

SHAKESPEARE TRIBUTE

The world of literature, indeed of arts and aesthetics, observes today the birth and death anniversaries of William Shakespeare. The playwright needs no introduction given the universality of his reputation. In this issue of Star Literature, three former students of English literature pay tribute to the man whose tragedies, comedies, histories and sonnets remain unsurpassed in tone and tenor nearly four hundred years after his passing.

Celebrations in Stratford The Bard has no equal

MD. SHAFIQUOL ISLAM

William Shakespeare was "born under a rhyming planet" at the building now known as 'The Birthplace' in Henley Street in 1564. He died in 1616 on the same day --- April 23 --- and was buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church. At eighteen he married Anne Hathaway in 1582. Their eldest daughter Susanna was born to them in 1583 followed by the birth of twins, son Hamnet and daughter Judith, in 1585 and a couple of years later they moved to London.

History is tantalizingly silent as to how Shakespeare entered the theatrical world but he is acknowledged as England's greatest poet and playwright and, though he wrote nothing about his actual birth town, his life and work remain inextricably entwined with Stratford.

Stratford offers an aura of all that about Shakespeare to the tourists and fans. The journey for a tourist begins with the birthplace and catches up all that is about him there. So one can visit Anne Hathaway's Cottage at



Shakespeare home

Shuttery, Shakespeare's mother Mary Arden's House, comprising two sixteenth century farmhouses and a countryside Museum and Palmer's Farm at Wilmcote, Sculptures of Shakespeare and his characters like Hamlet, Lady Macbeth and Falstaff in the Bancroft Gardens, Holy Trinity Church, Hall's Croft, the river Avon, The Royal Shakespeare Theatre, The Swan Theatre, Exhibition at 'The Falstaff's Experience' Museum, Water sculpture in the gardens at the theatre and the memorial donated by an American to Stratford, the Pub named after David Garrick, noted actor and founder of The Shakespeare Festival in 1769, the Grammar School where he studied (still a school today), Nash's House and New Place, falcons on a cage at the Birthplace Trust's Shakespeare Countryside Museum, shops after the name of characters like Cordelia and Iago.

It has been commonly said that a new book about Shakespeare is published somewhere in the world every day, and millions of people go to theaters around the world to see his plays performed. That is one kind of celebration of his life and works but this essay will explore from when and how his birthday is celebrated in his own birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon. Unfortunately the celebration culture was not built in a day. After the Bard's death in 1616, some years elapsed without any event and the visitors started travelling to Stratford only in 1650 onwards and the history of celebration is almost blank up to its origin in the eighteenth century.

To be specific, the origins of the celebrations go back to 1769 when the Corporation of Stratford-on-Avon invited the actor David Garrick to create a Shakespeare Festival. This really established town as a shrine of literary pilgrimage but was regarded as strictly a 'one-off' and was held in the autumn, not on the birthday. It was not until 1824 that the Shakespeare Club celebrated 23rd April itself, inaugurating a procession through the streets to Holy Trinity Church and some speeches.

Every year, the town Stratford-on-Avon celebrates the birth (and life and works) of its most famous son William Shakespeare. The celebrations are usually held on the Saturday nearest to 23rd April, Shakespeare's birthday. It is a very English sort of occasion for traditional core events, bringing together townspeople and their guests in a number of activities and events; its unique mixture of traditional pageantry, international spotlight and community celebration is organized by the co-hosts (the Birthday Celebrations Committee and the Town Council), with the financial support of the Royal Shakespeare Corporation, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford Town Trust and Stratford District Council.

Over nearly two centuries since then the tradition has grown to include many of the unique features which are still integral part of today's Shakespeare Birthday Celebrations: the boys from King Edward Six Grammar School (his old school) leading the procession, the rosemary worn 'for remembrance', the unfurling of flags and banners, the laying of flowers on the grave at Holy Trinity, the luncheon with speeches and the evening performance of one of his plays.

In 1896 the American ambassador was invited to Stratford and so began the tradition that linked the Celebrations with the Court of St James. To this day the Shakespeare Birthday Celebrations remain one of the few engagements for the Diplomatic Corps outside London. The celebrations now involve representatives from the worlds of literature, theatre, academia and diplomacy; a truly international gathering joining the people of Stratford on this special weekend to prove the Bard's prophecy of immortality of his own works in contrast to marble stones and royal monuments, "Not marble, not gilded monuments/Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme" (Sonnet 55.1-2).

