

## A CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF BILL SHAKESPEARE

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**ABSTRACT.** *A Contemporary Understanding of Bill Shakespeare.* This article is about choice. When approaching any topic there are two possibilities. In the first case, things are taken seriously. Accordingly, concepts such as *interest, education* and *research* should be common-sense. Discussing any cultural legacy should be done with care. Speaking about a topic should be done with a sense of propriety. In the second case nothing is really taken seriously because there seems to be lack of real interest in the topic. As such, a high degree of ignorance becomes rather evident. This, ultimately results in fundamental misunderstanding of the cultural legacy, and, of course, any discourse related to the matter seems to be severely distorted. The legacy of Shakespeare is not exception to these rules. One may try a sincere approach or, one may try to re-interpret it. Any re-interpretation may prove to be highly problematic and thus highly questionable whether they be in education, arts or history.

**Keywords:** *Bill Shakespeare, understanding, approaches, arts, history.*

**REZUMAT.** *O manieră contemporană de a-l înțelege pe Bill Shakespeare.* Acest articol se bazează pe ideea posibilității de alegere. În procesul de abordare a oricărui subiect de discuție se conturează două scenarii posibile. În primul scenariu lucrurile sunt luate în serios. În consecință, concepte cum ar fi *interesul, educația* sau *cercetarea* sunt percepute ca fiind de la sine înțelese. Orice discuție asupra unei moșteniri culturale ar trebui să conțină o doză de bun-simț. Retorica aferentă acestui subiect ar trebui să fie moderată. În al doilea scenariu, nimic nu este luat în serios pentru că, după cum se pare, există o reală lipsă de interes față de subiectul aflat în discuție. Așadar iese la iveală un grad mare de ignoranță. Rezultatul acestuia va fi o înțelegere în mod fundamental greșită a a moștenirii culturale iar orice retorică asupra subiectului va fi complet distorsionată. Modul în care este privită moștenirea culturală a lui William Shakespeare nu face excepție de la aceste reguli. Se poate încerca o abordare sinceră sau un fel de reinterpretare. Orice reinterpretare poate fi problematică și, în consecință, discutabilă, fie că este vorba de educație, artă sau istorie.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *Bill Shakespeare, înțelegere, abordări, artă, istorie.*

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The name in the title was chosen on purpose. It's not *William Shakespeare*. It's *Bill Shakespeare*. *Bill* is a nickname which suggests some degree of closeness. But, in this context it is meant to be used ironically, not because of any failures of the playwright, but because of how his works and, indeed the personality himself are perceived by our contemporaries.

It is rather understandable that people would be attracted to great figures. History can offer plenty of them. There is Roger Bacon, John Dunstable, William Tyndale, William Bird, William Harvey, John Harrison, etc. They are all figures from the past which have entered popular mythology from some of their strivings and achievements.

William Shakespeare is and, by all means should not be an exception for he has undoubtedly earned a place in a row call of great figures. William Shakespeare left a considerable cultural legacy. It is accepted that he wrote 37 plays, 154 sonnets and popularised more than 1500 words, even if the number he actually coined is still subject to debate.

His biography, however, is difficult to piece together. One should keep in mind that he was born under the less auspicious religious turmoil of the Tudor era. He was probably baptised catholic as he was born was during the rain of Mary I.<sup>2</sup> This would have consequences later for his family and himself, as England was turning increasingly protestant.

There are two periods in Shakespeare's life when we do not have too many sources of information about his whereabouts. Historians have given them the title of *lost years*. The first period starts in 1578 and ends in 1582 and spans the time between his formal education and his marriage. The second period starts in 1585 and ends in 1592, covering a time between the birth of his twins and the documentary evidence provided by criticism written by Robert Greene. There is also the fact that Shakespeare could not be bothered very much with publishing as he was more into performing.

Having these details in mind, a number of manners of trying to understand his life and works has sprung up over the years. They range from the ridiculous to the sublime. While there are innumerable attempts to describe William Shakespeare and his works in detail using whatever pieces of evidence one could find, and some of them as a result of many years of research are quite rewarding to read, there are some attempts which are not just at the fringe of any scientific methodology but also on the fringe of reason.

It is, perhaps, the lack of instruction on the part of people claiming to have done research. It may very well be the desire to feed an even less instructed public with information whose purpose is not to educate anyone but to appeal to the senses of the target public. Whatever the case, there is

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<sup>2</sup> Ackroyd, P. (2006). *Shakespeare: The Biography*. London: Vintage. p.53.

nothing laudable about such endeavours. They are dangerous and should be seen for what they really are.

One is, however, aware of the fact that, like any other phenomenon, it is difficult to describe and classify. Nonetheless, since one has to take upon oneself this task and to ease the understanding thereof, one has put pen to paper in an attempt to name a few counter-productive ways of looking at the life and works of William Shakespeare. While praise where praise is due, the author of this text deserves none since the next few lines are not a classification in a logical sense but merely an enumeration of questionable approaches.

