SHAKESPEARE'S AMERICAN JOURNEY

Dragoş Avădanei

Assoc. Prof., PhD., "Al. Ioan Cuza University," Iaşi

Abstract:The paper—basically attempting to answer, at least partially, the question in the second epigraph, by Georgiana Ziegler of the Folger Shakespeare Library—is made up of several sections and subsections, illustrating Shakespeare's "journey" (i.e. passage, course, itinerary, circuit, progress, tour, voyage, parade…) from 16th-17th century Britain to 17th-21st century America: facts and figures on Shakespeare and America, American Shakespeare "firsts,"(editions, stages, actors and companies, theaters, festivals, pageants…); Shakespeare anniversaries; Shakespeare societies, associations and publications; Shakespeare in American schools and colleges; trivia… Certain such "facts" get to be repeated from section to section, but this only comes to emphasize the main thrust of the critical effort: that of including as many references as possible in order to underline the "Englishman's" central role in a culture that is mostly embodied in a language that he helped modernize and stabilize as such, for a world that he "invented"; and hence such claims/titles as "Our Shakespeare," "America's Shakespeare," "American Shakespeare" or "Shakespeare for America."

Keywords: Shakespeare, America, influence, cultural impact, history, journey

"Literature cannot survive without William Shakespeare…"
Ashlee Jenson
"What makes the words, ideas and characters of William Shakespeare—an Englishman—so central to American life and thought?" Georgiana Ziegler
"Shakespeare has been and remains immensely strong and central to an American literary education, and not only literary education, but… to popular culture, to a huge, broad sweep of American culture…" Stephen Greenblatt
"The works of William Shakespeare and the cultural phenomenon that has materialized around the playwright's name now appear to be nowhere more at home or unconsciously accepted than in the United States of America."
Kim C. Sturgess

There had been many Americas (America=North America, and, in fact, the United States of America) before Shakespeare: an America of the Asians, the Paleo-Indians, who crossed the then non-existent Bering Strait, an America of the Native Americans proper, another one of the Viking explorers around the year 1000, Columbus's "Indian America," Amerigo Vespucci's

BDD-A26452 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:24 UTC)

America (his four voyages between 1497 and 1504 and his name on Waldseemuller's map of 1507, French (Quebec City, Canada in 1608) and Hispanic America (the Spanish had established a settlement at St. Augustine, Florida, in 1563, one year before Shakespeare's birth, and another one at Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1607); but what we might describe as "English/British America" is conveniently viewed as coming after Shakespeare and King James Bible of 1611; in fact, one of our college courses on American studies began with a lecture about how America came after Gutenberg, after Copernicus, after Luther and Calvin, and after the 1611 Bible and Shakespeare (each with its/his own importance).

It is probably even more appropriate to think that "English America" and Shakespeare came into this world in the same period: early English colonies were established in "America" in the 1580s, with Walter Raleigh's temporary settlements (1584 and 1587; Shakespeare got married in 1582, his daughter Susanna was born in 1583, twins Judith and Hamnet in 1585) on Roanoke Island and in Virginia (from "the Virgin Queen," Elizabeth I, 1558-1603). Then, in 1607, the first permanent English colony was named Jamestown (King James I was already on the English throne, 1603-1625).

Our parallel timeline becomes more interesting with the shipwreck of the "Sea Venture" (part of a nine-ship fleet sailing to Jamestown, carrying the colony's new governor) in a storm near the Bermudas in 1609; its crew and passengers had reached a deserted island, where they built two new ships, in which they finally arrived in Jamestown. Many accounts of the wreck were published, Shakespeare certainly read some of them (particularly that by William Strachey) and thus got the idea for The Tempest, 1610-1611, the last play he wrote alone; Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" is certainly another source (Caliban/cannibal); the play is his "tale" about shipwrecked Europeans colonizing an American island and enslaving the native population.

Shakespeare died in 1616, when other forts had been established at Albany, New York (by the Dutch first) and it would be another four years before the pilgrims arrived on the "Mayflower" and landed at Plymouth/Plimuth in 1620; it is this America that certainly comes after Shakespeare. whose American journey was about to begin.

And The Tempest was not the only play to contain references to America—"The Bermoothes," I 2; "the Indies" also occur in As You Like It, III 2 ("western Ind"), Henry IV, Part I, III 1 ("mines of India"), Henry VIII, IV 1 ("Our King hath all the Indies in his arms…"), The Merry Wives of Windsor, I 3 ("They shall be my East and West Indies…"), The Merchant of Venice, I 3 ("He hath an argosy bound… to the Indies…"); and see also the Anthropofagi mentioned in Othello.

