

William Shakespeare



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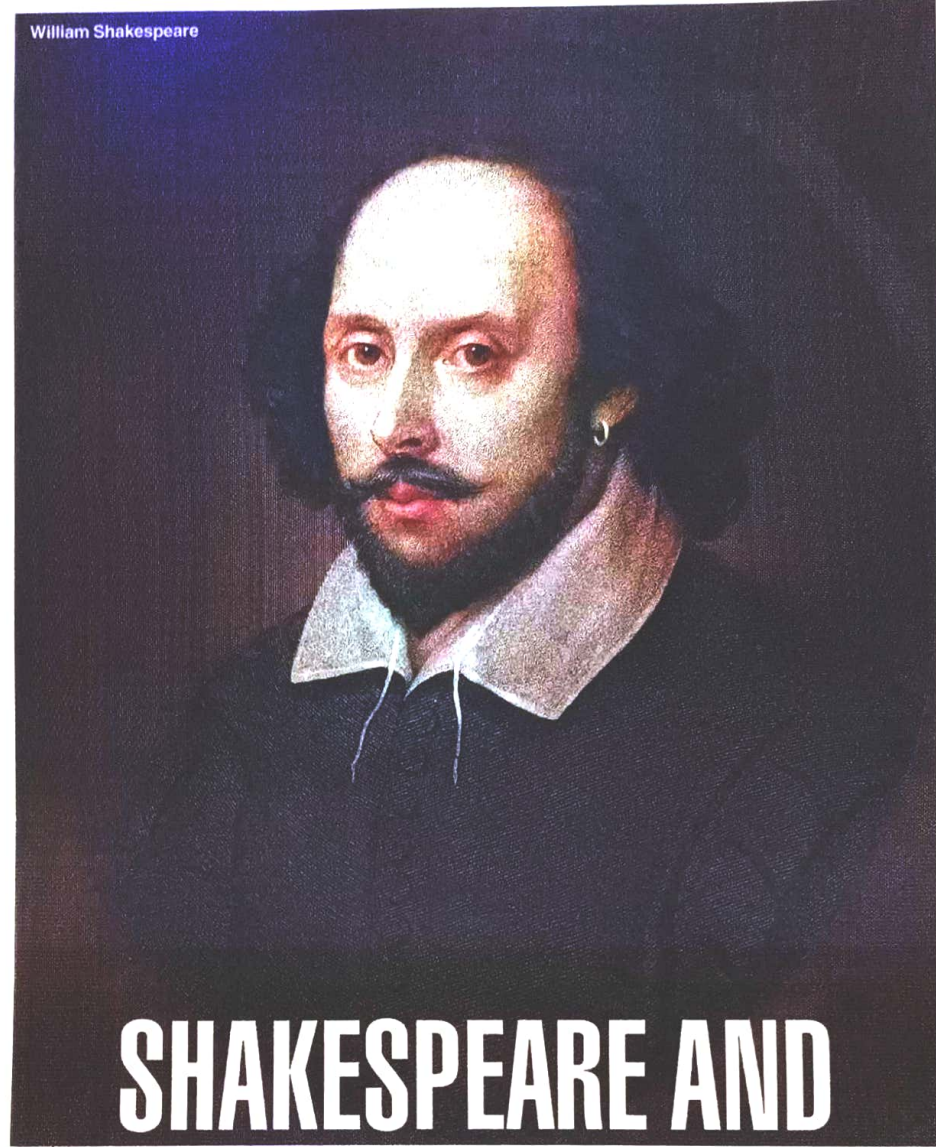
**BOOKS**

**T**hat great and gentle mellifluous voice of tolerance, the voice of William Shakespeare, echoes at the present time when rabid racism and gluttonous greed to swallow your neighbour's homeland and territory reduces them to the label of "the Other", turning their homes to rubble and letting their innocent blood flow in rivers. Having destroyed the Other who lives in a narrow strip of land called Gaza, the aggressors are salivating at the idea of redeveloping it into a "glitzy New Gaza of waterfront skyscrapers, industrial zones, and new ports", places where no displaced, poor Gazan will ever live. The glitz cannot hide the evil.

