

## A Roundtable Discussion....

# Shakespeare & Censorship

“All the World is a Stage” is a truism and, conversely, the stage—and the classroom—often reflects what’s happening out in the larger world. So we recently asked four leading Shakespearean scholars to discuss the Bard, his work, and the impact of censorship on the two both during their time, and up through to the present day. What emerged was fascinating, informative and, in many ways, instructive. And this conversation will only continue. So, we invite you, the teacher, to share your thoughts on these topics as well as general feedback to the authors’ remarks, by writing to [highschool@randomhouse.com](mailto:highschool@randomhouse.com) with the subject line “RHI Roundtable Reaction.”

### What kind of censorship did Shakespeare face during his career as a playwright?



DAVID BEVINGTON: Shakespeare’s main brush with authority had to do with *Richard II* during the Essex Rebellion of 1601; the play—not to be confused with his better known *Richard III*—was seen as sanctioning, or at least dramatizing, the removal of a king from office. But no penalties fell on the company or on Shakespeare. He had written the play several years earlier.

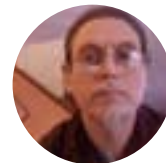


ERIC RASMUSSEN: Yes, I believe the pivotal dethroning scene in *Richard II* was apparently considered “dangerous matter” politically and was censored from every edition of the play published during Queen Elizabeth’s reign.

Also, Anthony Munday’s original 1590s manuscript of the play *Sir Thomas More*—about the man of the same name—was rejected by Edmond Tilney. The then Master of the Revels was concerned that its insurrection scene might incite real violence against foreigners living in London. Shakespeare was later brought in as one of several “play-doctors” who made the necessary changes in the text.

The 1606 “Act to Restrain Abuses of Players” forbid the use of “the holy Name of God or of Christ Jesus” in stage plays. In the dramatic manuscripts that had been written before 1606, instances of “God” were systematically changed to “heaven” in phrases like “God knows.” After 1606 playwrights wrote within the parameters of the prohibition, much in the same way that modern prime-time television writers understand that there are certain words prohibited by the FCC.

BRANDON TOROPOV: Yes, this legislation forced Shakespeare to go back and revise passages in some of the plays that were in his company’s repertory at the time, notably *Othello*.



RON ROSENBAUM: I’d argue (tentatively) that the censorship of references to God in oaths may have had a cumulative subtle effect of secularizing Shakespeare; for readers of the later (post-1606) versions of the play (and for later versions of Shakespeare the writer) removing a richness of reference (even in debased form) to holiness, to the spiritual realm that is so present in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* for instance. Blasphemy, after all, pays tribute to the reality of the God it invokes.

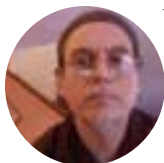
Also, we should consider whether the prohibition against oaths straitjacket, or at least inhibit, the naturalness of Shakespeare’s language—and by extension that of his characters. Perhaps this caused him to pause and inhibit himself, each time resulting in minor acts of self-censorship. It might be interesting to get students to compile lists of colorful oaths in pre-1606 Shakespeare and see if their absence makes for a blander, less highly charged linguistic fabric.

#### SHAKESPEARE FOR BEGINNERS

by Brandon Toropov  
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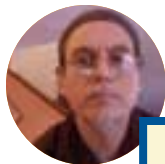
I think this conjecture could be the basis for getting students to discuss the broader—still open, still important—questions of Shakespeare’s attitudes towards the supernatural: ghosts, Purgatory, spirits, God, and what he referred to as the “divinity that shapes our ends/Rough hew them how we may.”



**TOROPOV:** On a political level, Shakespeare had good sense; he knew whom to flatter and when, and was well connected. All of this helped him to manage censorship problems when they arose. His careless decision to depict a historical figure—Sir John Oldcastle—as a drunkard and a braggart in *Henry IV, Part One* led to problems. Shakespeare had to rename the character in a subsequent draft of the play, and insert a disclaimer soothing the feelings of Oldcastle’s living relatives. The show went on. (We now know the fat knight as Sir John Falstaff.)

**Since his death, what themes in Shakespeare’s plays have drawn the attention of political and cultural censors and how has the focus of these censors shifted over the years?**

**TOROPOV:** *King Lear* was absent from the English stage for a long stretch in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century because it raised uncomfortable parallels with George III’s bouts of mental illness.