One other way of looking at "Shakespeare and America" is by following this quasi-syllogism: the language of America is English; English is Shakespeare's language (to a very great extent, as he helped standardize Modern English, created thousands of new words and phrases, influenced the writing—in English—of a great many American authors—see infra); America is Shakespeare's land or Shakespeare is America's. Of particular interest here is Henry Cabot Lodge's essay on "Americanisms" (in Shapiro, 2014), presenting the argument that American English, "a superior dialect," resembles Shakespeare's tongue more closely than does British English.

So one is not surprised to find authors who write about an "American obsession with Shakespeare" today—commercials, cartoons, calendars, all kinds of merchandise, memorabilia, clubs, performances, festivals, mass and elite culture, education, films…; or here is a German scholar, Karl Knorts, in 1882 (apud Broqua, p.47): "Yes, there is certainly no land on the whole earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such high esteem as in America, so much criticized for its love of money; should one enter a blockhouse situated in the far West, and should the dwellers there exhibit very definitely evidences of backwoods life, yet has he nearly always

BDD-A26452 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:24 UTC)

finished a small room in which to spend his few leisure hours, in which the Bible and in most cases a cheap edition of the works of the poet Shakespeare are nearly always found." Several decades later, in 1939, Esther Cloudman Dunn (Shakespeare in America) also thought that "some magic in his plays has made Shakespeare, along with the Bible, a constant companion of American development."

As the greatest writer in the English language (see, as one of the very many examples, John Reich and L. S. Cunningham's Culture and Values, 2005) and the most quoted writer in the history of the English-speaking world (the 2006 Literary Encyclopedia or The Columbia Dictionary of Shakespeare Quotations), it is always difficult to overstate Shakespeare's importance: his basic human themes, his accomplished writing style/s, fluidity of thought, multiple meanings, the creation of new English words and word combinations…

"Shakespeare's American Journey" (there is an abundance of books, essays, lectures, papers, conferences… entitled "Shakespeare and America," "Shakespeare's America," "Shakespeare in America," "America's Shakespeare," "Shakespeare in American Life," "Shakespeare for America," "Shakespeare and the American Nation," "American Shakespeare"…) may make some sense in a paper this size by our first mentioning a number of "facts and figures" (about editions, stages, theaters, companies and performances, societies and associations, anniversaries and festivals, curricula, courses and academic programs…), a number of Shakespeare "firsts" in America, Shakespeare in American schools, twentieth century anthologies and collections, and …Shakespeare trivia.

First (sic!), a number of Shakespeare "firsts" in America (including the Colonial Period): the first known amateur performance of Shakespeare in America (Romeo and Juliet in New York, 1730); the first known professional Shakespeare performance (Richard III, also in New York City) by a colonial acting company—1750; the London Company Comedians, under the direction of Lewis Hallam landed in Virginia in 1751, and their first production was The Merchant of Venice, to which were added Richard III, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Othello and Hamlet; the company toured such cities as Fredericksburg, Williamsburg and Annapolis, then Philadelphia and New York, with such new productions as Cymbeline, The Taming of the Shrew and Macbeth; as a young man, George Washington is known to have attended one of Hallam's performances in Williamsburg.

At about the same time (in 1761), the first American printings of King Lear and The Tempest appeared, with a first American edition of The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare to appear in 1799; in the meantime, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams find it proper and interesting to visit Shakespeare's birthplace at Stratford.

Other "firsts" come in the nineteenth century: the first known Shakespeare production on a Mississippi River showboat (Noah's Ark was the name of the keelboat) is recorded in 1817; in 1821-1823 a Black American acting troupe performs Shakespeare in New York, with minstrel shows, burlesques, parodies and travesties in "blackface" makeup to follow in mid- to late 1800s; first in 1831 in New York and fifteen years later through the Mississippi Valley, Charles Kean's Company began its (Shakespeare) American tour; and between 1844 and 1847 Julian Crommelin Verplanck produced the first illustrated Shakespeare edition in three volumes.

Also a "first"—and a very important one—is Emerson's essay on Shakespeare, included in his 1850 Representative Men (see infra); which makes it possible for us to also mention the great Transcendentalist's tribute to Shakespeare at the Saturday Club in New York (1872), a reprint of which inspired, years later, Henry Clay Folger's interest in the Elizabethan bard; and thus in 1832 this rich Standard Oil Executive opens the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D. C.,

BDD-A26452 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:24 UTC)

which houses the world's largest collection of Shakespeare materials (rare books, manuscripts, works of art related to Shakespeare or his time and, most importantly, 79 first folios). But we need to go back to 1872, when the Shakespeare statue was installed in New York's Central Park and to the 1880s, when Sarah Bernhardt came to America to give her own interpretations of Shakespearean characters.

