Towards the end of February this year, and just before a production of Richard the third (III) opened in Tehran, one Iranian theatre critic commented that it would be interesting to see whether *Atilla Pasiyani,* the Iranian director, would be modelling his version of Richard on Laurence Olivier’s classic performance, or would he be more inspired by Simon Russell-Beale in the more recent production by Sam Mendes? I think you can conclude that Shakespeare is very much alive in Iran today.

Memorable phrases such as “بودن یا نبودن، مسأله این است *Budan yā nabudan, harf dar hamin ast*”…to be or not to be, that is the question…or

مردن، خفتن، خفتن؛ شاید هم خوابیدن *Mordan, khoftan; khoftan, shāyad ham khābidan*; (…to die, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to dream, (there is the rub)…

اگر موسیقی خوراک عشق است *agar moosighi ghazā-yr ruh-e oshāgh ast*, if music be the food of love are all well-known quotations for Iranians and appear time and again in Persian blogs and comment boxes of networking sites.

While it is often said that the themes and stories developed and explored in Shakespeare’s plays enjoy a universal appeal it is also true that many of the plots and ideas are particularly familiar to Iranians from their own literature. You can find courtly romance and passion in the 11th century *Vis and Ramin*, fatal jealousy in the 12th century *Khosrow and Shirin*, corruption, power and redemption in the 15th century *Joseph and Potiphar’s wife* and the trials of kings and heroes in the *Shahname,* the Book of Kings, written more than a thousand years ago by the poet Ferdowsi.

Iranians, brought up on a literary diet of titanic clashes between the forces of good and evil as well as allegories of divine or sensual and often tragic love are instantly drawn to the depiction of similar ideas in Shakespeare’s plays and acknowledge the English playwrights skills in bringing together elements drawn from history, mythology, religion and folktales, even if some of the subtlety may be lost in translation. Themes from Shakespeare’s plays resonate at many levels in Iranian life today: Questions of honour and virtue, of love and loyalty, justice and treachery, humour and tragedy. Moreover, where Shakespeare touches on issues like kingship and the divine right to rule, Iranians can relate to this both in terms of their ancient past and their more recent experiences.

Apart from the clear references to the Sophy, the Persian King in the *Twelfth Night*, It is not really known whether Shakespeare had any direct knowledge of Persian stories such as those in the *Shahname*, although some say that both Hamlet, and Romeo and Juliet, were inspired by Persian heroic and romantic epics. Certainly, there is an uncanny similarity between some of Shakespeare’s sonnets**//** and quatrains from the 12th century Omar Khayyam. Both poets have given us poignant lines on the swift passing of time.

When Shakespeare says:

“When I consider every thing that grows

Holds in perfection but a little moment”

Omar Khayyam reflects:

Each Morn a thousand Roses brings, you say;

Yes, but where leaves the Rose of Yesterday?

However, before Shakespeare became well-known in Iran, some Iranians were getting first-hand experience of the Bard abroad. One of the first recorded accounts was almost 200 years ago when a young Persian, Mirzā Sāleh Shirāzi, sent to Britain to study, made references in his diaries to the playhouses of Europe and performances of Shakespearean plays.

The first full translation of a Shakespearean play, however, was completed in 1917 by Abolghāsem Qaragozlou, known as Nāser ul-Molk, an aristocrat and later high ranking court official, who was also one of the first Iranian students to study at Oxford. Legend has it that at a dinner party in Paris guests began to discuss the works of Shakespeare and someone suggested that it would be impossible to translate any of Shakespeare’s plays into Persian. This prompted Nāser ul-Molk first to translate Othello and later The Merchant of Venice. Before long other works including *Romeo and Juliette* and *Hamlet* were also translated, and now, more than 24 of the plays, as well as many of Shakespeare’s sonnets, have been translated into Persian, including among others, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra and Henry IV.

Biographies of Shakespeare are also available in Persian and TV documentaries, radio plays and review articles in magazines have also made many more people aware of the works of the man who Iranians regard as the greatest non-Iranian poet and writer of all time.

My own familiarity with the plays started in a Tehran secondary school at the tender age of 13 or 14 when Mrs Salimi, our English teacher, announced that we would be reading King Lear as part of our course. I remember vividly how we struggled to make any sense of the English, but the dedication of our teacher and our curiosity to find out more about the unbearable treachery of the two older sisters kept our class of 20 or so girls, mesmerised. We saluted Cordelia’s sense of pride and her loyalty to her father and her courage to return to England to save him- and just when we thought there would be a happy ending, these simple but famous lines shattered our illusion:

…She's gone for ever!

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,

And thou no breath at all?

Mrs Salimi told us the plots of several of the other plays too, such as Othello, Taming of the Shrew, and Romeo and Juliette; but this romance seemed so familiar to us that we were convinced Shakespeare must have copied it from our own 12th century, doomed love story of Layli and Majnoon.

Now, at any given time of the year, at least one Shakespeare play is on stage in Tehran or in one of the larger cities such as Tabriz or Shiraz.

