

# Shakespeare at Cornerstone:

A Compendium of Our Thoughts and Experiences



Parents Night, January 2005

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Shakespeare at Cornerstone,  
an eight part series by Dr. Tom Askew in ¶¶ for Parents, 2003-2004

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# Shakespeare Festival

Cornerstone Christian Academy  
ACSI Region: Rocky Mountain



## PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

to immerse students in the writings and themes of William Shakespeare, while preparing a festival event shared by the school families and the larger community as well

## SUMMARY OF PROGRAM

### SCHOOL PROFILE

GRADE LEVELS

K-6

ENROLLMENT

173

YEAR FOUNDED

1998

CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR

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The entire population of Cornerstone Christian Academy devotes the month of March to studying Shakespeare. Younger grades hear summaries of Shakespearean tales in read-aloud form, and they memorize sonnets and dialogues. Middle-grade students read prose abridgments of plays, and fifth and sixth graders venture into the original texts. Hands-on activities spotlight the culture of Elizabethan era, including its architecture, clothing, food, pastimes, and occupations. Timelines enable students to relate incidents in the plays to real-life events from various epochs of history.

This celebration of the Bard of Avon culminates during the final week with a daylong festival. In the early years of the school, this event was only an evening performance, in which students in every grade appeared on the stage, either singing, dancing, reciting, or performing a play. In its current form, the festival begins outdoors in a mock Elizabethan marketplace where students may visit booths ranging from brass rubbing to archery. Town criers and jugglers wander the festival grounds as students perform Maypole dances, Punch-and-Judy shows, and one-act vignettes in the outdoor amphitheater. The evening concludes indoors with performances by the older grades of parodies such as *Caesar Salad* or a film-noir version of *Macbeth*, and the grand finale is an abridgment of a complete play. Plays produced in recent years include *Richard III*, *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *The Tempest*.

Although the major plays are abridged, the language is not dumbed down. Students at all grade levels are exposed to the richness of Shakespeare's poetry and are excited to find out how many everyday English expressions have their origins in Shakespeare's writings.

The teacher who abridges the plays not only makes them briefer but also adapts them to be more age appropriate for elementary children. In the recent production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the adultery episode was tastefully minimized without damaging the thematic illustration of the consequences of deceitfulness. Lively discussions about the damage of gossip ensued among the students who performed this play.

Because Shakespeare wrote from a Christian worldview, there is little difficulty in helping students see God's truth in these plays. Witnessing the ruthless acts of Richard III brought up comparisons to some Old Testament kings, and the courage of Henry V reminded some students of the exploits of King David.

Last year for the first time, we invited sixth graders from the neighborhood public middle school to our dress rehearsal. Their teachers were complimentary and grateful as well as amazed that their students listened attentively.

One year a teacher realized that a new student had untapped potential and suggested that he be cast in a significant role. A formerly quiet and passive young man blossomed on stage, eventually assuming a place of student leadership.

According to play director Alicia Fodor, "The academic benefits are equaled by the life-changing perspectives given to the participants by the rich stories that touch their hearts and encourage them to want to reach others within the school community and outside as well. The faces at the end of a show well done are priceless to behold. Shakespeare's faithful depiction of the superiority of good over evil is clearly imprinted on their little hearts and minds."

## The Teaching of Shakespeare

by Dr. Jack Beckman  
pages 113-118 in the *Arché*

Charlotte Mason spoke of children participating in, “the banquet that is Shakespeare,” according to their needs and desires: “there is enough to satisfy the keenest intelligence, while the dullest child is sustained through his own willing effort. (*School Education*, page 245)

Miss Mason familiarized the children with the Bard of Avon in each grade level and during each term. The third and final term resulted in the performance of a Shakespearean play. For many of the students in later years, the enjoyment and performance of Shakespeare was a memory that lived beyond the classroom. The spirit and pride of the children’s work was exemplified through their practice and eagerness to recite both on and off the stage (see Essex Cholmondeley, *The Story of Charlotte Mason*).

The First Folio published in 1623 had this inscription on its flyleaf: “To the great Variety of Readers, From the most able, to him who can but spell...” This is reflected in the learned opinion of Peggy O’Brien, head of education at the Folger Shakespeare Library when she writes, “Shakespeare is for all students: of all ability levels and reading levels, of every ethnic origin.” Unfortunately, the teaching of Shakespeare has been quite limited to children of gifted and talented programs, and even more so, to the instruction of those students who are in high school or college. This effectively excludes a wide group of children. In the forward of his text designed to instruct elementary teachers in the practice of Shakespeare, Fred C. Adams responds to the question of age-appropriateness in this manner: “I believe that the moment a child takes pleasure in a humorous incident, is frightened by a suspenseful occurrence, or is warmed by a human experience - that child is ready for Shakespeare.”

Living during an era where the market for children’s products exists as never more, one is tempted to play into the idea that children are in need of an undemanding, diluted text to furnish food for the mind in the way of great literature, including Shakespeare. Today’s research regarding the brain and Charlotte Mason’s insight regarding the mind at work, both concur with the idea of challenging the student through the use of worthy thoughts in the form of literary language. There are manifold benefits in putting children in the way of

beautiful language and vivid ideas. The younger child develops listening skills and the beauty of language as he/she tells back what was heard. “Children take pleasure in the ‘dry’ parts, descriptions and the like, rendering these quite beautiful in their narrations. (*School Education*, page 245) Children also become confident readers and writers through the hearing and reading of well-written texts, with the sound and sense of language. And through additional times of questions and discussions in examining the use of figurative language, characterization, elements of plot, setting and themes, etc., the student and teacher alike, are exercising the full power of the mind in analyzing, comprehending, reflecting, and synthesizing. These questionings and discussions generate an education of an interior life of active contemplation carried on in various relationships of the self, the past and present, as well as the transcendent.

