

William Shakespeare: Poet, Playwright, Time Traveler

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The year was 1613. Well, no, that's getting ahead of myself ... or would it be *behind* myself? I'm unsure. By the gods! Time travel is confusing! I shall begin anew.

The year this all started was 2010. I was busy working on an issue of *READ* magazine that was to be (not "not to be") entirely devoted to William Shakespeare. We had produced many Shakespeare issues in past years, but I wanted this one to be extra special. The question was, how?

The other editors and I toiled for many a weary day. We tossed around possible story ideas and reviewed old issues and new books; we even entertained the idea of writing a fictional interview with the Bard. But it had all been done before. What we were looking for was an innovative way to approach the man whom many readers recognize as the greatest writer the world has ever known. Needless to say, the task that lay before us was daunting.

Our first deadline came and went. We had nothing. Our second deadline was looming and still, nothing. In the publishing business, it is never

wise to miss a deadline. People go berserk. You can imagine everyone's frustration. The time was nigh! Something had to be done! Our minds were so frazzled with possibilities and **devoid** of anything concrete that we decided it might **behoove** us to take a day off from the madness.

What follows is the absolutely, 100 percent, honest-to-goodness true story of the events that unfolded on that day. Don't ask me why we have labeled this "Fiction." Such things are beyond my understanding.

"You're making this up!" I shouted at my friend Paul. We had been shooting pool in his basement for the better part of the morning, and Paul had just won his third straight game of eight ball when he told me what I thought to be the dumbest lie I had ever heard.

"Why would I lie?" He casually racked the balls for a new game. "What would I have to gain?"

"You really expect me to believe that you've invented a time machine?"

"I don't expect you to *believe* anything. Try it out

for yourself. I'm done with it. There are only so many times you can be chased by dinosaurs in the past or fight aliens in the future before you get exhausted and realize ... 2010 is the time for me."

"I'm sorry ... aliens?"

"Not the point, Bry. Here." He tossed me a souped-up calculator.

"What's this?"

"That's the time machine, fool! Just type in any date and location you want to visit—and poof! You're there. Don't ask me how it works. It's way too technical for a word guy like you to understand. Just make sure you hold on to it tight when you travel. You don't want to lose it mid-trip and be stuck in the time vortex."

It sure did look like an ordinary, run-of-the-mill calculator. The only difference was that it had letters as well as numbers. For a giggle, I humored him and typed in "downtown London, June 29, 1613," because I knew something extraordinary had happened in literary history that night. Not surprisingly, though, nothing happened.

"Hit Enter," Paul said and smiled. "And fasten your seat belt."

I hit the button and Paul's basement vanished in a whirlwind of fantastic fluorescent colors. In a blink, I was standing amidst a group of hundreds of men, and a few women, above some kind of arena. They were all ranting and raving and throwing coins into a pit that was occupied by one sad, but furious, midsize brown bear. One of his legs was chained to a post, and a pack of howling dogs was attacking him. This was raw Elizabethan* sport in the flesh. It was awful. I pushed my way out through the crowd yelling "Shame on you!" but no one even turned a head. They were focused on the inhumane animal fight with bloodthirsty eyes. It was a different time, you see. So very, very different.

Understandably freaked out, I made a mad dash out of the arena and into central London. There were mobs, merchants, and miscellaneous musicians. The general atmosphere was a mix of joyous celebration and shameless **pandering**.

My style of dress turned quite a few heads. One 17th-century dude proclaimed, "What manner of fool is this?" Clutching the calculator, I bolted.

I ran on thinking that I should get out of there as fast as possible. I considered punching in my return date of 2010, but I took a deep breath and remembered: *Shakespeare is here. Somewhere*. I wasn't going to pass up this impossible opportunity.

I pulled myself together and did some Dumpster diving behind a second-rate tailor's shop. When I say "dumpster diving," I am referring to a pile of rubbish. The 1600s were certainly cool, but they weren't necessarily clean. Luckily, I found a decent pair of faded gray-brown breeches, a slightly stained doublet, and a somewhat ratty jerkin.** "When in Rome," I said to no one and changed quickly, though Rome was well over 1,000 miles away.

Donning my new garbage clothes, I stepped out into the street. How was I ever going to locate Shakespeare?

