

“Shakespeare Game”

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Abstract

Shakespeare clubs flourished 100 years ago, motivated in part by the desire to educate members and their communities about the moral lessons they attributed to Shakespeare’s works. The Shakespeare Club of Camden, Maine created a card game as a teaching tool. This note examines how the game works, the assumptions of the game’s creators, and mentions some ambiguities, factual errors, and differences between the way Shakespeare was taught then and is taught now. Judging the past from the position of the present is not the point here, but to simply understand the perspective of the fans who created this game with the hope that our attempts to teach Shakespeare now will not be unkindly judged a century from now.

Shakespeare clubs have not quite disappeared from America, but they flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The clubs comprised mostly women with the leisure to gather for reading, reciting, and discussing Shakespeare with the goal of bettering themselves and their communities. It was believed that Shakespeare’s stories were a great source of moral instruction, with Hamilton W. Mabie even calling Shakespeare “an educator” (1027). *A Study of Shakespeare: An Instructive Game* should be understood in these contexts.

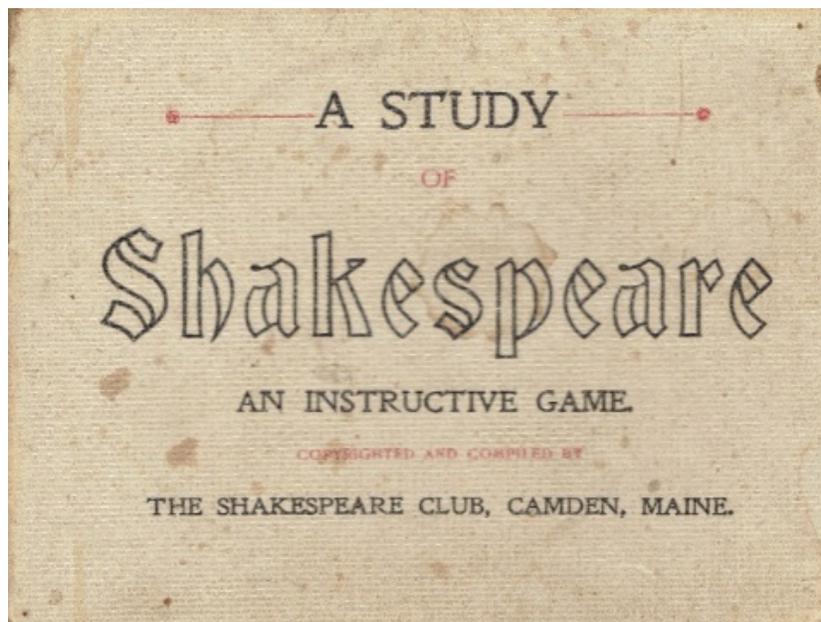


Figure 1. Game box top.

The game was created and published by the Shakespeare Club of Camden, Maine in 1897. It consists of 60 numbered cards with 5 to 7 questions per card. The instructions are simple. Read Figure 2.