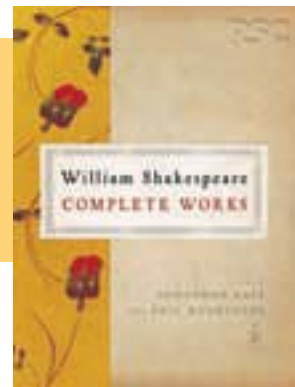
**ROSENBAUM:** In Peter Brook’s brilliant but polemical film of *Lear*, which I think students would find thrilling to watch, he exercises a kind of esthetic censorship. He puts his fingers on the scale, so to speak, all in service of his bleak Beckett-like view of *Lear* (read Jan Kott’s *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, the book that became Brooks’s guide to the landscape of the play). Brook makes a point of cutting those small but key gestures of humanity—like the servants bandaging Gloucester’s bleeding eye sockets—that argue that there is some good to be found in human nature.



On the other hand there was the 17th century editor who presented a version of *Lear* which “censored by addition,” you might say. In order to make the irredeemable tragedy of *Lear* more “palatable” he gave it a happy ending, with Cordelia not dying tragically in Lear’s arms but living to marry the “good guy” Edgar.

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I’ve presented actors doing both version of the endings of *Lear* and the audience debate that followed has been stimulating. Which ending did they prefer? How did each ending affect the total experience of the play? The natures of these questions, as well as the answers they have garnered, allows students who engage in this manner a much deeper understanding of the play.



**BEVINGTON:** Rewriting Shakespeare went on everywhere; and, oftentimes, it was simply a matter of shifting tastes toward refinement. *Lear* was indeed recast by Nahum Tate in the Restoration, but not because of any official censorship; it was rather that audiences could not bear the injustice of the death of Cordelia. Lots of plays were rewritten similarly. The *Henry VI* plays were re-presented as an indictment of civil war, again not through censorship but instead to address

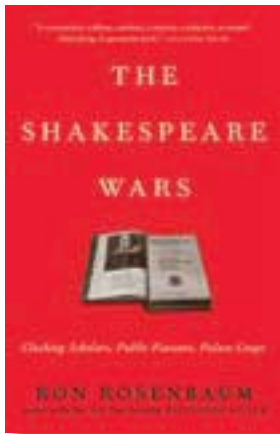
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audience concerns. The Trinculo-Stephano-Caliban plot of *The Tempest* became a kind of allegory of civil unrest, recalling the civil wars of mid 17th century.

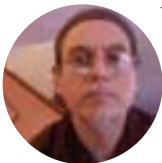
RASMUSSEN: *Hamlet* was banned in Russia during Stalin's regime because Hamlet's "indecisiveness and depression" were seen to be incompatible with the Soviet spirit of "optimism, fortitude, and clarity." In 1989, *Hamlet* was banned at an Israeli detention camp for Palestinians because the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy was seen as advising the audience to take up arms rather than suffer silently.



Other Twentieth century examples are: in 1931, *The Merchant of Venice* was banned from high schools in Buffalo, New York following protests from Jewish groups. Similarly, the play was banned in Midland, Michigan schools in 1980; in 1986, the teaching of *Macbeth* was challenged in Jefferson County, Colorado schools because it focuses on "Death, suicide, ghosts and Satan"; and in 1996, Merrimack, New Hampshire schools banned Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* because its cross-dressing heroine was in violation of the school board's "prohibition of alternative lifestyle instruction."

TOROPOV: *Othello's* theme of cross-cultural love has attracted much criticism over the years, especially in the American South during the period of segregation. At that time, a kiss between the black Othello and the white Desdemona was seen as a political statement. According to some sources, a black actor did not actually play the part on stage in the United States until the 1930s. The first such production in South Africa appears to have taken place in 1987.

Ultimately, every director of Shakespeare is technically a "censor," choosing to emphasize some elements of the original material over other elements. Kenneth Branagh had his reasons for cutting out vast chunks of *Love's Labor's Lost* when converting it to a modern motion picture in 2000. Thomas Bowdler had other reasons



for cutting passages when converting the same work to the family reading room, circa 1820. Who was "right"? I think you are when you went back to the best text available and read it for yourself.

**Who was Thomas Bowdler and what is his relevance to Shakespeare? What was the significance of Bowdler's work and how does it resonate today?**

TOROPOV: Thomas Bowdler was the editor of *The Family Shakespeare* (1818), a complete multi-volume set of the Bard's plays in which "nothing is added to the original text, but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family." The book was published in Bowdler's retirement; he was a physician by trade. His edition of Shakespeare was both an immense financial success and a landmark event in the history of literary censorship.



