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Cash, Cassidy, creator and host. That Shakespeare Life

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cassidycash.com.

How might lead poisoning have contributed to the death of Elizabeth I? Is it possible to walk from Mexico to Nova Scotia in 11 months, as sixteenth-century sailor David Ingram claimed to have done? How many different tools were needed to write a letter in Shakespeare's time?

These are among the intriguing questions Cassidy Cash asks guests in recent episodes (see [episodes 254](#), [253](#), and [248](#), respectively) of *That Shakespeare Life*, a short-form podcast in which Cash interviews scholars and other experts on topics related to the life and works of William Shakespeare. Begun in 2018, *That Shakespeare Life* releases new episodes weekly. Each episode is structured similarly: following a spate of prefatory elements (an announcer's introduction to the podcast, a sound bite from the upcoming interview clearly intended as a hook, calls to support the show on Patreon [[patreon.com](#)], an endorsement of the podcast from a previous guest, and so on), Cash introduces the week's guest. Guests include scholars in a wide variety of fields within or overlapping with early modern studies: recent interview subjects include anthropologist Dean Snow, whose newest book reassesses the reliability of a sixteenth-century English traveller's account of a journey through North America ([episode 253](#)); literature scholar Darren Freebury-Jones, author of monographs on Shakespeare's fellow playwrights Robert Greene and Thomas Kyd ([episode 252](#)); and historian Elizabeth Norton, whose work focuses on women in the Tudor period ([episode 244](#)). Most, but not all, interview subjects are academics; other guests include popular history authors, theatrical practitioners, and historical novelists. Cash's interview with the guest makes up the bulk of each episode's runtime, at the conclusion of which Cash asks the guest to recommend some resources for listeners interested in learning more about the subject under discussion, name a single volume the guest would like to be stranded on a desert island with, and mention any upcoming projects or releases (often the guest is promoting a book). Episodes run between 15 and 45 minutes, with most lasting about half an hour.

Though aimed at a general audience, *That Shakespeare Life* clearly has much to offer for teachers and scholars of Shakespeare and/or early modern

England. Cash's questions, for which guests seem prepared in advance, suggest connections between the guest's area of expertise and Shakespeare's works. Sometimes this connection is fairly straightforward, as with Macduff's having been "from his mother's womb untimely ripped" as a lead-in to a discussion of early modern obstetrics with medical historian Mary E. Fissell ([episode 238](#)), but in other cases it involves a lesser-known detail, such as Shakespeare's use of the term "cony catcher" in several plays, used to introduce Ari Friedlander's scholarship on early modern roguery ([episode 245](#)). Cash typically has an easy rapport with guests and asks engaging follow-up questions that point the conversation in surprising directions. Particularly useful in a pedagogical context are conversations that explicitly take aim at common misunderstandings or oversimplifications of aspects of the historical period. For instance, in "Did Women Act on Stage?" ([episode 219](#)), Pamela Brown points out that, contrary to common belief, women were never explicitly barred from performing on the English stage, and various theatrical performances including female actors did occur during Shakespeare's lifetime. The fact that, as Brown's research has shown, acting companies like Shakespeare's played an active role in excluding female performer and touted the English practice of employing boys to play female roles as a point of superiority over the contemporary mixed-gender troupes common in continental Europe could productively reframe class discussions of gender in Shakespeare's plays. What happens if we see this aspect of early modern theatrical performance not as something imposed on theatrical performers by religious and secular authorities but rather (or at least in addition) as a deliberate creative and commercial decision on their part?

While interviews are consistently framed as a way of providing historical context for the interpretation and appreciation of Shakespeare, conversations can be wide-ranging, and guests often provide fascinating insights into many areas of early modern history and culture less obviously connected to the Bard. A number of recent episodes, for instance, are concerned primarily with early English settlements in North America rather than life in Elizabethan or Jacobean England, perhaps a sign of the expanding influence of transatlantic and post-colonial approaches among early modern historians and Shakespeare scholars in recent years.

Though the podcast can be heard on any of the major podcatcher apps (Spotify, Apple Podcasts, etc.), instructors considering including an episode as a listening assignment or playing clips in class would be well-advised to provide

students with a link to the corresponding page on Cash's website (helpfully, the URL always uses the format [cassidycash.com/ep\[episode number\]](http://cassidycash.com/ep[episode number])), as the "show notes" there offer a wealth of resources for further study. Not only will one find the guest's biographical information and a partial list of Cash's interview questions but also, often, a lengthy write-up that meaningfully extends the episode's presentation of the guest's research, including images related to the topic under discussion, a summary of key points discussed including quotations from the interview (though full transcripts of interviews are unfortunately not present on the website), and full bibliographic information (with links, where available) for the guest's scholarship and any books or articles recommended by the guest. This write-up sometimes fills in gaps left by the nature of an impromptu conversation. For instance, in an interview with medical historian Suzie Edge ([episode 254](#)), Cash asked what kind of beetle was used by physicians in the period to produce blistering (and which, more recently, has been used as an aphrodisiac). Edge could not recall the beetle's name in the moment, but the notes for this interview on Cash's website helpfully provide an image of the beetle, its scientific name (*Lytta vesicatoria*), and even a link to a recent scientific study examining its medical uses.

Perhaps anticipating the podcast's use as a teaching tool in primary or secondary schools, Cash introduces this discussion with Edge, which deals with the often gory deaths of sixteenth-century monarchs, with a disclaimer that the subject may be disturbing for younger listeners. One wonders whether this concern is what prevented the early modern idea that mandrakes grew from the blood and semen of hanged men from coming up in Cash's discussion of mandrakes with Michael Brown ([episode 249](#)). Generally, however, the podcast does not shy away from frank discussions of taboo subjects.¹

With 255 episodes released at the time of writing, *That Shakespeare Life* offers a plethora of options for instructors interested in incorporating an accessible listening assignment into their courses. The search function on Cash's website makes finding an episode related to a topic of interest particularly easy, so instructors are likely to find an episode that helps to historicize a given text or topic discussed in a Shakespeare course; they might also give students the option of listening to and reporting on an episode of their choice, or the task of finding an episode that they can relate to a specific Shakespeare play or other

1. Episodes featuring subject matter perhaps too racy for younger listeners include "Curse Words with John Spurr" ([episode 228](#)) and "Medlars with Neil Buttery" ([episode 215](#)).

reading assignment. One important caveat here: in order to support the podcast financially without relying on advertisements, Cash has limited access to all but the 100 most recent episodes to Patreon supporters who donate at least \$5 per month. This means that students and non-Patreon-supporting instructors will not be able to access the majority of episodes found using the website's search tool.

The history and culture of Shakespeare's England is such a vast field of study that it can be difficult to decide where and how to begin historicizing Shakespeare for students. In this regard, *That Shakespeare Life* is a particularly valuable resource, an appropriately wide-ranging collection of bite-sized, engaging interviews that offers insights into everything from medlars to mandrakes, pirates to pumpkins. More than just a handy introduction, however, each episode, through its list of sources recommended by an expert on the topic, also offers a jumping-off point for further study that will prove useful for students and scholars alike.

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