

# Disrupt Texts' assault on Shakespeare and other classics: Money, ignorance and social backwardness

David Walsh

29 November 2021

At the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, composer and professor Bright Sheng came under attack in early October for showing an undergraduate seminar Stuart Burge's 1965 film version of William Shakespeare's *Othello*, with British actor Laurence Olivier playing the "Moor of Venice" in dark makeup. Although defenders of the university's actions have refrained from open denunciations of Shakespeare, that is where these right-wing social elements are headed.

The incident points to a much broader phenomenon on college campuses. In recent years, the study of ancient Greco-Roman history, literature and philosophy has come under attack as a discipline, along with disparate figures, in addition to Shakespeare, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Burns, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, John Steinbeck, J.D. Salinger, Philip Roth, Giacomo Puccini, Titian, Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Egon Schiele, Henri Matisse and many others. The latter are all considered sinners against contemporary upper middle class sensibilities.

Earlier this year, the *School Library Journal* published a shameful article headlined, "To Teach or Not To Teach: Is Shakespeare Still Relevant to Today's Students?" It argued that "Shakespeare's works are full of problematic, outdated ideas, with plenty of misogyny, racism, homophobia, classism, anti-Semitism, and misogynoir [misogyny directed towards black women]."

The piece continued, "Is Shakespeare more valuable or relevant than myriad other authors who have written masterfully about anguish, love, history, comedy, and humanity in the past 400-odd years? A growing number of educators are asking this about Shakespeare, along with other pillars of the canon, coming to the conclusion that it's time for Shakespeare to be set aside or deemphasized to make room for modern, diverse, and inclusive voices."

The *School Library Journal*, dedicated apparently to the dismantling and emptying of school libraries, cites the claim by Ayanna Thompson, director of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and professor of English at Arizona State University, that Shakespeare "was a tool used to 'civilize' Black and brown people in England's empire. As part of the colonizing efforts of the British in imperial India, the first English literature curricula were constructed, and Shakespeare's plays were central to that new curricula."

This is anti-historical absurdity. Can Thompson explain how Shakespeare, any more than any other artistic figure, was responsible for the use or misuse of his work after his death? We would imagine that mathematics, physics and biology were also taught in India as part of "the colonizing efforts." Should Euclid, Newton and Darwin be thrown out as well?

In any case, from there it is a small step to the *Journal's* contention that if the playwright "became a fixture in part due to colonialism, another

assumption to consider is what it means when people say his works, or any, are 'universal.'" Jeffrey Austin, English Language Arts department chair at Skyline High School in Ann Arbor—one of the hotbeds of identity politics—chimes in, "We need to challenge the whiteness of [that] statement: The idea that the dominant values are or should be 'universal' is harmful." This type of race-obsessed commentary, associated historically with the extreme right, passes for "left" criticism at present.

The #DisruptTexts website, aimed principally at high school teachers, is one of the most pernicious advocates of displacing Shakespeare and other significant figures and works, including F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. It claims its mission is "to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve."

When the words "inclusive" and "representative" are used by such people it does not signify the broadening of culture and education to the mass of the working class. On the contrary, it is a demand for the increased presence in various institutions of well-paid African American, Latino and other "media consultants," "diversity experts" and such.

What does it mean to "disrupt texts"? The website states defensively that "We do not believe in censorship and have never supported banning books." It lies. On Twitter, its representatives write, "Do we encourage teachers to replace racist, harmful texts? ABSOLUTELY. Can you teach a great text and still have a harmful impact? Yep."

In 2021, which "racist, harmful texts" are being taught in US classrooms? Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*? No, these people have in mind Fitzgerald, Harper Lee, Arthur Miller and Shakespeare, among others. And what does it mean, to "move away from continuing to give space to these voices," if removing, i.e., censoring and suppressing, texts is not involved?

One of #DisruptTexts' co-founders, Lorena Germán, has tweeted that "Did y'all know that many of the 'classics' were written before the 50s? Think of US society before then & the values that shaped this nation afterwards. THAT is what is in those books. That is why we gotta switch it up. It ain't just about 'being old.'"

This is someone who knows nothing, about history, literature or any other important subject. The poverty and backwardness of the language match the poverty and backwardness of the conceptions. If this individual had her way, the work of Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Whitman, Twain, Crane, Wharton, Norris, London, Sinclair, Dreiser, Cather, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Lewis and others would be dropped from school curricula.