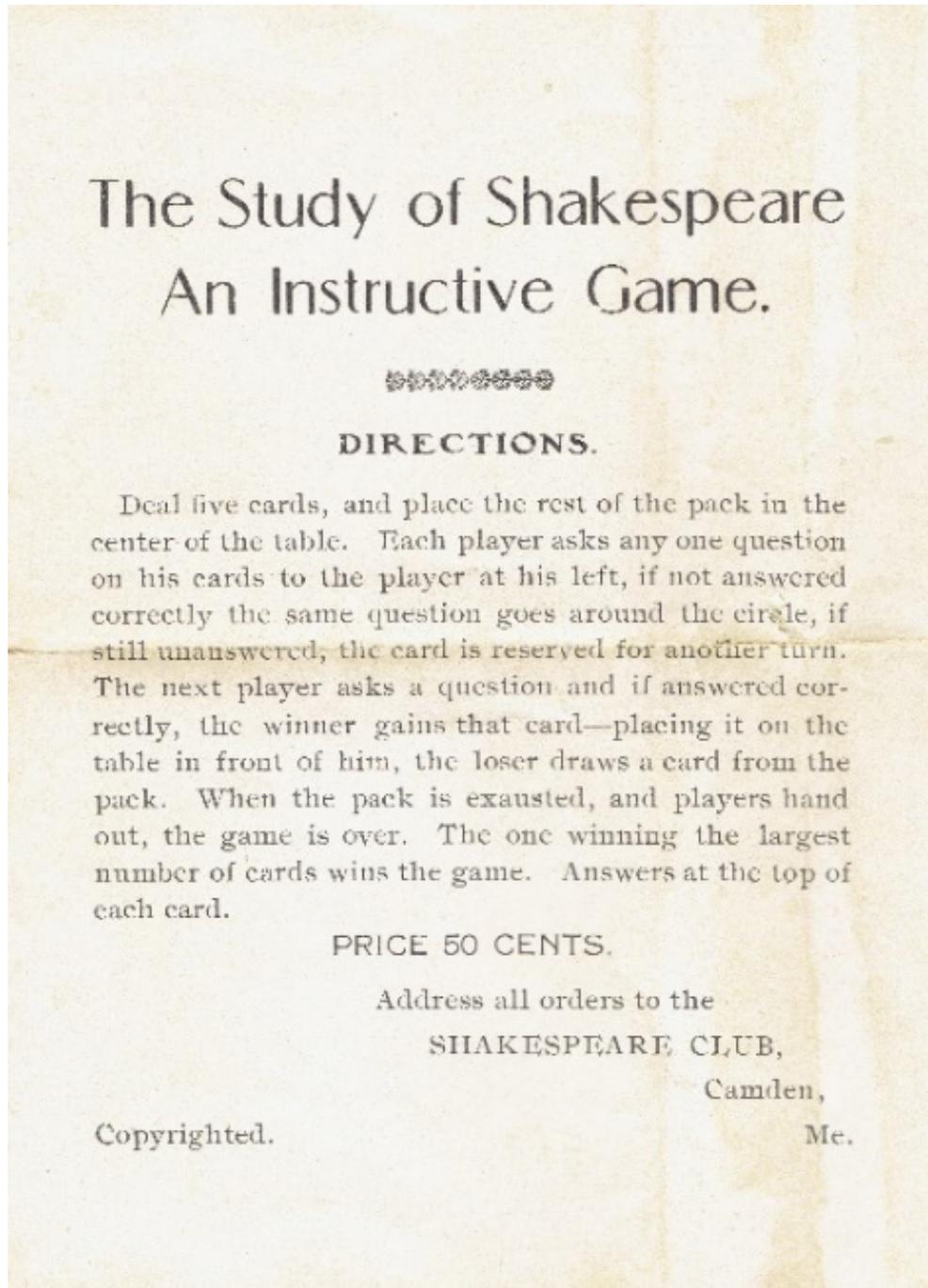


Figure 2. Instructions.

The title of each card is the answer to all the questions on that card. 25 plays from the 37-play canon are included. Excluded are *All's Well That Ends Well*, the *Henry VI* plays, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Measure for Measure*, *Pericles*, *Richard II*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and Shakespeare's non-dramatic poetry. Eight plays receive one question card. Three plays receive four. Plays with passionate soliloquies were fashionable at the time, so *Henry VIII* and *The Winter's Tale* are represented by four cards along with *Othello*. This was also the era of character criticism: Bradley published *Shakespearean Tragedy* in 1904, so most cards study Shakespeare's characters but nineteen cards, nearly a third, have questions about Shakespeare's stories, though the questions are generally similar to those on the character cards.

