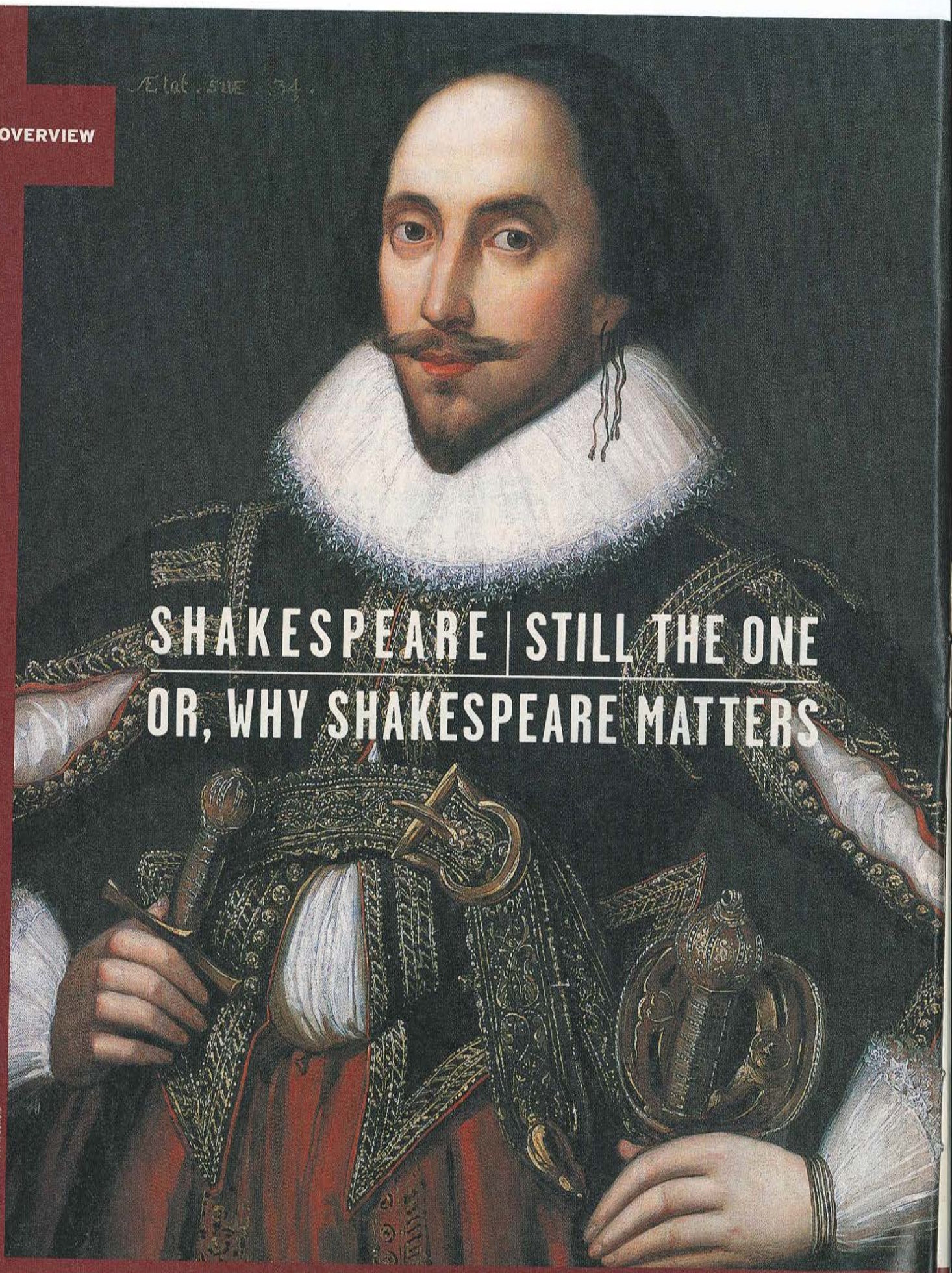


SHAKESPEARE | STILL THE ONE

OR, WHY SHAKESPEARE MATTERS

We commonly call William Shakespeare the greatest writer in the history of the English language. But he was more than that. He was a creator of culture. By defining the words we used (Shakespeare coined over 2,000 words, and countless phrases and idioms), he shaped the way we think about ourselves, and the way we frame our struggles and choices. Television programs, movies, politicians, sportscasters, moralists: all make references to Shakespeare. Shakespeare's concerns inform our discussion just as his words shape our language.