### **Purposes**

Students who have been exposed to William Shakespeare from the earliest age have been given a gift of language, of ideas and thoughts, of wonder and beauty. Elizabeth Nesbit had this to say about the works of Shakespeare:

*He was familiar with all the beautiful forms and images, with all that is sweet and majestic in the simple aspects of nature, of that indestructible love of flowers and fragrance, and dens, and clear waters - and soft airs and sounds, and bright skies and woodland solitudes, and moonlit bowers, which are the material elements of poetry, - and with that fine sense of their indefinable relation to mental emotion, which is its essence and vivifying soul - and which, in the midst of his most busy and tragical scenes, falls like gleams of sunshine on rocks and ruins....”*

Among the many purposes and reasons for exploring the life and works of William Shakespeare are these:

1. To introduce the students to “the greatest living dramatist the world has ever known.”
2. To acquaint the students with the beautiful English tongue in which he wrote.
3. To provide the students with a complex story, with many varied characters, twists of plot and turns of fate.

4. To wish that the true Plays of Shakespeare “may prove to them in older years, enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honorable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity: for of examples, teaching these virtues, his pages are full.” (Charles Lamb)

### **Preparations**

Because Shakespeare must be performance-focused - the acting out of it is the ultimate beauty of the thing - a festival or time for performance is essential. Students in younger grades (Kindergarten - Grade Three) are exposed to the life and times of Elizabethan England, its people, places and events. Using such resources as Lois Burdett’s *Shakespeare for Kids*, and Leon Garfield’s *Shakespeare Stories*, the students are given access to the stories and characters of many plays without losing them in a play-written format. Also utilized are Elizabeth Nesbit’s *Beautiful Stories From Shakespeare For Children* and Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales From Shakespeare*. These the teacher reads aloud and then the children narrate back from the wonderful plot lines, language, and voice of Shakespeare. For performance, children of this age will sing madrigals, recite sonnets and portions of plays, and dance Elizabethan dances.

Students in Grades Four through Eight have an adapted play to perform which has been integrated with their curriculum. As well, students in Grade Six, due to the content of Reformation/Age of Discovery, take time to concertedly study the life and times of William Shakespeare, producing a copybook with this topic in mind. These short (30-40 minutes) are performed at the culminating festival or chosen manner of performance.

The following list depicts some of the content covered and methods practiced successfully with students from five years to fourteen years of age in the teaching of Shakespeare:

1. Acquaint students with the culture of Elizabethan England. Participate in looking at pictures and art, listening to histories, stories, and music, reading poetry, rhymes and prayers, playing games of the day, practicing

dances, singing melodies, playing recorders and making a book illustrating drawings and narratives.

2. Present students with the geography and history of England.
3. Make known to students the life of Queen Elizabeth from childhood to her monarchy and portray her contributions to the theatre.
4. Familiarize the students with William Shakespeare, his life, his plays, and his contributions.
5. Inform students with the theatre in Shakespeare's day (players, audience, merchants, hired men, and the Globe).
6. Prepare students to receive the story as presented in the play through Lamb's *Tales From Shakespeare*, Nesbit's *Beautiful Stories from Shakespeare for Children*, or Garfield's *Stories From Shakespeare*.

### **Participating**

The teachers and students alike are participants in the feast that is Shakespeare. For the educator, his primary work has been in the preliminary "tasting" of these delights both individually and collectively with other teachers prior to presenting them to the students. As for the student, he becomes an active participant daily in all that is Shakespeare. The following is a list of some of the ways the student partakes in the knowledge of a Shakespearean play using a variety of mediums:

1. Read the language of Shakespeare from a variety of plays (quotes and brief dialogues).
2. Form a written record of the study in a copybook.
3. Hear the language of Shakespeare from a professional recording.
4. Experience a Shakespearean play on stage.
5. Read the text aloud in class.
6. Narrate scenes and acts in both a written and oral manner.
7. Memorize the language of Shakespeare.

8. Experience the words of Shakespeare through dramatic improvisations of “play acting” diverse characters and scenes.
9. Identify oneself with a character from a play for the presentation of a formal performance.

The student has thus become fully immersed as a reader, listener, narrator, artist, and actor in experiencing and expressing the words of Shakespeare through the study of a particular play (Grade 4-8). Upon finishing the reading of the text, the students prepare to present a play to an audience. The text now acts as the script. Parts of some characters and scenes are deleted because of difficulty or appropriateness and also as a result of time constraints (**Note:** the adaptations for plays may come from several sources: Leon Garfield’s *Shakespeare - The Animated Series* published by Heinemann, or Samuel French). The performances last from a minimum of 30-40 minutes to a maximum of 60-90 minutes in which students participate in speaking parts. Thus, each student has responded to the banquet of Shakespeare in an active manner which is so often reserved for the “gifted and talented.”

## *With the addition of the afternoon festival, has this all gotten too complex?*

Part Seven of Eight

This is another great question. The answers are: (1) it didn't just *get* this way; (2) If not this, then what? and (3) don't worry, there are some limits!

*It didn't just **get** this way.*

While it is consistent with human nature to always want to make things "bigger and better," this festival was actually the plan from the beginning here. When Cornerstone first opened, it was envisioned that some day the study of Shakespeare would involve an outdoor festival with a variety of appropriate Elizabethan era activities. But first, it was necessary for the school to get the plays on good footing. Having enjoyed great success for several years, it feels like a good time to attempt the school's original vision.

It is also the right time in a more pragmatic sense. As we saw last year, we have pretty much maximized what we can enjoy in one evening on one stage. The Worship Center was nearly full last year and the evening was quite long. Since we expect an even larger crowd this year, having the younger grades do their performances in the afternoon outdoors will free up more seats in the Globe Theater (the Worship Center) for those who need to see the fifth and sixth grade presentations. It will also shorten the length of time we spend in the evening performance.