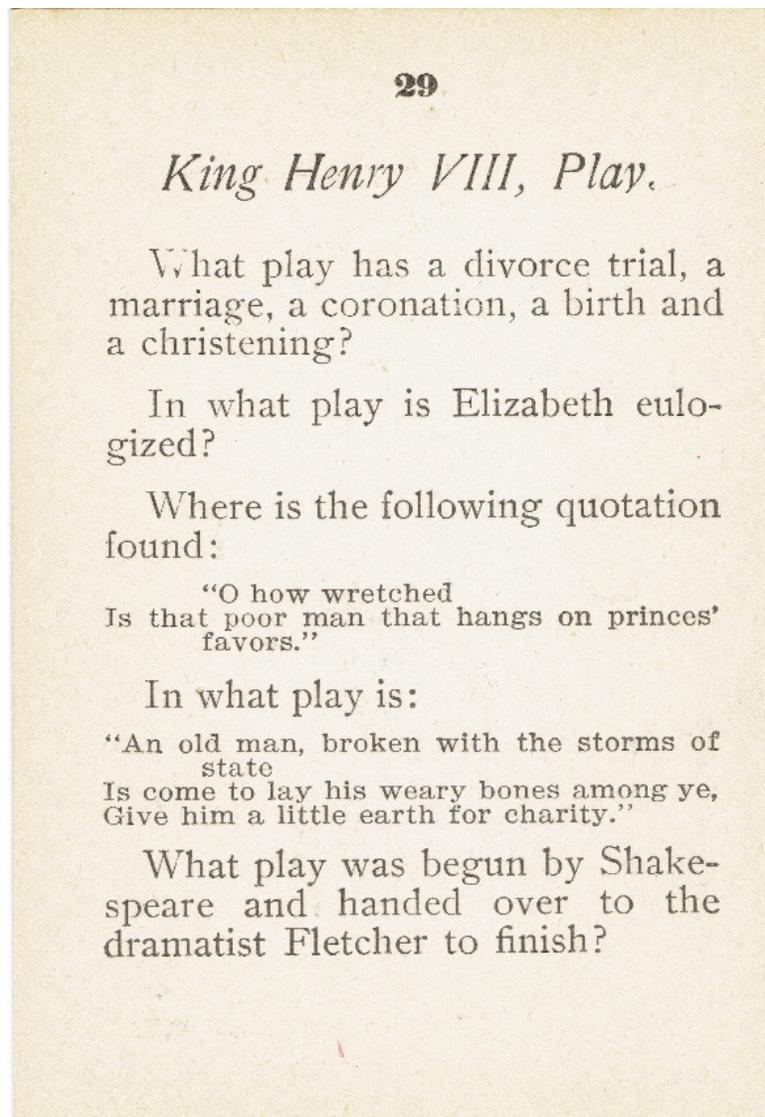


Figure 3. *King Henry VIII, Play card.*

Some answers reflect the state of knowledge that informed non-specialists had at this time. The last question in Figure 3 is an example. It is now believed that John Fletcher wrote 1.3-4, 3.1, and 5.2-4 of *Henry VIII*, the two authors working separately on their shares of the play. Shakespeare's share was not an incomplete job that was "handed over to the dramatist Fletcher to finish." The game creators assume only one answer is correct, but on the *Othello, The Play* card below the second question can be answered Richard III, Aaron, Saturninus, and one can argue for other characters as well. Another quirk is that Iago is not named. It is possible that detestable character was taken to be Othello by some being quizzed.

