

# A conversation with literary scholar and biographer Jonathan Bate about Shakespeare and “the empowering possibilities that I’ve always believed that literature has”

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Jonathan Bate is a prominent British literary scholar, historian and biographer who has written extensively about Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature, Romanticism, contemporary poetry and theatre history.

Among his best known works are *The Genius of Shakespeare* (1998), *The Song of the Earth* (2000), *John Clare* (2003), *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare* (2009), *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* (2019), *Radical Wordsworth: The Poet who changed the World* (2020) and *Bright Star, Green Light: The Beautiful Works and Damned Lives of John Keats and F. Scott Fitzgerald* (2021).

Bate is currently a professor at Arizona State University. He also remains a Senior Research Fellow of Worcester College Oxford, where he was Provost from 2011 to 2019, and he holds the title of Professor of English Literature in the University of Oxford.

Before moving to Oxford in 2011, he was a Fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, King Alfred Professor of English Literature at the University of Liverpool and Professor of Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature at the University of Warwick. He has served on the board of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

One learns a great deal from Bate’s books, whether or not one accepts every one of their themes or approaches. They are scrupulously researched, empty of postmodern and other forms of contemporary academic jargon, and intended to reach and educate a general audience.

Bate writes about various figures and trends, but Shakespeare has remained a central and abiding interest. In *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, he comments—remarkably and tellingly—that “the wonder of Shakespeare is that I continue to find unseen depths in him even after forty years of studying, teaching, editing, watching, and writing about him.” His most recent books on the subject bear out this assertion.

The WSWS recently spoke to Professor Bate. Our conversation occurred in the context of the ongoing campaign by gender- and race-fixated elements to diminish or displace Shakespeare and other literary classics. In October, the WSWS took up the case of Bright Sheng, the Chinese-born professor of composition at the University of Michigan, accused of committing a “racist act” for showing the 1965 film adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, which features Laurence Olivier playing Othello in black make-up.

On our video call, I first noted that the effort to diminish the significance of Shakespeare’s work was not a new issue. “You discussed it at some length,” I pointed out, “at an earlier stage of its development, in *The Genius of Shakespeare*, for example, more than 20 years ago. To cite one passage: ‘The argument goes something like this. “Shakespeare’s extraordinary reputation and continuing prestige are a function not of his

poetic genius but of his political servility, his adaptability to Establishment values. ...’” And so forth.”

Today, I added, we are hearing a highly racialized version of that. For example: “There is an over-saturation of Shakespeare in our schools and ... many teachers continue to unnecessarily place him on a pedestal ... This is about an ingrained and internalized elevation of Shakespeare in a way that excludes other voices. This is about white supremacy and colonization,” etc.

I asked Professor Bate if he could explain his present attitude toward these issues.

He first referred to the fact that that “the current culture wars are replicating those of the ’80s and ’90s. But with a focus on race and gender identity.”

Bate explained that he “began organizing” his thoughts on these matters in his second book *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theater, Criticism, 1730–1830* (1989). “I wrote it,” he said, “as a reaction against this movement that emerged in the 1980s, which claimed that Shakespeare was an instrument of the ideological state-apparatus. A serious look at Shakespeare’s place in the culture of that extraordinary time, the time of the French Revolution and the growth of radicalism in Britain, revealed that he was a voice of the Left, as well as someone used to justify the social and political status quo.”

He commented that he found it “understandable, unsurprising, but disappointing that there is now an idea that somehow Shakespeare needs to be displaced because he doesn’t give a voice to diversity.” Bate mentioned discussing the issue with his wife, writer Paula Byrne. “She comes from a working-class background. She used to teach in a community college in a very deprived area of the northwest of England. She said, ‘I always remember I had a black student—and to be honest, there weren’t many black students in the northwest of England at that time—who said, ‘I love *Othello* more than anything I’ve ever read before, because it was the first thing that I’ve ever read that showed that a black man can be a hero.’”

In regard to the Olivier performance in the 1965 film of *Othello*, Bate admitted to distinctly “mixed feelings.” In retrospect, he remarked, one can see “that his attempt to voice Othello as if he were a British Caribbean immigrant does look racist. But it wasn’t meant to be. So, looking back from the perspective of today, I am uncomfortable about the Olivier film, but then isn’t the notion that things in the past which make us uncomfortable in the present should somehow be suppressed as if they didn’t exist a failure to learn the lessons of history? Doesn’t it remind you of Stalin’s erasure of Trotsky?”

In any case, I interjected, these are things that could have been discussed

in the classroom. But shutting down the class and forcing the professor out ...?