Shakespeare is no museum piece. His plays are as vibrant and meaningful now as they were when they were performed 400 years ago. The struggles of Shakespeare's characters are still relevant today. People still fall in and out of love, they still scheme for power, they still betray their friends, they still wonder what might have been. His themes reveal the universal human condition: can we escape our destiny? how do we know if it's really love? what makes a government just? And his plots are nail-biters—harrowing adventures and bawdy shenanigans that still provoke laughter and tears after all these years, from the Elizabethan era to modern times. And across borders, too. Japan, Germany, Africa, the Middle East, South America, and many others have found in Shakespeare parallels to their own experiences. Shakespeare is universally loved and understood because he speaks to that which is eternal in humanity.

SHAKESPEARE'S PUBLICISTS: THE FOLIOS

Shakespeare didn't know he was striking a chord with eternity because he never actually published his plays during his lifetime. He wrote scripts and gave them to actors, many of whom lost, destroyed, or otherwise ruined them.

As time went on and his popularity grew, his contemporaries paid more attention to preserving his words for posterity. Some of his later plays were published individually in "quarto" form (the name refers to the book's small size). After his death in 1616, his acting company rounded up surviving copies of actor's scripts and published *The First Folio*, the original collection of all of Shakespeare's plays. To get a complete script for each play, the company had to fill in a lot of blanks. They called in actors to see if they remembered lines, contacted rival companies who had stolen script copies, and consulted audience members to check their recollections. The folio edition, when published, had a lot of mistakes, and sometimes it conflicted with published quarto editions.

Today, editors of Shakespeare's plays sometimes use the folio edition, sometimes the quarto, and sometimes later editions. That's why different editions of Shakespeare's plays will vary.

SHAKESPEARE'S STATS

BORN: April 23, 1564 (estimated), Stratford-upon-Avon, England
DIED: April 23, 1616 (on his birthday)
PLAYS: 38 (including co-written plays)
SONNETS: 154
COMEDIES: 18
TRAGEDIES: 10
HISTORIES: 10
WORDS HE INVENTED: over 2,000
MOST LINES FOR ONE CHARACTER IN A SINGLE PLAY: 1569 (*Hamlet*)
PLAYS BASED ON AN EXISTING WORK OR HISTORY: 37 (Shakespeare made up his own story for only one play, *Love's Labor's Lost*)
SEATING CAPACITY OF THE GLOBE THEATRE, WHERE MOST OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS WERE PERFORMED: 3,000
DESCENDANTS OF SHAKESPEARE: 0
MOONS NAMED FOR SHAKESPEAREAN CHARACTERS: 15
FILM VERSIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS NOMINATED FOR ACADEMY AWARDS: 20 (from *Forbidden Planet* to *Romeo+Juliet*)
PLAYS MADE INTO FILMS: 38 (all)
PERCENTAGE OF AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS WHICH REQUIRE STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE: 90%
NUMBER OF TIMES SHAKESPEARE MENTIONS AMERICA IN HIS PLAYS: 1 (in *The Comedy of Errors*, referring to the West Indies)

COMEDY, HISTORY, TRAGEDY

It was the editors of *The First Folio* who classified Shakespeare's plays as comedy, tragedy, or history, not Shakespeare. Though handy, the terms have a different meaning now than they did in Shakespeare's day.

A **comedy** involved the main character learning a lesson and falling in love. Usually, the villain is caught and the hero(ine) marries.

A **tragedy** involved the main character learning a lesson and dying. The protagonist is normally a person of high rank—a queen (Lady Macbeth) or a general (Othello). A flaw in the protagonist sets the events in motion and causes his or her downfall—ambition (Lady Macbeth) or jealousy (Othello). At the end, the character and sometimes his or her family is in ruins, the government has usually collapsed, and the character dies.

A **history** play depicted a story from England's royal past. These plays were highly political, as they dealt with what constitutes a good king (government). They were also full of action, telling (sometimes not all that honestly) of England's war victories. These plays are a little harder to understand, since you have to know the history behind the play.