In addition, there is the factor of Providence. With the increased number of families in the school, the excellent participation in CPF this year, and the completion by Carol Baranowski of the Volunteer Job Description booklet, suddenly God provided lots of willing hands who were willing to pitch in and get the job done. Some of these, like Festival Chair Sherry Courtney and Solicitation Chair Susanne Grogan, are relatively new to the school. Virtually every one of the large number of volunteer slots needed to plan and operate such a large event were quickly filled. If we had needed to browbeat and badger people to get all of the jobs filled, we might well question if we were premature or inappropriately ambitious. But with God's gracious provision, we see His timing, and it seems right to many of us.

So there *is* a plan, the timing seems right, and it should be a great event.

*If not this, then what?*

I touched on this in a previous answer, so I won't belabor it here. It is the nature of good schools to build community, and close communities love to get together for celebrations. At other schools it might be a carnival, or an outdoor field day, or something like the Mock Civil War event held recently by our neighboring school, Manzanita. Regardless of the choice, for such events to be a success, there must be much work and planning, just as we are putting into Shakespeare.

In our case, we've chosen one of our academic emphases to build such an event around. It could be something else, but this seems to suit us well. If it seems too labor-

intensive, that is partly a reflection of our bias for excellence here. If we were to wipe Shakespeare off our schedule next month, something else would rise up to take its place with in a short time. So why not Shakespeare?

*Don't worry, there are some limits!*

First the good news. Anticipating that we **will** enjoy the Festival and want to keep it an annual event, the planners have done some very wise things. First of all, we purchased permanent outdoor signs that beautifully reflect the period in which our festival is set. This was a big investment, but they will be reusable from year to year. And we are giving some consideration to setting up a permanent assignment for each grade so that we don't have to keep reinventing ourselves each year. This will also give younger students special things to look forward to as they progress up through the grades. This is all part of stabilizing our curriculum so that it will be more usable in the future.

But there will always be room for creativity; we just want to level out our expectations so that tweaking the basic concept doesn't have to exhaust us every year. I've seen this happen at previous schools. Shiloh Christian School, where I was the administrator for twenty-one years, still does the Light Night Festival, the Back-to-School Retreat, the Festival of Gifts, the Arizona Admissions Day Fair, and the Annual Field Day in pretty much the same way I started them many years ago – only they keep getting better! Other schools look at these as huge undertakings, but the tradition sustains itself pretty well after a while.

The point is, nobody wants this to get “out of hand.” We are not the Muppets who got the big head and decided to take their show to Broadway (or Hollywood, or wherever). We're just an elementary school providing good experiences for our children as they grow up. We don't have a profit motive or the quest for instant fame driving us. We just want to do what we do to the glory of God.

And now for the better news: we are flexible. If we're doing the wrong thing here, tell us. Schools, like individuals, may need course corrections from time to time. If we have bitten off more than we can chew, don't just spit it out! Chew on it a while (meditating) and let us have some constructive suggestions for how we can make it less stressful or more accommodating, or whatever it is that you feel needs improving. People who have a vested interest in the community we are creating here have the privilege of doing that. Let's keep the conversation going!

## *Why would we encourage ten-year-olds to portray witches?*

Part Six of Eight

The short answer is that we don't – encourage it, that is. Auditions for the Macbeth play, as with all our auditions, were voluntary. While all students are expected to participate in the Shakespeare Festival in some manner, we would not ask any student to play a part that offends his conscience. That actually happened this year with two students who were given parts which they felt they could not perform with a clear conscience. Learning to speak up about one's convictions is an important part of growing up as a Christian, and we hope all our young people feel free to do that. If we have used unnatural pressure, either from adults or peers, to cause a student to violate his conscience, then we should be informed in the spirit of Matthew 18.

The question would perhaps better be phrased, "Why would we produce plays in which characters must perform as witches?" and the answer to that question is quite different. It touches on the Christian view of evil in the world and whether or how it should be spoken of in our literary culture.

When my own sons were young, I read to them nightly from the scriptures. I made no effort to abridge or edit what was there. We usually did not discuss what was read, but when we did I let the discussion be guided by their questions. From an early age it was apparent to them that the theme of good versus evil runs through every passage in God's Word. It was also apparent that good and evil exist not just in the human world, but in the supernatural world as well.

In Exodus 22 and Deuteronomy 18, God's people are clearly commanded to have no one among them who is an actual witch. When Saul consulted a woman with a familiar spirit, referred to as the "witch of Endor," he was transgressing. In I Samuel rebellion is compared to the sin of witchcraft in a manner that clearly shows it was abominable in God's sight. And witchcraft continued to be condemned in the New Testament, as well.

In presenting any picture of the supernatural to children we must be sure that we are agreeing with God. To me, this is the great danger of the Harry Potter books. In the fiction of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, witches (and other supernatural beings outside of God's domain) are clearly evil, clearly to be avoided, and clearly self-serving. But in Harry Potter there is a sympathetic portrayal of wizardry, as though it is somehow neutral or innocent. Let me state this briefly, though it deserves expansion and a full discussion (possibly at a Headmaster's Tea): Harry Potter supposedly uses his supernatural powers for good, and in some people's minds that makes him okay. But all supernatural power outside of the gifting of God is corrupted by man's fallen nature, and is ultimately self-serving. Without having surrendered to the revelation of righteousness by God Almighty, all who would claim to use such powers for "good" are utterly incapable.

Shakespeare is much less conflicted on this subject than J.K. Rowling. In fact, his portrayal of the witches in Macbeth is much like the account of Saul consulting the witch of Endor in scripture. Just as with the witch of Endor, the witches accurately foretell an earthly, historic eventuality. And just as with Saul, this knowledge provides no benefit for Macbeth, and in fact works against him to entice him to covetousness.

