

CELEBRATING *Shakespeare 400*

*O this learning,
what a thing it is!*

Taming of the Shrew, I.2.159

To commemorate the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death, **Dr Keith McDonald** asked a panel of experts why we still celebrate his life and works.

While it may seem surprising to us now, William Shakespeare wasn't necessarily the most celebrated playwright during his own lifetime.

His contemporary Ben Jonson was arguably more influential among fellow writers, while the celebrated partnership of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher steadily eclipsed Shakespeare's prominence throughout the course of the seventeenth century.

Yet, 400 years on, it is Shakespeare's legacy that has prevailed.

He has become a truly global cultural phenomenon, perhaps even the world's greatest writer of all time. His plays have been translated into many languages and adapted widely for stage and screen around the world.

Writing wasn't Shakespeare's sole concern, of course. He was also an actor and an investor, managing property and owning shares in London theatres. He may also have been a money-lender. Such diverse entrepreneurial interests kept Shakespeare self-sufficient during a time when writers were fortunate to survive through the proceeds of literary patronage alone.

But naturally, he is celebrated for remarkable literary achievements that have managed to withstand centuries of critical appraisal.

Why is it, then, that we continue to celebrate him as a global icon 400 years on?

Do we even like Shakespeare?

Ironically, first impressions of Shakespeare are not always positive. The venerated Bard may even be more popular outside of Britain than he is on home soil.

Often, it's the influence of teachers that determine whether or not we grow up to become lovers of Shakespeare. Maybe we even grow to enjoy him in spite of, rather than because of, those who teach us.

That was the experience of Philadelphia-based actor and playwright Mark Knight, who spent time as a resident teacher at the Globe Theatre's Education Department, educating and entertaining others about the Bard.

'My first Shakespeare experience was at the hands of a crabby teacher who forced my entire class of inner-city north London kids to read *Julius Caesar* out loud, line by line,' he recalled.

'Any inattention, sniggering, or other schoolboy crimes meant severe knuckle-raps. In spite of this I went on to become an actor and playwright.'

It was years later and a move to south London that brought Mark's attention to the regeneration project for Shakespeare's Globe, which opened in 1997 under the artistic direction of Mark Rylance.

'Across Southwark Bridge, an American, Sam Wanamaker, had set up shop in an old tea warehouse,' he said. 'I wandered into that warehouse one day and spent the next decade learning about plays and playgoing in Shakespeare's London.'



'Reading, workshopping and lecturing day after day, I got a better handle on the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries than that knuckle-rapping fool of a teacher could ever have dreamed.'

This sort of experience draws greater attention to the merits of text and performance as educational vehicles.

Since Shakespeare wrote to entertain rather than simply to educate, it seems fair to say that newcomers to Shakespeare should expect to be entertained for the full impact of his plays to be realised.

History and rediscovery

Another reason why Shakespeare's legacy has continued to prosper is the number of new discoveries that keep rising to the surface.

By astonishing coincidence, a new First Folio was authenticated in the Scottish Isle of Bute just two weeks ahead of the big anniversary, prompting a new round of speculation as to how many more Folios exist and where they might be hiding.

More remarkable still, however, was the discovery in 2012 of the remains of King Richard III in Leicester. The find has brought renewed scrutiny to

Shakespeare's eponymous play and the role that dramatists have played in shaping our view of this divisive figure in British history.

The character of Richard was one that evolved throughout the Tudor period until Shakespeare took it up from a leading historian of the age, Raphael Holinshed, to make it his own.

'Shakespeare built up the character gradually through the *Henry VI* trilogy, culminating in *Richard III*,' says Sarah Knight, Professor of Renaissance Literature at the University of Leicester.

'But it had already appeared on the Elizabethan stage in a 1579 Latin play, *Richardus Tertius*, written by the Cambridge scholar Thomas Legge, and in the anonymous *True Tragedie of Richard III* (1594).'

Shakespeare's Richard presents with clear physical impairments. He regards himself as 'deformed', 'unfinished', and 'scarce half made up'. This is despite the likelihood that the king masked the symptoms of his scoliosis during his lifetime.

'The stunning discovery of Richard III's remains has given us material evidence about his physique and the manner of his death at Bosworth in 1485,' says Dr Mary Ann Lund, Lecturer in Renaissance Literature at the University of Leicester.