* vocab

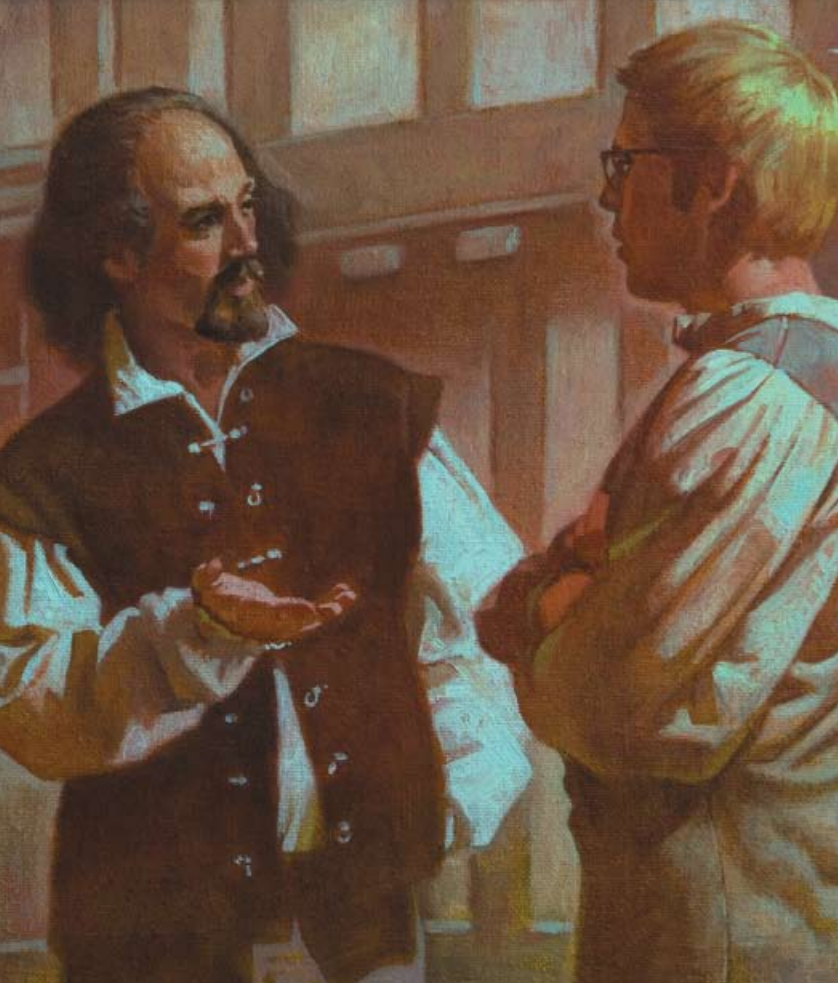
DEVOID: lacking

BEHOOVE: benefit

PANDERING: catering to or profiting from the weaknesses or vices of others

*The Elizabethan era was the period marked by the reign of Queen Elizabeth, 1558–1603. The activity described here is called bear-baiting.

**17th century clothing: breeches are knee-length trousers, often lavishly decorated; a doublet is a close-fitting outer garment, like a shirt, often sleeveless; and a jerkin is a sleeveless, fitted jacket



“The soul of this man is in his clothes!” a voice behind me said. I turned and dropped my jaw. It was the Bard himself. I would have recognized him anywhere. His silky, black hair flowed down into wavy curls on either side of his face, and his prominent, overbearing forehead was even more regal than in the pictures I had seen on Google Images. *What stupendous luck!* I thought.

“Good day,” he said, continuing on his merry way.

I followed him too closely. I had no shame. He sensed my presence and stopped in his tracks.

“Thought is free, friend,” he said. “Speak.”

“You are William Shakespeare,” I said, at last. He gazed at me, perplexed. The man, in his own time, was definitely not the superstar he is today and was therefore not used to the recognition.

“In body and in name, I am indeed.”

“But what’s in a name, right? Am I right? Ha. Ha, ha?” I laughed awkwardly as he continued to stare. “So, Will, what’s up?” My new companion tilted his

head toward the sky. I followed his gaze ... up.

“Whatever do you mean? Your speech and accent are foreign. Do I know you, sir?”

“Well, no. No. Not exactly. I’m ...” How to explain anything? “I’m an admirer of your work. I fancy myself a writer as well, and I am currently working on a, um, story that will feature you.” I said *story* instead of *magazine*, as the first magazine in print wouldn’t be for another 100 years or so.*

“A story about me? How enticing! Very well. Come along.”

I followed him through the streets of London. He had a sprightly step for a man of 49. I tried to forget the fact that he had only three more years to live. That information would do neither him nor me any good.

As we walked, Will, as he didn’t seem to mind being called, pointed out the Blackfriars Theatre. “An excellent venue for my plays,” he said, “though certainly, my heart

of hearts lies with my beloved Globe Theatre. The actors there, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, are truly the world’s greatest **thespians**. Their hearts are mighty, and their skins are whole.” A thought occurred to him. “Verily, let us, you and I, go to see a show at the Globe this afternoon. They are putting on a performance of my play *All Is True*.”