The twentieth century, needless to say, is too complex from the point of view of our title, so all we can do is skim and skip, or pick and choose: an interesting 1917 book by Charles Mills Gayley on Shakespeare and the Founders of Liberty in America (particularly, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams), followed by a similar one in 1941—Alan Thaler's Shakespeare and Democracy, both viewing the writer in the context of the American political system.

The interwar period witnesses the presence in America of such great actors (on both stage and screen) as John Gielgud, Paul Robeson and Orson Welles, the construction of two Globe Theaters (in San Diego—1932, and Chicago—1934, for the World's Fair), followed by several theater companies and festivals (in Illinois, Oregon, Massachusetts, New York, Washington, D.C., California, Alabama, Virginia, Arizona, Arkansas, Maine, Delaware, Hampshire, Connecticut, Colorado, Hawaii…), Joseph Papp's first season in Central Park, the publication (by the Shakespeare Association of America and produced by Folger Shakespeare Library in association with George Washington University) of the Shakespeare Quarterly, etc. etc; and this is, of course, the century of films and musicals based on Shakespeare plays (among them: The Boys from Syracuse, Swinging the Dream, Cole Porter's Kiss Me Kate, then West Side Story), TV series (begun in 1941), exhibits, various other shows.

A separate section/chapter should be titled "Shakespeare in American schools," or "Shakespeare and American education," or…; the nineteenth century began introducing Shakespeare study guides in schools, various types of quizzes (of the "who's who" type: who is… in /play/…), collections of Shakespeare quotes and monologues; some of the plays (Romeo and Juliet first and foremost, for 9th and 10th grades) became part of the curricula in the high schools classroom or in classes of creative writing and collaborative learning; from 1895, with a replica of an Elizabethan stage constructed at Harvard, thirty to forty other stages appeared in as many US colleges and universities; one also finds mentioned a 1960s tour of thirteen cities of A Midsummer Night's Dream with a student audience program that offered questions-and-answers sessions with actors (including an evening with the Kennedys in Washington, D. C.); or the founding of the Shakespeare Glove Center, in 1974, at the University of Maryland College Park by American actor and director Sam Wanamaker; or how, in the 1990s, Shakespeare became the subject of skirmishes in the "culture wars," as disputes erupted over how this plays were taught in colleges (see the Highbrow/Lowbrow book).

Or, in the present century, a book on Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage (2006) by Frances Teague, about a "Shakespeare that was an unacknowledged agent of radical change" in American popular stage; three years before, the National Endowment for the Arts had announced the "Shakespeare in American Communities" initiative, to support a hundred-community tour of the Bard; finally, the many TV series (Moonlighting, Happy Days, Columbo, Martin, Bonanza, Batman, Twilight Zone…, and, naturally almost, Star Trek) whose many episodes have Shakespearean titles and the characters often quote such plays as The Taming of the Shrew, Macbeth, Hamlet…

Such a culturally ubiquitous non-American author could not have gone without anniversary celebrations; anybody can understand that the colonists had little time and many other things to do

BDD-A26452 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:24 UTC)

than remember Shakespeare: in 1664 the English were busy taking over New Amsterdam (capital of the province since 1625) from the Dutch and name it New York (from the Duke of York, later James II of England); after the capitulation of Sept. 6, a second Anglo-Dutch war followed, and the conflict ended in 1667; then a third, with New York becoming New Orange and then New York again; so, little time for 100 years since Shakespeare's birth. In 1716, another one hundred-year commemoration, is blurred by the beginning of the Appalachian/"backcountry" settlement and the development of the Pennsylvania (or Kentucky) long rifle by German gunsmiths; 1764 comes immediately after the French and Indian War (1754-1563) and just before the Revolutionary War; and 1816 is overshadowed by the war with Great Britain (1812-1815), the Battle of New Orleans (Andrew Jackson defeats the British troops) and the election of James Monroe as President.

Thus we come to 1864, when Lincoln is re-elected, and slavery is not abolished as yet; still Shakespeare's three-hundredth birthday is celebrated properly on April 23rd, when Oliver Wendell Holmes reads his "Tri-centennial Celebration" about "our Shakespeare," ending in "we praise… Thee, Father, only thee!," followed by plays, other festivities, and lectures; the statue in Central Park could only be unveiled in 1872.