YOUR DREAM VACATION IN ELIZAB

CONGRATULATIONS!
You've been selected to travel back in time to see the premiere of *Hamlet* in 1601 London! Follow the itinerary and discover Shakespeare's world firsthand.

JORIS HOEFNAGEL/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

GETTING THERE

Traveling from rural England to London to see *Hamlet* presents a harrowing journey. Most of England's 3 to 4 million people live in small villages scattered across the countryside. The majority are commoners, who rent land from nobles. The line between gentry (landed nobility) and commoner is a severe one—the nobility are seen as part of the natural order, and their superiority is virtually uncontested. Only by accumulating wealth and buying land can a commoner hope to change status.

The place to make money—and theater—is London. Travel on the rutted, dirt roads is 12 miles per day by foot or 24 by horse (a woman would rarely undertake a journey like this by herself). You'll notice change as you get closer—nearly 100,000 people live in London (a little smaller than today's Cedar Rapids, Iowa), making London one of the largest cities in 1600s Europe.

BETHAN ENGLAND

LONDON BRIDGE

As you cross the River Thames, look up at the magnificent architecture of London Bridge. The decapitated heads impaled upon it are those of traitors to the state! (You'll want to stay on Queen Elizabeth's good side while you're here.) The Thames teems with swans (it's illegal to kill one in the city), and tiny boats known as wherries. The quickest way around London, wherries pick up passengers and transport them up and down the Thames. When you've crossed the bridge, hire a wherryman and be on your way.

NIGHT OUT

Numerous inns and taverns line the Thames, where travelers such as yourself can stay the evening. Bedtime is rather early; the lack of electrical lighting means that the town sleeps at sundown. Food should be plentiful; the last famine was over two years ago. The biggest meals are dinner, served at noon, and supper, served near sundown. The English diet is high in meat, especially seafood. Meat for winter is slaughtered in November, since it is expensive to feed animals over the winter. Therefore, the English use unique preservation methods (no refrigerators)—pork preserved in vinegar and bay leaves, and salted beef are two preserved repasts. By March, however, all the meat is more than a little gamy. If it's summer, the meat will be fresher and there will be fruits for sweets (almost no one can afford sugar). Don't expect forks; they've only just been introduced from Italy and are considered frivolous. Eat with your knife.

EARLY TO RISE

With no clocks, the day begins at sunrise. After a light breakfast, you'll have a chance to explore London's teeming neighborhoods. Most of London is filled with overcrowded town houses. There's no running water, so refuse and wastes are thrown into the streets. Unsanitary conditions cause rampant disease and will lead to a

LONG LIVED THE QUEEN

Elizabeth I ascended to the throne of England on November 17, 1558, six years before Shakespeare was born. She inherited a kingdom torn by civil strife and at war with two separate nations. She would emerge as perhaps the greatest leader of the millennium.

Queen Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had separated England from the Roman Catholic church, but her predecessor, Queen Mary I, was a stringent Catholic. England was therefore wracked by competing Catholic and Protestant rebellions. Elizabeth succeeded in quelling several uprisings by formalizing the Church of England as a Protestant church that kept several Roman Catholic traditions. (She also quelled dissent by crushing the rebellions and executing their leaders.) Several suitors, both foreign and domestic, vied for her hand in marriage, but fearing the dissolution of her power, she chose to remain unmarried. Thus, she became known as the Virgin Queen, and her claim that she was wedded to England made her incredibly popular with the masses.

Having solidified her control in England, Elizabeth turned to the rest of the world. She authorized the colonization of the Americas (where a new colony was named "Virginia" in her honor), and overthrew Spanish dominance in Europe. Her navy defeated the mighty Spanish Armada in 1588, thus establishing England as the world's premiere power and setting the stage for the rise of the British Empire, which would dictate much of the world's history for the next 350 years. Her accomplishments were so great that in *Time*'s 1999 review of the millennium, she was named Person of the Century for the 1500s.

Shakespeare's plays, especially the histories, take pains to show both the ancestors of Elizabeth in a good light, and the importance of a stable government—political views that served Shakespeare well in the reign of Elizabeth.

