Shakespeare for Fun
Shakespeare for Fun

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Mit 12 Abbildungen

Reclam
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Foreword

Is Shakespeare fun? Schoolchildren around the world would emphatically say: no. What is fun about reading plays that use words nobody understands anymore? What is fun about listening to teachers talk about boring topics like Elizabethan England, the War of the Roses and the iambic pentameter? Or about embarrassing topics like jealousy and homoeroticism? What is fun about being made to recite a sonnet in front of your classmates? Nothing.

On the other hand, if you ask the same schoolchildren if you can have fun with Shakespeare, many of them would certainly say: yes! What could be more fun than reading the whole of *Othello* in strange accents? (A favourite when I was at school was turning the Moor into an Australian.) Why not recite one of the sonnets in a monotonous voice, for example? Or what about a lisping Richard III: “Now ith the winter of our dithcontent / Made gloriouth thummer by thith thun of York.” And so on and so forth.

Finding fun and hilarity where the teacher finds poetry, beauty, and human conflict, taking pleasure in ruining the texts is, of course, an act of rebellion. It is entirely understandable that schoolchildren should look for laughs this way. After all, it is very difficult indeed to get people to laugh by quoting Shakespeare at them. This is also true when performing Shakespeare. Making Shakespeare funny on stage is notoriously difficult. The great English actor

Nigel Hawthorne has this to say about the matter: “The trouble is that the lines are little or no help, laced as they are with jokes which may have had them rolling in the aisles in Shakespeare’s Day, but now fall flatter than pancakes on Shrove Tuesday.” And actor Antony Sher makes a similar observation about Shakespeare’s clowns: “Autolycus’s speeches – like all Shakespeare’s clowns – are virtually incomprehensible; it’s like reading a joke book in Eskimo.”

The fact that you cannot make anyone laugh by quoting Shakespeare at them is all the more noticeable for the fact that the opposite is true of Shakespeare’s romantic poetry. How easy it is to use Shakespeare to be romantic! Simply quote a few lines from one of the sonnets: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Shakespeare is about love, after


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all, everybody knows that. “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” Just what kind of love Shakespeare treats in his works is a matter of debate, interpretation and speculation. Countless heterosexual couples decide to have a Shakespeare sonnet recited at their wedding, not realising that their most popular choice, sonnet 116, is almost certainly addressed by a man to a man.

And how simple it is to use Shakespeare to seem wise! Just quote Polonius’ words to his son Laertes in Hamlet: “To thine own self be true.” It doesn’t really matter much that Polonius is a meddling old fool whose main aim is to stop his son having too much fun in Paris, nor that most of Shakespeare’s sonnets are more intellectual than they are romantic. The effect is guaranteed nevertheless.

So, if you want to be romantic or wise, Shakespeare is your man. But if you want to make yourself sound witty or funny, then don’t enlist his help. Even the hundreds (thousands?) of puns in Shakespeare’s works fail to make us laugh. It all seems just a little bit too distant, too clever.

So if it seems that in Shakespeare for Fun we are having fun at Shakespeare’s expense, that we are laughing at him rather than with him, then this is undoubtedly true, just as generations of school children have sniggered about “capering nimbly”, and just as the advertising industry has

11 to meddle: sich einmischen. | 17 to enlist s.o.’s help: jds. Unterstützung gewinnen. | 21 to have fun at s.o.’s expense: auf jds. Kosten Spaß haben. | 22 undoubtedly: ohne Zweifel. | 23 to snigger: kichern. | 23f. capering nimbly: »He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber / To the lascivious pleasing of a lute« heißt es vom personifizierten Krieg im ersten Monolog aus Richard III (I,1,13 f.) (to caper: lebhaft und voller Freude sein; tanzen vor Freude; nimbly: geschickt; lascivious: lüstern).
made light of Hamlet’s philosophical question “To be, or not to be”.

But more than that, some of the texts in *Shakespeare for Fun* also laugh at the expense of those who take Shakespeare too seriously from a scholarly perspective, and also at those from the fringe of academia who propose ludicrous theories about all sorts of aspects of his life and works. James Thurber, himself an American, makes fun of an American woman who thinks *Macbeth* is a crime story and tries to solve the mystery of Duncan’s murder. Richard Armour and Woody Allen (in his text “But Soft … Real Soft” that could not be included here) make fun of the ‘authorship question’, which has become an obsession in certain circles. *Shakespeare for Fun* also includes parodies of some of Shakespeare’s best-known works. The English writer Richard Curtis imagines a *Skinhead Hamlet*. There are ‘modern’ versions of some key scenes from *Othello* and *Macbeth*. There are some absurd exam questions that will test your knowledge and try your patience.