### **1 The schoolboy approach**

If one is to go to Stratford-upon-Avon one is presented with a few constructions left over from Shakespeare's time as well as a few pictures and artefacts in a museum. They are meant to tell a story of what has been. And it's all very elegant. But it's all very simplified, as one might expect on a tourist sightseeing tour. People have grown accustomed to certain simplifications. There is no need to be passionate about anything really, much less about Shakespeare because everything is pre-digested. There are a few stops on a pre-planned visit. During the visit one will be told the same thing that everyone else has been told, with minor variations. If one is really lucky, maybe the local trust has hired a company of actors to put on a quick show. Then it's time for the souvenir shop and one has become a better, more rounded person.

The same goes for a classroom. It's simplified so that the words can reach every pupil. Yet the result of this simplification is not the generation of a higher degree of understanding, but the perception of it as something remote. On reading any of Shakespeare's works one is bound to notice that the words almost demand to be uttered. Whether in a theatrical performance or poem-reading circles the texts come to life in their splendour.<sup>3</sup> Without that context they lose a certain dimension. But truth be told, this isn't the only dimension they've lost. Shakespeare's language is part of a stage in the development of the English language which has been dubbed Early Modern English by linguists. This is important because the all language levels were ever slightly different than what they are today. Hence, starting with the pronunciation and ending with the fixed expressions would have been perceived differently by his contemporaries. The pronunciation would have been slower and this would have meant that the plays would have taken longer to act out. The

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<sup>3</sup> Brooke, N. (2004). "Language and Speaker in Macbeth". In Edwards, Philip; Ewbank, Inga-Stina; Hunter, G.K. (eds.). *Shakespeare's Styles: Essays in Honour of Kenneth Muir*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 67–78.

contents of the figures of style would have been quite apparent and would have elicited an immediate response from the public. In educational contexts, however, this is all ignored, supposedly for simplicity's sake. However, in the rare instances when something does seep through, it's mainly presented as a curiosity. To wit, it is rendered as fragmented pieces of meta-textual information. These two phenomena seem to complement each other almost perfectly. And the result is the creation of functional mediocrity.

## **2 The minimalist approach**

Originally, minimalism had little to do with arts. It was more of a business model. Invest as little as possible for the greatest possible profit. Even though some artists today have embraced minimalism as a target to aspire towards and programmatically pursue it, a minimalist approach has never ceased to give the impression that it has little in the way of content. A suitable example of minimalist interpretation of the Shakespearian works is to be found in *The Reduced Shakespeare Company*.

The first aspect anyone is likely to notice is its logo. It seems to reveal a hidden desire to join the National Football League, the professional association of American Football teams. This is not accidental. Everyone is tributary to one's cultural background. The second thing anyone is likely to notice is the word *reduced*. It really is much reduced. If *Romeo and Juliet* takes an average of two hours and thirty minutes to be performed on stage, *The Reduced Shakespeare Company* has had a performance which lasted less than thirty minutes in 1983. But, one needs to remember that *The Reduced Shakespeare Company* was in its infancy. As time went on, they got better at reducing. In 1987, the same company managed to outdo itself by having a go, for the first time at all the Shakespearian plays in less than an hour.

And it's been bliss ever since. Since then the company has managed to perfect its art of improvisation and thus adapted to the expectations of the public which does not want to be bored, it wants to be entertained. Ultimately, it has little to do with the entertainment encoded in the texts by William Shakespeare. It is superficial and ever-changing and thus more akin to science-fiction.

## **3 The conspiracy theories**

Most conspiracy theories surrounding Shakespearian literature try to cast a shadow of doubt over the authorship of the texts. The important word here is *Anti-Stratfordian*, referring to somebody who believes that the Shakespearean body of literature was written by somebody else than the personality from

Stratford-upon-Avon. It has to be said that, as with all conspiracy theories, *Anti-Stratfordianism* comes in two different guises. There is the idea that that a group of people have created the Shakespearian literature and for various reasons their works had been published as if penned by a single person. So, in this case there wasn't a single Shakespeare but several. The only question is if these supposed authors were working in tandem, or if they worked independently from each other. The other possible trend of *Anti-Stratfordianism* is that the works have not been written by Shakespeare but by another person. The seemingly reasonable idea here is that, such a person could not have possibly admitted to be the author of the plays and sonnets for societal concerns. However, since there is no indisputable evidence that this had actually occurred, a number of people have been suggested to have been the "real" Shakespeare. There is a veritable inflation of candidates to the position of possible author of the Shakespearian literature. Literally, dozens of names have been proposed over the year. But at the top of the list feature the names of Christopher Marlowe, Edward de Vere (the 17th earl of Oxford), Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Bacon, John Donne, Henry Neville, William Stanley (the 6th Earl of Derby). Yet not all are names are to be expected. Some people are simply not contemporaries of Shakespeare like Daniel Defoe. Others are quite far-removed in terms of style, such as Michelangelo Florio or Miguel de Cervantes. The interesting thing about these allegations is that all the people who are supposed to have written the plays and/or the sonnets belong to the educated high classes and are famous in their own right. All these stories are quite sensationalist and, of course, highly unlikely to have ever happened.

