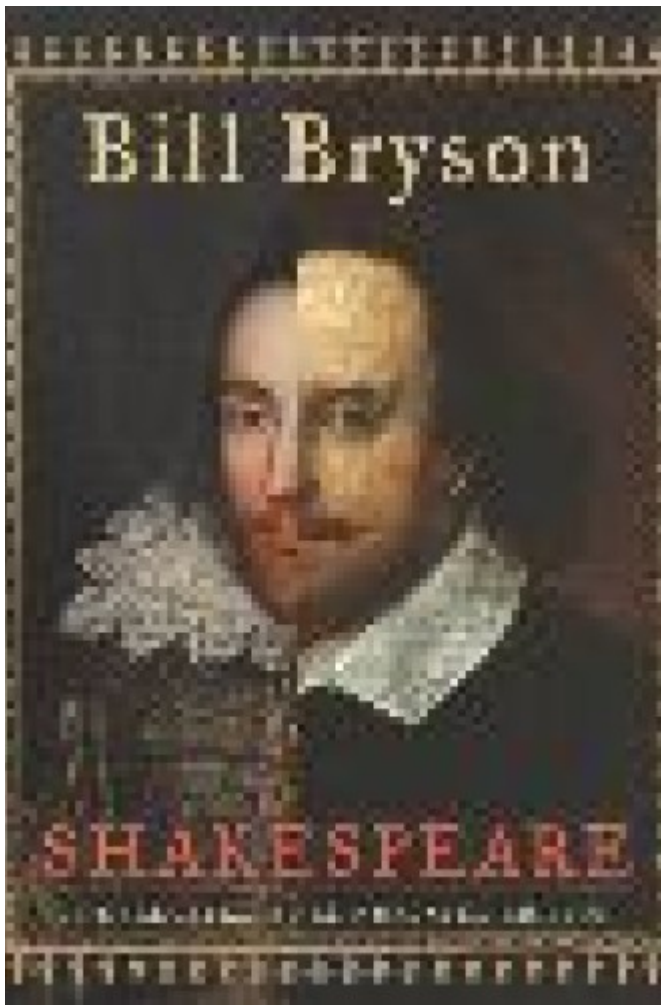


Shakespeare (The Illustrated and Updated Edition)

reviewed by [Brett Foster](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Shakespeare (The Illustrated and Updated Edition)

Bill Bryson
HarperCollins

Upon learning of Bill Bryson's new *Shakespeare (The Illustrated and Updated Edition)*, I felt momentarily confused. Had that witty writer of felicitous English prose already composed a new Shakespeare book, fast on the heels of his *Shakespeare: The World as Stage*, published two years before? After all, the best Shakespeareans are as industrious as their subject, who was the author of 38 plays, two long narrative poems and more than 150 sonnets. (See, for example, the multiple Bard studies apiece by Stanley Wells, Jonathan Bate and Marjorie Garber.) As it turns out, however, this latest book is simply a new, larger edition of Bryson's prior volume, presented more handsomely and filled with photos and other illustrations.

This new release may understandably raise some eyebrows: some people may judge this edition to be just so much marketing hocus-pocus—a slick way of keeping Bryson's book prominently on the shelves, and at a price that is a third higher. Fair enough, but it is nevertheless true that this version of Bryson's book may be the single best introduction to Shakespeare for general readers. Unsurprisingly (considering that Bryson wrote it), it is highly readable and features all of the Shakespearean and English Renaissance images that more seasoned students would expect to find. I would even call it a small coffee-table book, if that did not risk overshadowing the author's considerable text.