Having reviewed the place of witchcraft in Shakespeare's writing, we still face the question of portraying it dramatically. It is the nature of our learning at Cornerstone to be experiential and "hands on." This is admittedly not without some risks. In the physical sense, it would be highly irresponsible of us to put fake swords in children's hands and expect them to duel safely without precautionary education on the dangers of putting someone's eye out. The same would be true in the supernatural realm. We should be clear in our message to children, that while we portray evil for moral purposes (Macbeth and his wife are certainly wicked enough without the supernatural element) we must never mistake ourselves for being those people. It is critical that covenant children understand their relationship to the themes being presented.

That is why we have allowed exceptions for those who have requested them. That is why we must educate all our children to evaluate the messages and themes all around them each day. I don't want to beat this idea to death, but I hope every covenant family is just as cautious to interpret what their children see in their own homes (via television and DVD) as we are to interpret the literature we portray here at school. Keeping each other accountable in this way is part of our "iron sharpening iron" duty as brethren in Christ!

# *Where are the Biblical themes in a silly comedy like Twelfth Night?*

Part Five of Eight

This is a great question, and it deserves a really well-developed answer. In fact, if you would like to see a thoughtful study contrasting the ideal of Biblical love in Romeo and Juliet with the superficial view of love in *Twelfth Night*, see Michael Quieto's wonderful essay at <http://www.barney.gonzaga.edu/~mquieto/shakespeare/love.html>.

For the purpose of this article, I am merely going to summarize some general themes and comment on the scriptural principles involved. A really thorough treatment would require citation by scene and line with direct quotations from the play. I actually started out doing that, and filed it away as too big an undertaking at this time. It's in my "Some day... " zone now ☺

The three overriding Biblical concepts in the play are the fruits of folly, the cancer of deception, and the poverty of unbiblical love. Let's look briefly at examples of each of those themes in the text, contrasted with what the Bible has to say about it.

Folly abounds in *Twelfth Night* (hence the questioner's term "silly comedy"), and it bears various kinds of fruit. The fruit of the coarse jesting among Maria, Sir Toby, and Feste is confusion, wasted time, and personal offense, and even elementary children see can see that. Even though Malvolio is not a sympathetic character, he suffers greatly from the trick that is imposed on him, and spouts vanity as he imagines future wedded bliss with Olivia. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew represent different aspects of folly, and neither will inspire any child as a potential role model. Sir Toby epitomizes sloth, and is manipulative of Andrew in order to sustain his self-indulgence. Sir Andrew, aside from not comprehending the true nature of love, reveals the poverty of his philosophy when he states that life consists of eating and drinking (Act II, S. III), to which Sir Toby commends him as a scholar, showing the depths of his foolishness.

Covenant children ought to be familiar with the rich storehouse of Biblical thought concerning the contrast between wisdom and folly. Verses like "The thought of foolishness is sin: and the scorner is an abomination to men," (Proverbs 24:9) and "I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness:" (Ecclesiastes 7:25) should be a part of their Christian education. Since we cannot isolate our children from the foolishness of the world around them, it is appropriate for covenant parents to serve as interpreters to them of the ways of the world. Whereas worldly entertainments such as MTV and movies often entice our children to idolize worldly vanity as "cool," Shakespeare provides an excellent vehicle for demonstrating the unattractiveness of folly.

Deception is practiced wholesale in *Twelfth Night*. Although Shakespeare is highly inventive in the manner in which he portrays deception, it is important to note that he never justifies it. Viola nearly misses out on the love of her life by purposing to deceive, while Malvolio is devastated by the deception that is practiced on him. Even the clown deceives Malvolio by pretending to be a priest and torments him. Eventually Viola's costumed pretense nearly costs her life in a duel with Sir Andrew. Even Sir Toby is exposed as only being interested in Andrew for the sake of drinking money.

Although it isn't scripture, this is a good illustration of the maxim, "What a tangled web we weave, once we practice to deceive." The complications in the plot become more twisted because of the original deceit, and no good results arrive until the masks come off. Scriptures clearly warns of this in Proverbs 26:18-10..."As a mad man who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death, so is the man that deceiveth his neighbour, and saith, Am not I in sport?" But Scripture speaks to us not only in aphorisms, it speaks by illustration. Jacob's name meant "Supplanter," and his theft of Esau's birthright is deception with a vengeance. But the Bible story goes on to illustrate that deceivers can be redeemed. In the same way, Shakespeare provides both an illustration of the wickedness of deception, as well as a realization that it is universally found in human nature. And finally, he shows that deceit can be repented of and overcome.

A corollary to the deceit principle that is relevant to the plot in *Twelfth Night* is found in Deuteronomy 22:5..."A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this." After hearing the strong language of this verse, you may wonder how we even justify having our child actors do this in our production of *Twelfth Night*. The obvious interpretation of this verse is a proscription against mature adults cross-dressing for illicit purposes. Unfortunately, even in a covenant school, most of our sixth graders are aware of the existence of this perversion, and are also quite clear in their minds that this is not what they are doing. Nevertheless, the play once again serves as a good illustration of the bad fruit that comes from despising the wisdom of Scriptures.

Finally, *Twelfth Night* illustrates the bankruptcy of infatuation as opposed to God's standard of love. These people fall in and out of love with Professor Higgins's "speed of summer lightning." They protest too much (thank you, *Hamlet*) and too loudly their undying love for certain individuals, not even having any idea what the person is really like (or even what sex s/he is!). Michael Quieto, cited in the first paragraph, gives a convincing argument in his essay that the Duke is not actually in love with Olivia; he is in love with the idea of being in love!