LEFT PAGE TO RIGHT PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: NICHOLAS HILLIARD/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY; HENRY FUSELI/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY(2)

catastrophic plague in a few decades. Perhaps you're better off sticking to Cheapside—a thriving market where capitalism reigns and almost anything can be bought for a price. Or maybe you'd prefer to walk along the Strand. This exclusive street used to be home to Catholic prelates (religious men of high rank), but the property was seized by the crown when Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church. Now it's the most exclusive neighborhood in town, home to wealthy merchants and lords angling for Queen Elizabeth's ear. For the literary scene, visit St. Paul's Cathedral, where they've recently set up printing presses in the burial chapel. These newfangled presses run nonstop, printing out such hits as the Bible and "bootleg" quartos of popular plays (see p. 5).

THEATER DISTRICT

Finally, make your way to Southwark, a neighborhood of prisons, gambling, and theater. The first permanent theater opened in London in 1574; prior to that, companies roamed the countryside, presenting the same play to different audiences every night. When theaters became permanent structures, companies had to change the bill often to keep customers coming; this explains why Shakespeare had to write so many plays—the audience demanded it!

Before heading to the Globe Theatre, you may want to enjoy "alternative" entertainment at the neighborhood bear pits, where oddsmakers pit trained dogs against a chained bear in battles to the death called bearbaiting. (It doesn't sound very fair, does it.) It's rumored the Queen herself sometimes makes a visit. She's also known to visit the Globe, the famous 20-sided, open-air theater built in 1599 especially for performances of Shakespeare's plays. The Globe can hold 3,000 spectators, although most have to stand. Food and drink are served during the evening's program, which includes music and dance as well as the play's performance itself (with no intermissions). During the play, you'll find no women on the stage. The English society, led by a queen, feels it unfit for women to appear onstage. Young boys play the women's parts. There are no lights and limited sets, and occasionally the playwright will appear in his own work—as Shakespeare will tonight, taking the role of the Ghost in the premiere of *Hamlet*.

This is the stage on which Shakespeare set his dramas—this world of class strictures, rotten meat, filthy streets, dark nights without street lamps, and an all-powerful monarch. Look for signs of this world in Shakespeare's text; they may give you more insight into the play and the world from which it came.

SUPERSTITION

Shakespeare's plays are full of supernatural phenomena—ghosts, hags, and things that go bump in the night. Shakespeare, like most people in Elizabethan England, probably believed in magic and the supernatural. Knowing a little bit about the legends and folk practices of his time can help you better understand his plays.

WITCHES Most Elizabethans had little knowledge of science or medicine (they didn't even know the heart circulated the blood). In lieu of doctors, peasants visited "wise women," sometimes called "witches," who knew how to prepare herbal remedies and potions to cure ailments or solve dilemmas. These women were often the only medical service available. They were regarded with great awe, especially since they were rumored to be reliable forecasters of the future. This is the type of "witch" that Shakespeare presents in *Macbeth*.

GHOSTS Ghosts were such a staple of Elizabethan drama that stages came equipped with trapdoors so that ghosts could appear from the underworld. The Elizabethan idea of a ghost was similar to the modern idea of a spirit of a deceased person who remains on earth to torment the living, but belief in them was almost certainly more widespread. Ghosts figure prominently in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Richard III*.

FAIRIES Today we think of Tinkerbell and other small winged creatures as fairies. In Shakespeare's time, the image was wholly different. Fairies were magical but insidious creatures, often deformed and usually cruel, who delighted in playing tricks on humans, from souring milk to causing underground tunnels to collapse. It was important to placate these fairies (also known as goblins or redcaps) to prevent them from causing such disasters. The fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are this kind of mischievous creature.

LEFT PAGE TO RIGHT PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: NICHOLAS HILLIARD/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY; HENRY FUSELI/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY(2)

Timothy "Speed" Levitch (left), creator of Shakespeare Delivery, with Andy Dick and Amy Smart in *Scotland, PA*

COURTESY OF LOT 47 FILMS.

SHAKESPEARE DELIVERS

In New York, you can get almost anything delivered to your door, day or night—including Shakespeare. A new service called Shakespeare Delivery, created by Timothy "Speed" Levitch, offers a full menu of sonnets and scenes from the Bard's plays. His company of (about) 12 will show up anywhere and perform anything from a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* to a soliloquy from *Hamlet*. Levitch, known for his 1998 documentary *Cruise* (about working on Manhattan tour buses), currently plays a hippie in *Scotland, PA* (see pp. 26-27). If you live in NYC and you'd like to order "fresh moments from the master," call 212-714-5461. If you don't live in NYC, consider starting up your own version of Shakespeare-to-go—it sure beats delivering for Domino's.

