

The **Literary** **100**

A RANKING OF
THE MOST
INFLUENTIAL
NOVELISTS,
PLAYWRIGHTS,
AND POETS
OF ALL TIME

DANIEL S. BURT

THE LITERARY 100

A Ranking of the Most Influential Novelists,
Playwrights, and Poets of All Time

DANIEL S. BURT



Checkmark Books®

The Literary 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Novelists, Playwrights, and Poets of All Time

Copyright © 2001 by Daniel S. Burt

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Checkmark Books
An imprint of Facts On File, Inc.
11 Penn Plaza
New York, NY 10001

The poems of Wallace Stevens are reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., from *Collected Poems*, copyright © 1923, renewed 1951 by Wallace Stevens.

The poems of W. B. Yeats are reprinted with the permission of Scribner, a Division of Simon & Schuster, from *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Revised Second Edition, edited by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996).

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Burt, Daniel S.

The literary 100 : a ranking of the most influential novelists, playwrights, and poets of all time / Daniel S. Burt.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8160-4382-5 (hardcover: alk. paper)—ISBN 0-8160-4383-3

(pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Authors—Biography. 2. Literature—History and criticism. I. Title.

PN451.B87 2000

809—dc21

[B]

00-034093

Checkmark Books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at <http://www.factsonfile.com>

Text design by Joan M. Toro

Cover design by Semadar Megged

Printed in the United States of America

MP Hermitage 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PBK 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

THE LITERARY 100

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce photographs.

Emily Dickinson: Amherst College Library.

Robert Musil: Austrian Cultural Institute.

Ralph Ellison, Vladimir Nabokov, Flannery O'Connor, and Wallace Stevens: © Bettman/CORBIS.

E. M. Forster, Federico García Lorca, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf: Culver Pictures, Inc.

Günter Grass and Franz Kafka: German Information Center.

Samuel Beckett: Grove Press (Jerry Bauer).

Jorge Luis Borges, Tu Fu, Zeami Motokiyo, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, Cao Xueqin: Harvard University Archives, Harvard-Yenching Library.

Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Feodor Dostoevsky, Theodore Dreiser, George Eliot, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gustave Flaubert, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Allan Poe, Gertrude Stein, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Richard Wright: Library of Congress.

Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, William Blake, Giovanni Boccaccio, Emily Brontë, Robert Browning, Lord Byron, Catullus, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Geoffrey Chaucer, Anton Chekov, Joseph Conrad, Dante Alighieri, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, John Donne, Euripides, Henry Fielding, Tu Fu, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Thomas Hardy, Homer, Victor Hugo, Henrik Ibsen, Henry James, James Joyce, John Keats, D. H. Lawrence, John Milton, Molière, Ovid, Alexander Pope, Francesco Petrarch, Alexander Pushkin, François Rabelais, Jean Racine, Walter Scott, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Sophocles, Stendhal, Laurence Sterne, August Strindberg, Jonathan Swift, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, William Makepeace Thackeray, Leo Tolstoy, Anthony Trollope, Virgil, Voltaire, and William Wordsworth: New York Public Library Picture Collection.

Albert Camus, T. S. Eliot, Gabriel García Márquez, Thomas Mann, Pablo Neruda, Eugene O'Neill, George Bernard Shaw, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Rabindranath Tagore, and William Butler Yeats: Nobel Foundation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely grateful for the advice and assistance I received during the preparation of this book. Although I am indebted to a number of faculty members at Wesleyan University for their sensible guidance in the earliest stages of the ranking, I alone am responsible for any criticism my choices receive. Thanks to Carla M. Antonaccio, associate professor of classical studies; Anthony H. Chambers, professor of Asian languages and literatures; Antonio Gonzalez, professor of Romance languages and literatures; Indira Karamcheti, associate professor of English; Leo A. Lensing, professor of German studies; Joyce O. Lowrie, professor of Romance languages and literatures; Priscilla Meyer, professor of Russian language and literature; William Pinch, assistant professor of history; Roger A. Sanchez-Berroa, director of the language laboratory; Diana Sorensen, professor of Romance languages and literatures; Khachig Tololyan, professor of English; Ellen B. Widmer, professor of Asian languages and literatures.

