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## Why Shakespeare Belongs In Prison

By Karen Swallow Prior

It's his 450th birthday, and The Bard has never appealed to a wider or more diverse audience. American higher-ed English departments may be teaching [him less than they used to](#), but the Internet and modern film and TV interpretations have helped democratize appreciation of his works around the world. That's only fitting: In Shakespeare's era, the royalty in attendance at his productions was joined by crowds of commoners called "groundlings" and "stinkards" who paid a penny to stand in the pit, sweltering in the heat, while even more milled about outside.

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There's one "commoner" population to whom Shakespeare can hold special significance: convicts. Recent decades have seen a proliferation of programs in prisons, jails, and juvenile detention centers meant to introduce the accused to works found in the Folios and Quartos. While arts outreach efforts in correctional environments are nothing new, any diehard Shakespearean might recognize how his works appeal uniquely to the criminally accused, one of society's most marginalized populations.

Laura Bates, author of *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary With the Bard*, described teaching the plays in a super-max facility housing the most violent criminals in the system in an [interview](#) last year with NPR. The book's title comes from the words of one inmate, convicted of murder as a teenager and placed in solitary confinement for years.

"The day that I came knocking on his cell door," Bates explained, "his life had been so desperate, so bleak for so many years that he was literally at the point of suicide. And so in that sense by Shakespeare coming along, presenting something positive in his life for maybe the first time, giving him a new direction, it did literally keep him from taking his own life."

Is such redemptive artistic power special to Shakespeare? To an extent, yes. The themes and characters of Shakespeare's plays—overflowing with ambition, greed, love, deceit, betrayal, and revenge—naturally have particular resonance for criminal convicts.

“Shakespeare's tragic figures are very much imprisoned by both their circumstances and their choices,” says Scott Hayes, an associate dean in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Liberty University and a seasoned Shakespearean actor and director. “Prisoners connect deeply with that sense of imprisonment. The consequences of choices made by Shakespeare's characters are tremendous, and the prisoners truly understand and connect to the power our choices have to reap tragic consequences.”

Imagine how well the convict understands when Hamlet says, “Denmark's a prison,” or this line from *Merchant of Venice*: “Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long.” Clearly, Shakespeare knows something of the rebel's heart. It's a marvel, observes [Shakespeare Behind Bars](#) founder Curt Tofteland, that his “head didn't end up on a pike on London Bridge. Shakespeare was subversive, but he did it in such a way that allowed him to have a voice.” By creating complicated, three-dimensional characters and letting them voice their innermost thoughts in detail, Shakespeare's dramas help prisoners to give voice to long unnamed aspects of their interior lives.

Of course, some of these qualities of Shakespeare's works are true of most great [literature](#). Cognitive psychologist Keith Oatley writes about the transforming power characteristic of fiction in general in *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*. Oatley's research showed that readers of fiction changed the way they saw themselves more than did readers of non-fiction. He theorizes that engagement with artistic writing results in “an identification effect” and “a transcendent effect.”

First, readers of fiction experience empathy for the protagonists and then “compare their own lives and decisions with those of the characters.” Second, readers are “taken out of themselves, out of their usual ways of being and thinking,” thus freeing up the “habitual structures of selfhood.” Literary language, with its metaphors and metonyms and indirection, is more than gratuitous rhetorical flourishes, Oatley explains. Literary language reflects “ways of thinking” that are replicated in the mind of the reader through the act of comprehension.

Shakespeare's works are rife with such rich language that challenges the usual “ways of thinking” cited by Oatley. Shakespearean language “raises up rather than dumbs down,” Tofteland explains. And not merely because it is archaic. The sheer inventiveness of the language (Shakespeare is credited with [coining](#) more than 500 words) both accommodates and challenges the deep structures of society and the human condition (much like the best rap lyrics do). It helps, Hayes points out, that “Shakespeare was not meant to be read, but to be heard and spoken. Since many of these prisoners come from oral rather than literate cultures, they have an affinity for the aural nature of Shakespeare's language.”

Before creating his program for the accused, Tofteland taught Shakespeare to at-risk middle schoolers. That's when he first recognized the material's special appeal for the marginalized, disenfranchised, and imprisoned. He observed these “kids, who've been told their whole lives that they are stupid and troubled, get hungry for it”—hungry for the intellectual, personal, and human challenges for the downtrodden that Shakespeare has offered for centuries.

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