We would hope that children who have been introduced to God's standard of love as depicted in I Corinthians 13 and I John 4 would see through the capriciousness, wantonness, and self-absorption attested to in the so-called "love" of the characters in *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare actually takes on the role of satirist here as he "spoofs" these characters for their foolish conception of what love is about. In contrast, television comedies such as "Friends" present an equally bankrupt and superficial picture of love in a manner that makes the viewer sympathetic with these vain characters. Credit Shakespeare with showing them to be the fools they actually are!

# *Is Shakespeare really worth the time in the curriculum?*

Part Four of Eight

At first glance this may seem a lot like question #1. As I answered #1, I kept the focus on the curriculum and the relatively value of emphasizing one author so much. Today's emphasis is different and concerns the worthiness of Shakespearean writings as a subject of study in and of themselves, and my hypothesis is: they are worthy! In fact, below are *fifteen fabulous reasons* why they are worthy of time in our studies here at Cornerstone!

Attempting to answer the questions of Shakespeare's worth is daunting, and with all the volumes that fill all the libraries of books that have been written on this subject, and list of worthy attributes that will be listed here will be woefully inadequate. But in the list below I have given just a few of my favorite reasons to give much place to the Bard. I have tried to give hard data wherever possible but have also utilized quotations by some of my favorite Shakespeare experts.

First and perhaps foremost are you aware of these ways in which Shakespeare has shaped our understanding of...

## *Literature*

1. The Greeks gave us philosophy and tragedy, the Romans gave us law and a sense of history, but Shakespeare produced **definitive** models of tragedy, history, and comedy for the English language which have endured to this day.
2. Shakespeare was not just a prolific poet (154 sonnets and all his plays were in blank verse), not just a popular poet ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), but he *left his mark on English poetry forever by actually inventing a new sonnet form* names, appropriately, *Shakespearean sonnet*.
3. Shakespeare set a standard for breadth in literature which has influenced English authors for all time. He demonstrated that in order to write well one must be well read. An example would be his familiarity with Greek and Roman literature. Hercules is alluded to eleven times in ten different plays, Jupiter is mentioned twenty-five times in ten different plays, and Venus is referred to sixteen times in thirteen different plays. Shakespeare paid his audiences the compliment of assuming they would recognize these literary allusions without his having to laboriously explain them.
4. Shakespeare's characters have earned a place in English literature in perpetuity. For example, the phrases "Romeo and Juliet," "Star-crossed lovers," "Montague," and "Capulet" are so universally know that they can be alluded to in literature with no explanation on the assumption that the typical reader will know their story.



5. Shakespeare's plots even look good when recycled. Modern play-goers have been charmed by *Taming of the Shrew* transformed into *Kiss Me Kate* and *Romeo and Juliet* as *West Side Story*. The number of additional spin-offs and variations is huge.

I could go on and on with literary effects of Shakespeare, but we must rush on to the very critical factor of how Shakespeare has affected our English



## *Language*

6. Two years ago the second graders did a delightful skit showing some of the colorful expressions which have come into the English language through the writings of Shakespeare. A small sampling would include phrases like: *dead as a doornail*, *the long and short of it*, *hoodwinked*, *it's Greek to me*, *it's high time*, and *in a pickle*.
7. That fact is well-known, but lesser-known is Shakespeare's contributions to the English vocabulary itself. English was just beginning to be "standardized" in the Bard's time, which was concurrent with the writing of the King James Bible. Anglo-Saxon had developed from an unrecognizable form (to modern English speakers) called Middle English to the language of Shakespeare's day, often called Elizabethan English. In this time of flux, Shakespeare used over 22,000 different words in his plays and poetry (the whole King James Bible only utilizes about 15,000 words!) and linguists believe that over five thousand of these were used first (at least in *written* English) by Shakespeare.
8. Words believed to have been "coined" by Shakespeare include: accused, addiction, assassination, bedroom, blushing, champion, critic, dawn, elbow, excitement, eyeball, gloomy, lonely, moonbeam, ode, remorseless, and hundreds of others!

In addition, a knowledge of Shakespeare's plays has inevitable spill-over benefits in the subject areas of

## *History, Geography, and Culture*

9. First, look at the variety of historical settings for the plays: ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Troy, the Roman empire, Medieval England, renaissance England, just to name a few.
10. Secondly, consider the geographical and cultural venues represented: Italian peasants, Italian merchants, Italian vineyard keepers, Scottish noblemen, English monarchy, English villagers, Danish nobility, and Renaissance seamen.
11. Finally, consider the references to real history in Shakespeare's fiction (once again presuming education or interest therein on the part of the audience): Julius Caesar is mentioned forty-one times in plays set in various time periods, not including the one bearing his own name!

Moving to the more philosophical realms, Shakespeare is worthy of our time because of his illustrations of

### *Morality and Ethics*

12. Since, as Christians, we believe that the Bible is our source of morals and ethics, look at some key numbers here: some synonym for Scripture can be found in nearly every Shakespeare play, as well as a large number of the sonnets. In the plays alone, there are over two hundred fifty references to Holy Scriptures, with the phrase “Word of God,” being the most commonly used term!
13. From Rev. Ralph Allen Smith: “A...reason that we instinctively associate Shakespeare and the Bible is that Shakespeare’s plays end with the judgment of evil and the triumph of the righteous.”
14. From Huntley Cooney: “...Shakespeare writes within a moral universe. His universal themes of friendship, love, loyalty, and betrayal are all written against the background of Truth.”