Thanks as well to Justina Gregory, professor of classical studies at Smith College. I owe a particularly large debt to Krishna R. Winston, professor of German studies at Wesleyan University, for her support and friendship. I am grateful to my students at Wesleyan University, particularly to my class in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program during the fall of 1997, who shared their thoughts with me. I am grateful as well to the staffs at Wesleyan University's Olin Memorial Library, the New York Public Library Picture Collection, the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, and the Harvard-Yenching Library for their many courtesies. I want particularly to thank Taylor Loeb for her skill and dedication in helping with the illustrations to this book; Donald J. Davidson for his patience and assistance, and most especially Jim Ellison, who, over a series of pleasant and stimulating conversations, helped me focus on essential questions. Lastly, I owe the greatest debt to my wife, Deborah G. Felder.

INTRODUCTION

Compiling a ranking of the most influential literary artists of all time is not a task for the faint of heart. Although I have heeded the caution that fools rush in where scholars fear to tread, I also have been energized by an undertaking that seems a rarity nowadays, as the study of literature has been given over largely to specialists who seldom venture beyond their chosen, narrow territory into a tremendously rich and diverse field of study. The attempt to look at literature as a whole, comparatively, across cultural and historical divisions, certainly invites charges of superficiality and bias, but the effort remains a worthy one if it serves to stimulate thinking about literature from the broadest possible perspective. What makes a literary artist great? How can we measure and compare that greatness? What follows is one possible set of answers to these questions. In this ranking, I have tried to determine which novelists, playwrights, and poets have asserted the greatest influence, and which writers opened up the boundaries of the imagination in the most significant ways.

If my choices invite criticism and different conclusions, so much the better, because controversy should lead to further thought and discussion of literary values. I hope that my perspective will stimulate your own. Although I have taught the works of many of the writers in this ranking for more than 20 years, I make no special claims to comprehensive expertise in the full range of world literature over the centuries. Rather, I have approached the task in the spirit of a general reader who is forced to choose, based on literary tradition, critical history, and personal preference, the best that has been written. I have tried not to let any one of these elements assert too much weight in the process. Nor have I ignored a subjective component in this ranking. I have, as best as I could, made choices that reflect some consensus beyond personal taste or a narrow cultural bias.

Influence, in particular, is a tricky concept, and popularity alone is an insufficient measure for literary greatness. There are numerous examples in literary history of authors ignored by their contemporaries but revered by later generations, as well as enormously popular writers whom posterity has forgotten. Should a literary work, therefore, be evaluated for its impact on its

own time or on ours, and particularly in non-Western literature, on its own culture or through translation within Western culture? My ranking of the best novelists, playwrights, and poets of all time tries to balance these issues while recognizing that another writer, from a different time or culture as well as my own, determined to attempt an elusive level of objectivity, would have provided a different list.

In a sense, this book is a variant on the perennially fascinating question of what one should take to a desert island, with a limit of 100 of the best possible expressions of literary imagination. I posed this problem to a number of my academic colleagues and students to test my own choices and to learn from theirs, with revealing results. Among scholars it was not surprising that the writers in whom each specialized ranked highly; in many cases, the figures on one scholar's list were left off another's list entirely. Many scholars also were reluctant even to state an opinion on the relative merits of authors beyond their area of study. My students were the least intimidated by the question of literary greatness and were often far more willing to challenge conventional wisdom for the pleasure principle that many scholars resisted. Perhaps the best advice I received, from one of my students in Wesleyan University's Graduate Liberal Studies Program, was the sensible suggestion that the greatest writer of all time must be Anonymous—the highly eclectic and prodigious author of the Bible, the Icelandic sagas, *Beowulf*, *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, *The Tale of Heike*, and more—but I had to reject this advice in favor of known authors for the purpose of my ranking. Consensus among all whom I queried was impossible, but the majority of the authors in the final selection consistently appeared on everyone's list. After I learned a great deal from the choices of both scholars and students, the final selection was mine alone.

At various points, I would have liked to have had either a much shorter list or a much longer one in order to include more of the writers consigned here to the honorable mention list. To make the final cut, I have been guided by my sense of which authors have exerted the greatest influence over time in fundamentally establishing or altering the way we see the world through literature. The degree to which each writer shaped his or her literary tradition through the imagination and genius helped determine the ranking. As the literary critic Barbara Hardy has observed, "Good artists work within their chosen genre, great artists transform it." Innovation seems indispensable to literary influence over the centuries, and I confess a bias in favor of authors whose daring conceptions broke with the past and radically reconceptualized the world. To a greater or lesser degree, all of the writers in this ranking helped redefine literature, establishing a standard with which succeeding generations of writers and readers have had to contend.