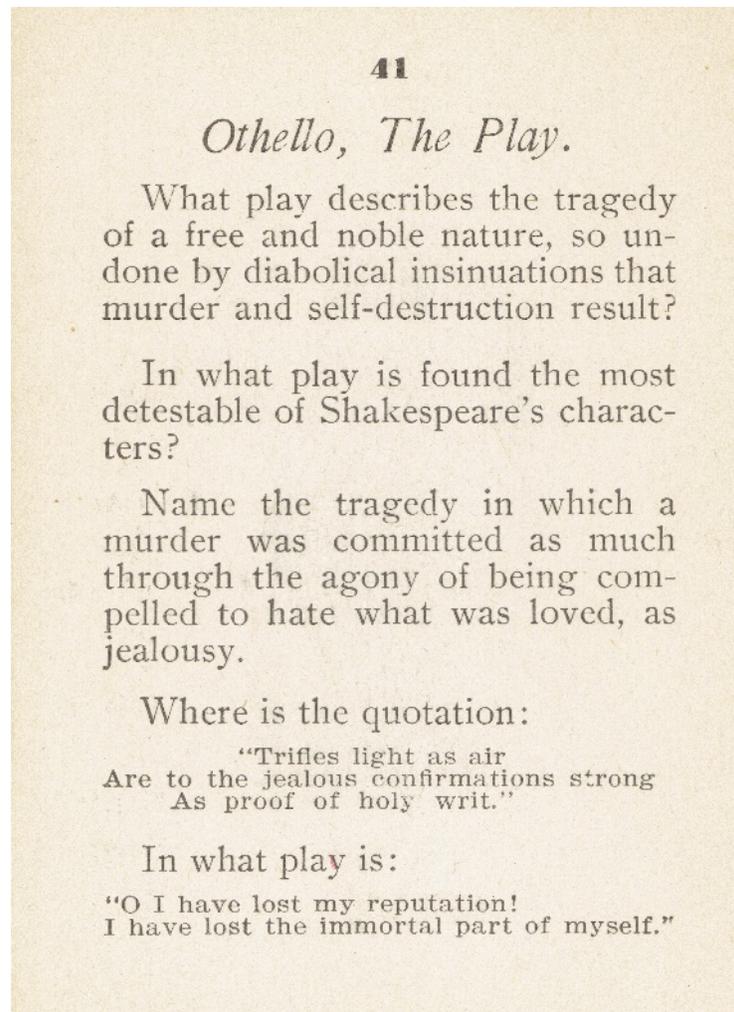


Figure 4. *Othello, The Play* card.

The second question on the *Merry Wives of Windsor* card takes an attractive piece of Shakespearean mythology as fact. Shakespeare club members lacked the benefits of modern scholarship.

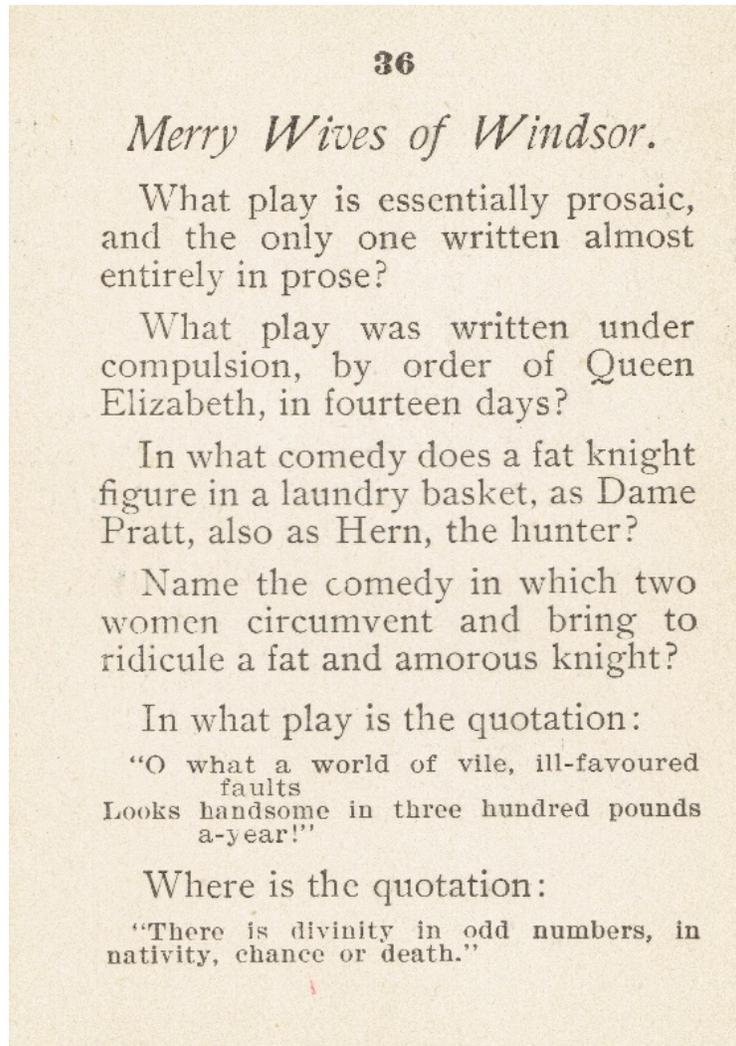


Figure 5. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* card.

