

Thoughts about Shakespeare today

from Mary Hartman, Director of Education at Bard on the Beach

[Bard Education](#) aims to inspire community, creating opportunities for participants of all ages, cultural backgrounds, genders, neighbourhoods, abilities, and personalities to be creative, collaborative, and courageous as they express themselves through Shakespeare.

Ideas we want to challenge:	Ideas we embrace:
Shakespeare was the greatest writer who ever lived.	That's an opinion, not a fact, and it's an opinion that no one can express with any authority. No one has read the work of every writer who ever lived, and no one ever will. It's impossible.
Shakespeare was a colonizer.	Shakespeare, the person, may have never left England, but it's true that Shakespeare, the cultural icon, has been used as a weapon of colonization. That's horrendous. On the other hand, Shakespeare's plays and poems have been translated into more than 90 different languages, translating not just the language, but the cultural setting of the stories. We encourage artists, students, and participants in our programs to express themselves through Shakespeare. We invite them to bring their own backgrounds, identities, and personalities into their exploration of the plays and make the language, characters, and stories their own.
Shakespeare is universal.	'Universality' is a popular, but dangerous idea. Who decides what's universal? How do they know that everyone feels that way? Instead, we embrace Shakespeare's elasticity: Shakespeare's plays are remarkably flexible, open to interpretation, to adaptation, to reimagining.

<p>Shakespeare is irrelevant.</p>	<p>'Relevance' is another tricky concept. Something is either relevant or it's not. We prefer to think about resonance. The language, characters, and stories are going to resonate in so many different ways for so many different people. They'll even resonate differently at different times in our lives. Resonance can grow or change, and it can have myriad qualities. That's more interesting to us than relevance.</p>
<p>Shakespeare's language is sacrosanct: you can't cut or change a word.</p>	<p>While Shakespeare often expressed ideas with remarkable power and beauty, there are plenty of times his characters say things that are unmistakably racist, misogynistic, anti-Jewish, or ableist. Colourism runs throughout the plays and poems, equating whiteness with beauty and blackness with evil. We can't pretend that isn't there and we must make a choice. If that's part of the story we're exploring, then we must make time and space to address it with care. If not, we can cut the text or change the language. And by the way, scholars have determined that Shakespeare and his company cut or changed the language all the time to suit the specific needs of their performances. There's no reason we can't do the same.</p>
<p>Shakespeare gives us the answers for all the important questions in life.</p>	<p>Shakespeare doesn't give us the answers. Instead, his plays ask questions, deep, complex, nuanced questions that are stimulating, provocative, inspiring, troubling. These big, compelling, urgent questions are ours to answer for ourselves, in all our infinite variety.</p>

If you're interested in finding out more, check out [A Shakesperience](#), our free 60-minute video introduction to Shakespeare. It challenges assumptions and defies traditions, inviting you to explore Shakespeare and discover how it resonates for you. There are also 15 free activities to support your exploration. The video is available with captions in Chinese, English, French, Hindi, and Spanish; there's also a version with audio descriptions. And the *Discovery Zone* is coming soon.