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Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Shakespedia

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Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Shakespedia.

Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, 2017–. Accessed 21 May 2023. shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia.

Under the banner of the authoritative Droeshout portrait of 1623, Shakespedia invites users to “[l]earn more about the life and works of William Shakespeare.” As a site for the acquisition of knowledge about William Shakespeare, the portmanteau “Shakespedia” teases cleverly at a digital encyclopedia of facts related to an all-encompassing “Shakespeare”—a hybrid fusion of both the man and the body of his work: a one-stop shop for the history and heritage of Shakespeare’s life, locale, and canon. “Celebrating Shakespeare is at the heart of everything we do,” proclaims the main Shakespeare Birthplace Trust website (shakespeare.org.uk), which maintains this digital repository and resource and reminds the user that they are a charity, imploring their audience to help “keep Shakespeare’s story alive.”

The story of William Shakespeare, born to John and Mary (Arden) Shakespeare, is central to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) site, both visually and contextually. Here, the Droeshout again features prominently as one of the largest icons of the dozen or so doorways featured on the home page that lead to an extensive labyrinth of explorations. The iconographic layout follows a pattern whereby the centralized icon appears in the top left of a sequence of differently sized but evenly patterned headings, with the three SBT properties completing the ticker across the bottom from left to right—“Shakespeare’s Birthplace,” “Anne Hathaway’s Cottage,” and finally, “Shakespeare’s New Place”—clearly laying out the trajectory of Shakespeare’s life from birth to death with a clearly subtitled narrative that identifies “where the story began” so that the visitor may “relive Shakespeare’s love story” and ultimately “walk in Shakespeare’s footsteps.” In doing so, the site offers the user an opportunity to undergo a digital romantic pilgrimage that satisfies a basic touristic urge to time travel. Indeed, embedded within the ticket scheme of the SBT properties, users are offered the opportunity to book the full ticket to “Shakespeare’s Story,” where they are offered the chance to discover “the full story of Shakespeare the boy, husband, family man and businessman across his family homes, all year round.” Shakespedia, however, offers the user an opportunity to fall down a proverbial rabbit hole of information and offers a

clear, detailed narrative of Shakespeare's biography that is appropriate for a range of audiences: not so complex as to alienate some users, nor so basic as to prove irrelevant to a specialist. Shakespedia anticipates the curiosity and needs of the user and offers a pleasing, user-friendly digital excursion through the key points of Shakespeare's life.

The Shakespedia home page provides users with a range of topics to explore, which, in reading the page from left to right, appear in the following order: "William Shakespeare," a comprehensive biographical landing page with nine subtopics that range from Shakespeare's birth to death; "Shakespeare's Family Homes," which details the provenance and significance of the SBT properties, critical points about Elizabethan architecture and conservation, and the inception of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust; "Index," providing a complete list of Shakespedia articles; "Shakespeare's Works," which covers a variety of areas including Shakespeare's plays, poems, First Folio, words, phrases, and quotes, and even offers three animated three-minute versions of *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Winter's Tale*; "Shakespeare's Globe Theatre," which offers a history of the original Globe Theatres of 1599 and 1614 as well as a hyperlink to the existing third Globe of 1997 (shakespearesglobe.com) with a brief overview of its provenance and reconstruction; "Shakespeare's Circle," offering the user 27 "imagined accounts from the people Shakespeare would have known"; "Playing Shakespeare's Music," which shares a series of videos with Jennifer Waghorn, a music and theatre history researcher; "Acting Shakespeare," which features discussions about a select group of actors who appear in *The Routledge Companion to Actors' Shakespeare*; "David Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee," a chronicle of the 1769 events that put Stratford-upon-Avon on the tourist map; and finally, the three previously mentioned Shakespeare properties: "Shakespeare's Birthplace," "Anne Hathaway's Cottage," and "Shakespeare's New Place."

Throughout the site, Shakespedia offers a variety of media possibilities for user engagement: embedded videos, podcasts (with accompanying transcripts to enhance user access), still and archival photography, animations, and succinctly written copy. At the time of this review, the site does not appear to offer alt-text descriptions for its numerous images, though some images do contain figure image titles. In the future, alt text could enhance the user experience for Blind and visually impaired users who rely on auditory explorations of the site and its contents.