Once the list was assembled, I considered each writer's merits and impact relatively, in a mental exercise akin to lining up the 100 greatest literary fig-

ures of all time to receive an honorary degree. The thrill derived from the juxtaposition of such diverse talents is, I hope, the appeal of this book. I have always taken a secret delight in the randomness of my book collection, in which I have resisted the practicality of alphabetization for the pleasure of accidental proximity. Hardy stands next to Woolf, Wilde next to Beckett, Fielding next to Blake, and so on. Each pairing suggests a dialogue of intentions and achievement that this ranking also attempts.

In each profile I have tried to distill the essence of each writer's career and character to help prompt the reader's consideration of literary merit and relationships. I hope my efforts will encourage readers to greater appreciation of the achievement each writer so richly demonstrates, and to stimulate their own valuation of literary excellence—in Matthew Arnold's phrase, "to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world."

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
INTRODUCTION	xii

1. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE	1
2. DANTE ALIGHIERI	5
3. HOMER	9
4. LEO TOLSTOY	13
5. GEOFFREY CHAUCER	17
6. CHARLES DICKENS	21
7. JAMES JOYCE	25
8. JOHN MILTON	29
9. VIRGIL	33
10. JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE	37
11. MIGUEL DE CERVANTES SAAVEDRA	41
12. MURASAKI SHIKIBU	44
13. SOPHOCLES	47
14. WILLIAM FAULKNER	51
15. FEODOR DOSTOEVSKY	55
16. T. S. ELIOT	59
17. MARCEL PROUST	63
18. JANE AUSTEN	67
19. GEORGE ELIOT	70
20. WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS	74
21. ALEXANDER PUSHKIN	78
22. EURIPIDES	82
23. JOHN DONNE	85
24. HERMAN MELVILLE	90
25. JOHN KEATS	94
26. OVID	98

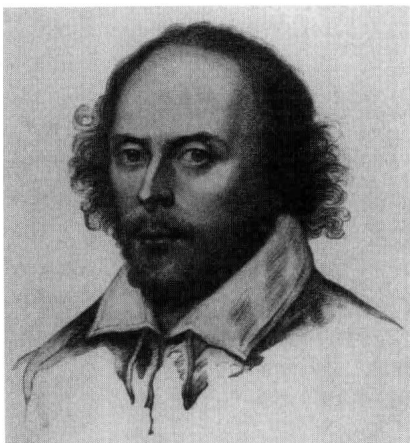
27. TU FU	101
28. WILLIAM BLAKE	104
29. AESCHYLUS	108
30. GUSTAVE FLAUBERT	112
31. FRANZ KAFKA	116
32. MOLIÈRE	119
33. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH	122
34. ARISTOPHANES	126
35. THOMAS MANN	129
36. HENRIK IBSEN	133
37. ANTON CHEKHOV	137
38. HENRY JAMES	141
39. VLADIMIR NABOKOV	145
40. WALT WHITMAN	148
41. HONORÉ DE BALZAC	152
42. JONATHAN SWIFT	156
43. STENDHAL	160
44. THOMAS HARDY	164
45. GEORGE BERNARD SHAW	168
46. ERNEST HEMINGWAY	172
47. D. H. LAWRENCE	176
48. CHARLES BAUDELAIRE	180
49. SAMUEL BECKETT	184
50. VIRGINIA WOOLF	187
51. ALEXANDER POPE	190
52. FRANÇOIS RABELAIS	194
53. FRANCESCO PETRARCH	197
54. EMILY DICKINSON	201
55. EDGAR ALLAN POE	204
56. HENRY FIELDING	208
57. JOSEPH CONRAD	212
58. ROBERT BROWNING	216
59. ALBERT CAMUS	219
60. CHARLOTTE BRONTË	222
61. EMILY BRONTË	222
62. JEAN RACINE	226
63. MARK TWAIN	230
64. AUGUST STRINDBERG	234
65. ÉMILE ZOLA	238
66. JORGE LUIS BORGES	242