Another set of conspiracy theories tries to suggest that, while William Shakespeare was the author, his creations were penned under the influence of various, if yet undetermined substances. To explain this phenomenon, one has taken the freedom to give an example which might just be of relevance. In 2011 A group of archaeologists from Birmingham Archaeology were digging up a few trenches in what used to be the New Place, the posh house which Shakespeare bought in Stratford-upon-Avon.<sup>45</sup> Their excavations were fruitful as they made a number of rather surprising discoveries. Firstly, they discovered that the sketch of the New Place made in 1737, while probably accurate, actually depicted the gatehouse where the servants may have lived. Secondly the house where the master would have lived in, i.e. William Shakespeare and his immediate family would have been smaller, thus less

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<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare Birthday Trust: <http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/visit-the-houses/latest-news/bbc-one-national-treasures-live-on-location-at-the-dig-for-shakespeare-tonight.html>

<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare Birthday Trust: <http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/about-us/volunteering/news/digging-deeper-for-shakespeare.html> (last accessed: 28 November 2019)

impressive and situated at the back of the courtyard, and, thus invisible from the outside. Thirdly, between the gatehouse and the master's house there would have been a series of outbuildings which would have housed a brewery, a pantry, etc. Fourthly, while the buildings were no longer standing, due to prolonged human occupation, they found small object or remains of various objects such as smoking pipes.

In 2015, *The Independent* published an article in the culture section which bore a rather peculiar title.<sup>6</sup> The reader of this periodical will be met with a sequence of words which make up a title which actually reads: 'Was William Shakespeare high when he penned his plays?' As one may suspect, it is rather interesting piece of investigative journalism. As such it tries to ease the reading public into the topic with some information about some archaeological finds, namely some smoking pipes of the era. But just in case the reader hadn't got the gist yet, it tries to go in depth by asking a very important question. That question is: 'What were they smoking?' It is here that the public is enlightened with the information that, at the time they were smoking tobacco. But the article is still very keen on making a connection with William Shakespeare. And this connection is to be made in the third part of the article called 'What we found'. And this is where it gets interesting. This part suggests that the pipes, even though used for smoking tobacco, contained traces of cannabis. The logic of this article then dictates that since there were no traces of cocaine, the playwright must have been aware of the effects of smoking coke leaves. According to the article, this would explain Sonnet 76, more specifically the expression "compounds strange" which is said to be a reference to coke. But like any well-written article it just has to have a convincing conclusion. In the excellent tradition established by this article, this conclusion is also based on a question. This question is, quite suitably, an approximate reiteration, if not a simplification of the title: 'Was Shakespeare high?' And the interesting thing is the technique used here. It is the anticlimax which is created by not providing an answer to such a highly cerebral question, which, in order to be properly understood, requires the careful lecture and consideration of the article in its entirety. The intelligent thing here is that the article keeps on asking questions as to use of "compounds" during the original shows. It is by using such rhetorical techniques that the article suggests that not just Shakespeare, but any of his likewise famous contemporaries might have been under the influence of some sort of substance. By now, the ridiculousness of the text must have become apparent to any discerning reader. So, an explanation as to why one is making

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<sup>6</sup> The Independent: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/william-shakespeare-high-cannabis-marijuana-stoned-plays-hamlet-macbeth-romeo-juliet-stratford-10446510.html>

a fuss about it is the next logical step. The thing is that this unfortunate way of looking at the life and work of William Shakespeare is by no means new, as one has encountered such suggestions as far as 1998, so they may be actually older than that year, and, in all probability, it may not die out in popular culture any time soon.

### Conclusion

This short voyage of discover has taken one from the ridiculous to the sublime. It was great fun and it seemed like a game. But one needs not forget that it was also a voyage into a world of obscure interests and reversed values. In practical terms, it has been a listing of some responses elicited by the encounter with the legacy of William Shakespeare's life and works. Unsurprisingly, they were all disappointing. There is little if any use for dull education. No artistic value is added by down market representations of his plays. And, of course, fringe theories deserve to be classified as science-fiction. In order to mitigate the effects of popular science, correct current trends and prevent future misuse of a solid reputation, one has to take back and make a decision. Ideally, this decision involves choosing the seemingly more difficult path of being properly informed.

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### **ONLINE RESOURCES**

The Independent: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/william-shakespeare-high-cannabis-marijuana-stoned-plays-hamlet-macbeth-romeo-juliet-stratford-10446510.html> (last accessed: 25 November 2019)

Shakespeare Birthday Trust: <http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/visit-the-houses/latest-news/bbc-one-national-treasures-live-on-location-at-the-dig-for-shakespeare-tonight.html> (last accessed: 28 November 2019)

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