

Article of the Week #11

1. Name: _____
2. Citation: (_____)
3. Number the paragraphs.
4. Annotate to show close reading, using a colored pen. **Highlight** and **define** any unfamiliar vocabulary.

10 Things You Didn't Know About Shakespeare

By Jude Morgan | April 4, 2016

Four hundred years ago this month, a playwright, poet, actor, husband, and father named William Shakespeare (1564–1616) died at his home in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare's plays are still performed, read, admired, and discussed everywhere. His contribution to Western culture—from ideas about youth, love, and human personality to the very language we speak—is enormous. The characters he created—Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, Shylock, Othello, and many more—are as real to us as if they had actually existed.

But the Bard (a name often synonymous with Shakespeare that literally means poet) was a human being himself, and the story of his life, work, and turbulent times is as “rich and strange” (to borrow a phrase from *The Tempest*) as any of his plays. Here we touch on just a few of the remarkable facts about William Shakespeare and his world. By the way, his tombstone in Stratford bears the words, “Cursed be he that moves my bones”—but it's only with great respect that we unearth these 10 things you didn't know about Shakespeare.

1. We're lucky to have Shakespeare at all.

Today, the birth of a child is usually a hopeful occasion, but in Shakespeare's day, childbirth was a dangerous time for both mother and child. Estimates of infant mortality vary, but it seems likely that in Tudor England (1485-1603), only one in three children lived to age 5. The main culprits were epidemic diseases like typhoid and bubonic plague, and lack of knowledge about good hygiene, nutrition, and medicine. John and Mary Shakespeare had already lost two children to unknown diseases before their son William was born. Tradition has his birthday as April 23, but no one is sure of the exact date. What we do know is that his baptism—a much more important event—was on April 26. Baptism was the moment when a person's life as a Christian really began. And it ensured the safety of their soul through the childhood hazards ahead.

2. Shakespeare never made it to college.

The man generally considered history's greatest author had only a so-so education. It's likely William attended Stratford Grammar School (for free because his father was a town official). There he would have studied 10 hours a day, six days a week, mostly Latin by rote. That was the international language of the professions, and vital to master if you wanted to climb up in the world. But young Will was probably taken out of school around age 14—perhaps because his once-prosperous father had developed serious money problems and needed him to work. (Shakespeare likely pitched in to help with the family glove-making business.) There was no chance of Will attending Oxford or Cambridge because his family didn't have the money to pay the tuition or the connections to get him in. Later, some of his critics would mock him for his lack of formal education. Now, many think it was his street smarts that helped create the Shakespeare we've come to know—an energetic and free creator who didn't worry about classical models.

3. Going into the theater wasn't a respectable choice.

Today, actors and playwrights are celebrities. Not so in Shakespeare's time. Shortly after his marriage at age 18 to Anne Hathaway and the birth of their three children over the next three years, Will made the solitary move from Stratford to London, where he tried his hand at acting and later, playwriting. But at the time, many people, not just Puritans, disapproved of the London theaters, which were a new phenomenon. To them, acting was a form of lying, and the theater was a waste of time that distracted people—especially young people, like apprentices—from work. Theaters were

located alongside bear-baiting* pits, and for many people they were equally disgusting. As for the “profession” of playwriting, that too was nothing to shout about. When Ben Jonson, Will’s friend and rival, published his own plays and called them his “works,” people laughed. They’re just plays, they said—not literature.

*Bear baiting was a bloody sport, popular in Shakespeare’s time, in which dogs were pitted against a bear.

4. Shakespeare created the first teenagers.

Romeo & Juliet: Orlando Bloom and Condola Rashad during a rehearsal in New York
You mean, four centuries ago, angst-ridden young people dealing with the trials of adolescence didn’t exist? They did. But the concept of teenagers wasn’t a thing in Shakespeare’s time, until he helped shed light on it. *Romeo and Juliet*, his story of the anguish and beauty of young love, was a huge hit in his day. And no other playwright could have created the mixture of troubled shyness and passion seen in the character Ophelia in *Hamlet*. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare pays astute attention to the generation gap when he puts these words in the mouth of a crusty Shepherd complaining about the youth, who are up to nothing “but wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting.”