One area where this site is progressive is “Shakespeare’s Plays,” which mimics features found in colloquial digital platforms. Each play’s synopsis begins with the initialism “TL; DR” (“too long; didn’t read”) and the phrase “may contain spoilers,” a popular way on a variety of social media platforms to introduce a brief overview of a lengthy text. It also offers the expected duration of engagement (“2 minute read,” for example), a feature often found on sites like *Medium* (medium.com). This provides a bit of informal banter that aligns the authorial voice with the user’s reception and signals that Shakespeare is something that can, indeed, be for all. This mash-up between encounters and expectations puts the user at ease. It also reveals that the intended audience for Shakespedia is a contemporary one—users who are already digital natives.

The trajectory of the site indicates a journey from Shakespeare’s biography to the body of his work, homing in on where the work was produced—Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre—which offers the user the following tagline: “Third time’s a charm: the when, how, and why behind Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.” From here, users move into the imagined narratives presented in “Shakespeare’s Circle.” These 27 fictionalized accounts are presented as audio files that activate the user’s imagination and are made to echo documentary interviews. These are read by a variety of actors and academics, and in the case of Susanna Shakespeare Hall, by renowned actor Jane Lapotaire. These accounts are based on the 2015 book *The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography*, the link for which is unfortunately dysfunctional.

The next section, “Playing Shakespeare’s Music,” features six different videos by Jennifer Waghorn, who shares an overview of her doctoral research and practice related to *The Tempest*. Waghorn covers a variety of areas, including “Musical Survival and Adaptation,” “Modern Composition,” “Character Songs,” “Underscore and Instrumentation,” and “Songs Inspired by Shakespeare.” Impressively, Waghorn offers edited versions of different melodies while playing a variety of instruments and layering in complex Elizabethan-inspired harmonies.

If the user is continuing to navigate this site as one would a book, “Acting Shakespeare” is next. This section features discussions with scholars Stanley Wells, Paul Edmondson, Paul Prescott, and Carol Rutter, regarding the work of four notable actors of Shakespeare—Judi Dench, Harriet Walter, Rory Kinnear, and Simon Russell Beale. Here the narrative seems to have progressed from the theatre for which Shakespeare wrote to the nature of performance—first musical

and then focusing on the actors' craft—which offers a variety of perspectives about the life and times of William Shakespeare.

Finally, attention is paid to David Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769. This section shares the fascinating account of the three days of Garrick's Jubilee, which is responsible for positioning Stratford-upon-Avon as a site for literary tourism and pilgrimage. The Jubilee chronicle plays out here in cinematic effect and helps to outline the significance of this influential—albeit imperfect—event and illustrates how, with Garrick's vision, Stratford became a destination for Shakespeare aficionados worldwide.

Shakespedia is a fascinating site for Shakespeare fans; it hosts a wealth of information for students, history buffs, and theatregoers who wish to satisfy their curiosity about William Shakespeare or perhaps brush up on a play before attending a performance in Stratford at the Royal Shakespeare Company—or anywhere else. The site is easy to navigate and is very user-friendly, with embedded links and intuitive jumps to alternate locations. The site is also clear about its function as a charity and its reliance on support. Throughout the site, it urges users to “help keep Shakespeare's story alive” with a call-to-action (CTA) “donate here” button featured below.

While this review proceeds in a linear fashion that follows the printed form in the Western world, from left to right and from top to bottom, it is possible to engage with content at any point without penalty, as each section of the site stands discretely as its own entity and as a component of a larger narrative. If following a linear trajectory, however, it appears as though the narrative is out of joint, and I would recommend that the Garrick Jubilee be relocated to appear before the more general text and performance elements that cover music and the significant contribution of a select group of contemporary actors. As it stands, Shakespedia takes the user from biography/history to Shakespeare's texts, and then from text to performance, before finally returning the user to matters of history once again. This arrangement reveals a larger question regarding the overall trajectory of the site and its purpose.

In some ways, the site hasn't quite decided what it wants to be. If it aims to truly be a Shakespeare encyclopedia, it would be well served to embrace additional sources beyond the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust that may be of interest to its users. If it is meant to narrate the unique story of the SBT and Shakespeare, it should centralize the significance of the Garrick Jubilee alongside the other historical details and events that opened the door to the formation

of a variety of Shakespeare heritage organizations—first the Shakespeare Club in 1824, and ultimately the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in 1847. In doing so, it can tell the story of how this vitally important heritage site, for which Shakespeare fans owe a debt of gratitude, came to fruition and how the SBT and their contributions continue to shape our experience of Shakespeare today. This realignment would offer the following narrative: from biography/history to history/cultural tourism to Shakespeare's texts, then directing the user to the components of performance. This would move users from the facts, to understanding why the facts are relevant, to how that relevance is perpetuated through performance.

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