1916 was again bracketed by World War I in Europe, but the Americans found time for two silent movie sessions (Antony and Cleopatra and Romeo and Juliet), evenings of Elizabethan folk dancing, a series of articles in the New York Times, and a "community masque" called Caliban by the Yellow Sands staged by Percy McKay in New York and repeated in Boston in 1917; and there were other community masques and their giant outdoor productions in Atlanta, North Dakota, Massachusetts…, plus pageants, lyceum lectures, readings and discussions of Shakespeare's work.

Finally, 1964 comes with numberless exhibitions, scholarly conferences, special performances, articles and books; Jacqueline Kennedy is the honorary chair of a national "Shakespeare Anniversary Committee" and there is, again and again now, "Shakespeare in Central Park," with a Shakespeare Garden that features only flowers that were mentioned in his plays and poems and free performances provided by the Delacorte Theater, the summer home of the New York Public Theater. And 2016 is just around the corner as we are writing these notes.

One may never be able to find how many Shakespeare associations and societies are in the fifty American states (in schools, colleges and universities, in larger or smaller communities, in various institutions and organizations…), but we can include in this paragraph the better known ones. The first among them seems to be the Philadelphia Shakespeare Society, founded in 1851, and followed in the second half of the century, by the Shakespeare Society of Wellesley College, the Grand Rapids Shakespeare Society and others; in 1968 was founded the Shakespeare Association of America, with a Globe Theater in Los Angeles, California, relocated in Monterey Bay, California, in 2008, with a New Shakespeare Sanctuary; it is "a professional organization for the advanced study of Shakespeare's works, times, and afterlife;" and also in California there is a Shakespeare Society of America, a benefit corporation dating since 1969. One can simply observe that, except for the Stratford-upon-Avon Shakespeare-related institutions (a Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, a Shakespeare Institute and a Club) and the London-based ones (the London Renaissance Seminar at Birkbeck College, the London Shakespeare Workout, and the Open University Shakespeare Society), the "Touchstone site provides information" about a Bath Shakespeare Society, a Nottingham one, and the British Shakespeare Association (founded in 2014!).

This section of "facts and figures" concerning Shakespeare and America may not have been sufficiently complete without this "trivia' component (taken from various web sites), i.e.

BDD-A26452 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:24 UTC)

miscellaneous commonplace facts with more than an element of truth in them; incidentally, in his 1593 Henry VI, Part 2, the Bard himself uses the word, in III 1, ll.1522-1526:

"Earl of Suffolk (to Cardinal Beaufort): But in my mind, that were no policy:

The King will labor still to save his life;

The commons haply rise to save his life;

And yet we have but trivial argument,

More than mistrust, that shows him worthy death."

Our first "trivia" is whether Thomas Edison could have become a Shakespearean actor; in 1865 Edison was employed as a telegraph operator in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he often attended the theater, where he enjoyed Othello and Richard III, as "his ambition was to be a tragedian"; he never became an actor, but he could have.

Next, there is a silver-mining town in New Mexico that during its "Old West" period was called Ralston (after San Francisco businessman and financier William Ralston, who went bankrupt and drowned himself in 1875); and sometime in the late 1870s the name of the town was changed to Shakespeare, from Colonel Boyle's "Shakespeare Gold and Silver Mining and Milling Company"; Boyle also built an adobe "Stratford Hotel" here in 1883.

Another location is the "Shakespeare and Co." shop downtown Lexington, Kentucky, at the intersection of North Broadway Road and 367 West Short Street, housing a full service bar and a private outdoor seating area decorated with a "distinct Shakespearean touch" (whatever than may mean).

The third place is also a pub, called "The New American Shakespeare Tavern," a "place of live music, hand-crafted period costumes, outrageous sword fights… and poetry of the spoken word"; this is in Atlanta, Georgia, at 499 Peachtree Street NE, across the street from Emory University Hospital.

Finally, our favorite "Shakespeare's American Journey" trivia, on which one could write a whole essay, i.e. "Shakespeare to Blame for Introduction of European Starlings to US" (see web page), a typically American story; to cut it short, let us just point out here that, in the late nineteenth-century, the "American Acclimatization Society" developed a project to introduce to the US every bird mentioned by Shakespeare in his work (about six hundred; remember, the flowers thus mentioned are already in Central Part). So, since "starlings" are mentioned in Henry IV, Part I, the "Society" released some hundred starlings in Central Park (again), New York in 1890 and 1891, and they spread all over, coast to coast, becoming more or less of nuisance (in that web author's view).

After some hesitation, we also decided to introduce this trivia ("Look Who's Related…" in "Gen; Blog Home"); namely, starting from the premise that Shakespeare is connected to over fifty-four million profiles in the world family tree (see also the "Genealogy Series"), we are told that Mark Twain is William Shakespeare's eighth cousin eight times removed and that Barrack H. Obama is William Shakespeare's fourth cousin fifteen times removed; so lots of Americans, both Caucasians and African Americans, are relatives of Shakespeare—some sort of a climax for a paper on "Shakespeare's American Journey."