BEVINGTON: Yes, his expurgated version of *Romeo and Juliet* has had lasting effects, turning up in varying forms in later editions and stage presentations. He also edited Gibbons' *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in a similar way! Interesting only as a quirky note in editing history and reception. This all was so infamous and oddly funny that it gave rise to the verb, to bowdlerize. He is not an individual whom editors take seriously today.

RASMUSSEN: He proclaimed that his earnest wish was to render his plays unsullied by any scene, by any speech, or, if possible, by any word that can give pain to the most chaste, or offence to the most religious of his readers." The irony of Bowdler's work, however, is that he failed to expunge some of the most salacious passages: Isabella's sadomasochistic lines in *Measure for Measure*, for instance, were not removed. "The impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies / And strip myself to death, as to a bed."

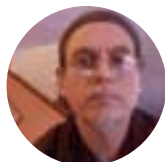


ROSENBAUM: I would argue that his greatest influence today—the greater problem today—is what I would call a "reverse Bowdlerism." It refers he over-sexualization of Shakespeare, by those determined to, well, reverse Bowdlerism. In many cases this takes the form of imposing the perverse Bowdlerism of Freud's simpleminded sexual interpretations, however discredited Freud is now.



The prime example has been the so-called "closet scene" in *Hamlet*. Laurence Olivier (in his film version)

was the earliest and most prominent of reverse Bowdlerists: he made it a heavily Freudian, ridiculously overheated love scene between Hamlet and his mother the Queen. All too many unthinking Freudian devotees have applauded this alleged daring, which reductively oversimplifies a deeply complex relationship. (Why not show students Olivier's version and ask them to discuss what they think the relationship is?)



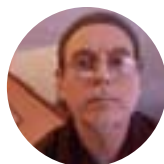
**TOROPOV:** Interestingly enough, the issue of Bowdler, and the subsequent debates, all began with a childhood experience: Bowdler's father's readings of Shakespeare to his family. Upon reading the plays on his own, the young Bowdler realized that his father had been making impromptu editorial decisions, seamlessly excising sensitive material without his own, his mother's, or any of his siblings' knowledge.

The impulse to give kids something to read—to give parents something to read to kids—is, at the end of the day, something to praise, as is the impulse to draw some kind of line somewhere; where to draw these lines is part of an ongoing discussion.

Condensed and expurgated versions of Shakespeare, meant for younger readers, will be with us forever, just as the originals will always be there for the curious who wish to see the larger picture. The “edited” versions often serve as the best advertisements for the full texts.

Bowdler's book ultimately stands as a fascinating barometer of nineteenth-century mores, and perhaps—just perhaps—as a point of entry in today's culture war over the regulation of media content.

**If you were a high school teacher, what themes or text of Shakespeare would you approach with sensitivity? How would you address these issues in a classroom?**



**TOROPOV:** By asking good questions, even about tough or controversial issues, and then

waiting to see what the kids come up with in response. For instance: Great questions about the objectification of women are still waiting to be asked in response to *The Taming of the Shrew*; great questions about being an outsider are still waiting to be asked in response to *The Merchant of Venice*. A good teacher uses the text of a Shakespeare play as a starting point, not an ending point, for a series of explorations about larger themes: identity, betrayal, loss, and belonging, among them.



**ROSENBAUM:** I've argued that there's no way to rescue *Merchant* from the anti-Semitism that is basic to the DNA of its language. I'm not arguing for censorship; to the contrary I think that modern efforts to “rescue” the play by erasing its anti-Semitism are themselves a kind of censorship. Pathetic attempts to make it a play that's not “anti-Semitic” but “about anti-Semitism,” such as the recent Al Pacino film, depend on bowdlerizing the anti-Semitism.

Most of them use a conceit that backfires. By making Shylock a “nicer guy”—a stolid “Joe Sixpack Shylock” as I've called Pacino, or “The Usurer on the Roof”—the film succeeds (as do most contemporary stage productions) in intensifying the anti-Semitism. They argue, in effect, that in the heart of even a “nice Jew” lies a poisonous hatred of Christians that would drive him to put a dagger through a Christian's heart (or “near the heart”) to settle a debt.

Is *Othello* similarly racist? There are certainly racist characters who make racist speeches; who try to make “blackness” into a synonym for evil and barbarity. But Othello himself is in almost all respects noble—unlike Shylock; he is a far more innocent victim of evil white people. Conversely, the evil white people in *Merchant* are Jews.

I have conflicting feelings about the relationship between the two plays and the two prejudices but comparing and contrasting them in the classroom could make for illuminating debates. ■

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