And finally, a familiarity with Shakespeare empowers us to be able to participate in what Mortimer Adler calls

### *The Great Conversation*

15. Who else wrote an average of 1.5 plays every year of his life (he must have dreamed in iambic pentameter)? Shakespeare has been translated into more languages than any other writings except – you guessed it - The Bible! Who else is known and loved by scholars at every institution of higher learning as well as acted by the likes of Denzel Washington, Michael Keaton, Keanu Reeves, Gwyneth Paltrow, Michelle Pfeifer, and Mel Gibson?

Yes, Shakespeare is universally known and loved, even at Cornerstone Christian Academy, where we are not ashamed that we devote curriculum time to his works each year.

# *Are we saying Shakespeare was a Christian?*

Part Three of Eight

First, a list of presuppositions that are implied by this question:

1. We can know if someone who lived over four hundred years ago was a Christian.
2. We can know whether someone alive right now is a Christian.
3. We should only read literature written by those whom we know (believe) to be (have been) Christians.

Let's address these one at a time, starting with the second one.

*We can know whether someone alive right now is a Christian*

Here I'm going to be a little bit theological, begging the indulgence of the fact that Cornerstone families came from a variety of denominational backgrounds with different theological slants on scripture. What I am saying here pretty much represents the slant of Cornerstone's founding church, Catalina Foothills Church.

With respect to God's sovereignty, we cannot know who are the elect until He reveals the Book of Life. Christ even warned that there would be deceivers among us. In an individual sense, we can have assurance of our salvation by affirming those things we know to be eternally true, as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. In a covenantal sense, we accept others as fellow believers on the confession of their faith. This is similar to the basis on which covenant families are admitted to the community of Cornerstone.

Not knowing the final disposition of God's election until He Himself reveals it need not be a hindrance to our life here on earth. But it should make us cautious about creating sanctimonious boxes in which we assume that people, events, circumstances, institutions, etc. are going to function in a particular manner just because they are "Christian." We must be more discerning than that in such areas, just as we should be with literature. Which is why we teach students to hold all things (Shakespeare as well as Frank Peretti) up to the measure of scripture in order to judge what is authentic and true.

*We should only read literature written by those whom we know (believe) to be (have been) Christians*

I sincerely hope there is not a Christian school anywhere in the world that would try to live by such a maxim. Imagine the "inquisitions" that would need to be held in order to make a summary judgment on whether or not a certain author had been a Christian. Imagine the poverty of such a school's library!

A saying of Christian school pioneer Frank Gabelein was "All truth is God's truth." While this statement merits a longer explanation, I cite it here just to remind us that God has revealed Himself in many ways, and "common grace" has been given to both the elect and the non-elect (Matthew 5:45). And again, teaching students to

recognize truth as determined by the standard of Biblical revelation is part of the job of Christian education.

Douglas Wilson, whose *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning* was an early inspiration for Cornerstone's philosophy, has said, "if your children are being educated to think like Christians to the glory of God, they should be able to read and analyze and to a certain extent, appreciate, the writing of godless writers who were, nevertheless, craftsmen. One can appreciate some of Twain's writing, for example, while understanding his despair and refusing to follow him in it. (A steady diet of Twain, however, could indeed present a temptation to cynicism and despair.)"

*We can know if someone who lived over four hundred years ago was a Christian*

As I illustrated above, we can't in any final sense. And we are even prohibited from covenant fellowship because the person is not living among us to confess his faith. How then, can we speak of what faith Shakespeare (or any historical individual) may or may not have had?

1. We can look at the records.

It is pretty clear that Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1574 (but less certain as to when he was actually born, although most people believe it was three days prior). This did put him into the general family of the covenant, though as stated earlier, it does not seal his election. Other than that, we know that he attended church regularly (Church of England) and his own children were baptized. And that's about it as far as anything tangible goes.

We also know some speculative information which could cast a pall of doubt on how we interpret the above. It is speculated he may have been an adulterer (but so was King David) and in keeping company with actors he was not always around folks with high moral standards (but neither was Jesus). So much for speculation.

2. We can make inferences from his writing.

Often with authors (especially one as prolific as Shakespeare) this tells more about their values and thought life than the actual historical events. But this is a very subjective area, and opinions can vary widely, even when examining the same data.

Adding to the complication is the fact that Shakespeare did not write non-fiction. Therefore, his writing speaks to us through a wide variety of characters' voices. And like any good fiction writer, he is adept at thinking through that character's lens, as reflected in the dialogue of the play. Henry V, for example, clearly comes across as a Christian gentleman, while Iago, the villain in *Othello*, is clearly the opposite. As the critic William Robertson Turnbull once pointed out, "Iago is an unbeliever in, and denier of, all things spiritual, who only acknowledges God, like Satan, to defy him."

Therefore, Gary Sloan, a militant atheist, has written a paper purporting to show that Shakespeare must have been an atheist, based on quotations in his plays. He blatantly ignores passages spoken by characters who were Christians and favors passages in which an obvious skeptic is speaking. Tom O'Brien, a Roman Catholic writer, does much the

same in lifting passages out of context in order to prove that Shakespeare was a secret Papist, since membership in the Church of England was conscripted in Shakespeare's day.

Speaking of skeptics, humanist author Aldous Huxley opined that Shakespeare could not have written as convincingly as a Christian character if he had not been a person of faith himself. Huxley said, "The poet's basic Christianity is very beautifully expressed in *Measure for Measure*, where the genuinely saintly Isabella reminds Angelo, the self-righteous Pillar of Society, of the divine scheme of redemption and of the ethical consequences which ought to flow from its acceptance as an article of faith—ought to flow but, alas, generally do not flow!