While Iranian theatre directors keep up-to-date with Shakespeare productions at Stratford and in London they also bring their own ideas to the staging of these plays. Occasionally, they experiment in innovative ways, for example, by creating a new play entitled *Maclet*, a combination of: you guessed it, Macbeth and Hamlet.

Maclet was performed as a traditional Persian passion play. The plot is really a parody in which Macbeth returns from battle with the Norwegian army and joins Lady Macbeth and King Duncan to attend the wedding of Gertrude and Claudius; and so the combined story unfolds.

In an earlier innovation in the 1970s Iran, we were presented with a T.V comedy adaptation of Othello where the Moorish general was depicted as a submissive, hen-pecked husband who has to thwart the sexual advances of his bossy wife, Desdemona, played by an actor in drag, who suspected him of marital infidelity.

Of course, not all of the current productions of Shakespeare plays in Iran meet with the approval of the state run cultural establishment. A recent physical performance of Othello does not seem to have gone down at all well with the more conservative critics who found the production, to quote, “trivial and scandalous”.

Both Shakespeare and classical Persian stories have flourished in countries where kings and rulers were deemed to be divinely anointed by God, and plays such as Richard II and Henry V investigate the divine right to rule. Interestingly, religious aspects of kingship continue to play a role in shaping the ruling institutions of both Iran and the UK. However, perhaps one of the most obvious shared preoccupation of both Shakespearian and Persian epics is the notion of honour - whether at court, on the battlefield or in the tavern: Honour in all its manifestations, its possession, its defence and its loss.

Ferdowsi could have equally spoken for Shakespeare when he summed up his own writing as “stories full of love and trickery, whose heroes lived for honour and chivalry”.

For some societies or individuals honour is only determined in battle and for others it equates to stoic virtue when faced by temptation and evil. But one thing that both classical Persian and Elizabethan traditions can agree upon is that death is always superior to loss of honour. To Iranians, the death of the hot-blooded young Hotspur in Henry IV is tantamount to martyrdom and something they can easily understand and relate to. Hotspur summed up his attitude to honour in this famous passage:

And if we live, we live to tread on kings;

If die, brave death, when princes die with us!

Now for our consciences, the arms are fair,

When the intent of bearing them is just.

On the other hand, the completely contrasting attitude to honour put forward by Falstaff while not commonly echoed in classical Persian literature, nevertheless would be appreciated by a modern Iranian audience who is also fed-up with corporate and political corruption and will enjoy the bluntness of Falstaff when he says:

*Can honour set to a leg? no: or*

*an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound? no.*

*Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? no. What is*

*honour? a word. What is in that word honour? what*

*is that honour? air.*

In the poignant *Shahname* story of Rostam and Esfandiyar, Ferdowsi explores the conflict between blind obedience or misplaced loyalty on the one hand// with upholding honour on the other. Rostam the hero of the epic is faced with a demand that goes against every grain of his being. He laments:

The world is but deceit and toil,

One man is rich, another poor; this man

Is honoured, that despised, but all must go,

Still men at least shall quote

Good words from me when I have passed away,

A wise man will not turn from truth: the honour of all the world is mine

“My deeds remain as my memorial;

My life on that. Enough!”

No wonder Iranians so easily understand these lines in Richard II:

*“Mine honour is my life, both grow in one;*

*Take honour from me, and my life is done;*

*Then, dear liege, mine honour let me try;*

*In that I live, and for that I will die.”*

The passionate defence of honour for an Iranian is more than fighting to guard the territorial integrity of the country, or the pursuit of technological advancement in the face of global resistance. Nor is honour just a word that appears in the manuscripts of our literary classics; it is part and parcel of our everyday life. Persian has many expressions and words for describing the notion of honour, be it sexual, ethical, family, tribal or national honour. However, the most common everyday references to honour are encapsulated in the two Persian phrases “*āb-e roo*”, meaning the *water* or *lustre* of one’s face that would be very hard to regain once lost, and *Qayrat*, best translated as a combination of pride- mostly male- and honour. *Qayrat,* so prevalent in the Middle Eastern patriarchal societies, is what an Iranian audience recognises in the character of Othello and his reaction to the supposed infidelity of his wife.

For us Iranians, the enduring appeal of the plays of Shakespeare is that they tell very human stories and make us feel the complexities, richness and difficulties of life as we juxtapose their account with our own experiences of tensions between rulers and the ruled, between fathers and sons, between authority- whether church or state- and man. In short, they give us dramas that highlight paradoxes and ironies of life.

Faced with sanctions and increasing diplomatic isolation from abroad, and restrictions on liberty at home, Iranians today could perhaps be forgiven if the arts took a back seat in their national life. But it hasn’t. The continued success of Iranian cinema both at home and on the world stage is evidence of a vibrant cultural ambition- and the continued staging of Shakespeare plays is a part of that. Technology and the global village environment ensures literature, drama and all the arts can flow relatively freely in both directions.

In the English speaking world today, the 13th century Persian mystical poet Rumi is said to be one of the most widely read poets. Unsurprisingly, leading the charge going the other way is … William Shakespeare.