

*William Shakespeare* (before 1840). Plaster. Gift of James Phalen, 1840.

This bust of the great English dramatist and poet, William Shakespeare [1564-1616], testifies to the Athenaeum's mission to promote literature, culture, and a space for the advancement of learning. In addition, the sculpture serves as an important architectural framing element for library's main hall. One of ten busts of prominent literary and political figures that James Phalen gave to the Athenaeum in 1840, it has been a fixture of the library since its earliest days.

Shakespeare is universally considered the greatest national poet of Britain, and one of the most important writers in the English language. His work transcends the generations and serves as a source of inspiration to many young writers and playwrights. For these reasons, then, the bust was a particularly fitting gift for Athenaeum – a library that, in the words of Brown University President Francis Wayland at its opening in 1838, “provides the means for the universal distribution of knowledge.”<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare was born and educated in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, and received the rudiments of a classical education at the Elizabethan free grammar school.<sup>2</sup> Ten years later he was an established playwright in London, where he worked at two theatres owned by James Burbage.<sup>3</sup> In 1598, Burbage moved to Bankside and built the Globe Theatre, in which Shakespeare owned stock and where most of his most famous plays were first seen.

Another portrait-bust of a literary icon, John Milton [1608-1674], belongs to the group of busts given by Phalen; together, they serve as important symbols of the great British tradition of creative thought – just as the Phalen busts of Homer, Demosthenes, Socrates, and Cicero represent the achievements of the classical world.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation from Brown University President Francis Wayland's words at the opening of the Athenaeum. ([www.providencetheatrum.org/about/welcome/](http://www.providencetheatrum.org/about/welcome/)).

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, and Bertrand Evans. *The College Shakespeare; 15 Plays and the Sonnets*. New York: Macmillan, 1973. pI.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p3.

The Phalen bust of Shakespeare bears a striking resemblance to a marble bust of Shakespeare by Peter Scheemakers, installed in the Long Room of the Old Library at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.<sup>4</sup> This bust rests atop the second bookshelf at the left near the main entrance, symbolically welcoming visitors in much the way that Athenaeum's bust does. The Trinity College Shakespeare is portrayed with a serious and thoughtful expression and the dress of his period. A sash that suggests a classical toga is wrapped around his shoulder, giving him the appearance of a timeless sage and literary hero.

Another bust of Shakespeare in the Athenaeum collection, donated by Ethelbert R. Billings in 1863 from his brother Alpheus' art collection when Alpheus passed away. It is modeled after John Taylor's iconic "Chandos" portrait of Shakespeare, painted between 1600 and 1610.<sup>5</sup> (Displayed apart from the collection of Phalen busts in the library's main hall, this work is currently installed in the William Goddard Memorial Art Room). Sculpted in marble, this neoclassical bust portrays the bard with a smile on his face and a toga draped across his shoulders; as with the Phalen/Trinity College bust, the toga aligns the writer with the literature of Ancient Greece or Rome.  
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<sup>4</sup> "Old Library - Book of Kells : The Library of Trinity College Dublin: Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, Ireland." ([www.tcd.ie/Library/bookofkells/old-library](http://www.tcd.ie/Library/bookofkells/old-library)).

<sup>5</sup> Information from Providence Athenaeum's binder, "The Board of Trade Journal" 1914. [Providence Athenaeum Archive]