Bryson gamely offers a defense of this updated edition in a new preface, which focuses on three "noteworthy recent developments." Most important, the Cobbe portrait of Shakespeare made headlines in March 2009 when Stanley Wells and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust announced its discovery and said that it was likely the only contemporary portrait of Shakespeare in existence. Bryson describes the portrait's subject as a "youthful looking, rather dashing man of healthy complexion, dapper attire, and a look of intelligence and sensitivity," though he is also quick to record others' skepticism. (The art historian Roy Strong says that identification of the man in the portrait as Shakespeare is "codswallop.") The cover of this new edition features a composite of the venerable Chandos portrait and this new Cobbe contender (think Two-Face from Batman). When the fresh, bright Cobbe portrait is compared with the familiar Chandos canvas, blemished from age, it is easy to see why the new discovery has generated such interest.

The second noteworthy development is the discovery of the foundations of The Theater beneath an abandoned warehouse in Shoreditch, in east London. Built in 1576, this structure was London's first public theater and a predecessor of the more

famous Globe playhouse in Bankside, on the other side of the Thames River. It was a predecessor in more ways than one: to confound a contentious landlord, in 1598 Shakespeare and the rest of the Lord Chamberlain's Men hastily disassembled The Theater's beams and scaffolding and carried them through the city to establish the Globe.

The third and final item that warrants this updated edition is the recent recovery of a first folio of Shakespeare's plays, stolen ten years ago from Durham University Library. Bryson tells this tale with great relish. It involves a mysterious seeker of an appraisal, the Folger Shakespeare Library staff, the FBI and an arrest.

These items do make this updated edition more timely—and it will be so for about six months, by which time a fresh wave of discoveries, claims and controversies about Shakespeare will appear in newspapers' arts sections and on English department bulletin boards.

The images in this edition range from iconic portraits of Shakespeare and the era's luminaries to contemporary woodcuts and reproductions of early books and archival documents, including the first printed plays featuring Shakespeare's name and deeds and wills that include his signature. My favorite item may be a polemical illustration of a Jesuit throwing torn-up Bible pages from a pulpit while one congregant yells, "You lye." Had that fellow lived later, he would have had a bright future in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Other memorable images include Everett Millais's haunting painting of Ophelia, its colors gorgeously reproduced here, and a 1608 document granting licenses to Shakespeare and his fellow actors for "playing comedies and tragedies" before King James. Two final images of contemporaries that may stir the imagination feature a dashing, lively-eyed John Fletcher, who collaborated with Shakespeare toward the end of the famous writer's career, and Robert Greene, an early attacker of Shakespeare: in the deathbed woodcut, he writes from his shroud, which unfortunately makes him look like a mascot—for the Fighting Turnips, perhaps.

Bryson's written account also contains some gems. He deftly re-creates the complicated religious and political contexts of Shakespeare's age, and also makes clear how brutal early-modern living could be. We may be enduring a recession, but at least we've been spared the "English sweat" and "starving harvests." Bryson arrives at a balanced view of Shakespeare as a reliable professional for theater

managers who constantly needed new plays, and yet “invigoratingly wayward”—killing off Julius Caesar halfway through his play and creating in Hamlet a disappearing hero who speaks a huge number of lines. Bryson is also sensitive to details of Shakespeare’s death. He wistfully imagines the full inventory of the poet’s estate, which was likely sent to London and then lost forever in the Great Fire, and he finds it odd that in his will Shakespeare left his clothes to his sister Joan.

This is not a book for those interested in Shakespeare’s writing itself, since Bryson rarely quotes from or analyzes lines from his plays. However, he does point out that some of Shakespeare’s words didn’t stick (*exsufflicate*), but many of his phrases did: *play fast and loose, remembrance of things past, be cruel to be kind, pomp and circumstance*. The book contains some illuminating passages, such as these lines from *King John*, which Bryson connects with the death of Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form.

Bryson has written neither a traditional academic monograph nor a trade book of the more facile sort. He presents recently discovered evidence through a portrait of eccentric American researchers, and he brings to the foreground his visits to Shakespeare’s birthplace and the Folger Library and his interviews conducted there. Bryson covers Shakespeare’s life, times and legacy brilliantly, yet throughout the book he is quick to admit the many lingering mysteries. He repeats this paradox in his new preface: “No human being has received more attention or yielded less certainty.”