NEW DEFINITIONS, OLD WORDS

The Washington Post recently ran a contest challenging readers to redefine everyday words and expressions. In the spirit of Shakespeare and his ability to coin new terms, *LC* would like to share some of the most clever entries:

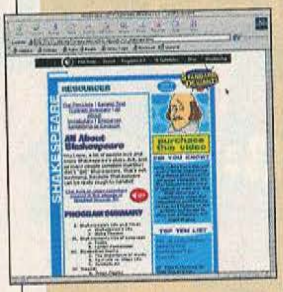
Coffee (n.), a person who is coughed upon
Flabbergasted (adj.), appalled over how much weight you have gained
Abdicate (v.), to give up all hope of ever having a flat stomach
Negligent (adj.), describes a condition in which you absentmindedly answer the door in your nightie
Lymph (v.), to walk with a lisp
Gargoyle (n.), an olive-flavored mouthwash
Flatulence (n.), the emergency vehicle that picks you up after you are run over by a steamroller
Balderdash (n.), a rapidly receding hairline
Oyster (n.), a person who sprinkles his conversation with Yiddish expressions

OTHELLO IS UPDATED

PBS recently aired an updated version of *Othello*, using contemporary language and set in modern-day London. Screenwriter Andrew Davies kept the outline of the plot and specific famous lines and speeches, as well as the major characters. The characters, however, have received some interesting career overhauls:

Othello, formerly a general in the Venetian army, is John Othello, a metropolitan police commissioner. Desdemona, who was never given much of a career except being Othello's wife, has become Dessie Brabant, a journalist. Iago, otherwise known as Othello's assistant, Ben Jago, is the deputy police commissioner. For more information on the updated *Othello*, which aired on January 28, 2002, visit **http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/othello/**

SHAKESPEAREAN SEQUELS



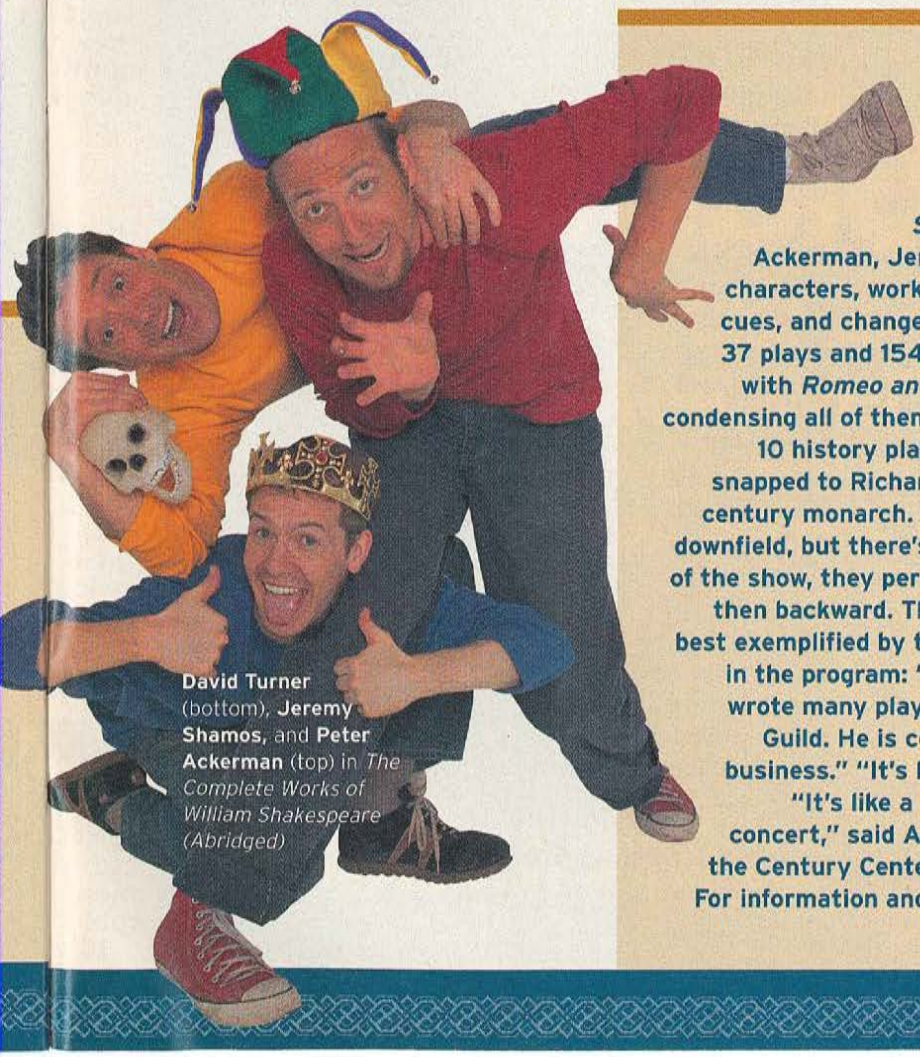
Check out this top-ten list of sequels to the Bard's best on PBS's Web site (http://www.pbs.org//standarddeviantstv/episode_res_shakesper.html). While we got a good laugh out of these, we think we'll stick with the originals!

