

Readers of *Shakespeare for Everyone to Enjoy*
are saying. . . .

David Brown's enthusiasm for the works of Shakespeare is contagious! We think Angus Bowmer would be pleased that his legacy at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival continues to inspire playgoers of all ages. Brown encourages those new to the theater experience to jump right in as he shares ways to introduce students to these glorious plays.

William Patton

Executive Director 1953–1995

Shirley Patton

Actress 1955–1991

Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Having met the author, I can attest to his credibility in this subject. Too often those who write about Shakespeare do not base their opinions on facts. This is a most enjoyable and factual read.

Dr. David Noebel

President and Founder of Summit Ministries, Manitou Springs, Colorado

The lover of Shakespeare will find much that will inspire him, but Professor Brown's offering is variously a theological reflection, a detailed memoir of his unique experiences teaching and directing, and most importantly—an impassioned invitation to the novice to come under the spell of that greatest of dramatic conjurers.

Edward Hofmeister

Theatrical Professional, Graduate of University of Southern California

This is a book to be savored by both teachers and students. The author communicates his extensive knowledge of the Bard's works with a contagious enthusiasm that must surely win even those students who have resisted getting to know the great playwright. In these pages it becomes clear that Shakespeare is indeed for everyone to enjoy.

Mary-Elaine Swanson

Author of *The Education of James Madison*

This wonderful, little book is for those who love the Bard's plays but who are not Shakespeare scholars. I have loved Shakespeare for over 50 years, read all his plays, and have seen almost all his plays on stage, but have never, till I read David Brown's book, been introduced to the historical facts on Shakespeare's life, family, and work in an exciting and scholarly way for the average person. I will enthusiastically recommend this book to my friends, and we hope to go to Ashland this summer to get in on David Brown's lectures.

—Dr. Jay Grimstead

President and founder of Coalition on Revival, Murphys, California

During the last thirty-five years, the author has researched the Christian history of William Shakespeare and taught youth and adults how to discern the many Biblical analogies and presuppositions portrayed by his characters and themes. This volume can help you appreciate, as a good and profitable thing, the works of Shakespeare, "the Bard" or poet of the Bible.

—James B. Rose

President, American Christian History Institute

Shakespeare

for Everyone
to Enjoy

David R. Brown

An
Ascribed
Book

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Dedication

In Memoriam

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DR. ANGUS L. BOWMER

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Contents

	Foreword	xi
Chapter One	<i>“O for a Muse of Fire”</i> Introduction	1
Chapter Two	<i>“This Happy Breed of Men”</i> The Universality of Shakespeare	7
Chapter Three	<i>“This Was a Man!”</i> The Life of Shakespeare	15
Chapter Four	<i>“Converted from the World”</i> Shakespeare’s Religion	25
Chapter Five	<i>“Conscience Is the Most Sacred of All Property”</i> The Principle Approach® to Shakespeare	33
Chapter Six	<i>“And Man Became a Living Soul”</i> Spiritual Values in Shakespeare’s Plays	41
Chapter Seven	<i>“Don’t Ride the Green Bus”</i> A Visit to Stratford-on-Avon	49
Chapter Eight	<i>“I Am Constant as the Northern Star”</i> Character Development	61
Chapter Nine	<i>“The Play’s the Thing”</i> Shakespeare in the Classroom	71
Chapter Ten	<i>“All the World’s a Stage”</i> Shakespeare on the Stage	87
Chapter Eleven	<i>“All’s Well that Ends Well”</i> Conclusion	101
APPENDIX: I	Records of the Life of Shakespeare G. B. Harrison	109
II	Shakespeare’s Will	121
III	Bibliography	125
IV	Noah Webster Educational Foundation	127
V	Principle Approach® Classical Education About the Author	129 131

W^{illm} Shakspeare.

William

Shakespeare

Foreword

AFTER many years of teaching Shakespeare at the college and high school levels, my associates suggested that I ought to write a book detailing some of my lectures. In addition, I was challenged to relate my experiences while directing three of his plays. As I pondered over my notes and reflected on my work, I concluded that too many people do not enjoy Shakespeare. My experience has been that the more I studied these great plays, the more I developed a love for the works of the greatest playwright in history.

My primary objective in writing this book is to open up new vistas to Shakespeare's plays. As I struggled to decide how I could best relate my own pilgrimage, I began to sense a deep desire to help those who have little or no experience in studying Shakespeare or in attending live performances of his plays. Also, I wrestled over what would be the best way to try to dispel the negative reactions that so many have expressed to me after attending a play or viewing a video or movie.

A second objective is to provide homeschools and Christian schools a means for studying Shakespeare, especially in independent study groups. During the time that I served as the superintendent of Christian Heritage Academy, we added an independent study section to our school. The parents whose children were enrolled in this section told me that they could not find any suitable material to help their children with a study of Shakespeare's works. Hopefully this book will help to fill that need. However, this book has been written to challenge all students to delve into a richer understanding of his plays and sonnets.

