Discovery Zone
Rethinking Shakespeare:

Challenging Tradition and Inspiring Curiosity

When we say 'Shakespeare' it can be difficult to know exactly what we're talking about. Of course, there's William Shakespeare, who lived in England from 1564 – 1616. However, it's difficult to say much about him because the surviving records reveal little about his personality or character. As a result, people have filled in the blanks to create an image of Shakespeare as a cultural icon. This image was constructed by people who lived at least 150 years after Shakespeare died, so it reflects their values and sensibilities. Unfortunately, this idea of Shakespeare has sometimes been used to reinforce oppressive perspectives and practices, such as imperialism and colonialism.

Since we know so little about Shakespeare himself and since the image of Shakespeare as a cultural icon is so distorted, perhaps when talking about 'Shakespeare' it's best to focus on the plays and poems themselves. Remarkably open to interpretation, they present extraordinary opportunities for students to explore vibrant language, engage with complex characters, and grapple with compelling questions.

The Discovery Zone invites students and teachers to use their own unique perspectives when exploring Shakespeare's plays and poems. However, what are the best ways of introducing this exploration? How can we talk about Shakespeare in ways that inspire connection for today's students, rather than establishing distance? Addressing the elephant in the room by challenging traditional notions is a great place to start.

Ready to explore with your students? There are 50+ free resources for exploring Shakespeare in **The Discovery Zone.**

This resource is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license.

Challenging Bardolatry, or Shakespeare Worship

Ideas we 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 human being has read the work of every writer who ever lived, and none ever will. It's impossible.
Shakespeare is universal.	Universality is a popular idea. BUT who decides what's universal? How do they know that everyone feels that way? Instead, try embracing Shakespeare's elasticity: Shakespeare's plays are remarkably flexible, open to interpretation, to adaptation, and to reimagining. It's that flexibility that provides an open invitation to exploration and expression.
Shakespeare's language is sacrosanct: you can't cut or change a word.	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 it's not, then we can cut the text or change the language. Shakespeare and his company often cut or changed the language to suit the specific needs of their performances. There's no reason we can't do the same.
Shakespeare gives us the answers for all the important questions in life.	Shakespeare doesn't give us the answers. Instead, his plays ask questions: deep, complex, nuanced questions that are stimulating, provocative, inspiring, and troubling. These big, compelling, urgent questions are ours to answer for ourselves, in all our infinite variety.

Challenging the Backlash to Shakespeare

Unfortunately, The traditions around celebrating Shakespeare as a cultural icon have been closely tied to imperialism and colonization. This has led to an understandable backlash. Many people identify Shakespeare with these injustices and conclude that there should be no place for the plays and poems in students' learning today. These questions merit nuanced discussion.

Ideas we challenge:	Ideas we embrace:
Shakespeare was a colonizer.	Shakespeare, the person, likely never left England, but it's true that Shakespeare, the cultural icon, has been used as a weapon of colonization. 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. Students are encouraged to express themselves through Shakespeare – by bringing their own backgrounds, identities, and personalities into their exploration of the plays and making the language, characters, and stories their own.
Shakespeare was racist, misogynist, antisemitic, classist, and ableist.	There are numerous instances of hurtful language used by Shakespeare's characters. Handled with care, this can provide an extraordinary opportunity for students to address essential questions about problems throughout history and in our society today. It can also give students the opportunity to challenge such language and look for alternatives. This is a more productive and hopeful approach than dismissing outright everything Shakespeare has to offer.
Shakespeare is irrelevant.	'Relevance' is a tricky concept. Something is either relevant or it's not. Resonance is a more nuanced phenomenon. The language, characters, and stories are going to resonate in many different ways for different people. They'll even resonate differently at different times in our lives. Resonance can grow or change, and it can have myriad qualities.

If you're interested in finding out more, check out A Shakesperience, a 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.

bard EDUCATION