10. *Titus Andronicus II: Titus Strikes Back*
9. *Antony and Cleopatra IV* ("You just can't get any deader then this.")
8. *Hamlet 3D (Or Not 3D)*
7. *Coriolanus II: The Wrath of Kahn*
6. *King Lear III* ("He's back, and he's hoppin' mad!")
5. *Othello 10: Police Academy in Venice*
4. *Timon of Athens V* ("The one right after Timon of Athens IV.")
3. *The Return of Julius Caesar* ("Again, Bruté?")
2. *Romeo and Juliet Part 3: Zombie Wedding*
1. *Macbeth II: The Reeeaaaallly Long Apology*

(S) TWISTS
SHAKESPEARE

DID HE OR DIDN'T HE?

For years, people have debated whether Shakespeare actually wrote everything for which he is famous. A group called the Oxfordians claim that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, is the author of Shakespeare's plays. Their most recent proof: a 500-page doctoral thesis that investigates the parallels between the plots of the plays and de Vere's life. The thesis also examines parallels between the plays and passages marked in de Vere's copy of the Geneva Bible. In addition, de Vere is reported to have received a grant of £1,000 a year from Queen Elizabeth. One of the earliest biographies of Shakespeare states that he "had an allowance so large that he spent at the rate of £1,000 a year." Oxfordians think that this is no coincidence. Other arguments involve the plays' dates. Those who believe in the authorship of Shakespeare (called Stratfordians), say that since 10 of Shakespeare's plays are dated after 1604, Oxford (who died in 1604) couldn't possibly have been the author. But Oxfordians think that the plays' dates are incorrect. Why all the fuss? The question is important not only because of Shakespeare's longevity and prominence in the theater, but also because of his contributions to the English language. And it's always important to give credit where credit is due.



David Turner (bottom), **Jeremy Shamos**, and **Peter Ackerman** (top) in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*

THE ENTIRE CANON IN UNDER TWO HOURS

In *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*, three actors (Peter Ackerman, Jeremy Shamos, and David Turner) take on 75 characters, work with nearly 100 props, cope with 200 light cues, and change costumes dozens of times as they address 37 plays and 154 sonnets in under 2 hours. The actors start with *Romeo and Juliet*, and then move on to the comedies, condensing all of them into one short play. They also perform the 10 history plays as a football game: ". . . and the crown is snapped to Richard the Second, that well-spoken fourteenth-century monarch. He's fading back to pass, looking for an heir downfield, but there's a heavy rush from King John!" At the end of the show, they perform *Hamlet* at top speed, first forward and then backward. Their riotous take on Shakespeare is perhaps best exemplified by the (purposely) inaccurate bio they give him in the program: "William Shakespeare was born in Brooklyn, wrote many plays, and was not a member of the Dramatists Guild. He is considered one of the really good guys in the business." "It's like an amusement-park ride," said Shamos. "It's like a runaway train," said Turner. "It's like a rock concert," said Ackerman. Hmmm . . . The show is playing at the Century Center for the Performing Arts in New York City. For information and tickets, call TeleCharge at 212-239-6200.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROL ROSEGG