

Editor's Note: William Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564 and he died on April 23, 1616. Nobody really knows on which day exactly he was born, but it is indeed rather romantic to think that he was also born on 23 April. This article is a tribute to the great poet and playwright on his birthday.

# Did Shakespeare Know He Was “Shakespeare”?

JOHN DREW

Did Shakespeare know he was “Shakespeare”? That is, even in his own day, did he know he was a cut above the ordinary when it came to writing dramatic poetry, that his language was, as a miner’s son would later put it, “so lovely! like the dyes from gas-tar”?

We need not get stuck in the mud of Literary Criticism’s contested sites to find an answer but only look to two plays that many consider Shakespeare’s

skill from what he says and shows us about his fellow actors and the plays they perform. The players in the *Dream* are amateurs; those in *Hamlet*, professionals.

## A Midsummer Night’s Dream

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the actors of the play within the play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, have almost as much share of the action as the principals, courtiers serving Duke

entertainment as a way of putting aside melancholy (or, as he later re-states it, easing anguish). It is a nice irony of the *Dream* that we need the comic relief of a bunch of amateur craftsmen incongruously rehearsing a tragedy to offset the tragic course of unrequited court loves that mars what conventionally ought to be the joys of Maytime wooing.

Initially, it might seem that Shakespeare is simply making fun of the clumsy artisans with their crude solutions about how to act out the roles of a lion, a wall and the moon. Peter Quince the Carpenter has his hands hilariously full trying to direct the incorrigible Bottom the Weaver, who fancies himself playing more roles than just the lead as well as rewriting the script to suit himself.

Shakespeare obviously enjoys scribbling the tum-titty rhyming verse of the crude play. It begins with a prologue that, wrongly punctuated, doubles back on itself and, full of overdone alliterations and anachronistic malapropisms, staggers into a tragic climax rendered in Skeltonical rap. Interestingly, however, the Duke rallies in support of these “rude mechanicals” when both his Master of the Revels and his bride to be, Queen Hippolyta, counsel against his decision to watch their lamentable efforts.

The final Act of the *Dream* has begun with the Duke, appropriately enough of Athens, echoing Plato’s view that the lunatic, the lover and the poet are all mad, the poetic imagination giving “to airy nothing a local habitation and a name”. At this point, it is the Queen, amazed by the magical turn of the day’s events, who checks the Duke’s conventional view of poetic imagination as being merely fanciful.

Confronted with the earnestness of the artisans, however, it is the Duke who argues for the value of the imagination, of apprehending the spirit behind the words. While the Queen suggests it is up to the players to supply the imagination, the Duke counters that even the best actors “are

but shadows” and require from their audience that suspension of disbelief that a later lecturer on Shakespeare will advocate.

Shakespeare himself, at the outset of *Henry V*, makes a direct plea to the audience to piece out the imperfections of theatrical staging with their thoughts and this may allow us to conclude that the authoritative voice of Duke Theseus is also authorial. We are thereby compelled to accept the amateur craftsmen as part of the goodly company of thespians.

## Hamlet

After the artisans of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* come the travelling players of *Hamlet*. Although they, too, are originally called to dispel melancholy with entertainment, this time in the haunted castle of Elsinore, eventually they serve not to provide comic relief but to heighten the tension.

Warmly welcoming the players and speaking with them, Hamlet is himself as at few other moments in the play (those in the company of Horatio excepted). The suspicion that Shakespeare is standing not so very far behind him is raised when Hamlet cannot wait to see the players perform, enthusiastically providing a cue for them by reciting a dozen well-spoken, well-wrought lines in a scene between Aeneas and Dido that out-Marlowes Marlowe’s version.

Hamlet, his affection for the players evident in his insisting Polonius (parroting academic categories of types of plays) treat them as hospitably as he would people of his own social station, is so astounded by the realisation that the emotions they have feigned in the enacted scene appear more real than his own that he hits upon the idea that a play, in holding up a mirror to nature, may serve to “catch the conscience of the King”.

It is difficult not to hear the actor Shakespeare’s voice in the judicious advice Hamlet gives to the players before their performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play Hamlet has chosen for the mirror it offers of the prior

murder of Hamlet’s father. Hamlet, while himself flouting the advice he gives to clownish actors such as Bottom not to insert lines into the script, deplores the way they over-act and rant: “it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags...”