2014 marks the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth. In some way *Shakespeare for Fun* is part of these celebrations. In 2000 the *New York Times* ran a headline “At age 436, His Future Is Unlimited”. We can only add, at age 450, Shakespeare’s future is as unlimited as ever – as are the possibilities of having fun with him and his works.

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1 to make light of s.th.: etwas bagatellisieren. | 5 scholarly: wissenschaftlich, gelehrt. | 6 fringe: Rand. | academia [ækə’dɪˈmɪə]: die akademische Welt. | ludicrous [ˈluːdɪkrəʊs]: lachhaft, absurd, lächerlich. | 13 obsession: Obsession, Besessenheit.
How to Spell the Name of a Well-known English Writer

How do you spell Shakespeare? Well, not even Shakespeare knew how to spell his own name, so it seems. We know of six signatures in Shakespeare’s handwriting, including the spellings ‘Shakp’, ‘Shaksper’, ‘Shakspere’ and ‘Shakspeare’. This may seem strange, but Shakespeare was just using the breviographic conventions of his time. In Shakespeare’s time, no one really knew how to spell anything, let alone their own name.

What about Shakespeare’s gravestone? Surely we can find the correct spelling there, set in stone for eternity? On the memorial plaque in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon, his name is spelled ‘Shakspeare’. So is this the correct spelling? Well, next to this, the inscription on the grave of his widow, Anne, calls her the “wife of William Shakespeare”.

And the rest of the world? How did they decide to spell Shakespeare? How have people spelled Shakespeare over the centuries? Here are some of the most popular spellings:

Schaksp. Shake-speare Shaksper
Shakespeare Shakespere Shaksper
Shackespeare Shakespheare Shaxberd
Shackespere Shakesphere Shaxpeare
Shackper Shakespea Shaxper
Shackspere Shakspear Shaxper

We all know that Goethe was the “Dichterfürst” (this is his ‘sobriquet’), but what about Shakespeare? From very early on Shakespeare was known as the “Swan of Avon”. This goes back to a poem Ben Jonson wrote for the First Folio, the first printed edition of Shakespeare’s plays. It refers not only to the swans on the river of Shakespeare’s birthplace, but also to the ancient belief that the souls of poets pass into swans.

Even more common than the Swan of Avon is “the Bard”.

In 1769, David Garrick – an actor, writer and manager of the 18th century – called Shakespeare the bard of all bards:

The bard of all bards was a Warwickshire bard.

Today, no one ever seriously calls Shakespeare “the Bard”, which is why he is referred to as the Bard throughout this book.

In conclusion: if for some reason you don’t want to call Shakespeare Shakespeare, then call him the Bard, or the Swan of Avon.
Myths about Shakespeare’s Life

He was a deer poacher. Not long after Shakespeare’s death, an obscure clergyman, Richard Davies, notes that Shakespeare was “much given to all unluckiness in stealing venison and rabbits”. Furthermore, he was “oft whipped and sometimes imprisoned”, which finally “made him fly his native country …”

He was a schoolmaster. Half a century after Shakespeare’s death, John Aubrey reported this as fact in his Brief Lives.

As a young man, Shakespeare and his companions set out to the neighbouring town of Bidford to compete in a drinking competition. After being soundly defeated, Shakespeare fell asleep under a crab tree along the road. This tree, later known as Shakespeare’s canopy, became a tourist attraction and was torn to bits by souvenir-hunters in 1824.

During the Lost Years, Shakespeare …

– was a conveyancer’s clerk in the office of a prosperous country lawyer,
– served as a foot soldier in the campaigns in the Low Countries,
– visited Italy,
– was a teacher, or a scrivener or a gardener or a sailor or a printer or a moneylender or a coachman.

Shakespeare helped write the *King James Bible*. (If you look at Psalm 46 and count 46 words from the beginning, you arrive at the word ‘shake’. Then if you count 46 words from the end (excluding the word ‘Selah’) you arrive at the word ‘spear’.

When he arrived in London, he was employed at the theatre as a horse holder, according to Nicholas Rowe and Dr Samuel Johnson. In 1765, Johnson wrote that Shakespeare “was to wait at the door of the play-house, and hold the horses of those that had no servants, that they might be ready again after the performance”.