Marking the 447th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth on 23rd April in 2011, Stratford will observe all the important traditions whilst incorporating new and exciting features. There will be many more celebrations in London and all over U.K. while some of us, the fans all around the globe will read his poetry or enjoy one of his plays acted on stage or movie screen or listen to a lecture today. Our lives may be 'walking shadows', we may be 'poor players' or 'dull actors' who forget their parts but the Bard will remain deathless and his birthday and works will be celebrated in the millenniums unknown, countries and languages yet to be born "How many ages hence/ Shall this our lofty scene be acted over, / In states unborn, and accents yet unknown" (Julius Caesar 3.1.111-3, Cassius to Brutus).

Md Shafiqul Islam is a senior civil servant

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

At the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the new millennium, William Shakespeare was voted the greatest Englishman ever born. He beat all his rivals very convincingly. No politician, scientist, sports or cultural personality could come near him. This was not true about any other poet, playwright or novelist anywhere else in the world.

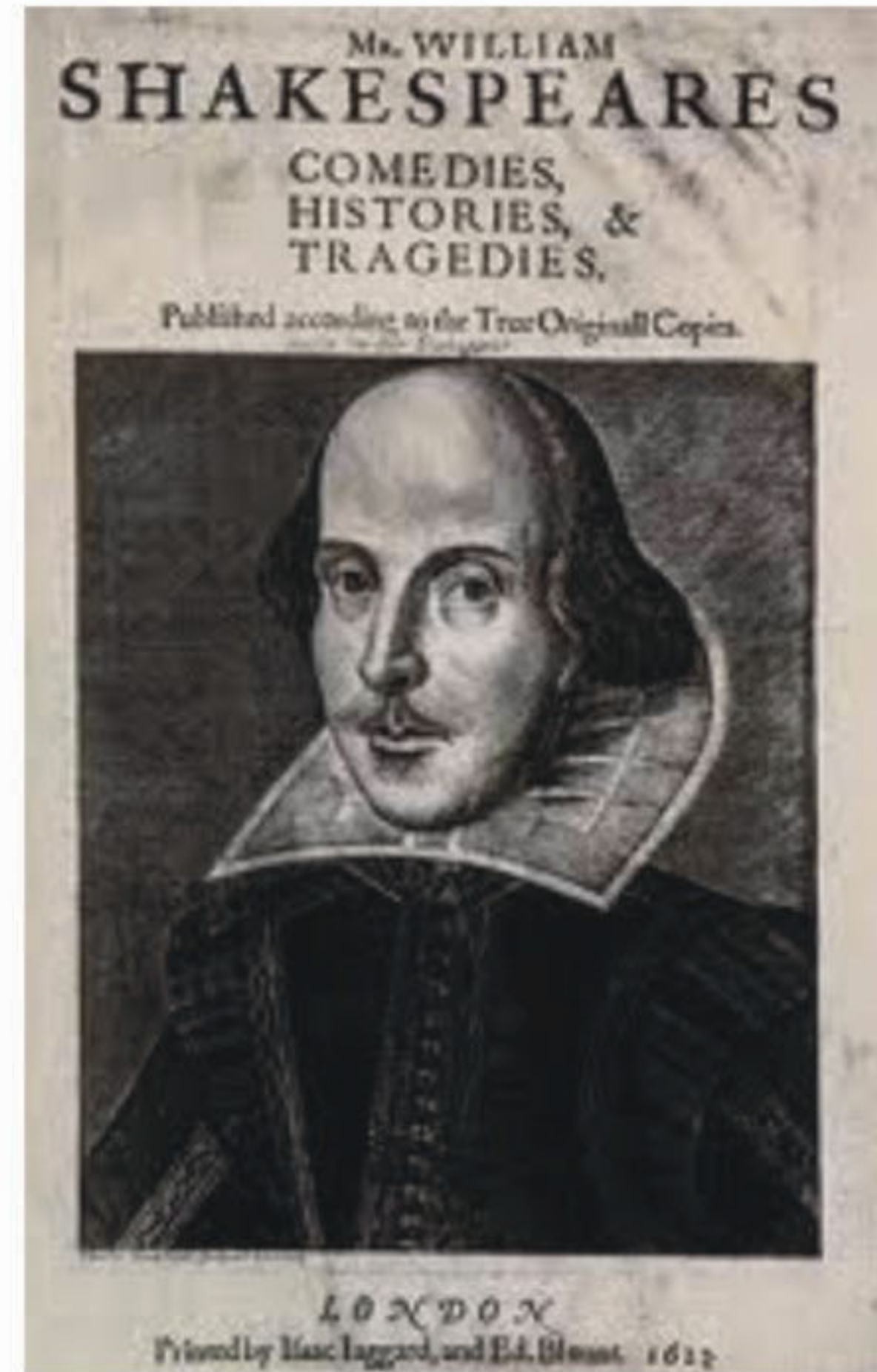
The greatest poet and playwright was supposedly born on April 23 in 1564. Stratford-upon-Avon, the place of his birth, was a prosperous, small market town of Warwickshire with two thousand inhabitants. Baptised on April 26, it is generally accepted that he was born on 23 April, St. George's Day. Four hundred forty seven years after his birth, he is as relevant to us as he was to his readers during his lifetime. Or perhaps he means to us even more now. He died, also on April 23, in 1616 and thus lived for only 52 years. It is known that he wrote nothing during the last four years of his life. His thirty eight plays, two long, narrative poems, one hundred and fifty-four sonnets and several other poems have been admired for five centuries all over the world and will be admired in the coming centuries. He is admired by all students of serious literature, irrespective of religion, colour and age. He is equally popular in India and Pakistan, the Arab Muslim world and Israel, the USA/Europe and the third world. Time cannot wither him.

