

Myth

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SHAKESPEARE WAS THE MOST POPULAR WRITER OF HIS TIME

One popular website in which users ask and answer each other's questions poses this question: "Was Shakespeare popular in his day?" The entire answer posted by a reader states "Yes he was Shakespeare!"¹ It's a fair summary of general assumptions: how could Shakespeare *be* Shakespeare – read and performed 400 years after his death and translated across languages, media, and hemispheres – had he not been popular in his own time? But the question of how we define popularity and whether the evidence about Shakespeare confirms this myth need a little more probing, and we need also to separate popularity in the theater from popularity in print.

First, to the theater. From 1594 onwards, when he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men as both sharer (part-owner) and resident playwright, Shakespeare's own popularity is intrinsically related to that of the company. Thus, while the development of the Chamberlain's Men and the company's increasing dominance in the London theater economy cannot be solely attributed to Shakespeare's plays, nor can it be separated from them. The Globe theater on Bankside, built by the Chamberlain's Men in 1599, could take over 3,000 spectators; in 1608 the company opened an additional indoor theater, Blackfriars, for winter performances. In 1603 it received the patronage of the new king, James, becoming the King's Men and performing regularly at court. Shakespeare's own wealth also grew over this period: in 1596 his family acquired a coat of arms and with it the right to be styled "gentlemen"; a year later he bought a large five-gabled house in Stratford-upon-Avon, New Place, reputedly the town's second-largest. All these economic and prestige indicators suggest that the company and its house dramatist were thriving, and this in turn suggests

30 *Great Myths About Shakespeare*, First Edition. Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith.
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that Shakespeare's works, like the plays the company performed by other dramatists including Thomas Middleton and Ben Jonson, were popular.

It is, however, harder to be more specific. Almost no one who went to the theater at this time wrote about what they had gone to see. John Manningham, a legal student who saw *Twelfth Night* at Middle Temple in February 1602 is a rare exception, noting that it was "a good practice in it to make the steward believe his lady-widow was in love with him, by counterfeiting a letter as from his lady, in general term telling him what she liked best in him and prescribing his gesture in smiling, his apparel, etc. and then, when he came to practice, making him believe they took him for mad."² Manningham enjoys the situational humor of the trick on Malvolio, but frustratingly has nothing to say about Viola's male disguise as Cesario or the representation of fraternal twins: the glimpse of what was memorable, or popular, about the play is fleeing. Something similar could be said of the Jacobean accounts of performances of *The Winter's Tale*, *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline* by the astrologist/doctor Simon Forman (see Myth 13). The only sustained details we have about the economics of the Elizabethan theater come from the rival company the Admiral's Men, and from papers associated with their entrepreneurial manager Philip Henslowe. These papers suggest that Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, with its dynamic and amoral central character Barabas, was among the most frequently performed plays, with a schedule including ten performances in six months, far in excess of records for any Shakespeare play. When Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess*, a sharp satire on Anglo-Spanish relations, hit the Globe in 1624, it was such a sensation that it played for nine consecutive performances: no play of Shakespeare can claim anything like that box-office success. While our iconic reference point for classical literary drama is probably the image of Hamlet holding the skull of the jester Yorick (see Myth 27), for the early modern period the most instantly recognizable drama was not Shakespeare, but the bloody revenge tragedy by Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (written around 1590). Kyd's play spawned a prequel, a ballad version, was reworked by later playwrights to extend its stage life, and was quoted, parodied, and generally riffed upon by writers up to the closing of the theaters. There is no contemporary evidence that any of Shakespeare's plays had this reach, although we do know that other writers copied and reworked his plays: for example *Hamlet* echoes are evident in two almost contemporary plays, John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and Henry Chettle's *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, and early in the seventeenth century John Fletcher wrote *The Woman's Prize*, a sequel to Shakespeare's battle-of-the-sexes comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*.

There is one particular aspect of Shakespeare's dramatic work where we can see significant contemporary popularity: the characterization of

the disreputable, lovable, and obese knight Sir John Falstaff. Falstaff first appears in a play apparently called *Henry IV*, where he is a distinctly unheroic and satiric counterpart to the play's depiction of noblemen fighting in the aftermath of the deposition of King Richard II. As the companion of King Henry's eldest and rather prodigal son, Prince Hal, Falstaff offers an alternative world of tricks and taverns which draws both the heir to the throne and the play's audience away from the play's political content. Falstaff's popularity seems to have been immediate. A sequel was written – *Henry IV Part II* – and Falstaff was also transplanted into a quite different locale, the bourgeois town of Windsor, in the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (see Myth 28). There is evidence in letters from the period that his name had become a popular type. As the index to the classic collection of contemporary references to the plays, *The Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, notes, “for the purposes of this index, Falstaff is treated as a work,” and references to Falstaff far outnumber allusions to any other aspect or play. Among the entries are comments in plays by Massinger, Middleton, and Suckling, as well as private references including the Countess of Southampton's gossipy postscript to a letter to her husband: “All the news I can send you that I think will make you merry is that Sir John Falstaff is by his Mrs Dame Pintpot made father of a goodly miller's thumb.”³ Falstaff can also be said to have inaugurated Shakespeare scholarship: debates over his characterization developed into one of the earliest books on Shakespeare, Maurice Morgann's 1777 defense, *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff*.