“No!” I shouted, and Will stopped short in the street. “I mean ... I’d rather not.”

“Why?” he asked. “What’s the matter that you have such a February face, so full of frost, of storm, of cloudiness?” I could not tell him the truth, because later that very day a tragedy would occur. I had plugged this exact date into Paul’s calculator time machine because during this afternoon’s performance, a cannon would be shot from the stage and cause a great fire that would burn down the theater. I did not know what to do with this foresight. So I stalled.

“What play did you say was showing at the Globe?”

“*All Is True*,” he repeated.

“Is it? I have heard that the play is actually about Henry VIII. Why don’t you just call it that?”

His **countenance** changed to a radiant glow, and he clapped me on the shoulder. “Thou art brilliant in your simplicity, sir! I will do so indeed! Hurry, let’s away! To the Globe!”

My stalling tactic had backfired. The cannon would undoubtedly still fire, and the Globe would burn. Except now, I might be responsible for the death of William Shakespeare if he were to attend. Or myself for that matter! Something had to be done. I slyly reached for the calculator in my pocket. When he turned away from me, I promptly typed in “Boston, MA. December 11, 2010.” I jogged the few steps toward Will, wrapped my arms around him in a bear hug, and with one free thumb I pressed Enter on the time traveling calculator. *Boom! Zoom!* We were gone in a brilliant display of light and color.

It was a bustling Saturday afternoon in Boston. This time of year is filled with crazed holiday shoppers running around to get the best deals.

“This is such stuff as dreams are made on!” Will said, unable to believe his eyes.

“Yeah, about that. You’re not dreaming, Will. I have a confession to make. I’m sort of a time traveler. Well, amateur time traveler, for sure, but still ... I kidnapped you and brought you to the year 2010. I hope you aren’t angry.”

He looked at me, astounded. His 17th-century brain was processing information that would boggle any 21st-century scholar. As his wheels turned, a few passersby gave us queer looks. We were a pair, all right. No doubt we looked like two fools fresh from a Renaissance fair.

“I’m very sorry. I don’t have time to explain, but I just could not let you go to the Globe tonight. This night ... in 1613, I mean ... wow, time traveling is hard. Do you feel woozy too?”

“Where we are—there are daggers in men’s smiles.” He was spellbound. He didn’t seem to care that I’d ripped him from his time, from his world, from his life. “There’s place and means for every man alive. Though this be not mine, I will revel in the holiday. Indeed, I have immortal longings in me. Where to, fair time bender?”

Cool, I thought, *he’s going with it*. “Well, we should get off the street for starters. I know a guy who lives around here. He’s a writer too. He may be the only

one who would believe this crazy story.”

“What is to believe? Are we liars? Though I am not naturally honest, I am so sometimes by chance.”

“As much as I do love your words of wisdom, Will, let us, as you would say, away.”

My friend Jeff lives in Newburyport, a suburb of Boston. As much as I wanted to give Will the grand tour, I wanted to get him somewhere safe first. I hailed a cab. Dumbfounded, the Bard got in and scooted over. I followed.

After an initial freak-out over the speed of the cab, Will managed to calm down and marvel at the incredible sights that rushed past his window. “Pleasure and action make the hours seem short,” he said, and I nodded. He was being a real trouper. “What a spectacular mode of transport!” he exclaimed with delight.

When we arrived at Jeff’s apartment building, I gave the cabbie a generous tip.

I rang the bell, and Jeff’s voice came through the intercom. “Who is it?”

“What sorcery is this?!” Will shrieked.

“What?” Jeff’s voice again.

“Jeff, it’s Bry. I’ve got ... well ... just ring us up.”

“Us?”

“Just hit the buzzer please, Jeff!” He did, and we walked up. Will still looked frazzled from the surprise of the phantom voice that had come through the magic box on the wall.

Jeff opened his door and was surprised to see just me. Will was lingering down the hall a bit, and Jeff hadn’t spotted him yet. “Hey! What are you doing in Boston, man?”

Will cautiously stepped forward. “Jeff Ives, meet William Shakespeare.”

“I don’t get it,” Jeff said. “What’s the joke?”

“No joke. I sort of time traveled and kidnapped him. No worries. He seems to be taking it well.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, fellow wordsmith.” Will bowed a greeting.

“Sooo ... are you going to let us in?”