5. His plays are full of gore—but Will kept his hands clean.

During Queen Elizabeth I’s reign (1558-1603), London was a violent place. Public executions drew huge crowds—especially if hanging or drawing and quartering** were involved. In a tense society where men routinely wore swords and used them, brawls and duels were common. Will’s fellow playwright Christopher Marlowe was stabbed to death in a tavern fight. Ben Jonson killed an actor in a duel. But somehow, Shakespeare steered clear of trouble. Maybe he didn’t care for real violence since he got more than his fill in the theater. Catering to audiences’ tastes, Shakespeare killed off characters by stabbing, hanging, dismemberment, and poison. At the end of *Hamlet*, four corpses are on stage. And 14 characters are killed in the span of five scenes in *Titus Andronicus*—Shakespeare’s bloodiest play.

**Drawing and quartering involved tying a person to a horse and dragging him to a place where he would be chopped into four pieces.

6. Your teachers may be worried about plagiarism, but Shakespeare wasn’t.

We all know plagiarism is a serious offense that can get you expelled from school—or even in trouble with the law if you reproduce copyrighted material like books or music without permission. But there was no copyright in 16th-century England. Printers could and did print anything they could get their hands on, including plays, from all kinds of sources. Some versions of Shakespeare’s plays that have come down to us were the tattered scripts of the first actors, complete with their notes and scribbles. That’s why it’s so hard for modern editors to fix on “true” editions. And even the idea of “original material” was different then. Nearly all of Shakespeare’s plays were based on existing stories, legends, chronicles, or older plays. Nobody thought that was a bad thing. It was what the writer made of it that counted.

7. Shakespeare wasn’t a lone genius.

Shakespeare wasn’t the only person writing plays for a living. Some of his contemporaries—Jonson, Marlowe, Thomas Middleton—are still read and performed. Others seem to have fallen from view—or maybe we are reading or watching their work without knowing it because these guys often collaborated. It was a busy industry with high turnover, and sometimes a pair of writers or a team could get the work done more efficiently. Occasionally their names were recorded, but more often, scholars have to try to reconstruct who wrote which parts. It’s generally agreed that at least one other writer had a hand in *Macbeth*, particularly the witch scenes. At the end of his career, Shakespeare was openly collaborating with younger playwright John Fletcher on *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

8. If you speak English, you speak Shakespeare.

No other writer comes close to Shakespeare in shaping the English language. Thousands of common words and phrases were invented, first used, or popularized by him. It’s from his plays that

we get swagger, addiction, obscene, fashionable, and rant. Not to mention vanish into thin air, forever and a day, and good riddance. And some of the names he created for characters—like Olivia, Jessica, and Miranda—are still popular today. Of course, not all the words he pioneered have stuck: There’s swoltery, meaning “hot and sticky,” and quatch, a word he used to mean “plump.” Oh well, nothing in life is a foregone conclusion—another phrase coined by Shakespeare.

9. There will never be another Shakespeare—literally.

It’s sad and strange to see how quickly the Shakespeare family tree withered. His only son, Hamnet, died at age 11 of unknown causes. Shakespeare had prospered so much that he was granted a gentleman’s coat-of-arms—but ultimately had no heir to bear it. His three brothers were childless, as was his last descendant, his granddaughter Elizabeth Hall, who died in 1670.

10. Every age re-invents Shakespeare.

A generation after his death, England was torn apart by a civil war (1642-51). Under the Puritan rule that followed, the theaters were closed. When they finally reopened in 1660 under King Charles II, a theater lover, tastes had changed. In describing a performance of Hamlet in 1661, diarist John Evelyn wrote, “the old plays begin to disgust this refined age.” Throughout the following century, Shakespeare’s plays were still performed—but abridged, altered, and generally mauled. The tragedy of King Lear was given a happy ending, complete with a wedding. It was the Victorians in the 19th century who put Shakespeare on a pedestal as “the Bard,” mounting lavish productions with jeweled costumes and realistic scenery. The 20th century saw new approaches to Shakespeare productions—modern clothes and updated settings that reflected current events and politics.

But perhaps the most radical re-invention of Shakespeare came not from visionary playwrights but from conspiracy theorists, some of them arguing that Shakespeare didn’t author the plays—or even that he didn’t exist at all. (Virtually all serious scholars dismiss these theories.)

That’s one thing Shakespeare never loses: the endless ability to fascinate and keep us wondering.

Short Answer: Answer using RACE format.

1. What kind of education did William Shakespeare have? _____

2. How was acting and playwriting regarded in Shakespeare’s time? _____

3. Why is it hard for modern editors to decide on “true” editions of Shakespeare’s plays? _____

4. In what ways have people reinvented Shakespeare in the years since his death? _____