*Alas, alas!*

*Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once  
And He that might the vantage best have took  
Found out the remedy. How would you be,  
If He, which is the top of judgement, should  
But judge you as you are? O, think on that;  
And mercy then will breathe  
Like man new-made."*

As I said in the first article in this series, what is clear is that Shakespeare spoke from a Biblically literate perspective to an audience he presumed to be Biblically literate. Critic Troy K. Brydon observed, "His works emphasized the common beliefs of both sects of Christianity as well as some distinctly Catholic ones. This in no way makes Shakespeare a Christian or, more specifically, a Catholic. At its most fundamental point it does mean that Shakespeare had a grand knowledge of the Bible and the Christian religion. The bizarre religious circumstances of Shakespeare's world played a large role in molding his works into what they became. Right there and right then was the perfect time for Shakespeare to produce the wonderful work he created."

In summary, curious students may logically want to know, "Is this author, whom we read so much of, a Christian or not?" A good model for an answer comes from Dr. Ronald Horton, Professor of English at Bob Jones University:

"We cannot say for certain that Shakespeare was personally a Christian. He was capable of very low humor, some, oddly in plays whose moral tone is exceptionally high. We can say that intellectually Shakespeare was Christian. On moral and religious issues he thought as one whose convictions had been formed by the Word of God. His plays as fictional arguments, make as persuasive a case for goodness as the poetic imagination has yet devised."

## *Are we setting up Shakespeare as an idol?*

Part Two of Eight

Great idea! We have this cute little ceramic bust of the Bard on our Shakespeare display table in the church lobby already! We could just move it into the sanctuary and *then...*

**Whoa! Just kidding, of course!**

I trust that all of our covenant parents are spiritually mature enough to know that modern day idols come in many different forms, not always in convenient statuette format. And I hope you don't misinterpret my comedic foray as belittling the question. I actually think it is a valid question, and it deserves a serious answer. No one is more concerned about the propensity for idolatry among twenty-first century post-moderns than I am.

But as I am attempting to illustrate above, idolatry is a subtle and insidious snare. If someone were to set up a statue of Molech in Reid Park and issue a decree that everyone in Tucson must come and sacrifice their children on an altar before Molech, I think most Christians wouldn't have much trouble discerning and resisting that temptation.

But I believe Christians who surrender their children to the prevailing entertainment-driven, sex-crazed youth culture do much the same thing. And child-sacrifice isn't the only kind of idol worship going on in style-conscious, consumer-oriented, lustful, covetous contemporary USA. But that's another subject for another time.



On a more realistic level, the issue might be stated, "are we creating an inordinate reverence for the person and works of William Shakespeare?" I have actually been subjected to instruction by teachers who "revere" their hobbyhorses too much, and it isn't difficult to see that inordinate respect and affection are only a few steps away from carnal worship. Worse yet, it tends to make those teachers a bore and often counterproductively results in an antipathy for the object of the teacher's affections on the part of his/her students.

Plain and simple, Shakespeare has not been equalled as a writer in the English language since his time. As an English major, I will defend that statement all day long. A few eighteenth century essayists may have approximated his imagery and diction, but certainly no fiction writers or poets have come close, and Shakespeare does both genre in one form – blank verse drama.

Admitting this fact is not the same as reverencing him, any more than awarding a first place award in a pie-baking contest is an act of worship. If he's the best, we should say so, say why, interpret him to our children, enjoy his works, and move on. That's part of what being a well-educated person is about.

But before we leave this subject, let's reflect for a moment on what our faith teaches us here. Question #52 of the Westminster Shorter commandment asks, "What are the reasons annexed to the second commandment?" The second commandment, you will remember, is the proscription against graven images and idol worship. The answer given is, "The reasons annexed to the second commandment are, God's sovereignty over us, his propriety in us, and the zeal he hath to his own worship."

I once mistakenly wrote "Shakespeare wrote from a Christian worldview." That is not the most accurate way to express what I meant. A fairer statement might be, "Shakespeare reflected his own scripturally-informed education and perceptions of human nature and society by writing to an audience he also assumed to be Biblically literate and comfortable in a society based on Biblical presuppositions." Complicated, I know, but more accurate.

This is reflected in both direct quotations as well as inferences in the works of Shakespeare, so I close with these pertinent quotations:

**Reflecting God's sovereignty over us:**

*There 's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 't is not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes?*  
Hamlet. Act v. Sc. 2.

**Reflecting God's propriety in us:**

*"There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."*  
Julius Caesar Act IV Scene III

**Reflecting the zeal God has to his own worship:**

*K. Hen. Come, go we in procession to the village:  
And be it death proclaimed through our host  
To boast of this or take the praise from God  
Which is his only.*

*Flu. Is it not lawful, an please your majesty, to tell how many is killed?*  
*K. Hen. Yes, captain; but with this acknowledgment,  
That God fought for us.*

Henry V, Act IV, Scene VIII

# *Does Shakespeare have too large a place in our curriculum?*

Part One of Eight

This question is big enough to be divided into several subsections, each indicated in italics below.

*If it does, it doesn't have to be forever.*

First, a word about curriculum choices. They're important, yes, but not the end-all and be-all. While everyone is in search of the "perfect curriculum" it's pretty clear that if one existed someone would change it (for not particularly good reason) as soon as possible. Curricula are fluid and transitory, and the best we can do is adopt a set of guiding principles and try to stick to them while all the time we are tweaking and adjusting.

For example, in classical schools we like teaching Latin. IN the early years of the classical Christian school movement (all the way back in the early '90's!) most available Latin textbooks were written for the high school level. There were a few elementary texts available which had been written for elite prep schools back east, but for various reasons they did not hold much appeal for many of us. An early classical school (Logos in Moscow, Idaho) solved this problem by writing their own texts (which meant that their teachers had to go across the road to University of Idaho and take Latin themselves, which they did!). Soon other classical schools started buying the Logos texts – we even use them here at Cornerstone. But someone said "No, they need more grammatical concepts and less paradigm chanting," and another series got written. Then someone else said, "No, we need an approach that uses ecclesiastical pronunciation instead of classical pronunciation," and another series was born. And then someone said, "We need a more self-paced program that would appeal to homeschoolers," and another series was born. And I keep telling students that the perfect elementary Latin textbooks won't exist until I write them!