“Sure, sure. I’ll play along,” Jeff said, and we entered his humble abode. We sat in his living room

* **vocab**

THESPIANS: actors

COUNTENANCE: the expression on one’s face, visage

*The first print publication to use the word *magazine* was called *The Gentleman’s Magazine*. It debuted in London in 1731.

and he poured us both some tea. “I assume this has something to do with *READ?*” he asked, not able to take his eyes off the Bard, who was busy squirming and lightly bouncing himself into a more comfortable position on the couch.

“Yes and no. We’re pressed for time, and we don’t have a play or any features for our ‘You Know Who’ issue.” I went on to tell him about my adventures of the day. Slowly, he began to accept the truth.

“So you’re saying this is the *real* William Shakespeare.” Will winked coyly at Jeff.

“It is an honor and a privilege, sir,” Jeff said. “I can’t begin to tell you how much I admire your work.”

“Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving.”

“Right.” Jeff and I are both huge Shakespeare buffs, but we were starting to think that his use of antiquated English was a bit intrusive to the conversation. “So what now?” Jeff asked.

“Well, I have to nail down just what the heck this issue is going to be. Do you happen to have any old *READs* lying around to show Will?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” He busted out the Goals, Dreams, and Obsessions issue, and together we explained the concept behind a readers’ theater play. Jeff had adapted Herman Melville’s classic novel *Moby Dick* into a play for that issue, and Will seemed impressed.

“You would do this with my work as well?”

“Yes,” I said. “You want to help out?”

“Verily! Let us write! Where art thy ink and quills?” Jeff and I both suppressed a laugh.

Jeff went to his laptop and opened it. Shakespeare shrieked. “It is more sorcery! If this be magic, let it be an art!”

“Oh, make no mistake, we are making art,” Jeff said and opened up a Word document.

For the next two hours, we struggled between explaining the technology of a computer and planning the issue. Jeff was excited to write the Center Stage play, and Will was enthusiastic about overseeing it. He was actually very cool about the idea behind “adaptation.” He relished the idea of teaching his works to *READ*’s young-adult audience. By 7 o’clock, Jeff had adapted *Much Ado About Nothing* and was creatively spent.

“Let’s go out!” I said. “A celebration is in order! Let’s go see a show.”

“Oh!” Jeff exclaimed. “There’s a production of *Romeo and Juliet* tonight. How about it, Will?”

“Dost thou mean my *Romeo and Juliet*?”

“None other!” I said. “You’re a legend, my friend! You have no idea how much you are **revered** in our day. People love you and your work!”

“Such as we are made of, such we be. I would give all my fame for an evening at the theater.”

“To the theater then!” said Jeff.

“To the theater!” I agreed.

“The play’s the thing,” said Will, of course.

Luckily, Jeff was of about the same build as Will and me, so we borrowed some of his clothes and were soon on our way. Will absolutely adored the theater and was amazed by the seemingly endless seating capacity. However, once the show began, he was not shy with his groans of **derision**.

“What is this?” Will proclaimed not even halfway through the first act. “The actors are ruining my work!” It was true. The acting was awful, the set was ghastly, and the overall experience was subpar at best. Of the pair that played the hero and heroine, Will proclaimed, “She speaks, yet she says nothing. And he that is likest to a hog’s head is far from the flower of courtesy. He is deformed, crooked, old and **sere**, ill faced, worse bodied, shapeless everywhere, vicious, ungentle, foolish, blunt, unkind, **stigmatical** in making, worse in mind!”

“Will,” I spoke softly to him. We had already received many shushes and foul looks. “You can’t just **berate** the actors out loud.”

“And why not? For they are murdering my art! This is the silliest stuff that I ever heard! It is the whole lot! How many ages hence shall this, my lofty scene, be acted over? In states unborn and accents yet unknown! Ack! Despised substance of divinest show. A change of venue! My kingdom for a change of venue!” And with that he got up and stormed out of the theater, into the street. We had no choice but to follow.

“I agree with you,” Jeff said. “It was bad, but it wasn’t *that* bad.”

“Would they had rehearsed under my careful eye, the play would not have stank as did that pig’s sty! ’Twas a travesty! A perfect tale told by perfect idiots, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing!”

“He’s pretty harsh,” Jeff said to me aside.

“Alas, thought is free. What’s done can’t be undone. Let us return to your abode and gather my things. I would very much like to go home, I should think.” So, sadly, we walked back to Jeff’s apartment.

Upon entering, Will made quick haste with changing back into his 17th-century garb. “I am ready, sirs. No legacy is so rich as honesty. And quite honestly, I am aghast. Free me

of this night terror you so **idly** call *future*.”

Jeff was beside himself with despair. He opened his laptop and casually went to his Facebook page. I was reaching into my pocket to use the time traveling calculator when Will looked at Jeff’s computer.

“What’s this?”

