

# Early Modern Studies Journal



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### *Exhibition Review*

“O, What Learning Is!”: a Review of the British Museum’s exhibit *Shakespeare: Staging the World* (19 July- 25 November 2012)

Summer 2012, London hosted the Olympics, an undertaking four years in the making, and Shakespeare was an integral part of the ceremonies. Danny Boyle’s opening ceremony, entitled *Isles of Wonder*, was inspired by Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Sir Kenneth Branagh cited Caliban’s “Be Not Afeard, The Isle is Full of Noises” speech, while dressed as industrial visionary Isambard Kingdom Brunel. At the closing ceremonies, Timothy Spall, playing Winston Churchill, emerged from the top of Big Ben to recite the same speech. Sir Ian McKellan as Prospero told his wheelchair-bound Miranda to explore her brave new world for the opening ceremonies of the Paralympics.

Shakespeare has also been in the minds for another group of directors collaborating on a different four-year long project. The British Museum’s current exhibition [\*Shakespeare: Staging the World\*](#) (19 July-25 November 2012) is a stunning and not-to-be-missed exhibit. Curated by Dora Thornton, British Museum Curator of Renaissance Collections and the Waddesdon Bequest Renaissance European culture, this exhibit is a highly collaborative effort. Working in conjunction with the Royal Shakespeare Company at every level of preparation and exhibition, this is a first for the British Museum to collaborate with a theatrical company. The wealth of dynamic items are culled from throughout the United Kingdom, from the British Museum’s own holdings to the British and Bodleian libraries, from the National Portrait Gallery to the Shakespeare Institute, from Dulwich College to the Sheldon Tapestry Workshops, and everywhere in between.

Thornton claims that the exhibit has three aims: 1. To move from present day London (c. 2012) back in time to London 400 years earlier, 2. To depict the playhouse as an important site of secular ideas and communication, a place representing and representative of England’s emerging national identity, and 3. To use objects to create a dialogue between Shakespeare’s

real and imagined worlds.<sup>1</sup> The exhibit does all of this and more. It is engaging and memorable with wonderfully chosen and idiosyncratic objects displayed and superb RSC performances interspersed. Whether someone is a Shakespearean scholar or has only read *Hamlet* in high school, the exhibit will leave any viewer exclaiming, like Juliet's Nurse, "O, what learning is!"

The exhibit is separated into eight, equitably divided galleries, and a ninth, solitary, but especially poignant gallery exhibit.<sup>2</sup> Set into the British Museum's circular and centralized Reading Room Tower, viewers twist through the various gallery spaces, moving into and out of Shakespeare's various worlds—both real, geographic locations and imagined spaces. The exhibition is beautifully mapped out and organized, so that some item from an earlier space resonates in later galleries. For example, the portrait of Abd el-Ouahed, a Moroccan ambassador to England, displayed in the initial gallery "Shakespeare's London" resonates as "valiant Moor" in "Venice and the Modern City," a later gallery dedicated to the ethnic, religious, and female strangers in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. This "Othering" is reflected again in the eight gallery devoted to *The Tempest* and "Exploring New Worlds" with its focus on exploration, colonization, and fantastical depictions of Native Americans.

Each gallery space then does multiple simultaneous tasks: evoking real and imagined places; highlighting particular plays; creating coherent sub-narratives and arguments about the items in the gallery space, while creating an overall metanarrative. It is far too difficult to demonstrate the breadth and depth of each exhibit space, so an example of one gallery will have to suffice.

The second gallery—designated by rough hewn walls and descending wooden beams to recreate a modernist depiction of Warwickshire—is dedicated to the "Forest of Arden," both the physical landscapes near Stratford-upon-Avon and the imagined forests of *As You Like It* and *Merry Wives of Windsor*. The items, while relating to particular lines, themes, or places within the two plays, are cohesively displayed to depict issues of "regional and national consciousness": early English efforts at surveying and mapping; cloth work from the area, from fine ladies' fashions to pastoral themed bed valences; and general objects associated with rural life, such as gardening tools and detailed botanical sketches. Each and every gallery space is just as fully imagined and painstakingly represented. This multifaceted recreation—of words, images, objects, and performance—holds true for the other gallery spaces, whether depicting "Kingship, Rebellion, and Witchcraft" (*Macbeth*), "The Origins of 'Great Britain'" (*Cymbeline*), or "The Medieval Past" (the history plays).