Bate suggested, "It doesn't do anybody any good to erase the past, in all its complexity, including those elements of it that we now find, at best, embarrassing, at worst deeply offensive. I simply don't think Olivier's reading of the play was a very good one."

He commented that his feelings about *Othello* as a play had "evolved over the past 25 years. I'm now much more conscious than I was when I first saw or read the play of the importance of Islam in the play and in the age of Shakespeare more generally. Iago's use of racist tropes is one dimension of the play, but I'd say that there is more emphasis on the Christian-Muslim conflict. ... It seems to me it's a play more about religious wars, than it is about race, as race came to be understood in the 19th and 20th centuries."

Returning to Shakespeare and politics, I asked, wasn't it simply empty-headed, "in any event, to suggest that Shakespeare must have had a stabilizing, conservatizing influence on the public?" The playwright "presented aristocrats and kings and queens stabbing one another, overthrowing one another, cheating, lying, behaving in every sort of rotten, underhanded way. How could that not have contributed to the public's skepticism, loss of confidence, loss of illusions about the upper echelons of society, its God-anointed betters?"

Bate agreed. "When his company staged the play about the conspiracy to assassinate King James, it was shut down almost instantly. All the theaters were shut down when Nashe and Jonson put on *The Isle of Dogs*. Shakespeare knew he had to be careful about what he said, to get it on stage. His plays had to be read by a court official—the Master of the Revels."

But, he went on, "Shakespeare entirely undermined the notion that the word 'noble' refers to both someone's aristocratic position and his or her morality. King Lear speaks of 'the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office.' That kind of destabilization you talk about made it possible, in terms of the development of the popular psyche of the age, for King Charles I to be put on a stage-like platform and have his head chopped off in front of a crowd outside the very building where King James, his father, had watched *King Lear*!"

Bate continued: "And then you only have to see throughout history the way in which Shakespeare has been used for revolutionary purposes, in exactly the way that Shakespeare himself used, say, Roman history for revolutionary purposes."

I suggested that, in our view, the artist was not identical to his or her social origins or political conceptions. For a Marxist, the honest, important work has an objective value, apart from the artist's inevitable socio-historical complications, or even retrograde views, which depend on myriad circumstances. "To read Shakespeare," I added, "for his immediate 'politics' or for his fate at the hands of the British establishment is seriously mistaken, and deeply subjective."

In this regard, Professor Bate referred to a comment from Walter Benjamin in his 1937 essay, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian." Benjamin asserted, he said, "that what defines great works of art is that they 'incorporate both their pre-history and their after-history—an after-history in virtue of which their pre-history, too, can be seen to undergo constant change ... their function can outlast their creator, can leave his intentions behind.'"

Bate wanted to add one thing about a "standard argument against Shakespeare, and indeed the canon of English literature in general—that it first was used educationally, became canonical, as a way of indoctrinating the Indian people in the early 19th century, for purposes of empire."

He pointed out that this was not, in fact, when Shakespeare started being used in education. "His work starts being used in the late 18th century in the dissenting academies. They were attended by people, typically from the lower-middle class, who didn't get to go to Oxford and Cambridge

and study Latin and Greek, and didn't take their oath of loyalty to the Church of England. Those institutions were established to empower the lower-middle classes through education. Instead of the Latin and Greek classics, it was Shakespeare and Milton that were put at the center of the curriculum."

The idea of English literature as a discipline, Bate continued, "begins in Warrington, in the northwest of England, in the dissenting academies, out of which people like [chemist and radical political theorist] Joseph Priestley came. [Literary critic and radical] William Hazlitt was educated at a dissenting academy in Hackney, in the east end of London. So, Shakespeare's initial role as an educational force does not have to do with the Empire and indoctrinating the non-English with Englishness. ... This is an error symptomatic of the current debates, in which race is often raised instead of class."

This, needless to say, was something with which I strongly concurred.

Bate has written forcefully against the extreme relativism of certain strands of postmodernism. In our conversation, I brought up his response (in *The Genius of Shakespeare*) to a passage in the work of British academic Terence Hawkes, in which Bate wrote that the "New Iconoclasm" was "in error when it says, 'Like the words of which they are composed, the plays have no essential meanings.' Words have semantic range, but they also have semantic limits. The error is the result of a leap from ambiguity to radical indeterminacy. ... 'Both/and' does not license a free for all; that Shakespeare is changed by being performed does not mean there is no Shakespeare. The plays do not mean anything and everything just because they mean many things."