67. CAO XUEQIN	246
68. GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO	249
69. VOLTAIRE	252
70. LAURENCE STERNE	256
71. WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY	260
72. PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY	264
73. EUGENE O'NEILL	268
74. WALLACE STEVENS	272
75. GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON	276
76. GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ	280
77. WALTER SCOTT	284
78. PABLO NERUDA	287
79. ROBERT MUSIL	291
80. ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON	294
81. FLANNERY O'CONNOR	298
82. CATULLUS	301
83. FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA	305
84. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE	308
85. THEODORE DREISER	312
86. RALPH ELLISON	316
87. ANTHONY TROLLOPE	320
88. F. SCOTT FITZGERALD	323
89. VICTOR HUGO	327
90. RABINDRANATH TAGORE	330
91. DANIEL DEFOE	334
92. GÜNTER GRASS	338
93. LU XUN	342
94. E. M. FORSTER	346
95. ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER	350
96. TANIZAKI JUN'ICHIRO	353
97. RICHARD WRIGHT	357
98. GERTRUDE STEIN	360
99. ZEAMI MOTOKIYO	363
100. OSCAR WILDE	366
HONORABLE MENTIONS	371
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	379
INDEX	391

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1

1564–1616



The striking feature of Shakespeare's mind was its generic quality, its power of communication with all other minds,—so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one particular bias, or exclusive excellence more than another. He was just like any other man, but that he was like all other men. He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself, but he was all that others were, or that they could become.

—William Hazlitt, *On Shakespeare and Milton*

It should come as no surprise to see William Shakespeare placed at the head of a ranking of the most influential literary artists of all time. At literature's most basic and elemental level of language, form, and vision, Shakespeare's power is unequaled. If the mark of a writer's greatness is the creation of the largest imaginary universe populated by believable characters and the reflection of the widest human experience, surely Shakespeare is alone in the magnitude of his achievement. Acknowledged as the greatest English writer, unrivaled in popular and critical acclaim, Shakespeare is also the recognized international master whose universality communicates across cultural divides. Shortly after Shakespeare's death, Ben Jonson wrote in tribute to Shakespeare's greatness:

Thou art a Monument, without a tombe,
An art alive still, while thy Booke doth live,

And we have wits to read, and praise to give . . .
 Triumph, my *Britaine*, thou has one to shoue,
 To whom all Scenes of *Europe* homage owe.
 He was not of an age, but for all time!

Jonson's sentiment has held sway as each generation since Shakespeare's has discovered new relevance and significance in his plays and poems. No other writer has so completely established literature's boundaries and excellence in the creation of fully realized characters, in the genius of his dramatic storytelling, and, most magnificently, in his supreme mastery of language as an expressive, poetic medium.

The little we know about Shakespeare's life and artistic development has contributed both to the myth of the playwright as a natural, instinctual artist rather than a conscious craftsman, and also to the search for alternative sources of his creations in other authors, such as Francis Bacon or Edward de Vere, whose education and experiences seem a better fit to explain the genius of the playwright. The essence of the man who produced such a glittering array of masterpieces has eluded and confounded his critics. "Shakespeare is in the singularly fortunate position," W. H. Auden once remarked, "of being to all intents and purposes, anonymous." Ralph Waldo Emerson rightly argued that "Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare." What continually perplexes us is Shakespeare's defiance of customary artistic limitations, his unmatched objectivity, and his freedom from the personal bias that confines most artists. Shakespeare's art is one of remarkable inclusiveness that captures the full range of human experience, in which most traces of inspiration and the personality of its creator have been fully absorbed in the works themselves.

What we know for sure of Shakespeare's life comes from a few scanty records that fix his birth, marriage, the baptism of his three children, and his later theatrical successes as an actor and playwright. Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in the geographical center of England, a rural community of fewer than 2,000. His father was a prosperous and prominent tradesman, bailiff, and alderman, who suffered a decline in fortune and prestige. It is likely that Shakespeare was educated at the local grammar school, where he was exposed to the Latin classics, of which OVID [26] was a particular favorite. At the age of 18 he married a farmer's daughter, Anne Hathaway, who bore him three children: Susanna in 1583 and the twins Hamnet and Judith in 1585. What Shakespeare did or experienced in the next seven years, before records locate him in London as a successful playwright and actor, remains a mystery. By 1594 records show that he was a shareholder in London's most celebrated stage company under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain. Besides his early plays—the comedies, *Comedy of Errors* (1592), *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1594), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

(1595); historical chronicles, *Henry VI* (1590), *Richard III* (1592), and *Richard II* (1595); and the early tragedies, *Titus Andronicus* (1593) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1594)—Shakespeare achieved literary distinction as a poet with *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). He would continue his nondramatic writing with a masterful sonnet cycle that circulated among his friends and was published in 1609. The achievement evident in the sonnets alone would have secured Shakespeare a significant place in English literary history.

