

# *Delineating Shakespeare's Education*

Reviewed by Don Rubin

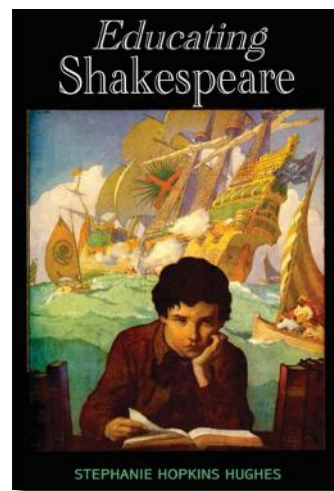
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*Educating Shakespeare. By Stephanie Hopkins Hughes. Cary, NC: Veritas Publications, 2022. 384 pages, (paperback \$25).*

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For many years I taught a third-year university course called Modern Theatre and Society, which sought to connect theatrical art to the social and political constructs out of which they grew, to link plays to their historical moment in the belief that art and society were somehow tangentially connected. My students would read core excerpts from Hegel and then read Ibsen—*Peer Gynt*, *Brand*, *Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*. They would read Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin as a prelude to absorbing Strindberg; and read Karl Marx before taking on Chekhov.

But the approaches I took in the previous century—seen by a newer generation of scholars as the Late Modern Dark Ages, a time when works of art themselves still stood supreme—have vanished from most universities and today's students are reading not the works so much as the bloodless literary and social theories that have accreted around them. They read Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, linguistic philosophers who say, among other things, that the author is dead, and that authorial intent is not to be valued, is actually incidental to what readers themselves choose to find of interest in literary works. In this setting, success most often goes to students who read



a work of art not for the pleasure of discovering what it *says* or even *how* it says it but, rather, from an academic requirement to categorize or taxonomize it, dissecting the pages with surgical precision from the viewpoint of race, class or gender. The search for authorial intent today has gone the way of outmoded cultural artifacts such as walkie-talkies and spats. Those students still interested in such curiosities receive little more than smiles from the modern academy and are then put out to intellectual pasture. In most of academia today, no one really cares about what an author may have intended or thought, or where their ideas originated, or what insights might be had by looking at their *story* through wider lenses.

For Stephanie Hopkins Hughes, the founding editor of this journal, *The Oxfordian*, this failure to teach “story” is the academic bane of our times. And, as someone who invested more than four decades in teaching “story” to enthusiastic university students, I must agree. It is a palpable loss extending across the literary spectrum and a significant one in the specific area of Shakespeare studies.

As Hughes puts it in her recently published *Educating Shakespeare*, a volume about how one learns about how the writer known as Shakespeare must have learned:

until those who should be taking seriously the task of explaining how these immensely influential works of dramatic literature came to be written leave off counting feminine endings and begin dealing with their *provable connections* to the *social and political history of the periods* when they were created....the world will continue to believe that Shakespeare's identity doesn't matter....

English departments...[have] plunged ever more deeply into the abstract, adopting ideas and terms from one science after another—while ignoring those studies that *might* have offered real perspective....There would have been nothing wrong with this flight into theory had they kept these ideas within their graduate think tanks—but when they began teaching them to undergraduates—replacing discussions of meaning, style, purpose and pleasure with arcane spinoffs from the language sciences—students began dropping out.... A large part of the reason why students who would have been eager to major in English

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in the past are avoiding it today is because they were turned off by... English classes...where theory so infected the study of literature that high school teachers were teaching semiotics because that's what they themselves were taught... all pleasure having been drained out of it. (286–7; my emphases)

Wide-ranging in its approaches to identifying the story of Shakespeare's life—whoever he or she might have been—Hughes focuses on what the author of the plays and poems himself actually knew, about what must have been included in his education, about what disciplines and subjects were actually appreciated in 16<sup>th</sup> Century British provincial classrooms (religion being number one) and what subjects were avoided (poetry).

In going through these insights into traditional Tudor education, the gaps are clear between the broad education that “Shakespeare” must have had and the extraordinarily narrow education most students including the man from Stratford actually received. In this merry wandering, Hughes offers us numerous glimpses into many connected stories, including a brief history of the evolving London stage—the social media of its time—and its unique place in the dissemination of ideas, language and knowledge in Elizabethan society.

Under her fascinating gaze, Hughes launches a barrage on 21<sup>st</sup> Century academe, not hesitating to identify where academics—especially those in literature programs—went so terribly wrong. Though always focusing on the world of education, she nevertheless offers a tangential mini-history of the Elizabethan age, its Boy companies, the real meaning of Bad Quartos and even looks in on Early Modern notions of pleasure.