The fact that #DisruptTexts chooses to single out for attack three works—*The Great Gatsby*, *The Crucible* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*—highly critical of aspects of American society, including the emptiness of the American Dream, the vileness of the rich, the character

and consequences of political witch-hunts and racist frame-ups, is telling in its own right. The sole criterion by which these forces gauge a work is the extent to which it advances their racist cause and financial interests. Art and truth do not get a look in.

An especially sinister project undertaken by the website is its campaign against Shakespeare. On Twitter, in October 2018, Germán announced: “#DisruptTexts takes on Shakespeare. You will find questions, discussions, and resources to aid you in critically disrupting the teaching of Shakespeare at your school or home. Comment and share!”

To be blunt: those who advocate “disrupting the teaching of Shakespeare” should be regarded with utter contempt, they are little better than right-wing hooligans breaking in and setting fires to books.

In its “Chat: Disrupting Shakespeare,” addressed to “Fellow Disrupters,” the #DisruptTexts website argues that “Shakespeare, like any other playwright, no more and no less, has literary merit. He is not ‘universal’ in a way that other authors are not. He is not more ‘timeless’ than anyone else.” His plays, the reader is informed, “harbor problematic depictions and characterizations” and contain “violence, misogyny, racism, and more.”

In the first place, it is impossible to take seriously people, self-proclaimed “educators,” who post in public the empty-headed assertion that every playwright “no more and no less, has literary merit,” whatever that might mean. As for the rest, global culture and humanity as a whole over the past 400 years have already pronounced on the assertion that Shakespeare has no more value than “any other playwright.” His reputation is safe. #DisruptTexts disgraces itself by its positions.

We read further: “Overall, we continue to affirm that there is an oversaturation of Shakespeare in our schools and that many teachers continue to unnecessarily place him on a pedestal as a paragon of what all language should be.” The conversation, #DisruptTexts insists, “is about an ingrained and internalized elevation of Shakespeare in a way that excludes other voices. This is about white supremacy and colonization.”

The website, in the manner of Alcoholics Anonymous, offers brief accounts by teachers who have broken free from the Shakespeare addiction. One such, from Flint, Michigan, details her decision to “disrupt” *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Romeo and Juliet* with Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X* (2018). She describes this as “a good first step for me to disrupt *the classics that plague our curriculum*,” and concludes, “I know in the future I will be better equipped to point out *the oppressive structure that both Lee and Shakespeare rely on*—that is, if I even return to teaching either story at all.” (Emphasis added.)

What vile nonsense this is! And how brave and honorable of Germán and company to mount a campaign against *Romeo and Juliet* in particular, one of the most tragic, agonizing stories ever brought before an audience? The doomed teenage lovers done in once again, this time by race-fixated know-nothings!

This is a conscious effort to block youth from access to some of the finest, most subtle products of the human mind and spirit. It is part of the systematic coarsening and “dumbing down” of American society, which have already had devastating political, social and, more recently, health consequences.

This does not come from the “left,” but from the right. These denunciations of great literature and art, regardless of the empty “anti-racist” demagoguery, are in the tradition of pro-Nazi poet and playwright Hanns Johst, responsible for the famous line, slightly altered from the original German, “When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun.”

#DisruptTexts includes among its “learning guides” *Antiracist Baby* by racist fanatic and snake-oil salesman Ibram X. Kendi. Disgracefully, Penguin Classics, now a subsidiary of media conglomerate Bertelsmann (which generated \$23 billion in revenues in 2020), offers the learning guides, including Kendi’s execrable work, to teachers and librarians, announcing on its website, “We are honored to partner up with

#DisruptTexts to bring you this resource to help you bring equity to your classroom or library!” A giant transnational publisher in partnership with book burners!

Large amounts of money are involved. The global market for “Diversity and Inclusion” was estimated at US\$7.5 billion in 2020 and is projected to reach \$15.4 billion by 2026. Any exposure of this charlatany endangers lucrative careers, six-figure salaries, “diversity, equity and inclusion” (DEI) projects, “standards” and “toolkits,” and consulting firms (such as Germán’s own Multicultural Classroom, an educational consultancy group that offers workshop and speaker sessions aimed at helping “participants understand the intersection of race, bias, education, and society”).