Shakespeare was born in Italy and fled to England to avoid the Inquisition at age 24. There he changed his name from Michelangelo Collalanza (Italian for “shake speare”) to Shakespeare.

Shakespeare smoked pot, dope, marihuana, cannabis – whatever you want to call it. South African scientists proposed that Shakespeare smoked cannabis on the basis of a misinterpretation of a phrase from sonnet number 76 (“keep invention in a noted weed”) along with the discovery that pipes found in Stratford contained traces of the drug.

Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, is a direct descendent.
ent of Shakespeare. A German scholar claimed to have found evidence that Elizabeth Vernon, who married the Earl of Southampton, was the dark lady of the Sonnets, and that Shakespeare had an illegitimate daughter by her. Since the daughter, Penelope, went on to marry the second Baron Spencer, from whom Diana Spencer was descended, this would mean that the Princes William and Harry are directly descended from Shakespeare, as is the latest addition to the Royal Family, George ...

Some Things that are Actually True

– Shakespeare wasn’t born on 23rd April at all. All we really know is that he was baptised in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford on 26th April. In the 18th century people decided to celebrate the 23rd April as Shakespeare’s birthday – it is after all the feast day of St George, England’s patron saint. But quite apart from that, 23rd April in 1564 was not the same as 23rd April today. England was still using the Julian calendar, and didn’t adopt the reformed Gregorian calendar until 1752. So, in 1564, the date referred to then as 23rd April was actually the 3rd of May by today’s calendar.

– In celebration of Shakespeare’s 400th birthday in 1964 a group of Stratford actors gave a reading in the Vatican before Pope Paul VI. They took a copy of the First Folio for His Holiness to inspect. His Holiness thought the book

was a present … The actors were in the unfortunate position of having to correct His Holiness so they could take the valuable book back home with them.
– In 1979 India became the first country to establish a journal devoted to a single play, the twice-yearly *Hamlet Studies*.
– The Polish pianist and composer André Tchaikovsky (1935–1982) “bequeathed his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company for use in *Hamlet*. Wrapped in a brown-paper parcel it arrived on the general manager’s desk one morning along with the rest of the post.”
– Prince Charles played Macbeth at a school production in 1965.
– The smallest Shakespeare society in the world was discovered in 1888, when the journal *Shakespeariana* published a list of more than 100 Shakespeare clubs. The smallest was the “club of two”, which carried on its proceedings entirely by correspondence.
– At a production of *Macbeth* in the Norwegian town of Bergen in 2001, Macbeth was represented by a tomato, Duncan by a can of tomato purée, and other leading characters by a can of beer and a thermos flask.
– At the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2000 Homer Simpson played Macbeth. The plot of Shakespeare’s play was not changed, but the roles were taken by the cast of *The*.

Simpsons. The voices were done by the Canadian impressionist Rick Miller. Marge Simpson played Lady Macbeth, Mr Burns played Duncan, Barney played Macduff.

Is this a dagger I see before me or a pizza?
Mmmmmm … pizza.

– In 1890, Eugene Schieffelin (1827–1906), a member of the New York Zoological Society who wanted to introduce all birds mentioned in Shakespeare’s works to North America, released eighty starlings into New York’s Central Park (starlings are mentioned in *Henry IV Part I*). Before Schieffelin came along, there were no starlings in North America; now there are over 200 million of them.

– From 1990–2011 an image of Shakespeare was used for the UK’s Domestic Cheque Guarantee Card scheme. The hologram, when moved from side to side, showed Shakespeare frowning, then warmly smiling.

– There are hardly any places named after Shakespeare. No town in the UK is named after him. (See, however, p. 25.)

– Ira Aldridge (1807–1893) was the first black actor to play major Shakesperian roles.

– Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) played the first Hamlet on film and possibly the only Hamlet with a wooden leg.

– John Barrymore (1882–1942) broke the record of 100-nights of Hamlet by performing it 101 times in 1922.
– Patrick Stewart, whom many of us may know from *Star Trek*, once played a white Othello with a completely black cast.

**Shakespeare’s Life**

by Richard Armour

William Shakespeare, later known as the Beard of Avon, was born in 1564, on April 12, 22, or 23, and all his life kept people guessing. His mother was of gentle birth, but his father, who came of yeoman stock, was born the hard way. The house in which William saw the light is much the same today as it was then, except for the admission charge.*

Shakespeare grew up in the little town of Stratford-on-Avon, learning small Latin and less Greek, according to Ben Jonson, probably because he was busy amassing the largest English vocabulary until Noah Webster. For a time he worked for his father, a glover. He was a dreamy lad, which explains the unusual number of four- and six-finger gloves

* Actually Shakespeare was not born in the Birthplace but in the Museum, a fact which he found embarrassing and kept secret from all but his closest friends.

