

To b-day, or not to b-day: what a piece of work is Shakespeare

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Did you get a card for the bard? Intrigue around Shakespeare the man continues unabated. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

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In William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the conspirator Cassius bitterly describes the position of Caesar in Rome. He says:

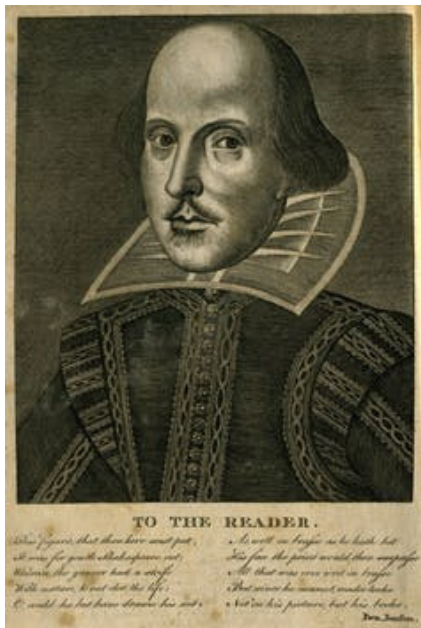
*... [H]e doth bestride the narrow world
Like a colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.*

While written about Caesar, these words are a rather prophetic description of Shakespeare, whose birthday falls today. William Shakespeare occupies a very similar space: a towering literary colossus, he remains both admired and – to some extent – feared. We mere mortals – we petty men and women – walk humbly in his shadow, in wonder and (sometimes) in confusion.

And as today is the bard's birthday, we petty humans should be especially worshipful.

Well, more accurately, it *might* be Shakespeare's birthday. Maybe not. William Shakespeare was baptised on April 26 1564, according to the Parish Register. So odds are he was born *around* this time.

An incomplete biography



A 1787 engraving of Shakespeare.
Wikimedia Commons

This discrepancy over the precise date of Shakespeare's birth is just one of several questions clouding the playwright's biography (although biographical evidence for Shakespeare is far less scant than rumour might have you believe).

There is also the question of his hasty marriage to Anne Hathaway, and of course, the mysterious years frequently referred to as "the lost years" of 1585-1592, where conjecture has him doing everything from teaching to travelling.

There are persistent questions about entirely speculative debates over Shakespeare's sexuality (who is the young man of the sonnets? What about the dark lady?), religion (secret Catholic? Loyal Protestant? Or was he more akin to contemporary Christopher Marlowe's alleged atheism?), and even education (weren't he and his family illiterate country peasants?).

And, most notably, there is the ongoing and tiresome authorship question (did he even write those plays?). Sceptics or "anti-Stratfordians" have posed a host of alternative authors – the Earl of Oxford, Francis Bacon, even Queen Elizabeth.

Such lingering questions – baseless or otherwise – are not, in themselves, all that interesting.

Far more interesting is what those questions and rumours say about our relationship with

Shakespeare. These doubts indicate that we are slightly uncomfortable with the heavy spirit of this solitary genius casting its impossibly impressive shadow over us. And so we hold on to the inconsistencies, perceived or actual, in an attempt to nail his feet to the floor.

But it's also more than that. While we search for ever more evidence that Shakespeare really *was* – that there was a real, flesh-and-blood man behind the colossus – we also contradictorily enjoy Shakespeare's mysteriousness. There is seductive allure in his ambiguities.

New evidence about Shakespeare?



Jeremy Tarling

It is this contrary drive for both discovery and mystery which lies behind the incredible excitement generated by discoveries about his life.

And recently we've had quite the – potential – discovery.

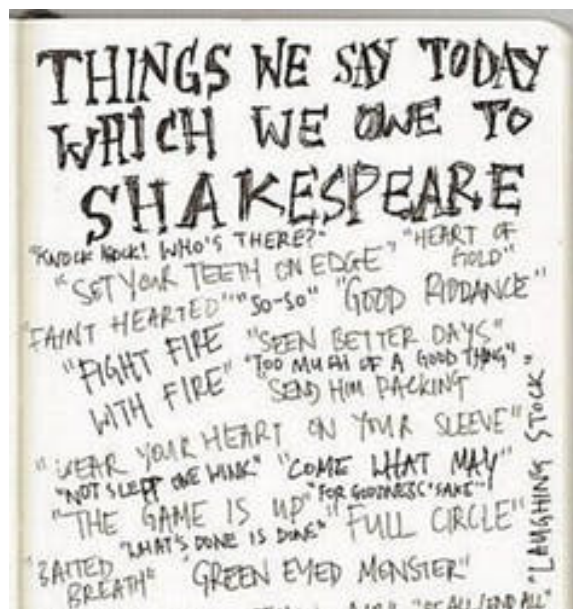
This week two New York antiquarian booksellers made an extraordinary claim: they believe they have identified Shakespeare's annotated dictionary. Specifically, they have acquired a copy of John Baret's *Alvearie*, published in 1580, with annotations that imply a connection with Shakespeare.

While the evidence is yet to be thoroughly examined or commented on by scholars, the excitement around this 16th-century dictionary – and the buzz of a potential link to Shakespeare and an additional means by which he created his canon – attests to the fascination that he retains.

It is not just in his biographical details that scepticism exists. Questions of relevancy cling stubbornly to Shakespeare, especially in relation to the teaching of his works. Why do we study him? Why is he relevant? How does he retain such a powerful hold in our popular, cultural, theatrical, and educational imaginations? Why Shakespeare?