“Disrupt” or simply criticize “#DisruptTexts” at your peril! As Young Adult author Jessica Cluess found out the hard way. In late November 2020, in response to Germán’s stupid and menacing attack on books “written before the 50s,” Cluess replied in a series of angry tweets.

She wrote, “If you think [Nathaniel] Hawthorne was on the side of the judgmental Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* then you are an absolute idiot and should not have the title of educator in your bio.” And further: “If you think Upton Sinclair was on the side of the meat packing industry then you are a fool and should sit down and feel bad about yourself.” Cluess also referred to Zora Neale Hurston’s “*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and other literature of the extraordinary Harlem Renaissance,” continuing, “This anti-intellectual, anti-curiosity bullshit is poison and I will stand here and scream that it is sheer goddamn evil until my hair falls out. I do not care.” She also sarcastically commented on “that embodiment of brutal subjugation and toxic masculinity, [Henry David Thoreau’s] *Walden*,” before urging those who actually agreed with such witless statements to “Sit and spin on a tack.”

For her entirely appropriate and much needed comments, Cluess came under a furious attack, egged on by Germán, as a “racist” who was threatening “violence.” Unfortunately, Cluess gave in to the pressure and issued an abject apology. Her literary agent, in an act of exemplary courage, subsequently dropped the writer as a client. The Vandals at #DisruptTexts, with laptops and Twitter accounts, are practitioners of a new McCarthyism.

### Shakespeare, anti-Semitism, racism, misogyny

Such outfits rely on a generally low level of historical and cultural knowledge. Their contention that Shakespeare represents “colonization” and authority generally, that his work legitimizes the status quo flies in the face of historical experience. In reality, Shakespeare has often appealed to the oppressed and downtrodden, and has been turned to by them, for more than two hundred years at least.

And for good reason. The dramatist’s eloquent denunciations of injustice and cruelty, as well as his theme of personal emancipation, still inspire audiences and readers. The case could be made that the modern opposition to anti-Semitism, misogyny and racism begins with Shakespeare.

The Jewish moneylender Shylock’s speech in *The Merchant of Venice* remains one of the finest, angriest egalitarian manifestos in the history of literature: “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?”

It should be noted, for the benefit of Shakespeare's feminist detractors, who are apparently unable to read or think, that the playwright includes an appeal resembling Shylock's (including its warning about revenge) on behalf of women and wives in *Othello*. Emilia, Iago's wife, who becomes a heroic figure in the last moments of the play, refusing to be silenced by her husband—although it costs her life—and exposing his nefarious plot against Othello and Desdemona, earlier speaks out against men who “strike,” “scant” financially or prove unfaithful to their spouses:

... Let husbands know  
Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell  
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,  
As husbands have. What is it that they do  
When they change us for others? Is it sport?  
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?  
I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?  
It is so too: and have not we affections,  
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?  
Then let them use us well: else let them know,  
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

Although, again, for social and historical reasons, male characters dominate his plays for the most part, Shakespeare created, in addition to Desdemona and Emilia, a great and varied collections of female figures, not all of them laudable and admirable by any means: Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*), Rosalind (*As You Like It*), Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Cordelia and Goneril (*King Lear*), Gertrude and Ophelia (*Hamlet*), Isabella (*Measure for Measure*), Miranda (*The Tempest*), Olivia and Viola (*Twelfth Night*), Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*), Titania (*A Midsummer's Night Dream*), Cressida (*Troilus and Cressida*) and, of course, Lady Macbeth, among others.

#DisruptTexts attempts to chloroform public opinion by suggesting that admiration for Shakespeare by African Americans represents the “internalization” of “white” oppression and colonialism. They distort, or rather omit entirely the historical record, because it speaks against them. In fact, the most rebellious and farsighted African Americans have been drawn to Shakespeare's work.