The young Shakespeare wrote his first plays in his 20s. The England he wrote about during the reign of his beloved Queen Elizabeth I (1550-1603) — who ruled over a mighty, disconnected, fractured nation with palace intrigues, constant threats to her of being overthrown or killed by Catholics waiting in the wings — was the England that served as the contextual reality for his plays. It is no secret that the Queen dressed in the most resplendent gowns of silk from all over the world with the emblem of the human ear sown between the folds, that stated quite clearly that she wanted to hear what her subjects had to say.

In these dire socio-political climes, it is not surprising that Shakespeare's work delves into the dark, racial and xenophobic currents in Elizabethan England, in which the Bard offered a "cure for xenophobia", as the scholar Stephen Greenblatt suggests. In effect, Shakespeare does not endorse prevalent racial prejudice, but he probes it, and presents the "Other" in the form of Othello and Shylock in a manner both complex and empathetic, bringing to his audiences at the Globe Theatre in London an image of these two marginalised characters steeped in humanity, and at the same time presenting the standard racist characters of the period.

The Bard of Avon made it a point to write about the need for humanism and peaceful coexistence. The global mass migration of refugees escaping imperialist wars and persecution in Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Ukraine — numbering over 117



# SHAKESPEARE AND HIS STAND AGAINST RACISM

In a world torn asunder by division and war, Shakespeare remains a voice that calls out for oneness

million people forcibly displaced, as of mid-2025 — seems to have been foreseen by the Bard in his play *Sir Thomas More*, where the character of Thomas More, the Chancellor of England, gives a passionate speech against the mob mentality of Londoners to ban "strangers" (refugees and immigrants). In his time, the playwright took a stand against xenophobia and intolerance, both traits running riot in English society. More says, "Imagine that you see the wretched strangers, their babies at their backs and their poor luggage." Far from ignoring the deep-rooted racism, misogyny, and intolerance, the

Bard confronts these prejudices head on with his pro-refugee stand. Shakespeare showed English society its own warts. He presented powerful reasons to embrace "the Other" in the characters of Othello, and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, presenting both as marginalised persons, a Moor and a Jew. Listen to the dialogue Shakespeare writes for Shylock: "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the

same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? 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?" Shakespeare succeeds resoundingly as a commentator who, through the persuasive words of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, argues that Shylock be shown mercy, while at the same time warning Shylock that should he take an ounce more, or an ounce less, of Antonio's flesh, Shylock would lose everything. And so, Portia argues, "The quality of mercy

is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes... it is an attribute to God himself." Her speech highlights the limits of uncompromising justice. And the message is, as always, kindness is all.

How did English audiences and the press react? The audience found *Othello* compelling, and were mostly enthusiastic, but the newspapers, heavily influenced by a pro-slavery lobby whose financial backing they received in exchange for writing along racist lines, were hostile to the idea of a Black man performing a leading role in a play by the nation's most revered playwright.

Shakespeare creates the character of Othello as a Black military leader, the Moor of Venice, as a man fooled by his manipulative White subordinate, Iago. This binary of an honest Black Moor and dishonest White man caused a stir in England.

Shakespeare shows the character of the military General Othello as being a person well respected and admired, the Duke referring to him as "valiant Othello". Before Iago begins manipulating Othello, he is highly regarded in Venice for his leadership, noble qualities, and high standing. He wins praise for his military prowess, with commendations like "he commands like a perfect soldier". Even Iago acknowledges Othello's competence, referring to him as "the worthy general". His loving wife Desdemona admires his inner virtue and mind, saying with clairvoyance that she "saw Othello's visage in his mind".

Shakespeare speaks out on behalf of "the Other" in both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, by opposing racism in a society that was deliberately created to position Jews and Africans in Early Modern England at an arm's length from the English. According to the "rules" of class-ridden English society, it was necessary to keep "the Other" at a safe distance in order to avoid social "chaos" — because allowing "the Other" to penetrate England's sense of order could lead to society spinning out of control into chaos.

Always ahead of his time, the Bard did not portray multiculturalism in the sense we understand it at present, but his plays did sympathetically explore cultural encounters, foreigners, and "the Other" in his 16th-century world. We see his profoundly humanistic portrayal of a marginalised character in Caliban in *The Tempest* with such great depth that it offers a moving audience experience of prejudice (in addition to sympathetic characters Othello and Shylock).

Shakespeare made clear to his audience the imperial project of European powers to colonise foreign territories. Although their excuse was that they were on a civilising mission, they had no moral or ethical restraint. Thus, Caliban, the dispossessed native and original inhabitant of the island in *The Tempest*, warns Prospero who has usurped his