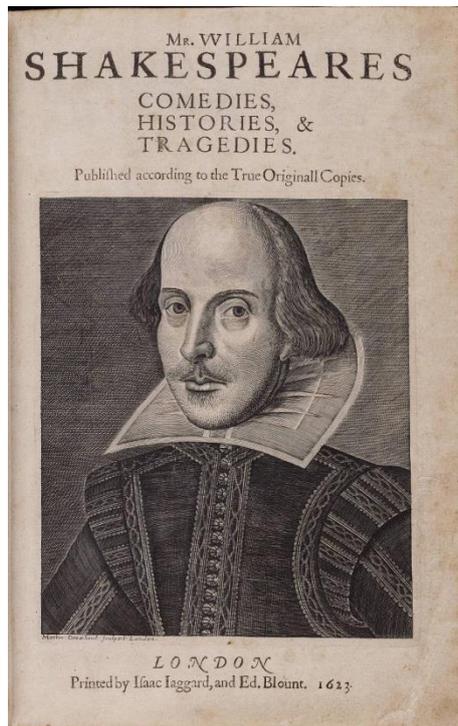


## IS SHAKESPEARE IRRELEVANT TO SCHOOLS?



### Prof Peter Titlestad

I/We believe you are involved in debate about removing Shakespeare's works from the school syllabus on the grounds that his work is irrelevant to South Africa, a colonial inheritance and not South African. How can the literature of a foggy island in the northern hemisphere, brought in the baggage train of an imperial colonial power and part of an elitist, Eurocentric western culture, ( written furthermore 400 years ago – the world has just finished celebrating the quatercentenary last year ) have value for the youth of South Africa today? After all, children here are Africans and should be given the literature of Africa, more especially perhaps that written by black writers, about Africa. At first glance this might seem a reasonable, commonsense point of view.

The argument is very much that of the so-called Christian National Education of our unhappy past. Give them their own culture. Don't allow them a glimpse outside the laager. Claim them for the Volk. (And, of course, for the Party.) It is the argument of a perverse nationalism. By contrast, should not the object of education be to widen horizons?

The whole question of relevance is highly problematic. What is relevant? Perhaps what is most relevant is precisely what is not to be found in one's

own back yard. In any case, if it be objected that Shakespeare is “English”, it could be argued that Shakespeare belongs to the world. In fact, Harold Bloom, the notable American critic, went so far as to say that Shakespeare was the inventor of human nature! And was Shakespeare elitist, only for intellectuals or for the upper classes? His theatre, which was a commercial success, had standing room at the front around the projecting stage at a penny for the “groundlings,” many of whom were quite possibly illiterate but had to be kept entertained by what went on on the stage just above them. The actors had perilously close contact with a working-class audience. The bear-baiting pit was just down the road as an alternative.

To eliminate Shakespeare because he is “English” is an entirely false argument. Let us chuck out all the other aspects of our national life which we owe in part to English culture and influence. These, whether we like the argument or not, pervade South Africa. Where would one start? The parliamentary system, a legal tradition, freedom of the press, our academic life, our school system? What about the English language itself, the transaction language in so many spheres of activity, the second mother tongue to many and a vital second language to so many more, as well as the mother tongue of significant sections of the population, (not all white)? With all this English around, could we not just say that Shakespeare is part of South Africa too, rather than earnestly and high-mindedly pushing him away?

There is a Shakespeare Society in South Africa that holds a triennial conference. It has drawn, if memory serves, delegates from France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Russia, Japan, Taiwan, Canada, Australia, the West Indies, India, the USA (black and white), even the United Kingdom. Shakespeare belongs to the world. The Society runs a Shakespeare for Schools programme, (not just for whites) that is welcomed with enthusiasm.

It might be argued that all those “History Plays” really must be irrelevant! How can all the Kings of medieval England have any interest for the Republic of South Africa? But think again. We have our constitutional assembly of traditional leaders, some of whom entitle themselves “Kings.” The histories of certain royal houses are still vivid in the memory. We have monarchies on our borders, where the doctrine of the divine right of kings lives on. Plays treating acutely rivalry, power, legality, leadership and the problem of a bad king are not irrelevant. And the Histories include the great comic character Falstaff, the archetypal good companion fat man leading the young Prince astray with the fate of the kingdom in the balance, a relevant enough theme for young minds to consider.

When English history became too risky to write about, Shakespeare turned to classical history, full of political lessons and examples of how men function in the realms of power. By some strange lapse of authoritarian oversight, *Julius Caesar*, a play about the assassination of a dictator by a group of political idealists, was prescribed for years and years in Bantu Education. Are you now going to take Shakespeare away?

Would you argue that Shakespeare is difficult? Then at least leave him in the syllabus as a choice for those with the guts, ability and pride to rise to the challenge. Don't cut off the heads of the tallest poppies. What kind of educational achievement is it to level everything down?

To conclude, the notion that Shakespeare is irrelevant is in itself merely ridiculous. The proposition that any great literary figure admired for centuries can be irrelevant is of course ridiculous, but in the case of a country in which English culture has left a deep imprint, to expunge Shakespeare from schools is more than usually ridiculous. Shakespeare is not alien to these shores nor a relic of colonialism; possibly the greatest writer of English literature is not a statue to be toppled in a fit of "must fall" enthusiasm. To regard Shakespeare as a relic of colonialism is just nonsense. To remove him from the education syllabus in the well-meaning notion that the young people of South Africa will in some way or other be better off is in fact to tread the broad road of deprivation that leadeth to destruction.