First of all, the student must rid himself of any previous thoughts or ideas that might hinder his quest to develop an interest in studying Shakespeare. Negative views about the Bard and his plays must be cast aside. Without an open mind, the student will often miss the gems of wisdom waiting to be discovered. No matter how many times I have studied, lectured on, or attended live performances of Shakespeare's plays, I always discover something I had previously missed. A strong,

positive attitude will serve you well when you start your adventure into the wonderful world of Shakespeare.

Secondly, one who values the truth will put aside all attempts to read into Shakespeare's plays conceptual material that he never intended to write. Today it is in vogue for a director to put his own value system and message into his production of the play, so that Shakespeare's original intent is lost. This destroys the enjoyment of the play. The life and work of the Bard of Avon is often viewed from conjecture and mere guesswork. Our desire is to look at the facts, many of which can be documented. This book includes in the appendix a listing of most of the indisputable records. The appendix also contains the last will and testament of William Shakespeare.

Finally, I want to encourage the reader to commit himself to a deeper study of what was once considered an indispensable subject in an academic curriculum in American education. When I attended high school, a class including at least one Shakespeare play was a requirement for graduation. Most colleges and universities offered Shakespeare courses, which were required for an English literature major. Too often in recent times, instead of teaching the works of Shakespeare, the writings of authors whose works cannot match the power and beauty of England's finest playwright are being substituted.

Special thanks to Alice Eller, who has spent countless hours editing this book, and to Beth Ballenger, Founder and Director of the Noah Webster Educational Foundation, for encouraging the production of this book, Linda Jay Geldens, Adam Brink, and Mary-Elaine Swanson for proofreading the text, to Desta Garrett of *dg ink* for design, layout, and publishing, and to Helen Cook, publicist. I am also grateful to my wife and three sons, who attended many of my lectures, and to my sons for their participation in the plays I directed at American Heritage Christian High School. My thanks to all my students, whose encouragement has contributed to making this book a reality.

David R. Brown
Newark, California
2007

Chapter One

“O for a Muse of Fire”

Introduction

*O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!*

CHORUS, Prologue to *King Henry the Fifth*

MANY people today think that the plays of William Shakespeare are boring, too difficult to understand, or simply not relevant for our time. Some may object to the language. Others say his plays are too sophisticated. Then there are those people who, after attending one bad performance of a Shakespearean play, decided they would not enjoy any of Shakespeare’s plays. Because of this, they refuse to attend any more productions written by the greatest playwright of all times.

What these people have failed to realize is that Shakespeare wrote for the purpose of bringing entertainment to the stage for men, women, and children of diverse classes and backgrounds to enjoy. This is one of the reasons scholars and patrons call him a genius. He instinctively knew how to reach every audience and what to write so they would leave the theater with a desire to come back again.

In all his plays, Shakespeare had one primary motive: to entertain. Many playwrights do not follow this principle. They choose to write plays that appeal to what is politically correct or put forth a moral agenda. If the primary objective of a play is something other than entertainment,

the play will only appeal to a limited audience and fail to bring in a broad base of patrons.

Because Shakespeare understood good business principles, he was prepared to compete at the highest level of theater, the London stage. He may have learned this while growing up in Stratford, helping his father in his successful business as a tanner and seller of leather goods. He would have had ample opportunity to observe the things that caused problems in the growth of the leather shop. If the shop did not make money, the family was in trouble.

As a boy, one of the great advantages for Will was the character of his parents. It does make a difference for a boy to live in a home where the parents exhibit strong Christian faith and convictions. This will be documented in the chapter on the life of William Shakespeare. Honesty, frugality, perseverance, and other character traits would have been encouraged. The records indicate that his father, John Shakespeare, was probably a strict but loving disciplinarian.

At some point, Will became aware of the theater. Will would have had ample opportunity to observe the theater in Stratford, as traveling troupes performed there occasionally. It is possible, although we have no specific record, that his parents may have taken him to one of the famous stages of London. Somewhere in his personal experience with theater and business, Will learned the importance of this one great purpose of all theater: audiences must be entertained!

Since Elizabethan audiences found great enjoyment even at his first play, Shakespeare was quickly established as the leading playwright in London.¹ This success continued throughout his career, with even greater attendance and longer runs of his later plays. The popularity of his plays did not end with his career. However, he probably never imagined that four hundred years later, audiences would still be attending his plays and studying them as literature.

Why then do so many people say that they do not enjoy Shakespeare, or that they are not interested? There are several problems that have arisen in today's culture. First of all, our education system has slowly dropped

its emphasis upon classical education. In fact, most public schools have dropped Shakespeare along with Latin and other classical studies from their curricula. Closely related to this is the failure to develop an extensive vocabulary. Scholarship does not appeal to lazy minds. That is why many people will not even attempt to read Shakespeare or the King James Bible.