I commented that he seemed to have kept himself apart from the worst ravages of postmodernism. "In your works," I said, "you concentrate on historical facts and trends, on real, objectively existing human beings and problems, and your writing is jargon-free and accessible. Did you have to come to a conscious reckoning with postmodernism at some point?"

Bate thought for a moment. "It seemed to me from an early stage," he replied, "back in the early 1980s, when we began being aware of deconstruction, that it would end up running the risk of destroying the value of literature through the combination of the use of jargon, which to ordinary people is rebarbative, and the idea that all writing is amenable to the same kind of deconstruction. It involved the evacuation of the idea of the beautiful, the idea of aesthetic excellence, the possibility of there being some works of art that continue to do their work through time. All these developments ran the risk of cutting us off from the empowering possibilities that I've always believed that literature has."

He noted that he had always sought to reach multiple audiences. As an example, Bate referred again to a certain re-thinking he had done about *Othello*. Before incorporating it into his intellectual biography of Shakespeare, *Soul of the Age*, "I first developed the idea as a lecture. I tried it out at a high school in Blackpool in the north of England in a very working-class area. The kids were studying *Othello* and they absolutely got the argument. I then did the same talk as the plenary lecture at the World Shakespeare Congress in Spain, addressing all the world's leading Shakespearean scholars, and I hardly changed a word, and the talk went down just as well there. I fail to see why you need convoluted prose in order to put across important ideas about Shakespeare and his formative influence upon global culture."

If you were addressing a nervous or perhaps somewhat skeptical crowd of high school teachers or college teachers, I asked Bate, how would you present the importance of teaching Shakespeare?

He responded: "I would simply say that students love to be stretched and that although when you start out with Shakespeare the language can seem difficult, alien, I've never had an experience in 40 years of talking to a group of high school kids or teaching undergraduates in many different universities where at the end there have not been students saying, 'Oh, my God, Shakespeare's amazing, Shakespeare makes me see things

in new ways. I love the way he uses language, the way he represents human personality, human conflict.”

Bate referred to his comment in *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* that he was still learning from the playwright after four decades of studying his work. “And often it has been students, and not necessarily privileged ones, who have shown me those things,” he noted. “We are creatures who live and think, communicate and socialize, by language, and language can do so much, and I don’t think there’s anybody that I’ve encountered in all of human history who does so much with language as Shakespeare.”

“At various points in *Soul of the Age*,” he went on, “I talk about the fact that Shakespeare was a victim of snobbery. He was snubbed and represented as an uneducated outsider, a peasant from the provinces. The fact that he had to deal with the university wits, the clever Oxbridge types, early in his career, who were mocking him, gave him a real understanding of what it is to be an outsider, what it is to be taunted, to be harassed. That, it seems to me, is one of the things that allows him to represent Othello and Caliban and other outsiders so sympathetically.”

In *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* Bate writes suggestively about the important influence in particular of Roman writers Terence, Virgil, Cicero and Ovid on Shakespeare. I raised this subject.

He told me that he had years ago written a book, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (1993), “exploring in detail the myriad ways in which Shakespeare used his favorite poet, Ovid, so when I was asked to do the lectures that became the recent book I wanted to take a bigger look at Shakespeare and the classics. One of the things that I got excited about was the influence of Cicero in particular. Nobody had written about Shakespeare and Cicero, even though he does appear as a character in *Julius Caesar*, yet Cicero did so much to shape the political culture of Shakespeare’s age, as indeed of later ages.”

“There are some historians,” Bate argued, “who say there was no such thing as republican thinking at the time. That can’t be true: anybody who read Cicero, and everybody who had a grammar school education had to read Cicero, would have encountered the notion that an elected leader might become a tyrant and therefore have to be assassinated in the name of saving the republic. It seems to me that there is a line from the history of Roman republican thinking through to the republican moment in English history and then obviously to the republican moments in French and American revolutionary history.”

Based on a reading of his book, I commented, “it seems to me in part at least that Shakespeare gets his deep humanity and flexibility as well from the pagan classics.”

He said, “*How the Classics Made Shakespeare* was written to some extent against the tendency in a lot of recent Shakespearean criticism to focus on him and the debates around Catholicism.” Bate continued, “Shakespeare finds imaginative inspiration far more in the glorious anarchy of the pagan gods of Greece and Rome, because Greek and Roman religion has these gods who are symbolic of different aspects of human behavior, whether it’s desire, power, purity, drunkenness, beauty, whatever.”

