare's extreme and enduring popularity rests in his ability to create characters "as real as we are," according to Harold Bloom. Shakespeare penned about 1,000 characters in his career, 100 with significant roles. The best of the hundred, Bloom argues, have a life beyond the five acts we see played on stage. He cites a select group including *Hamlet*, *Iago* and *Cleopatra* as being "more real than anyone I know."

The most independently vital of any of Shakespeare's characters, according to Bloom, is Falstaff, Prince Hal's friend and mentor. Bloom's identification with the ribald knight is so thorough that he sometimes refers to him as "Sir John Bloomstaff." Everyone appreciates Falstaff as a fellow of infinite jest—including reportedly Elizabeth I, who asked for another play featuring the character, which Shakespeare provided in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*. But many critics dismiss Falstaff as a roisterer whom Prince Hal must ultimately reject to become the triumphant Henry V. To Bloom, this is outrageous character assassination. He likens Falstaff to Socrates and slams down his tea mug with great force when discussing King Henry's banishment of his old mentor.

"I regard Hal as a hypocrite, a true villain, a monster!" Bloom declares.

Look at what is happening here: A man, who is by definition highly intelligent, is getting incensed over the treatment of a fictional character created centuries ago and a continent away.

This perhaps is the key to Shakespeare's unique position in our culture and our hearts. We have relationships with his characters. They leap off page and stage and into our consciousness where we can admire them, worry about them, argue with them. And after they have melted into thin air, we wait with bated breath for them to take human form once again.



James Andreassi as Richard and Pegge Johnson as Queen Elizabeth in Elm's *Richard III* from 2004.



Natalia Duncan and Alex Organ in the title roles in Elm Shakespeare's 2005 production of *Romeo and Juliet*.