'With the wealth of new knowledge we now have, we must reinterpret how and why Shakespeare portrayed Richard in the way he did. Why, for example, did he emphasise that he had a withered



6699

No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en:
In brief, sir, study what you most affect.

Taming of the Shrew, I.1.39-40

arm, a feature for which there's no evidence, and even give him a limp?'

The discovery offers a strong reminder of how Renaissance drama, enthralling and entertaining as it is, can walk a dangerous line between fact and fiction. 'These plays all show how history and drama vividly overlapped during the Renaissance,' adds Professor Knight. 'It's a moment when historians used literary techniques to animate their writing and playwrights borrowed from historians.'

Remembering the Bard in London and Stratford

To mark the anniversary on 23 April, much of the commemorative activity took place in London, including the launch of 'Shakespeare: Metamorphosis', the University of London's first major exhibition. This has a certain propriety to it, since Shakespeare's theatrical career was predominantly based in the capital. Indeed, it was London that inspired many of his dynamic settings, says Dr Hannah Crawforth, Senior Lecturer in Shakespeare Studies at King's College London.

'The sights, sounds and smells of London underwrite every crowd scene, inform every jostling commercial interaction, inform the political dealings that occupy his plays, be they set in Rome, Verona, Elsinore or Athens,' she explains. 'The Capulets' mansion, into which Romeo steals to visit Juliet, is a replica of the grand houses Shakespeare saw on the early modern Strand.

'The disguise of the Bedlam beggar and the depictions of mental illness so unflinchingly staged in *Lear*, suggest the Bethlehem Hospital, famed tourist attraction in Shakespeare's London. 'Hamlet's world of witty repartee mirrors the rhetorical sparring of the Inns of Court students and the buzzing atmosphere around St Paul's Cathedral,' she adds. 'As we commemorate his death London has a right to claim Shakespeare as her own.'

But institutions in Stratford-upon-Avon have been equally keen to claim the picturesque Warwickshire town as the spiritual heart of Shakespearean commemoration. To Anjna Chouhan, Lecturer at the

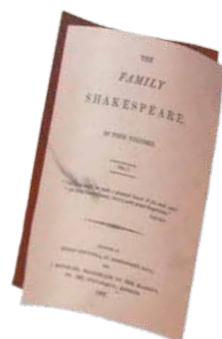
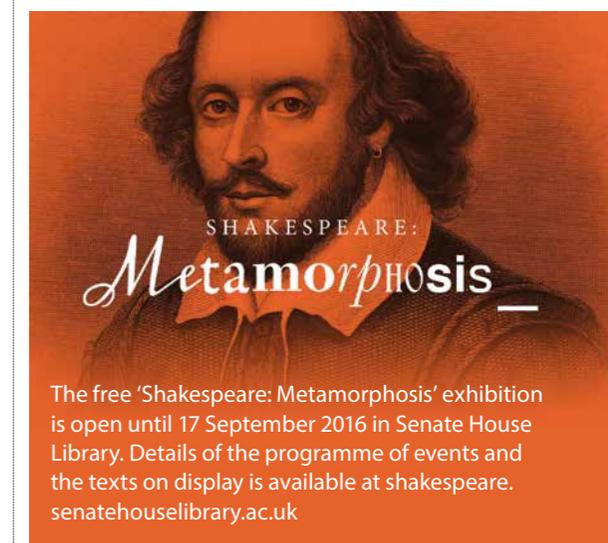
Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, no celebrations are quite like those held in his home town.

'The tradition of marking Shakespeare's birthday in Stratford began in the 18th century and continues to flourish,' she says. 'Ambassadors, thespians, tourists and enthusiasts from around the world descend on the town for the street parties, parades, theatres, gala concerts and Shakespeare properties to champion his life, works and legacy.'

To mark the anniversary, the Birthplace Trust is set to open a new site recreating Shakespeare's family home. 'New Place invites visitors to stand on the ground where Shakespeare chose to raise his family, tend to his personal and financial affairs and where he passed away in April 1616,' Dr Chouhan explains. 'The anniversary of his death seems the right time. The world can now enjoy the site of his actual family dwelling in the town that he loved and called home.'

With a thriving legacy on stage and page, in performance and adaptation, in discovering old relics and re-imagining new ones, the cultural value of Shakespeare shows little sign of drifting.

If anything, we're finding ourselves brought closer and closer to the illustrious Bard, and perhaps more enamoured with his memory than ever before.



6699

O, learn to read what silent love hath writ:
To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.

Sonnet 23