Those gods are all quarreling “with each other and that’s what human life is like. A lovely play like *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is absolutely shot through with the language of these kind of gods in conflict. I don’t think he had much time for monotheism because he didn’t have time for ‘mono’ ideas in general. The whole point about Shakespeare is this fantastic, complex, contradictory play of ideas and feelings.”

What strikes one over and over again in Shakespeare, I commented, “is this incredible empathy, the ability to put himself in various shoes and work out the logic of the given individual’s positions, whether it’s a 14-year-old girl, a Moorish general, a gravedigger. You point to the comments of Dr. Samuel Johnson and Hazlitt, and what you refer to as Shakespeare’s ‘mongrel’ form, his stylistic ‘hybridity.’ It seems to me

that it has to be connected, at least on the intellectual front, with that revival of the classical world.”

Bate said, “I think that’s absolutely right. Coming back to some of the culture wars of today, I think it’s a rather strange moment where writers are having to be hesitant about taking any subject position other than their own. There’s a fine English novelist named Rose Tremain who recently said, ‘I’m just not sure I can go on writing novels because people are going to attack me for appropriating the identity of people who I am not.’ It just seems so bizarre because I thought the whole point of art was to imagine what it’s like to be someone else.”

As one of my final questions, I pointed out that he studied and analyzed a number of artists who wrote magnificently—Shakespeare, Wordsworth (at least the early Wordsworth), Keats, Fitzgerald, John Clare. Was there ever a danger, I asked, “of this kind of mood—‘Well, the world is in a bad state, look at the headlines, but at least there’s Shakespeare’? Can the beauty of art become a means of distracting you from the world? How do you keep your literary criticism oriented toward life and reality?”

Bate replied, “Bread and circuses? I think that’s a fair potential criticism.”

Perhaps he hadn’t understood my point: “It’s not a criticism, you have every right to study these artists, and they are all great figures. I’m speaking rather about a danger, what might be a temptation in difficult times, to ‘fly away’ with ‘Beauty.’”

By way of an answer, Professor Bate explained his view of things: “Arguably, there are three great crises facing the United States and the world: the crisis of the climate, the crisis of inequality and poverty, and the crisis of mental health. I would hold my hand up and say that I think my work is more addressed toward the crises of mental health and the climate than that of social inequality. But what I would say is that the mental health crisis and the climate crisis affect the disadvantaged, the marginalized and the excluded to a far greater extent than they affect the privileged. Therefore, there is all the greater need to give those without privilege the plays of Shakespeare as a tool for thinking and, I believe, the mindful meditative reading of poetry as a form of mental oasis, a tool for managing painful feelings. There’s all the more need for educators to give those things as tools to people from disadvantaged backgrounds and that’s one of the reasons that I was very keen to come to Arizona State, which is the university committed more than any other in America to genuine inclusion.”

Given the figures and subjects he writes about, I wondered whether Bate himself had come under attack by the identity politics forces.

“It’s sometimes been argued,” he explained, “that my work inclines too much to the aesthetic, and insufficiently to the political, which I don’t think is true.

“The area of my work that’s stirred greatest controversy would actually not be so much my books on Shakespeare as my work on the place of literature, and poetry in particular, in thinking about ecology and the environmental crisis. In my book *The Song of the Earth* [2000], I argued that the particular thing the arts can bring to the debate about our environmental crises, is something that is ‘pre-political.’ So I made a distinction between eco-poetics and eco-politics.

“Obviously, a huge part of the environmental problem is purely political. It has to do with capitalism, profit, the extractive industries, and so on and so forth. I wouldn’t deny that for a moment. But at the same time, I do think a part of the story is a devaluation of a notion of the sacredness of the earth.”

For Marxists, I said, “Social inequality and the climate crisis are absolutely bound together. We don’t see any possibility of solving any of these issues without breaking the stranglehold of this capitalist elite.”

Bate responded, “I do sometimes wonder whether the concepts of development and sustainability are actually compatible with each other because what ‘development’ means in many senses is capitalism. It’s the

kind of development that has taken place in China in the last 30 years. How amazing that what is in effect state-controlled capitalism has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, but at what environmental price?”

I remarked that Trotsky had made an “environmental statement” in *Literature and Revolution*. “He argues that humanity in socialist society, through technology, will organize life rationally, including ‘the course of the rivers’ and ‘rules for the oceans.’ Humanity will do all of this so well ‘that the tiger won’t even notice the machine, or feel the change, but will live as he lived in primeval times.’

“Nature and human activity, which is itself part of nature, are entirely compatible, but a harmonious existence is not compatible with production for profit and the nation-state system. All that has to go before we can solve anything, but, in any case, that’s a discussion for another day.”



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