“Oh. Nothing. It’s just Facebook. It’s a social networking Web site where people can tell their friends what they’ve been up to. It’s a grand time waster. See what I just wrote?”

“Weirdest day ever,” Shakespeare read aloud. “*Will* I ever know more greatness and woe at once? ’Tis a tragicomedy.” He smiled. “That is clever, sir! So all your companions will read this?”

“Yeah. That’s pretty much the whole idea.”

A thought then struck the Bard, and his eyes lit up.

“What is it?” I asked.

“We shall go forward and be choked with our ambition! Though this be madness, yet there is method in it. Tell me, can anyone create a Bookface persona? Be he real or imagined?”

“Facebook, yes,” I said as I walked over to them, seeing the beginnings of a superb idea forming. “Why?”

“Nothing will come of nothing, dear friends! The whole underlying idea behind *Much Ado About Nothing* is just that! It is a sincere lot of nonsensical tomfoolery that amounts to no more than a jolly and entertaining waste of a few hours. I say we create our Benedick and our Beatrice, and we give them free rein over this Book of Face and let us see what will develop! “Open locks, whoever knocks! It is inspiration! Let him in!”

“I dig it,” Jeff said. “How should we start?”

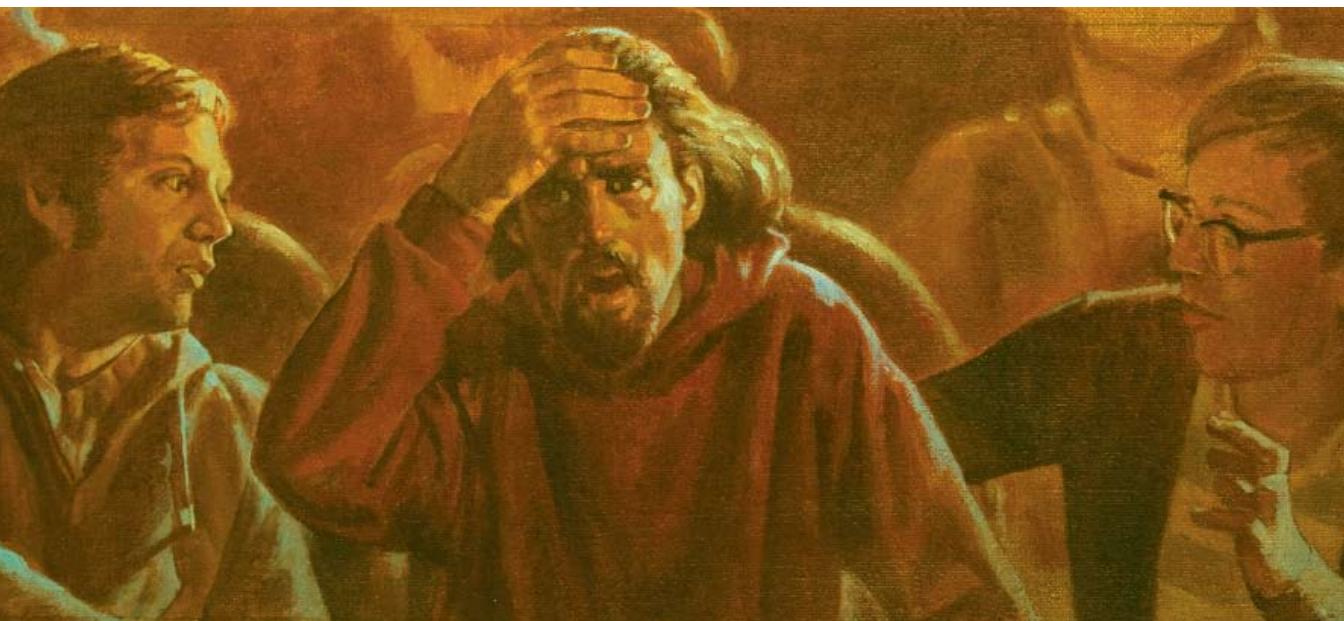
“Let us say,” Will began, “that the action shall commence during the month of my birth.”

“April,” I said. “Let’s say Tuesday, April 26. We have a lot of planning to do.”

“Quite. So let us begin. You can always take me back to jolly old England any time.”

“Quite,” I agreed and smiled. It was going to be a thrilling four months. ■

See page 2 of this issue for more details on this exciting Shakespearean Facebook endeavor! Go to www.weeklyreader.com/ado to join the play!



*** vocab**

REVERED: regarded with respect

DERISION: the use of ridicule

SERE: dry, withered

STIGMATICAL: having a physical blemish or deformity

BERATE: to scold

IDLY: without worth or importance