

**Title:** The lure of Shakespeare  
**Author(s):** [Robert W. Butler](#)  
**Source:** [Calliope](#). 15.8 (Apr. 2005): p37. From *General OneFile*.  
**Document Type:** Article  
**Copyright:** COPYRIGHT 2005 Cobblestone Publishing, a division of Carus Publishing Company  
[www.cobblestonepub.com/](http://www.cobblestonepub.com/)  
Full Text:

Many people consider **Shakespeare** the greatest writer in the English language. His legions of admirers point with awe to the rhythm of his words and the wide range of human emotions he portrays and evokes. But has **Shakespeare** always been so popular? And how did an Elizabethan actor-turned-playwright become a world-famous figure?

From the start, **Shakespeare** was popular among the English. Shortly after his death, his [plays](#) were published in a collection known as the First Folio (1623), with a poem by Ben Jonson included that featured the lines, "He was not of an age, but for all time!" The memory of **Shakespeare** remained strong among audiences as well, since his plays were produced regularly by many companies. But, in 1642, during the English Civil War, the theaters of London were closed by order of the government and remained so for 18 years.

By the time they reopened in 1660, styles had changed. The court of the new king wanted a more elegant, refined, classical world, and **Shakespeare** struck them as coarse in his language and careless in his plots. His comedies, in particular, fell out of favor as the years passed.

By the 1700s, however, a turnaround had begun. The first new edition of his plays in nearly a century, along with the first biography ever written, appeared in 1709 and immediately sparked a **Shakespeare** revival. Despite continuing questions about his style, which led many producers to cut or alter his plays (sometimes even writing new endings for them), audiences were enthusiastic. Great performances also helped. David Garrick, the greatest actor of the century, and Sarah Siddons, the greatest actress, were both enthusiastic

**Shakespeare** supporters and starred in many of his plays at the Drury Lane Theatre. In the 1800s, Shakespeare's popularity soared. Multivolume editions of his plays were published, exuberant productions and extravagant sets supported stars such as Fanny Kemble and Edmund Kean, and touring companies brought small-scale versions of **Shakespeare** to towns and villages everywhere.

In the 20th century, **Shakespeare** remained as popular as ever, with actors such as Sir Laurence Olivier, Sir John Gielgud, and Kenneth Branagh bringing his characters to life. Students around the world now read **Shakespeare** in literature classes, and his plays are sometimes staged in modern-day costume to emphasize his significance to today's world.

More remarkable is the story of Shakespeare's popularity in other lands.

News of Shakespeare's talent spread even during his lifetime. Occasionally, a foreign merchant or diplomat saw a Shakespearean production. In 1601, the Russian ambassador was present when *Twelfth Night* was first performed. Traveling companies of English actors staged some of Shakespeare's plays in Germany and Poland while the playwright was still alive. But it was the great French author Voltaire who truly popularized **Shakespeare** beyond English shores in the 1730s. From that time onward, Shakespeare's works have been extensively studied and performed around the world.

In America, copies of the plays are believed to have circulated in the late 1600s, and the first performance was *Romeo and Juliet* in the early 1700s. A

century later, Americans practically worshiped **Shakespeare**. Philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson called him "the first poet of the world." In the 1900s, Shakespeare's works were being translated and printed in India, Africa, China, and Japan.

In the 20th century, a new medium inspired countless variations on the **Shakespeare** canon: the movies. Some have been filmed as recreated plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) or *Henry V* (1989). Others were adapted stories in modern settings such as *West Side Story* (1961) or *Richard III* (1995). Still others were transposed into stories in a completely different land and culture such as *Ran* (1985), a Japanese tale of samurai based mostly on *King Lear*.

Whether recorded or live, the performance of a major **Shakespeare** role is traditionally seen as the ultimate test of an actor's ability. From Richard Burbage in the 1500s to Ian McKellen and Judi Dench today, the greatest actors are those who are able to master **Shakespeare**. By itself, this is the most enduring tribute to the theatrical talent of William **Shakespeare**, the Bard of Avon.

### A magnificent Relic

Among the more striking piece of [theater](#) history held at the Folger is this faded but still-regal coat worn by Edwin Booth when he played Richard III. Booth took New York by storm in 1857 and remained a dramatic force until his retirement in 1891. Several of his costumes are housed at the Folger, which has about 36 complete or partial costumes in its collection, most of them from 19th-century Shakespearean productions.

During the 1864-65 season, Booth secured his place at the top of America's theatrical world by playing Hamlet 100 nights in a row at New York City's Winter Garden, a remarkable feat at a time when most plays were performed for only one or two weeks. Less than a month later, he and the nation were stunned by the news that his younger brother, John Wilkes Booth, also an actor, had assassinated Abraham Lincoln. Briefly, Edwin Booth went into seclusion. But he did return, establishing Booth's Theatre in New York and founding the Players Club in the same city.

**Butler**, Robert W.

### Source Citation (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Butler, Robert W. "The lure of Shakespeare." *Calliope* Apr. 2005: 37+. *General OneFile*. Web. 6 Nov. 2014.

### Document URL

[http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA132867807&v=2.1&u=nysl\\_sc\\_schchem&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w&asid=ea34ea9ab4df96f6882621b3a7fc84ba](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA132867807&v=2.1&u=nysl_sc_schchem&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w&asid=ea34ea9ab4df96f6882621b3a7fc84ba)

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A132867807