By the late 1590s, Shakespeare's prominence and success allowed him to purchase a large home, New Place, in Stratford, and to secure the rank of a gentleman with the recognition of his family's coat of arms in 1596. He shared in the expenses for the construction of the Globe in 1598, a large playhouse south of the Thames, where his masterpieces were performed. They include the great comedies, *As You Like It* (1599) and *Twelfth Night* (1599); the historical cycle of *Henry IV* (1597) and *Henry V* (1598); the great tragedies, *Hamlet* (1600), *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605), and *Macbeth* (1605); and the Roman plays, *Julius Caesar* (1599) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606). Around 1610 Shakespeare retired to Stratford, although he continued to write a series of romances or tragicomedies that include *Cymbeline* (1609), *The Winter's Tale* (1610), and *The Tempest* (1611) before his death in 1616 at the age of 52.

It is impossible to write briefly of Shakespeare's achievement in a literary canon that includes more than 30 plays, the majority of which are crucial to an understanding of literary history and resist reduction even to the conventional categories of comedies, tragedies, and histories. It is possible here only to point to some of the central qualities that define Shakespeare's genius. One place to start is with the dramatic tradition that Shakespeare inherited and revolutionized. As with all of literature's greatest figures, Shakespeare's work is derived from a complex blend of time, place, and particular genius.

Shakespeare is fundamentally a great assimilator of the popular dramatic tradition, joined with the humanist energies released by the Renaissance and the expansive freedom of expression and form that the Elizabethan stage allowed. Prior to the Elizabethan dramatists, the English theater offered mainly religious and allegorical themes. Shakespeare, preeminently, instead used drama to explore secular human experience and reflect the actual life of English and world history, shaped by a remarkable grasp of the commonplace and the subtlety of behavior and psychology. He established the link with AESCHYLUS [29], SOPHOCLES [13], and EURIPIDES [22] in reviving drama as a medium for the most profound exploration of human existence. Extending the rules of classical drama, he created an expressive dramatic form that would serve as a romantic alternative to the classical norm of order and balance, and helped establish the tension between classicism and romanticism that defines modernism.

Shakespeare divided his efforts fairly equally among the four major categories available to him in drama—tragedies, comedies, histories, and

romances—and turned the potential limitations of the Elizabethan theater, with its bare, open stage, into a great strength, as his expressive language compensated for limited stage effects. From king to clown, Shakespeare is able to capture the high heroism of a character like Hotspur in *Henry IV* and his opposite in Falstaff; the tortured melancholy of youth in *Hamlet* and the anguish of age in *King Lear*; and the delightful follies of love in his comedies, as well as love's corruption in *Othello* and *Macbeth*. Expressed in his remarkable expressive language, as Thomas Carlyle observed, "woven all of sheet-lightning and sunbeams," Shakespeare exploited the widest vocabulary of any English creative writer and fashioned an unsurpassed pattern of dazzling and functional imagery. Yet Shakespeare's greatness rests not principally on either his daunting range or virtuosity, but instead in his power to communicate, to reveal our selves in the mirror of his art.

DANTE ALIGHIERI

2

1265–1321



... And she delivered of a son, whom by common consent with his father, they called by the name Dante [the Giver]; and rightly so, because, as will be seen in the sequel, the issue was most perfectly consonant with this name. This was that Dante of whom is the present discourse. This was that Dante granted by the special grace of God to our age. This was the Dante, who was first to open the way for the return of the Muses, banished from Italy. 'Twas he that brought under the rule of due numbers every beauty of the vernacular speech. 'Twas he who may be truly said to have brought back dead poesy to life. The which things, when duly considered, will show that he could not rightly have borne any name but Dante.

—Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Early Lives of Dante*

The greatest artists dominate and define their age, even as they are defined by it. Dante is such an artist. He towers over the Middle Ages as its consummate literary figure, creating out of medieval beliefs poetry that has claimed our attention ever since. Even as Dante's faith and theology may fail the modern reader, the sheer majesty of Dante's vision and the coalescence of human thought and experience into visionary poetry continues to delight and inspire. With Dante, hyperbole is inevitable. He remains a touchstone for Western civilization, and *The Divine Comedy* is one of the most revered and influential literary works in history, perhaps the greatest single poem that has