Shakespeare in constructing the script of *Gonzago* clearly has as much fun in tossing off tedious rhyming couplets for this bombastic murder story as he did for *Pyramus and Thisbe*. We are left in no doubt about the superiority of his language and the value, grace of Marlowe, of blank verse. But again, whatever this superiority in script-writing, Shakespeare, by way of Hamlet, shows his affection for his fellow actors.

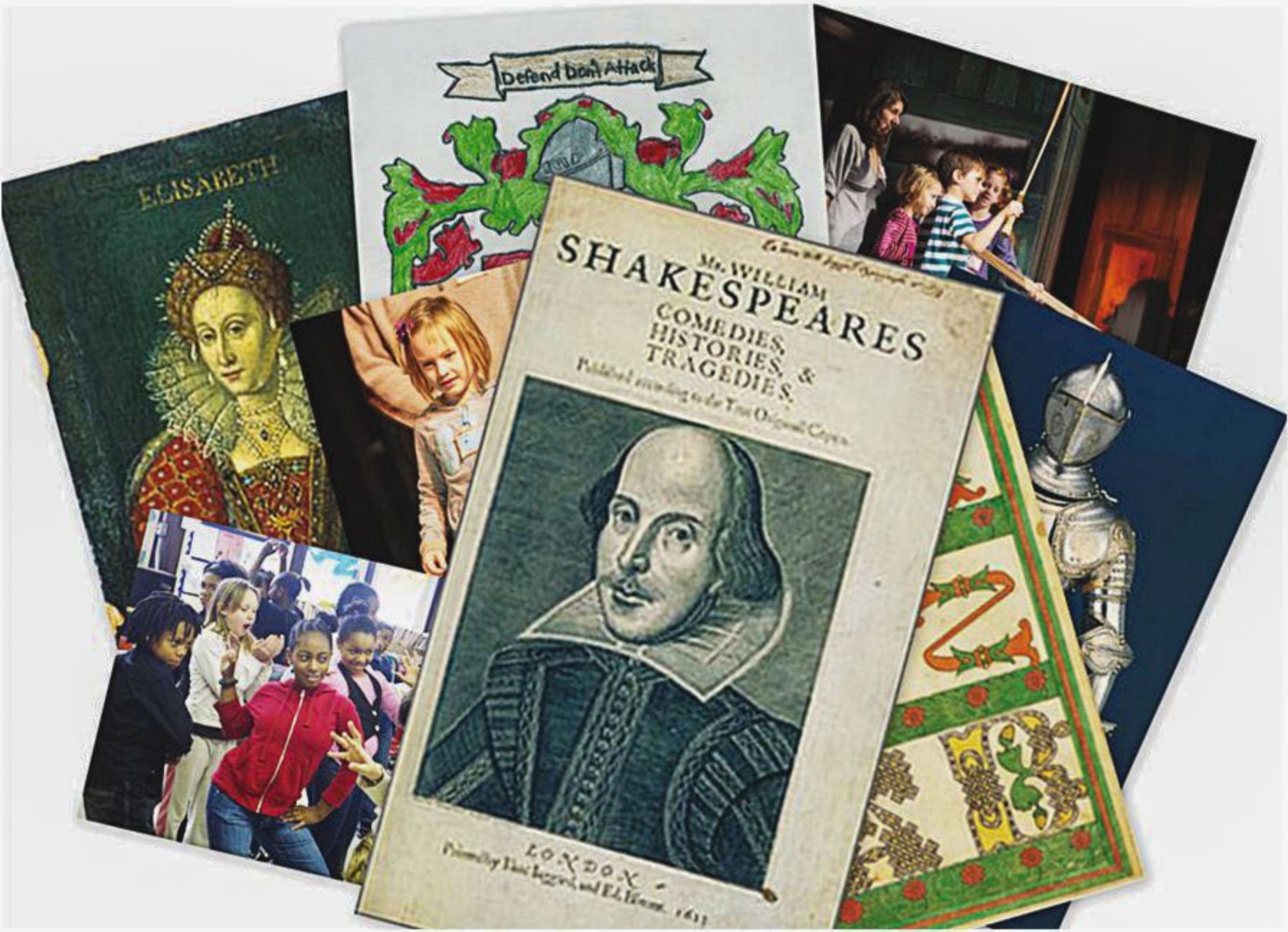
## Stage as World

*Hamlet* as a whole is less obviously self-referential than *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* about the relevance to life of the illusory world of theatre. Nonetheless, its protagonist spends much of his time onstage play-acting as mad in order to counter the spying and lying of political life and it is the central scene of the play within the play that brings the action to its tipping point. We are left in little doubt that, inherently, all the world’s a stage. We are also left in little doubt that Shakespeare is a master craftsman in depicting this.

The plays within the plays, whatever else their dramatic purpose, draw our attention to the fact that the plays within with they exist are on an altogether higher plane of achievement. In constructing these contrived parodies and in his portrayal of the players who perform them, Shakespeare demonstrates just how much he is working well within his own abilities.

Shakespeare knew he was “Shakespeare.”

John Drew’s theatrical credits include the *Apothecary* in *Romeo and Juliet* and *First Nymph* in *The Tempest*. Drew wears many hats and this Spring he is a Visiting Scholar at ULAB.



finest: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, most engaging of his comedies; and *Hamlet*, the extended tragedy that has teased the minds of audiences off-shore as well as on ever since it was acted on board the ship that in 1607 sailed to seek Jahangir’s permission to establish an English “factory” in India.

Each of these plays has a play being rehearsed and acted out within the main play and we can get some sense of Shakespeare’s awareness of his own

Theseus. That the potential tragedies of star-crossed lovers in the main action are averted and they are reconciled to each other and to the audience by the end is largely the work of fairies “come from the farthest steep of India” (a happy coincidence since such a resolution happens to accord with the aesthetics of classical Sanskrit theatre). Peristan indeed.