The Royal Shakespeare Company's performances are inspired and illustrative, giving life to the objects and making the contexts of certain displays more palpable and profound. Geoffrey Streatfield's rousing performance of the "St. Crispin's Day" speech is projected on a wall between Henry V's funerary achievements, his sword and helm to one side and his shield to the other. [Junjo O'Neil](#) physically becomes Richard III, slowly moving from handsome

upright man, contorting and twisting into the wicked king, pulling up his left shoulder by several inches, crippling his left hand, and arching his brow into lupine glare. Paterson Joseph relates [Brutus' funerary oration](#) while holding a unique coin commemorating Caesar's assassination. Ian McKellan, as Prospero, prophetically reads aloud "Our revels are now ended" as viewers enter the final exhibit space devoted to "Shakespeare's Legacy."

Just as the Olympic ceremonies were bookended by Shakespeare, the Shakespeare exhibit is also bookended, but by two very different and literal books. As viewers first enter the first gallery "Shakespeare's London," a copy of the iconic First Folio is open to the much loved frontispiece portrait of Shakespeare. This priceless 1623 text has its modern counterpart when viewers enter the last exhibit space "Shakespeare's Legacy," which only has one item on display, a cheap, modern copy of Shakespeare's plays. Thornton claims that this was the item she most coveted for the exhibit, and its emotional and cultural value belies its shoddy appearance. This edition, lovingly dubbed the "Robben Island Bible" was owned by Sonny Venkatrathnam, a prisoner for his anti-Apartheid activities in South Africa's Robben Island Prison. Venkatrathnam covered his copy in cheap Diwali cards to disguise his book as Hindu scripture and covertly circulated the text among the inmates, asking them to mark and sign a passage. Opened to a page in *Julius Caesar*, we see Nelson Mandela's signature and date (16-12-77), and his chosen passage: "Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste death but once."<sup>3</sup> It is a fitting final piece that resonates and articulates how and why Shakespeare is still read and loved now.

The exhibit runs until 25 November 2012, and for those unable to attend or who wish to learn more, there are a variety of media and materials supplementing the exhibit. In conjunction with the exhibit, the [British Museum is hosting a series of talks](#), lectures, family and children's workshops, RSC performances, and film viewings. Several of the RSC performances are available for [viewing](#). There are two books available based on the exhibit, the comprehensive and coffee table sized [Shakespeare: Staging the World](#), edited by Jonathan Bates and Dora Thornton, and the smaller gift book [Shakespeare's Britain](#), co-edited by Jonathan Bates, Dora Thornton with Becky Allen. Twenty of the items on display are also discussed on the [BBC Radio 4 Series Shakespeare's Restless World](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Thornton, Dora. "Shakespeare: Curator's Introduction." *The British Museum*. London. 21 July 2012. Lecture.

<sup>2</sup> The nine galleries each have a different thematic focus, and when there is an especial focus on particular Shakespearean texts, they have been indicated in parentheses: 1. Shakespeare's London, 2. The Forest of Arden (*As You Like It*, *Merry Wives of Windsor*), 3. The Medieval Past (the history plays, but especially the works of the Second Henriad), 4. The Classical World (*Julius Caesar*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Venus and Adonis*), 5. Venice and the Modern City (*The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*), 6. Kingship, Rebellion, and Witchcraft (*Macbeth*, *King Lear*), 7. The Origins of 'Great Britain' (*Cymbeline*), 8. Exploring New Worlds (*The Tempest*), and 9. Shakespeare's Legacy.

<sup>3</sup> The date is significant as it is the anniversary of the Battle of Blood River (16 December 1838) when the Boers defeated the Zulu; in 1961, on that date, the African National Congress "began its violent resistance to the South African regime" (exhibit case card).