Some of the plays we know to have been popular in the theater are lost because they were apparently never printed: *The Wise Man of West Chester*, for example, had repeated performances over a long period in 1594–7.⁴ The question of how Shakespeare's plays came to be printed is discussed in detail in Myth 4. In trying to use the evidence from Shakespeare in print to pin down his contemporary popularity, it is interesting to note that only half of his plays were published during his lifetime: there was no market for, say, a quarto of *Macbeth*, but this fact might be explained by saying the play was not popular (no one wanted to buy it) or that it was (the theater company therefore did not want to sell it). Lukas Erne has argued that in 1600, the year in which Shakespeare was most visible in the print marketplace, his works account for about 4 percent of that year's published output across all genres. Erne identifies forty-five separate editions of Shakespeare's plays in print during his lifetime, more than for any other contemporary playwright: particularly popular in terms of the number of editions were the early history plays *Richard II* (six editions before 1616), *Richard III* (five) and, thanks to Falstaff, *Henry IV* (like many sequels, *Part II* does not seem to have been such a success).⁵ For comparative purposes, *The Spanish Tragedy* also had

six print editions over the same period; the bestselling play by reprints is the anonymous pastoral romance *Mucedorus* (first published 1598) which has more than a dozen editions over three decades. The attribution in print to Shakespeare or, more allusively, to “W.S.,” of plays not now generally thought to be Shakespearean, including the mythical story of the founding of London *Lochrine* (1595), the city comedy *The London Prodigal* (1605), and the true-crime murder story *The Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), may point to the fact that Shakespeare’s name sells.

Additionally, there is evidence of an inverse relationship between the historical survival of texts and their contemporary popularity. Some printed texts do seem to have been read to death. There are, for instance, only two extant copies, neither complete, of the first edition of *Hamlet* (1603), and just one copy of the first, 1593, edition of Shakespeare’s poem *Venus and Adonis*: his first entry into print, and the work, along with the tragic narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (first printed in 1594), for which he was probably best known during his lifetime. The majority of contemporary references to Shakespeare are to him as the author of these two popular poems, which went into nine and five further editions respectively before 1616. The dictionary derivation of “popular” is “belonging to the people as a whole”: it’s hard to state that any writer in the Elizabethan period was popular in this sense, where, as David Cressy has estimated, literacy rates may have been around 30 percent for men and less than 10 percent for women in 1600.⁶ In addition, no print run of any book in the period was allowed to exceed 1,500 copies (the Globe theater, remember, could take 3,000 spectators). Literary works in any case were only a small part of the print market, which was dominated by religious works – sermons, prayer books, bibles, commentaries, and psalm translations – and by household manuals – conduct books and “how-to” works: within this restricted sphere, however, Shakespeare was certainly a significant player.

Popularity and personal renown or artistic recognition are not necessarily the same thing: if we were looking at bestselling books from our own period we would probably not expect that category to overlap extensively with critically acclaimed or “classic” literary works. There is evidence that Shakespeare’s works were valued by contemporaries. Francis Meres, writing in 1598, identifies Shakespeare’s predominance:

As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latins: so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for Comedy, witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love labours lost*, his *Love labours won*, his *Midsommers night dream*, & his *Merchant of Venice*: for Tragedy his *Richard the 2*. *Richard the 3*. *Henry the 4*. *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*.

The identity of “Love labours won” is unclear. Elsewhere in his analysis, though, he seems to identify Shakespeare as on a par with contemporary writers rather than exceeding them in quality or popularity. For example, here is his list of “the best for Comedy amongst us”:

Edward Earl of Oxford, Doctor *Gager* of Oxford, Master *Rowley* once a rare Scholar of learned Pembroke Hall in Cambridge, Master *Edwards* one of her Majesty’s Chapel, eloquent and witty *John Lyly*, *Lodge*, *Gascoigne*, *Greene*, *Shakespeare*, *Thomas Nashe*, *Thomas Heywood*, *Anthony Munday* our best plotter, *Chapman*, *Porter*, *Wilson*, *Hathway*, and *Henry Chettle*.⁷

This is a roll-call of theatrical writers of the time, not a selective pantheon. The existence of the posthumously printed edition of Shakespeare’s collected dramatic works (1623), in an expensive, high-status folio format more usually associated with bibles and serious works of history or topography, is evidence less for his popularity than for his literary – and financial – value. And even as the Folio’s editors address it to “the great variety of readers,” “from the most able, to him that can but spell,” and joke that they wish the readership were weighed rather than numbered, they do so at the head of a volume whose cost pushes it well beyond anything that might be called “popular” in its true sense – “of the people.”

Notes

- 1 http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Was_shakespeare_popular_in_his_day
- 2 Quoted in Emma Smith (ed.), *Blackwell Guides to Criticism: Shakespeare’s Comedies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 1.
- 3 F.J. Furnivall, C.M. Ingleby, and L.T. Smith, *The Shakspeare Allusion-Book* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), vol. 2, p. 536; vol. 1, p. 88.
- 4 <http://www.lostplays.org>
- 5 Lukas Erne, “The Popularity of Shakespeare in Print,” *Shakespeare Survey*, 62 (2009), pp. 12–29 (pp. 13–14).
- 6 David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 177.
- 7 Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia. Wits Treasury* (London, 1598), pp. 282, 284 (sigs. 2O2^r, 2O3^v).