

There is a wide body of information available both on-line and in print which delves deeper into the debate and presents questions for further thought, such as timelines, historical events, and information about other known playwrights of the day. Based on what is known and unknown about the life of Shakespeare, it does not appear that this debate will be silenced any time soon—like any conspiracy theory, it thrives on unanswered questions from incomplete historical records and plain curiosity.

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Censoring the Bard: Shakespeare's Content and a Youth Audience

By Tammy Whynot

Audiences unfamiliar with Shakespeare's work may be surprised to learn that within some of the most highly regarded English-language texts of all time--intermixed with elegant description and poignant soliloquies--there is plenty of teenage rebellion, swearing, bawdy humour, gang violence, murder, and references to the

occult through depictions of witches, magic, ghosts, and fairies.

When considering Shakespeare and a youth audience, the question has come up in the past about the appropriateness of the content of his plays. Being familiar with the rowdier or more controversial side of Shakespeare can be of value if questioned by a teen about the ongoing appeal and relevance of his works, or if required to address a parental concern about the content in the plays. However, according to *Freedom to Read*, Shakespeare has not been challenged in recent decades in Canada (Freedom to Read, 2011).

Despite this lack of recent challenges, classic works are not immune from returning to the center of a censorship debate, evident in the recent publicity in early 2011 surrounding the altering of text in a new edition of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Indeed, Shakespeare's works have undergone similar treatment in the past: in 1807, Dr. Thomas Bowlder published revised editions of Shakespeare's plays, in which he removed from the original text "everything that can raise a blush on the cheek of modesty" (Urban, 1819). These included in particular references to sexual activity or passages he deemed blasphemous. Titled

The Family Shakespeare, Bowlder aimed to revise Shakespeare in such a way that it would be appropriate for reading aloud by parents in a family setting. His efforts were praised in an 1819 edition of *Gentlemen's Magazine*, which extolled the virtues of the altered text as being both valuable and masterful (Urban, 1819). Based on the impact these revision had, the word "bowlderize" has since entered the English language as meaning to censor text considered vulgar (Occidental College Library, 2007).

Shakespeare's plays have also faced multiple instances of complete re-writing for a youth audience, dating back to the *Lamb's Tales* of 1807 (incidentally, the same year of Bowlder's revisions). In these writings, the plays of Shakespeare are re-written in prose form, aiming to capture the virtue and honourable nature of the writings for children and "young ladies" (Bottoms, 2004). A perusal of these works reveals that, as one might expect, the racier aspects of Shakespeare have been omitted or glossed over, leaving behind a version deemed at the time suitable for innocent youth.

When contemplating Shakespeare and a modern youth audience, librarians may find insight in a statement written by Vicky Greenbaum, a teacher. She poses the

question “how do we, as teachers, encourage readiness in readers for challenging literature of all kinds? Shall we teach the art of insightful reading, or shall we live in fear that parents and other well-meaning arbiters may bar Shakespeare and other challenging texts from the curriculum?” (Kupfer, 2009). If the role of the youth librarian is to guide patrons toward becoming true, critical readers, then surely having challenging and controversial works available in the collection for borrowing is essential, as is being prepared to discuss—and possibly defend—their content if questioned.

References

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Book Review: *Wondrous Strange* by Lesley Livingston

By Tammy Whynot

Rating: 4.5/5



While seventeen-year-old Kelley Winslow rehearses for the role of Titania in her troupe’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, she is unaware that there exists a *real* Faerie Otherworld—one that apparently desires her destruction. In the nine nights leading up to Halloween, the magic sealing the Gates