We also learn about John Hemmings, one of the alleged powers behind the First Folio who was the long-term business manager of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Hemmings, we are told, started his career as “an apprentice to a member of the Grocers Guild” and Hughes speculates on his possible role in getting William Shakspeare to make his own fortune by selling the family name. In another Hughes speculation, we are told that Shakspeare may have only visited London on rare occasions, and that he may have never really lived or worked there.

Hughes is quite even-handed about the authorship question in her first two chapters, so much so that Stratfordians might well consider accepting some of her ideas. She admits her own amazement, though, when it comes to certain facts: that since so many scholars in so many fields agree on Shakespeare's broadly based, in-depth knowledge, why do so few seem interested in where that often-arcane knowledge came from? Indeed, as actor Mark Rylance says in a back cover quote for this volume: “An artist can be born with genius for a certain activity but they can't be born with education or life experience.”

Clearly, that must come from somewhere; in the case of the Bard that is puzzling indeed if one insists that he was born into an illiterate provincial family in 1564. Using that time and place as the intellectual center for so complicated a personage simply doesn't hold. Which is why for today's professors and teachers of integrity, what in good conscience does one tell students about the author? For those aware of the Authorship controversy, one can, of course, simply articulate the issues and urge students to do further research. But for those deaf or vague to the Authorship question, there is little hope that they will do more than simply tell the same old story that they themselves heard and hope it hasn't changed too much.

In the end, this jewel of a book is wonderful reading—both for those knowledgeable about the authorship issue and for those who are simply curious. It is not only lucid but filled with pertinent questions, trenchant observations and tantalizing tidbits on her core subjects, many of which illustrate the tunnel vision of the academic puritans. For example:

- She asks how the puritans succeed in getting so many to join Calvin's anti-sex crusade and wonders about the reason "for the success of these brutal anti-sex, anti-female, anti-pleasure, anti-poetry, anti-laughter campaigns?" (203, 205).
- She notes that for "the mythical lovers Tristan and Isolde, the semi-historical Lancelot and Guinevere, or the real Heloise and Abelard... Christian chivalry allowed *desire* to flourish... so long as they kept their hands to themselves" (171).
- Even early English translators of the Bible, she points out, paid the ultimate price for allowing joy to enter. "Though Wycliff managed to die on his own without help from the authorities, his corpse was not so lucky. In 1428 his critics had it dug up, burnt, and thrown in the Thames" (155).
- "Preachers railed [against theatre] from the pulpit. Mayors bombarded the Privy Council with demands that the theatres be 'plucked down.' From the late 1560s on—every riot, every visitation of the plague, was blamed on the theatres, the actors, and, of course, the authors of their plays—so it should be obvious that the identity of an author of a particular play—or series of plays—would have been... a matter of concern" (196).

As for identifying the true author of the plays, she notes with just a touch of sarcasm that:

- For most students and many teachers "the Stratford Shakespeare [is] just as fictional as his plays.... [a writer drifting] "in a murky semi-historical void somewhere between St. Paul and Santa Claus" (ii).

Moreover, on the refusal of traditional scholars to even consider that anyone else might have written the plays using earlier versions as evidence, she notes that:

- Shakespeare scholars “egged each other on as they labeled one quarto after another good, bad, stolen, badly copied, misreported, poorly memorized—everything, that is, but the most obvious explanation—that it was *the author’s own early version*—his *juvenilia*. Shakespeare’s lack of juvenilia is one of the great weaknesses of the Stratford thesis. He seems to have emerged, fully matured, out of nowhere....” (271).

Of course, as with any wide-ranging volume—and sometimes Hughes is a bit too wide-ranging—there are some factual challenges to be made. At one point, she refers to the playwright Bertolt Brecht as “a German Jew” which all researchers have agreed he wasn’t. Indeed, why does Brecht even enter into this volume?

She says as well that Czech playwright Vaclav Havel was imprisoned by “Stalin’s regime.” Again, no point in bringing this up. It may have been a Stalinist-styled regime, but it was certainly not Stalin since the Russian dictator died in 1953. Havel turned 17 that year.

Also, without any necessity, she notes that in 1936, the Spanish playwright Garcia Lorca was “executed by a Nazi firing squad.” Well, the truth is that he was executed that year, but the execution took place in Granada, Spain apparently under orders by the dictator Francisco Franco, trying to root out gays and rebels in the country.

The fact is Hughes sometimes goes too far afield in the book, and when her enthusiasms take her somewhat beyond her own obvious areas of strength—Education, Early Modern theatre and the Shakespeare Authorship Question—she ends up on shakier ground. But when she focuses on the real targets, she is certainly quite wonderful and enormously insightful.

In the end, this is a book that can teach us all and, perhaps as important, challenge us all to think better and more deeply.