Shakespeare was raised in Stratford-upon-Avon. His father was John Shakespeare, a prominent citizen in Stratford who was a glover and dealt in wool. An Alderman and a Justice of the Peace, he owned property in Stratford, and married Mary Arden, the daughter of a well-to-do farmer from Wilmcote, near Stratford. Though there is no documentary evidence to prove it, it seems likely that William Shakespeare attended the Grammar School at Stratford. He may have left before he completed the full curriculum. At the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years older than him, with whom he had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith. Anne Hathaway was the daughter of a well-to-do farmer at Shottery, a couple of miles from Stratford. Between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer and partner of a playing company, called The Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as The King's Men. When James I came to the throne in 1603, the Chamberlain's Men came under his patronage and were henceforth called the King's Men. Shakespeare's success as a playwright made him financially solvent and he owned property in London and Stratford. He appears to have returned to Stratford in the spring of 1612, where he died four years later.

Shakespeare produced most of his known works between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were mainly comedies and histories, genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the sixteenth century. He then wrote mainly tragedies until about 1608, including Hamlet, King Lear, Othello and Macbeth, considered some of the finest works in world literature. In his last phase, he wrote tragicomedies, also known as romances, and collaborated with other playwrights.

Shakespeare's reputation reached its peak in the nineteenth century. The Romantics loved him very much and the Victorians worshipped him with a reverence that George Bernard Shaw called 'bardolatry'. In the twentieth century, his work was repeatedly adopted and rediscovered by new movements in scholarship and performance. His plays remain highly popular today and are constantly studied, performed and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world. He is widely recognised as the greatest writer of the world.

William Shakespeare's plays, especially his tragedies, are



perhaps man's best artistic creations. Only the ancient epics and the Greek tragedies can come near him. Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece are brilliant long poems. His sonnets, according to critics, are a profound meditation on the nature of love, sexual passion, procreation, death and time. No wonder Shakespeare's influence on later writers the world over is beyond measure.

Shakespeare's work has made a lasting impression on later theatre and literature. In particular, he expanded the dramatic potential of characterisation, plot, language, and genre. For example, until Romeo and Juliet, romance had not been viewed as a worthy theme for tragedy. Soliloquies had been used mainly to convey information about characters or events, but Shakespeare used them to explore character minds. Hamlet is the best example. His work heavily influenced later poetry. The Romantic poets attempted to revive Shakespearean verse drama, though with little success. George Steiner described all English verse dramas from Coleridge to Tennyson as 'feeble variations on Shakespearean themes'.

Shakespeare influenced all major novelists, particularly Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner and Charles Dickens. Herman Melville's soliloquies owe much to Shakespeare. His Captain Ahab in Moby Dick is a classic tragic hero, inspired by King Lear. Scholars have identified 20,000 pieces of music linked to Shakespeare's works. These include two operas by Giuseppe Verdi, Othello and Falstaff, whose critical standing compares with that of the source plays. Shakespeare has also inspired many painters, including the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites. Sigmund Freud drew on Shakespearean psychology, particularly that of Hamlet, for his theories of human nature.

William Shakespeare is next to the Bible, our best teachers of literature used to tell us at the Dhaka University during our student days.

Junaidul Haque writes fiction. He is a senior airline official.

He was for all time . . .

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There are reasons why you cannot ignore William Shakespeare. In a larger dimension, you cannot stay away from literature, the pursuit of it. For literature speaks of life, more pertinently of what life ought to be or could be. In Shakespeare, you come by all these images, perspectives if you will, which speak of existence. He delves into the soul in all its manifestations. Think here of arrogance, that common human frailty.