The point is that no one studying any of these curricula is getting a raw deal. They will know more about Latin than they would have if they had never studied it, and I most cases *much* more. And thanks to the incessant conferences and seminars that we educators love to attend, word will get around about what works and what doesn't. [This is a special benefit of working in the private sector, I might add, for those who may be wondering why curricula doesn't always universally seem to improve. But the problems with entropy in government schooling are a story for another time].

If Shakespeare is too large a part of our curriculum, our natural process of reviews and improvements will take care of that.

*If it didn't, something else might; it's the nature of a good education to provide depth as well as breadth.*

This answer speaks to a presupposition behind the original question: the notion that it would be wrong for certain subjects to take up too large a part of the curriculum.

Faced with this concern, some would be tempted to say that, as a safeguard, all part of the curriculum should be studied in minimalist fashion, survey course style, never dwelling inordinately long on any idea or topic.

This would be very difficult to accomplish (how many time in life do we keep a large number of tasks equally balanced?) because, among other reasons, it is contrary to the nature of teaching and learning. First of all, teachers do not teach in a vacuum. They bring their own background knowledge, personal interests, and unique talents into a teaching experience, and these will inevitably influence the weight with which different topics are presented. Secondly, teachers teach within several contexts beyond themselves: the preferences of the parents, the dynamics of disparate students, the guiding philosophy of the school. For these and many more reasons, it is inevitable that certain aspects of a school's curriculum will receive more attention than others.

But that which is inevitable is not always that which is best. In this case, it probably is for the best. One of the realities of school curriculum is that students need both breadth (knowing something about a wide variety of subjects) and depth (knowing some subject[s] deeply and thoroughly). Magnet schools often illustrate this quality of specialization. In our case, Cornerstone has made a conscious choice to let Shakespeare be one of our major emphases. We believe there are many good reasons for this (to be discussed in future questions), but even if this were not the case, there would have to be something we spent more time on, just for the experience of a well-rounded education.

*As it is, it's a lot better than most options.*

First there are the school-designed options. As mentioned above, magnet schools reflect this possibility. Others schools intentionally emphasize some aspect of local history or geography. It would be unlikely (and unwise), for example, that as school on an island would neglect to cover some facet of marine biology in each year's curriculum. Some emphases are less imaginative, such a generic designations of a school as a "math" magnet or "science" magnet. Either way, the real value of an emphasis in the curriculum would not necessarily be on the choice of the topic emphasized, but the quality with which it is taught.

Other emphases are less intentional, and often reflect culturally contemporary themes (or even fads). An example would be schools which claim to emphasize technology (a current cultural hot button) or even faddish topics like comic book art, Harry Potter characters, garbage recycling projects, and so on.

If students find these topics not very intellectually challenging, they often employ their natural energy to study self-chosen topics outside of the school curriculum:

- memorizing lyrics to pop songs on MTV,
- performing calculations involving study time versus the television schedule,
- utilizing internet plagiarizing sources to avoid doing research,
- interminable instant message chatting,
- and so on.

Given such options, it is the bias of the Cornerstone philosophy that Shakespeare is appropriately challenging, sufficiently meaningful, and intellectually satisfying enough to occupy a place of emphasis in our curriculum.

# *And what are elementary students supposed to gain from all this?*

Part Eight of Eight



I don't want to repeat any of the benefits of Shakespeare I mentioned in earlier columns, so I will begin by referring you back to the answers to questions 1 and 4. In these articles I mentioned many good things that elementary children will gain from participating in the study of Shakespeare.

I think the most enjoyable way to answer this question would be to share with you some of our treasured "Cornerstone moments."

## *1. A Tale of Untapped Potential*

This anecdote comes from the recent article published in the ACSI magazine about Cornerstone's Shakespeare Festival.

"One year a teacher realized that a new student had untapped potential and suggested that he be cast in a significant role. A formerly quiet and passive young man blossomed on stage, eventually assuming a place of student leadership."

## *2. From the Early Years*

"We remember the sweet production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, when our son performed in his first Shakespeare play. The look on his face when he drew a big laugh from the audience was like a light coming on. He realized that he had talent, and people were enjoying him! His interest in drama and theater have continued into high school."

## *3. Shakespeare who?*

A Cornerstone family were vacationing in another state. Their elementary daughter struck up a conversation with an older tourist while enjoying the sights of the place they were visiting. Coming back to her parents, the Cornerstone child exclaimed, "Mom, he's in high school and he doesn't even know who Shakespeare is! What kind of school does he go to?"

## *4. Practice makes perfect (from a teacher)*

"My first year at Cornerstone I was concerned that the students did not seem to understand what their lines meant. One student had a particularly challenging monologue. I enjoyed discussing what the words meant with her. As her understanding grew, her delivery became passionate, articulate, and well-modulated. By the evening of the performance, she fairly glowed with enthusiasm as she delivered this soliloquy!"

## *5. Practice makes perfect II (from a parent)*

"I am helping coach students with their lines this year. At first they reciting drily with little or no expression. As we went over the parts together, they began to see the personalities of the characters they were enacting and the relationship of their lines to the

plot of the play. In just two short weeks they are now laughing knowledgeably at the funny parts and looking forward to rehearsals as they become more comfortable with what they are portraying.”

6. *Shakespearean vocabulary fun*

A third grade teacher was identifying the diphthong “ie” by explaining that in some words it makes the sound “ee” while in other words it sounds like the pronoun “I.” Several students exclaimed, “Oh, as in the word “Fie!” The teacher realized this word had been in their Shakespeare reading for that week.