Another roadblock to the enjoyment of Shakespeare is the failure to produce his plays as he wrote them. That was one of the principles I learned from Angus Bowmer, the founder of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. He said one of his main desires in producing the plays was to attempt to reproduce the plays the way Shakespeare originally intended. This, of course, is a matter of interpretation. When the interpretation is based on an intense study of the original material, it is more likely to result in a production that comes close to the author's intent. I was thrilled one summer when attending a superb production of *King Richard the Second* at Ashland, Oregon, to hear the woman next to me exclaim: "Now that's the way I enjoy a Shakespeare play, when it is performed the way Shakespeare did it."

When the audience is distracted by bizarre "gimcracks,"² improper dress (or various degrees of undress), it is extremely difficult to follow the plot line. Sometimes even putting the actors in common street clothes can be a distraction because many audiences are expecting Elizabethan or other appropriate period costumes. If the distractions are overwhelming, many playgoers will lose interest or become so irate that they cannot enjoy the production. However, it is possible to produce Shakespeare in modern clothing without losing continuity or the audience's attention when the director carefully blends the Elizabethan language and setting with a contemporary atmosphere that appears normal to those watching the performance.

One more common failure in our contemporary American drama scene is the desire to read into a Shakespearean play some cultural or political agenda that simply is not in the lines of the play, or if hinted at in the lines, was not intended by Shakespeare to be a dominant theme. Many years ago, we attended a production of *Timon of Athens* in the Bowmer Theatre. The setting for the play was a military insurrection in

Latin America, with both men and women soldiers. In the courtyard following the play, we met Dr. Bowmer who was then retired from the position of artistic director at the Oregon Shakespeare Theater. He asked me what I thought about the play, and I responded that I left the theater totally confused. Then he replied: “I talked to the director about this and he showed me the lines. Yes, these minor points are in the lines, but they should not dominate the setting or the plot. Unfortunately, this is what we have to look forward to in experimental theater!”

In some cases, a director will overemphasize the description of a minor character (or characters) to the point that the actors distract the audience from following the main plot and theme of the play. In other presentations, I have left the play feeling that the director had intended to leave the audience with the thought that immoral behavior is desirable. The truth of the matter is that Shakespeare always treats bad behavior as tragic or puts it into a comic situation where a member of the audience might identify with the condition and learn to laugh at himself for his own failures.

In fact, many teachers who have spent years delving into the depths of Shakespeare’s plays have concluded that infidelity brings disaster. From this perspective, Shakespeare differs noticeably from his contemporaries and many of the dramatists of the Restoration and of modern Broadway. A noted scholar, G. B. Harrison, states: “He has plenty of jokes about cuckolds’ horns, as have all Elizabethan dramatists, but he sees nothing comic in unfaithfulness or unchastity, which always bring disaster.”³

A deep enthusiasm for the works of Shakespeare is acquired through a long process. Probably the most important factor for me has been the association with others who have passed on to me the satisfaction they have derived from both reading the plays and seeing good productions. Two of my teachers at East High in Denver inspired me by giving our class an opportunity to experience a taste of his plays. First, my tenth-grade literature teacher led us through a study of *Julius Caesar*. The following year, I was fortunate to have a speech teacher who used famous lines from a variety of Shakespeare’s plays to teach us how to emphasize certain techniques in public speaking.

Later, when I was attending the University of Southern California, I signed up for a two-unit literature course which included a study of *Hamlet*. This professor noticed how enthusiastic I was during this study. He called me aside one day, and said: “We have the best Shakespeare professor in America right here at USC, Dr. Frank Baxter.” The next semester, I signed up for Dr. Baxter’s Shakespeare class. I was not disappointed.

There were no assigned seats in Frank Baxter’s classes. The front seats were taken by those students lucky enough to have classes in Founders Hall the previous hour. I was one of those who had to cross the entire campus, so I regularly sat in the back row of the auditorium. This did not deter my interest. I literally hung on every word as Dr. Baxter took us through about half of the canon, including all of Shakespeare’s most popular plays.

Many years later, when I was a pastor in Medford, Oregon, Bill and Shirley Patton (members of our church) introduced me to Angus Bowmer. While I had gained an academic appreciation for Shakespeare the man and the power of his dramatic writings from Dr. Baxter, I learned the methodology for staging a Shakespearean play from Dr. Bowmer. Years later, while I was teaching Shakespeare classes at American Heritage Christian High School in Hayward, I was able to use this invaluable training to direct three Shakespearean plays using high school students in both cast and production.

The secret to the enjoyment of Shakespeare is often found with those who have gained an understanding of and devotion to the greatest playwright in history. It is the purpose of this book to open up that secret to you, the readers, so that you may come to the same love and appreciation of this great literature.

1 This can be documented by the receipts at the box office, showing his first play taking in receipts far above average. “Records in the Life of Shakespeare,” 1592, March 3, in G. B. Harrison, ed., *Shakespeare, Major Plays*, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace, 1948, 9. (Appendix I, 109–119.)

2 *gimcracks*: A trivial mechanism; a device; a toy; a pretty thing. Noah Webster. *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (Facsimile 1828 edition). San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967.

3 Harrison, 1948, 6. (Appendix I, 109–119.)