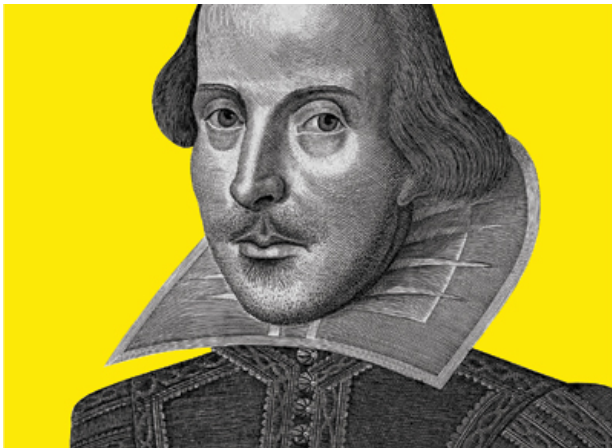


## Much ado about nothing?

by **HANNAH BRADBY** Sep 17, 2012



### Shakespeare. Staging the World

British Museum exhibition: 19 July to 25 November 2012

This exhibition seeks to create a dialogue between the imaginary worlds of Shakespeare's plays and objects from the actual world that he and his contemporary audiences inhabited. Inevitably many of these objects are books, pictures and maps, but also on display is a calf's heart stuck with pins (used as a counter charm to protect cattle from witches, since you ask) and a witch's cursing bone (presumably necessitating the pin-stuck heart). The exhibition is interspersed with a dozen projections of actors proclaiming key Shakespearian speeches on audio-visual loops.

The exhibition hints at the extent to which Shakespeare's language has suffused and shaped the world in which we live today. For instance, Shakespeare helped to create the idea of 'Great Britain': prior to the accession of James VI of Scotland as James I of England in 1603, Shakespeare's mediaeval plays of 1590 were concerned with 'England', but in 1610 the play 'Cymbeline', makes repeated reference to the King of *Britain*. Shakespeare's historical plays cemented poor old Richard III as a villain in contradistinction to heroic Henry VII, with his wickedness symbolised by his hunch-back. Although there were 900 Black Africans among the 200,000-strong population of Shakespeare's London, 'Othello' really confirmed the emergent tendency to discuss blackness and whiteness as distinct categories.

The exhibition has something for the health-watchers too, with a copy of royal orders read out in churches closing theatres to curtail the spread of plague from 1603 onwards. And an angel coin (referred to in *Macbeth*), which, once touched by a legitimate King, was said to cure scrofula.


The final object on display is copy of Shakespeare's Complete Works, which was read by the political prisoners of Robben Island in prison off Cape Town during the 1970s, with favourite passages annotated. 'NRD Mandela 16.12.77' appears in blue ink next to a speech in Julius Caesar Act 2, Scene 2. More of these contemporary objects which speak so clearly to the ongoing relevance of Shakespeare's shaping of our world, would have been welcome.


Testimony to the lack of dazzle in this exhibition is that the blue and gold moulded ceiling and curved shelving of the old reading room in which it is staged draws the eye. Glimpses of the reading room's semi-occluded beauties are cunningly framed by the temporary walls which scaffold the exhibition, as if the designers knew that visitors would need something beyond the exhibits to admire.


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