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to be found in Stratford antique shops. Subsequently he was bound to a butcher, an awkward situation that kept his nose to the chopping block.

Much of his good taste Shakespeare inherited from his father, who once held the position of ale-taster for the town of Stratford. Young Will made the local team and met the Bidford Sippers in a spirited contest, winning his liter. According to Legend, the chief source of information about Shakespeare’s youth, it took him two days to get home from Bidford, which was only a short walk but a long way on hands and knees.

When he was eighteen, Shakespeare met Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older and had begun to give up hope. What he saw in Anne is not known, but he may have admired her thatched roof, as so many have since. At any rate it gave him a good excuse for getting unbound from the butcher. Shakespeare’s friends could see no reason for his rushing into marriage, but William and Anne could. Their daughter, Susanna, was born six months later.

Within two years, Shakespeare left for London – alone. Anne had given birth to twins, and there was no telling what she would do next. Moreover, he was accused of poaching something in a deer park, and it wasn’t an egg.

Between 1585 and 1592 little is known of Shakespeare.

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2 to bind s.o. to s.o.: jdn. (Lehrling) jdm. (Meister) verpflichten. | 3 chopping block: Hackklotz; Anspielung auf die Redewendung to keep one’s nose to the grinding stone (auch: grindstone): etwa: schuften, sich dahinterklemmen. | 5 ale-taster: Bierkoster. | 7 Sippers (pl.): scherzhafter Name für die fiktive Trinkgemeinschaft (to sip: nippen). | 15 thatched roof: Reetdach. | 23 to poach: 1. wildern; 2. (Ei) pochieren.

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These are the Lost Years, a period fraught with mystery and much more frustrating than the Lost Weekend. It may be that Shakespeare went into a deep sleep, like Rip Van Winkle, or wandered around in a daze, unaware of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the introduction of the Irish potato. One authority, believing that Shakespeare must have been doing something of which he was ashamed, conjectures that he was a schoolteacher. This gave him access to the library, where he surreptitiously copied the plots of old plays for future use.

Some credence is given to the theory that Shakespeare during this period was holding horses outside a theater.* After eight years, he became one of the most experienced horseholders in London. It was at this time that he began to write, holding the reins in one hand and a pen in the other. His earliest history plays were on the reins of Henry VI and Richard III, internal evidence being the famous line in the latter play, “A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!” a

* Unless they were held, they went inside to watch the play.

1 **to be** fraught with s.th.: voll von etwas stecken. | 2 **Lost Weekend:** Bezeichnung für einen im Suff verbrachten Zeitraum (nach dem Roman *The Lost Weekend*, 1944, des amerikanischen Schriftstellers Charles R. Jackson, 1903–1968). | 3 f. **Rip Van Winkle:** Protagonist der gleichnamigen Erzählung von Washington Irving (1783–1859), der in den Catskill Mountains (USA) einschläft und 20 Jahre später aufwacht, um eine völlig veränderte Welt vorzufinden. | 8 **to be ashamed of s.th.:** sich für etwas schämen. | 9 f. **conjecture:** mutmaßen. | 9 f. **surreptitiously** [ˈsərəpˈtɪʃəsli]: heimlich, verstohlen. | 11 **give credence** ['kriːdənts] to s.th.: einer Sache Glauben schenken. | 12 **holding horses:** Wortspiel mit to hold one’s horses ›sich selbst zügeln, sich gedulden‹. | 16 **rein:** Zügel; Wortspiel mit reign ›Herrschaft‹.
cry which Shakespeare must often have heard from departing theatergoers on rainy nights.

Shakespeare was very versatile. Besides being a successful playwright, he was an actor and part owner of the theater. Once when they were short of scenery he painted himself green and played a tree. When not otherwise occupied, he sold tickets at the box office and souvenir programs in the aisles. This gave rise to the theory that there were six William Shakespeares, additional evidence being the six signatures in the British Museum, each spelled a different way. But there were actually only two: the Man and the Myth.