As literary critics have noted, while Shakespeare provided the Jewish moneylender one magnificent speech, he wrote an entire tragic drama centered on the North African general, Othello. In his remarkable 1965 study, *Othello's Countrymen—The African in English Renaissance Drama*, the Sierra Leonean academic and literary critic Eldred Durosimi Jones argued that Shakespeare used the background of English stage tradition and growing popular experience by the early 1600s with Africans, Arab and black, on the streets of London “very sensitively, exploiting its potentialities for suggestion, but at the same time moving away from the stereotypes, so that in the end Othello emerges, not as another manifestation of a type, but as a distinct individual who typified by his fall, not the weaknesses of the Moors, but the weaknesses of human nature.” Shakespeare, Jones added later, was able to transform “the Moor with all his [previously] unfavourable associations into the hero of one of his most moving tragedies.”

The human word, as Trotsky once observed, “is the most portable of all materials.” Former slaves in the epoch of the Civil War, impoverished and oppressed Jews deep in the provinces of Tsarist Russia, Chartists in Victorian England, sweatshop workers in New York City at the turn of 20th century, all could—and did—make Shakespeare and his titanic dramas and themes their own.

Othello and Shylock figure prominently in the encounter of African Americans with Shakespeare. Heather S. Nathans of Tufts University

begins her essay “‘A course of learning and ingenious studies’: Shakespearean Education and Theater in Antebellum America,” with this remarkable passage:

In 1788, Matthew Carey's popular Philadelphia journal, the *American Museum* [the first magazine to print the Constitution, in September 1787], printed a letter from a black author who called himself ‘Othello,’ exhorting the nation's white citizens to fulfill the Revolution's promise and abolish slavery. Appropriating the dignity and authority of Shakespeare's martial leader, the author warned that if white Americans continued to flout the laws of nature by holding slaves, they would bring down divine justice from ‘a Creator, whose vengeance may be now on the wing, to disseminate and hurl the arrows of destruction.’ The following year, the *American Museum* printed another letter on the subject of slavery by an anonymous author who also borrowed Shakespearean rhetoric to support his argument. Describing himself as a former slave, he paraphrased Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, begging justice for the nation's black citizens: ‘Has not a negro eyes? Has not a negro hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?’

This hardly needs commenting upon. *Othello* and Shylock's famed speech are invoked in the battle to make American society live up to the pledge of the Declaration of Independence and do away with chattel slavery. This battle would erupt into full-scale conflict in the Civil War 73 years in the future.

Nathans writes further on, “How, why, or where African Americans then encountered Shakespeare in early American culture is not always clear.” After referring to the possible roles of free schools and theaters, she also takes note of the more than 50 “African American literary clubs” that sprang up in various northern and eastern cities. Nathans continues: “By the 1850s, knowledge of Shakespeare had become an important part of the black educational experience in America—whether it was in the playhouse, the classroom, or the privacy of a select reading club.”

The African Company, the first known black theater troupe, opened at the African Grove Theater in New York in 1821, and operated for several seasons. Its first production was Shakespeare's *Richard III*, followed shortly by *Othello*. According to Anthony Duane Hill of Ohio State University, the company's “principal actors were James Hewlett (1778-1836), the first African American Shakespearean actor; and, a young teenager, Ira Aldridge (1807-1865).” Soon after the theater closed in 1823, Aldridge, “by now one of the Company's leading performers, sailed to London where he was free to practice his craft as a respected professional. Aldridge reached the pinnacle of acclaim internationally as a stage actor for over 42 years throughout the capitals of Europe.”

Aldridge also identified with Shylock. In response to the actor's performance of the part in St. Petersburg in 1858, a Russian reviewer commented perceptively, “In Shylock he [Aldridge] does not see particularly a Jew, but a human being in general, oppressed by the age-old hatred shown towards people like him, and expressing this feeling with wonderful power and truth. . . . His very silences speak.”

### Shakespeare, Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright and more

The greatest African American figure of the abolitionist and Civil War epoch, the former slave Frederick Douglass, was devoted to Shakespeare

and literature in general (he took his “freedom name,” Douglass, from Walter Scott). When asked in 1892 to name his favorite authors, Douglass ranked Shakespeare first.

In “Frederick Douglass, A Shakespearean in Washington,” author John Muller notes that tens of thousands of people each year visit the National Historic Site at Cedar Hill, “Douglass’s home in Anacostia [D.C.], where the library shelves hold volumes of Shakespeare’s complete works and a framed print of Othello and Desdemona hangs above the mantle in the west parlor.”