Danger knows full well that Caesar is more dangerous than he / We are two lions litter'd in one day / And I the elder and more terrible.

There is that timeless, unmistakable hint of politics here. The malady Caesar suffers from is an affliction which has regularly destroyed the lives of authoritarian, self-obsessed men. Recall more from Julius Caesar. The most powerful man in Rome reminds the one who had earlier warned him of the Ides of March. The Ides of March are come, says Caesar, with a grin. Ay, Caesar, says the other, but not gone. Minutes later, Caesar is a bloodied corpse.

Shakespeare's universality springs from this deep-rooted ability in him to present individuals in all their corporeal and intellectual manifestations. That good, thinking men are often incapable of decisive action or eventually act when the effort is doomed to failure comes through in the Prince of Denmark. In Hamlet lurks a philosopher, a fastidious lover. Forty thousand brothers, he screams at Laertes,

cannot equal his love for Ophelia. And yet that morbidity of a thought --- 'To be, or not to be. . . ' --- pushes him toward an ugly end. And when he goes down, he carries a whole body of people with him. In Hamlet, therefore, you come by the image of the perennial scholar rendered immobile through inordinately long moments of rumination. He fears the consequences of his probable acts and stays his hand. Those consequences happen anyway.

There is something of the impartial about Shakespeare, the dispassionate in him if you will. He tells us what men have long known, before and after him. *The evil that men do lives after them / the good is oft interred with their bones . . .* That is Antony. In Shakespeare's deft use of language, this mundane truth takes on the form of a philosophical statement. And you stumble into similar philosophical peregrinations even in Shylock, much though you may dislike the nerves in the man who badly needs his pound of flesh:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions . . . If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? . . . The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard, but I will better the instruction.

The evil in the man peeps through that well-formulated statement. Shylock is the symbol of a man under siege, at least in his view. And besieged men are prone to explosive behav-



Alas, poor Yorick!

our, even incendiary acts. That said, how do you assess the plain villainy in Lady Macbeth, in whom not a drop of the milk of human kindness can be spotted? Macbeth succeeds Duncan on the throne; and yet somewhere concealed behind the crown he wears is the disturbing figure of a henpecked husband.

Power, then, becomes a matter of opinion. If Lady Macbeth rides her husband, in that all-encompassing sense of the meaning, the fiery and-gradually-submissive Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* is in the end a considerably shrunken woman. Petruchio will have none of the nonsense she hurls at him. Note:

Petruchio: Come, come, you wasp: I'faith, you are too angry.

Katherine: If I be waspish, best beware my sting.

Petruchio: My remedy is then, to pluck it out.

Unhappy, ambitious individuals people the world of Shakespeare. And men initially happy at the rise of their siblings to the summit are soon made grumpy by an excess of hate and a plenitude of expectations. You find some of that in *Richard the Third*. Richard, not yet king, seemingly celebrates the emergence of his brother as monarch thus:

Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this son of York / And all the clouds that low'r'd upon our house / In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

The hunchbacked Richard will soon emerge, in all his depth of vanity and villainy, to wreak havoc on the world around him. Consider, through the prism of history, the march of such hunchbacks, figuratively speaking, to the heights of glory at the expense of the good and the pious. They destroyed a world.

Shakespeare is all about life, about the nature of men and women. He makes us

laugh, even in the midst of deepening gloom. Think here of Puck, of Nick Bottom, of Caliban. The folly into which Lear lands himself once he surrenders the pomp of royalty to Goneril and Regan swiftly pushes him down a spiral staircase of gathering insignificance. And yet the proud king, not in the best of moods, dismisses his Fool as a plain, silly being. The Fool comes back with a vengeance: *...now thou art an O without a figure: I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing.*

Yes, you laugh at the wit in the Fool. And yet there is pathos which comes with that laughter, for Lear has fallen to the depths. Remember his tears, the howl that appears to rend the heavens asunder as he cradles a dead Cordelia in his arms?

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all?

Lear's tears become yours. Somewhere in you a father, a foolish one to be precise, rises. And you understand those bootless cries flung at the heavens.

Shakespeare, then, is part of you --- beyond frontiers, beyond cultures, beyond circumscribed time. Ben Jonson puts it aptly: 'He was not of an age, but for all time.' And Laurence Olivier was not far behind: 'Shakespeare --- the nearest thing in incarnation to the eye of God.'

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Literary Editor, The Daily Star.