

## SHAKESPEARE AND THE EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Gain a better understanding of human behavior by exploring thought experiments in Shakespearean plays and the historical roots of experimental psychology within early modern literature. This book combines scientific psychology with English literature to discuss thought experiments in selected Shakespeare plays and examine the central role of thought experiments in the natural sciences. Thought experiments are essential for progress in scientific research. Indeed, Albert Einstein and a number of other leading scientists relied almost exclusively on thought experiments. Thought experiments also play a pivotal role in English literature, particularly in Shakespeare plays. By focussing on thought experiments and experimental psychology's place within early modern English literature, the volume establishes a more wholistic approach to understanding human behavior.

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Fathali M. Moghaddam  
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FATHALI M. MOGHADDAM

*Georgetown University*



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Headmaster  
Christopher Porteous and History Master Henry Chambers,  
Eltham College, London.*

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## *Preface*

Throughout my three decades of work as a professor of psychology at research universities, William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) plays have been for me a source of deep inspiration and insight into human behavior. I have been particularly inspired by Shakespeare's psychological *thought experiments*, which provide imagined demonstrations or tests of particular hypotheses about human behavior. Thought experiments play a central role in modern experimental psychology (and science more broadly), but they have a rich and much longer history in English drama. The traditions and conventions of Early Modern English drama are an essential part of the intellectual and cultural roots for contemporary experimental psychology.

It is striking that well before the birth of scientific psychology in the nineteenth century, Shakespeare had already developed the idea of the controlled experiment to test specific hypotheses about human behavior. Yet, when we search for books or research papers on "Psychology and Shakespeare" from the perspective of experimental psychology, we come up empty-handed. This absence is due to the huge gap that exists between experts in psychological science and Shakespeare scholars, a gap I take steps to bridge.

This book represents a revolutionary turn away from the expansive tradition of discussing Shakespeare's plays from a psychoanalytic viewpoint.<sup>1</sup> The ideas of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Carl Jung (1875–1961), and other psychodynamic thinkers have been applied exhaustively in discussions of Shakespeare's works (and in English literature more broadly). In a sharp turn away from this tradition, I explore Shakespeare's plays from the perspective of twenty-first-century experimental psychology. This novel approach makes very good sense, because Shakespeare himself was an experimentalist moving in the vanguard of the scientific revolution taking place during his life.<sup>2</sup> This is a revelation I explore further in the chapters to come.

Some critics will contend that by focusing on Shakespeare's thought experiments and interpreting them in light of twenty-first-century research methods, we are "reading into" Shakespeare's plays characteristics that do not belong to his historical era. However, the same critics neglect the fact that thousands of academic and popular works applying the ideas of Freud, Jung, and other psychodynamic thinkers are part of the well-established tradition of the research literature on Shakespeare. Second, such critics are underestimating progress in, and the influence of, scientific thinking on Shakespeare and other writers in his era. Thought experiments require imagination and the adoption of a scientific worldview, qualities that were amply present in Shakespeare's time and in his plays.

By identifying and exploring the thought experiments integral to Shakespeare's plays, we recognize the role of conventions and traditions in English literature in the wider development of scientific thinking. Second, we help to bridge the gap that has historically divided the "two solitudes" of art and science.<sup>3</sup> This is an important step in our era, when efforts are being made to bring more attention to STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), and the value of the humanities and English literature in particular is being questioned. This book helps readers with a background in the arts recognize that they can gain a deeper appreciation for Shakespeare through better understanding experimental design. On the other hand, Shakespeare's thought experiments reveal to readers with a science background that the scientific method infuses Shakespeare's plays. Thus, this book constructs a stronger bridge between the arts and the sciences, to help us better appreciate that the scientific method has far broader foundations, roots, and reverberations than traditionally conceived.

## *Acknowledgments*

This is a heretical work. In my defense, I submit that a number of other people encouraged, cajoled, maneuvered, and tempted me to commit heresy. Generations of Georgetown University students, less experienced and unaware of the seriousness of our offense, took my seminars *Psychology and Literature* and *Psychology and Shakespeare* and, in their youthful innocence, joyously speeded along with me on this heretical path. My psychology department colleagues allowed me to teach these subversive courses, without challenging my merging of such apparently incompatible topics as science and Shakespeare. Some of my friends and colleagues, particularly Duncan Wu, Don Taylor, Steven Sabat, David Lightfoot, and (the late) Rom Harré, talked with me reassuredly about psychology and literature, without once hinting that I was on a dangerous and seditious path. David Repetto of Cambridge University Press very enthusiastically supported me going down this path and skillfully guided the work to completion. These co-conspirators made this project possible. So, you see, my guilt is shared.