At the outset of the *Dream*, the Duke argues for the merriment of

## POETRY

### ~A Wish~

AINON N

When my eyes dim  
When I am unable to read and write  
I pray the old writing table  
Paper, inkwell, and the quill  
Will still consider me their friend  
I will sit with them  
Sense the sun rise and set  
Remember the green leaves  
Turn into magnificent colors  
Of gold and red  
Feel the breeze change  
From warm, to cool, to cold  
I will reflect  
I gave the best of me to them

Perhaps not perfection  
But all that I had

I will release the soul  
To my eyes  
They will contemplate  
Breaching infinity  
To give my mind  
The language of interpretation  
To perceive, to understand  
To live, be alive again

They will hold the world in color  
See dreams within  
Read the words of hope

And thus, the question  
Does vision need to see?  
In quiet  
I close my eyes  
To embrace the illumination!

Ainon N. writes from Chicago, USA.



## Three Poems

SHAMIM AZAD

### 1. Being

Life is a bundle of mingled yarn  
humongous and hazy  
tightly tangled  
when you see from near.  
It is translucent and transparent  
slackly stitched  
when you can distant yourself from there.

### 2. Blue Grotto

It was a blue grotto –  
the light that reflected  
from the bottom of the sea  
made me look blue and glow.

You have to slouch in to get inside  
through a cut glass window.  
The fisherwoman who had taken us in  
was singing an eerie song we did not know.  
The tall dark trees fringed with translucent blue  
dishevelled droplets of snow  
They were vanishing with no destination –  
Confused, where to go?

We floated for a while on a world completely silent  
then the silence became whispers  
Murmurs down our vertebrae and marrow.  
Our silent breath turned into a  
chaotic cluster of joy and sorrow  
until it became a confused scream  
in the cave in that damp yellow.  
Our soul rose from the round-about  
reached to the summit to follow  
and we followed, joined in singing that eerie song  
we did not know.

### 3. In the silence

I hear my eye  
Lashes dropping  
The bark cracking  
Blue bells chatter  
with long lustrous grass.

I hear the whispers of insects  
Insane over raspberries ripened  
Juicy drupelets globes  
In the delusion of silence.

Shamim Azad is a poet, author and journalist.