BDD-A26452 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:24 UTC)

It must have become obvious (at least, like most such paper writers, we can simply hope) that we used "journey" in our title in some of its less usual of its very many meanings: a passage or progress from one stage (sic!) to another, one period/century to another; or a distance in time and/or space covered across the Atlantic and four centuries by the great Elizabethan; a course or area suitable for traveling, and America has proved to be just that (see the epigraphs); a circuit or itinerary, a voyage or a parade (our dictionaries: Webster, Heritage, Random House). So, finally, Shakespeare as the world's itinerant, or as a journeyman, only this last concept seems to complicate things somewhat, and another path/journey may prove more encouraging, i.e. while Britain's American journey of conquest was limited to one-hundred-and-fifty years, Shakespeare's is forever.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bristol, Frank Milton, Shakespeare and America (Chicago: Hollister & Bro., 1898/Reprint: London Forgotten Books, 2013);
Bristol, Michael D., Shakespeare's America. America's Shakespeare (New York: Routledge, 1990);
Broqua, Vincent, "American Shakespeare: Introduction," http://transatlantica.revues.org/4878;
David Galenson, Recognizing That Poets Don't Peak Earl: T. S. Eliot Reads Shakespeare, www.huffingtonpost.com/david-galenson/recognizing...;
Desmet, Christy and Robert Sawyer (ed.), Shakespeare and Appropriation (Accents on Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1999);
Dotterer, Ronald L., Shakespeare: Text, Subtext, and Context (Selingsgrove, Pa: Susquehanna University Press, 1989);
Dunn Cloudman, Esther, Shakespeare in America (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939);
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, Shakespeare; Or, The Poet, readbookonline.net/readOnLine/7601);
Emerson, The Portable, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: The Viking Press, 1968/1946);
Emily Dickinson's Shakespeare. Paraic Finnerty, muse.jhu.edu>Browse>Literature;
Erickson, Peter, Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994);
Finnerty, Paraic, Emily Dickinson's Shakespeare (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006);
Gayley, Charles Mills, Shakespeare and the Founders of Liberty in America (New York: Macmillan, 1917/reprinted 2012, Ulan Press);
How Is America Mentioned in Shakespeare's Plays?, http://wwwshakespeareinamerican.life/org/features/faqs/faq2.cfm;
Kauffman, Michael W., American Brutus: John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies (New York: Random House, 2004);
Knorts, Karl, Shakespeare in Amerika (Berlin: Theodor Hoffman, 1882);
Kolin, Philip C., Shakespeare and the Southern Writers: A Study in Influence (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011);
Koon, Helene Wickham, How Shakespeare Won the West: Players and Performances in America's Gold Rush, 1849-1865, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1989/1925);
Levine, Lawrence W., Highbrow/Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988);

BDD-A26452 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:24 UTC)

Levine, Lawrence W., "William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation," The American Historical Review, Vol 89, No 1 (Feb. 1984), pp.34-66;
Loney, Glen and Patricia McKay, The Shakespeare Complex: A Guide to summer festivals and year-round repertory in North America (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1975);
Rawlings, Peter, ed., Americans on Shakespeare (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd, Modern Humanities Research Association, 1999);
Shapiro, James, Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare? (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010);
Shapiro, James, ed., Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now (New York: Library of America, 2014);
Shattuck, Charles H., Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976);
Sturgess, Kim C., Shakespeare and the American Nation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004);
Taylor, Michael, Shakespeare Criticism in the Twentieth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001);
Teague, Frances, Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006);
Thaler, Alwin, Shakespeare and Democracy (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1941);
Thorndike, Ashley Horace, Shakespeare in America (London: Oxford University Press, 1927/Folcroft Library Editions, 1974);
Vaughan, Virginia Mason and Alden Vaughan, eds., Shakespeare in American Life (Washington, D. C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 2007);
Walkowitz, Rebecca L., "Shakespeare in Harlem: The Norton Anthology 'Propaganda,' Langston Hughes," rcl.rutgers.edu/~walkowitz/pubs/Hughes/pdf.;
Watson, Joseph, "Shakespeare in America," New York Herald, 26 February 1877, p.6 (web);
Westfall, Alfraed Van Rensslaer, American Shakespeare Criticism, 1604-1865 (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1939);
Words Shakespeare Invented, Shakespeare-online.com.

BDD-A26452 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:24 UTC)