Muller goes on, “Douglass frequently alluded to Shakespeare in his oratory and was known to attend performances of Shakespeare at local Washington theatres. On at least two occasions Douglass served as a thespian for the Uniontown Shakespeare Club, a community theater company.” Moreover, in an episode full of social and cultural resonance, Douglass on one of those occasions performed the role of Shylock. (Douglass and his second wife were among the first Americans to attend a performance of Giuseppe’s Verdi’s opera, *Otello*, in May 1887 in Rome.)

The impact of Shakespeare on the greatest African American artists in the 20th century, including the members of the Harlem Renaissance, should come as no surprise—his work contains immense drama, torment, tribulation at the highest level. Langston Hughes titled a volume of poems “Shakespeare in Harlem,” and Zora Neale Hurston’s later novels, one critic notes, shows her “refiguring images and problems from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.”

The central image of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, the accidental suffocation of a white woman by a black man, deliberately echoes *Othello*. In his diary, Wright once observed, “By God, how Shakespeare haunts one! How much of our speech comes from him.. .. One is awed.” In 1959, playwright Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*) discussed how a contemporary dramatist uses “the most obvious instruments of Shakespeare. Which is the human personality and its totality. I’ve always thought this is profoundly significant for Negro writers. ... Man, as set down in the plays, is large. Enormous. Capable of anything at all. And yet fragile, too, this view of the human spirit; one feels it ought to be respected and protected and loved rather fiercely.”

Ralph Ellison wrote *Invisible Man* with “two books ... on his desk at all times. One was the dictionary, the other the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*.” Novelist James Baldwin, in 1964, observed that Shakespeare, the “greatest poet in the English language found his poetry where poetry is found: in the lives of the people. He could have done this only through love—by knowing, which is not the same thing as understanding, that whatever was happening to anyone was happening to him.” We could go on.

Trotsky spoke of “the cultural thirst of the masses.” Shakespeare was a vital figure to generations of the most advanced British workers, striving for culture and knowledge. Historian Martyn Lyons, explaining “the profusion of working-class autobiographies ... in the nineteenth century,” remarks that the “eager search for book knowledge was vital to the intellectual emancipation on which political action was based.”

In his *The Genius of Shakespeare*, Jonathan Bate writes of two traditions, the “Establishment Shakespeare” and the “Popular Shakespeare.” To substantiate his argument that the playwright “has survived and has been made to matter as a voice of radical culture,” Bate points to the case of Thomas Cooper (born 1805) who became a leader of the Chartists, the revolutionary movement of the British working class, in the city of Leicester.

Cooper and his comrades called themselves “The Shakespearean Association of Leicester Chartists.” Bate explains that Cooper “gave lectures on contemporary politics, but also on Shakespeare: to do so was to reclaim a heritage for the people. When Cooper was arrested for fomenting riot and on a false charge of arson, he raised money for the legal expenses of himself and his fellow-accused by putting on a

production of *Hamlet*.”

American workers too, in the 19th century and beyond, sought to educate and enlighten themselves through Shakespeare, Scott, Dickens and other classics. For example, in “Poverty and Privilege: Shakespeare in the Mountains,” Rochelle Smith, from Maryland’s Frostburg State University—in one of the state’s poorest Appalachian counties—notes that in the years “before the Civil War, some of Frostburg’s miners were certainly reading Shakespeare, as one of them, Andrew Roy, reminisces: ‘We used to meet after our day’s work in the mine and read aloud to each other.’”

Shakespeare was immensely popular in the US at this time. Lawrence W. Levine in “William Shakespeare and the American People,” asserts categorically that “Shakespeare *was* popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America.” Levine cites the comment of a US consul in England who, just after the Civil War, “remarked with some surprise, ‘Shakespearean dramas are more frequently played and more popular in America than England.’”

Of course, there were also “respectable” African American critics, like a certain Dr. Humphrey, who commented in the *New York Observer* in 1839 that he was sorry that “most of his [Shakespeare’s] plays were ever written” and that “Shakespeare as he is, is not a fit book for family reading. What Christian father, or virtuous mother, would allow him, if he were alive, to come into a blooming circle of sons and daughters and write his plays, just as they stand in the best editions?”