Several times Shakespeare acted in the plays at the court of Queen Elizabeth, but the Queen was too busy watching Essex to notice. When King James came to the throne, Shakespeare was made one of the King’s Men, a company of actors who had the right to protection from the King after a bad performance. Shakespeare never really excelled as an actor, but since he wrote the lines it was easy for him to learn them.

This was Merrie England, and Shakespeare had a gay time in London, his wife and children being in Stratford. He was often seen at the Mermaid Tavern, imbibing with Ben Jonson and the sons of Ben, who were sent to watch
out for their father and carry him home. But his favorite pub was the Temple Bar. “Drink to me only with thine eyes,” Ben was fond of saying, but Shakespeare knew he didn’t mean a word of it. “O rare Ben Jonson,” he would remark, clinking canikins with his friend and quaffing the good English ale.*

In his last years, having had his fun, Shakespeare returned to Stratford and lived with his wife. When he died, he bequeathed her his second-best bed, the one with the broken springs and the crack in the headboard. Who got his number one bed is a dark secret.

Over Shakespeare’s grave is an inscription that says: “Curst be he that moves my bones.” So far as is known, the bones have never been moved in all these years. It is possible, of course, that this book may make Shakespeare turn over in his grave, but in that case he will have moved them himself.

Shakespeare’s Pubs
by Sam Schoenbaum

According to an anecdote reported by the great eighteenth-century editor Edward Capell, Shakespeare diverted him-

* No matter how rare Ben was to start with, by the end of the evening he was usually well done, in fact completely stewed.

2f. “Drink to me ... eyes”: erste Zeile von Ben Jonsons Gedicht »To Celia« (1616). | 4 rare: 1. außergewöhnlich, hervorragend; 2. ungegart (Bezug auf die Fußnote, Z. 23, stewed ›gedünstet‹, ›durch‹, ›besoffen‹). | 5 canikin (arch.): Becher, Trinkgefäß. | to quaff s.th.: etwas in sich hineinkippen. | 9 to bequeath s.th. to s.o.: jdm. etwas hinterlassen, vermachen. | 13 curst: verflucht. | 21 to divert o.s.: sich amüsieren.
self at an alehouse in Wincot with a fool who belonged to a neighbouring mill. Another report holds that Shakespeare often met his friends at the Greyhound in Stratford. From still a different source we learn that the Three Pigeons in Brentford was the inn favoured by Shakespeare and Jonson. The poet also frequented the Devil Tavern, presumably in London, and he sought relaxation in one of the wooden chambers of the Red Lion in the Edgware Road. On other occasions Shakespeare and his friends enjoyed their potations at an old house known as the sign of the Boar in Eastcheap. The legend to a nineteenth-century engraving of the Falcon Tavern on the Bankside informs us that this establishment was “celebrated for the daily resort of SHAKESPEARE and his Dramatic Companions”. Yet another tradition maintains that the conviviality took place at a little tavern called the Globe […]. On the road from Stratford to London, Shakespeare sometimes stopped for the night at The Olde Shipe Inne in the straggling village of Grendon Underwood, immortalized in the distich, ‘Grendont Underwoode – The dirtiest towne that ever stood’; in the nineteenth century, visitors would be escorted up the old oak staircase, with its quaint balustrades, to the gabled third storey, where in a room with a curious little oval window the great man had slept.

Shakespeare’s True Nationality

Shakespeare was German. It is true that he was born in England, but the more you think about it, the more likely it seems that Shakespeare was actually German. To be more precise: the more the Germans thought about it, the more certain they were that Shakespeare was German.

This sounds confusing, but it is really quite simple. We could start with a simple fact: Shakespeare is better in German. Germans experience the poetry and drama of Shakespeare without having to worry about all those difficult words Shakespeare used. Who cares about the occasional inevitable inaccuracies of any translation? Who cares if the puns don’t work (they aren’t really very funny or poetic anyway). What really matters is drama and poetry. And it is here that Germans have such a great advantage over people who don’t speak or understand German. Germans experience Shakespeare more directly than we English speakers ever will.

‘Shakespeare in German’ is not just an English writer whose plays work well in another language. Shakespeare in German is a major German playwright! He is a German classic. Goethe, Schiller, Shakespeare. These are the great literary icons of German culture.

The first people to realise that Shakespeare was German were, of course, the Germans – we are not talking about any old Germans, these people were serious German philosophers and philologists. People like August Wilhelm Schlegel, who said Shakespeare is “completely ours”. From

inevitable: unvermeidlich. | inaccuracy [inækjərəsi]: Ungenauigkeit.