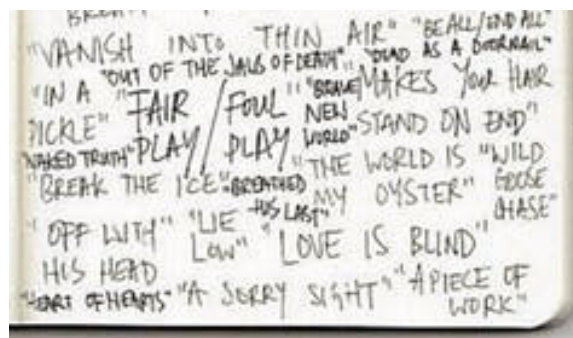
Typically, this question is answered by citing the attributes of his “universality” or “timelessness.” Although he was not always the immortalised, deified figure that we are now familiar with, Shakespeare has come to be seen not just as a national but global voice, whose works ring true, “timeless” and “universal” across ages and continents. As Graham Holderness describes in *The Shakespeare Myth*, this is the “religion” of “bardolatry, the worship of Shakespeare.”

I don't think Shakespeare is unique or relevant because he is somehow magically universal or timeless. These words imply that we don't *do* anything with Shakespeare; that he just sits there, being appropriate for us.



Our Shakespeare

Universality is not a quality innate in his plays and poems; they do not miraculously metamorphose into a form suiting our specific time, culture or context. It is also because of us: it is our ability to do things with Shakespeare, our role in the interactions with his work across the centuries that contribute to what we see as “Shakespeare” today.



As the scholar Andrew Gurr puts it: “we always rewrite Shakespeare into our own image”.

TRF_Mr_Hyde

And there is a plethora of examples of people doing just this.

In Jordan earlier this year, Syrian children in a refugee camp put on their own version of King Lear.

In Queensland, the Shakespeare Prison Project enables prisoners to perform Shakespeare’s plays.

In France, academics are converging for a conference marking Shakespeare’s birthday.



Peter Evans and John Bell from Bell Shakespeare examine a rare Shakespeare folio as part of the State Library of NSW's Shakespeare celebrations. AAP Image/Dan Himbrechts

In Australia, the Bell Shakespeare Company is celebrating Shakespeare with a Google Australia partnership. The State Library of New South Wales is showcasing Australia’s only copy of Shakespeare’s First Folio (the first collection of his works published posthumously by his acting colleagues in 1623).

Meanwhile, the place of Shakespeare’s birth, Stratford-upon-Avon, will celebrate this weekend with an official birthday procession. The Globe Theatre in London has commenced a two-year tour of Hamlet to every country in the world (coming to Australia in May 2015). And, of course, there’s even a

hashtag: #happybirthdayshakespeare.

You may call this evidence of his universality and timelessness. But it's quite the opposite.

Shakespeare is only universal or timeless to the extent that our interactions with his works make him so; in the ways in which we “rewrite Shakespeare in our own image”. Every student is an active part of how Shakespeare is remade, and should be aware of that role.



Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. See Li/Newzulu

The “point” of Shakespeare, then, is the extraordinary malleability of his exceptional works.

Beyond the simple fact that his language and narratives are beautiful and captivating, Shakespeare is inherently usable. And we – as a society, as educators, as learners, audiences, and performers – must actively do things with Shakespeare, and see what his plays can say and do and show for our own contexts.

That's not easy. The desire to innovate and diversify the teaching and learning of Shakespeare – particularly through methods such as now widely-accepted “active” approaches which foreground the importance of performance as a means to counteract the potentially intimidating challenges of early modern text – is often in conflict with the increasing restrictions of rules and regulations of our educational systems.

But as Liam Semler has argued in his book *Teaching Shakespeare and Marlowe: Learning Versus the System*: “If the world decreasingly comes to us in the humanities, we must increasingly go to it.”

We must deliberately and enthusiastically intersect our world with works such as Shakespeare's, and in so doing, we can genuinely celebrate Shakespeare's legacy and understand better his significance for us.





Bell Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, at the Sydney Opera House, March 2014. Dan Himbrechts/AAP Image

In this way, it is less about the man and more about the phenomenon. It is now essentially a truism in Shakespearean scholarship that behind the mythology of the legendary “Shakespeare” is a more complex process of collaboration. Shakespeare was influenced by specific cultural contexts, and his works were amended and changed by collaborators, actors, printers, and editors.

The plays that we know of today, that we use in our classrooms and see on our stages and screens, started with Shakespeare, but are brought to us and remade via many hands.

Shakespeare, I think, would have expected this. He was not precious with his use of sources and, after all, as he reminds us in *Hamlet*:


*Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O, that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t'expel the water's flaw.*

Shakespeare knew very well that the spirit of a man – the reputation and fame that lingers on – jars imperfectly with the physical being of the body. That is what leads to the assassination of Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play: his physical limitations, his humanity, cannot match up to the imagined godliness of his mind and spirit.

In celebrating Shakespeare's birth-date this year, it is well worth distinguishing between man and colossus. The fertile and imaginative potential of Shakespeare's plays will continue on “so long as men can breathe or eyes can see” (*Sonnet 18*) - as long as there are hands and minds to enjoy them and to experiment with them, remaking the plays for the times and places of now and the future.

But this is a different phenomenon to Shakespeare the man; and any attempts to reconcile the two will always prove wanting. That, perhaps, explains the ongoing impulse to both worship and to question William Shakespeare.

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