To the pragmatic-minded, the #DisruptTexts argument that books must be more “relevant” and accessible to students, about people “who look and sound like them,” is irresistible, but it is a very shallow one. Why not then restrict English language curricula to television commercials and *People* magazine? The immediately relevant and accessible is often not insightful or valuable at all. Students are capable of taking on complex texts if they are motivated and understand that something important will come out of the mental effort.

The most insidious argument against Shakespeare centers on the claim that he offers no special insights, that he is a playwright like any other—as Germán puts it, “I want to offer what to read INSTEAD of Shakespeare. Trust me, your kids will be fine if they don’t read him.”

It is not true that young people “will be fine” if the race zealot-censors, in combination with the general decay and disintegration of the public education system, succeed in depriving them of Shakespeare and other literary classics.

It is not true, as the *School Library Journal* article claims, that “If the point of language arts classes is to explore literature through critical analysis; grow writers; increase skills, literacy, and meaningful engagement; and create lifelong readers, students can do that through any text.” *Any text*, mind you!

It is not true that “There is nothing to be gained from Shakespeare that couldn’t be gotten from exploring the works of other authors,” in the words of Ann Arbor’s Austin.

The philistinism and light-mindedness of these various comments beggar belief. “Why not sell off that Michelangelo or that Leonardo, they’re simply gathering dust (and crowds)—there must be something in the storeroom that will do every bit as well?” And these are people responsible for educating young people.

There are art works charged with meaning to an intense degree, works that are richer and more challenging, more demanding of us than others. This is why they have survived and continue to call on our own powers of comprehension and sympathy. These are works that still move, enlighten and, yes, *improve* us. Shakespeare is not read and performed today because “maleness” and “whiteness” continue to be “centered” by some conspiracy, but because of his unique dramatic and poetic gifts, his unsparing realism, his profound insight into human relationships.

Of course, no artist is “timeless” or “universal” in an *absolute* sense.

Every writer, painter or composer is produced and shaped by definite social, historical, national, geographical and individual-psychological conditions. The significant figure works in and through those particular circumstances to produce enduring, objectively meaningful art. The truly “immortal” artist endows feelings and moods with “such broad, intense, powerful expression,” in Trotsky’s phrase, as to raise them “above the limitations” of the life of a particular epoch. Class society, despite great changes, possesses certain common features. So, plays written in London in the first decade of the 1600s “can, we find, affect us too.”

Shakespeare lived during the transition from the declining feudal system to capitalism. He wrote his poetry and plays, or began to write them, at a time when old and new social forces co-existed, even coalesced or fused for a time under Queen Elizabeth I, an unstable, ultimately untenable state of affairs that would come to an end in the explosion of the English Revolution a quarter-century after his death. The age “was loosening all the old ties of society and undermining all traditional conceptions. The world had suddenly grown almost ten times bigger.” (Engels) A fortunate combination of objective circumstances and Shakespeare’s own genius-intuition permitted him to look both backward and forward in time, both upward and downward in social space, perhaps more than any other literary figure in history.

His work is not magical or “divine,” but it is brilliant and highly unusual and deserves to be treasured. He registered in a poetically encyclopedic fashion and conveyed to others the point to which the most economically and politically advanced societies had reached in terms of both public and private conduct. Beyond that, Shakespeare was able to work out the future results of certain changes taking place (hence, his ability in *Othello*, for example, to treat the consequences of social resentment and the poisonous uses of race hatred), as well as to mentally put himself in the position of the socially marginalized or abused, women, Jews, blacks, and forcefully, *logically* arrive at and dramatize their responses to their oppressive or unfair conditions. As a Scottish writer later put in the mouth of one his characters, “Shakespeare, sir, was not one to flinch from the utmost severity of a Case.”

And the onset of the Renaissance meant, moreover, that “with the old narrow barriers of their homeland fell also the thousand-year-old barriers of the prescribed medieval way of thought. To the outward and the inward eye of man opened an infinitely wider horizon.” (Engels) A vast accumulation of human experiences, thoughts and feelings, pent up by institutions and religious dogma for hundreds of years, were able to find expression, not only in Shakespeare’s plays, of course, there were dozens of gifted dramatists in England, but most powerfully and concentratedly in his.

#DisruptTexts and its co-thinkers are dedicated enemies of enlightenment and education. Students, teachers and serious academics should treat them with derision, challenge them and expose their ignorance.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**