When a character appears in multiple plays, the questions on that character’s card may be answered by multiple plays. The *Mark Antony* card is an example. The second question refers to *Antony and Cleopatra* and the third to *Julius Caesar*.

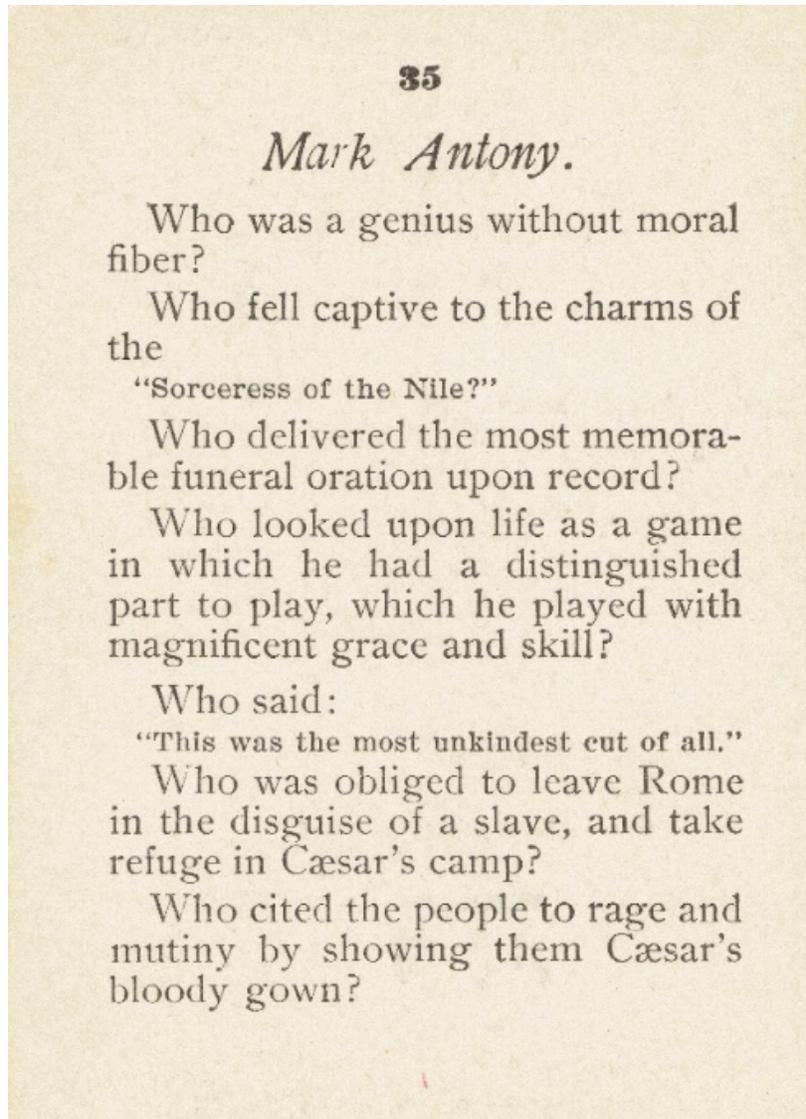


Figure 6. Mark Antony card.

This card also illustrates the subjectivity of a few questions in the set. Is Antony without moral fiber when he sends Enobarbus's treasure after him? The writer(s) of this card had opinions about Antony, but those opinions are debatable. The question is also an example of the ambiguity already mentioned: surely, Richard III is as valid an answer, and perhaps more valid.

A very few questions make no sense; the first on the *King Lear, The Play* card is an example.

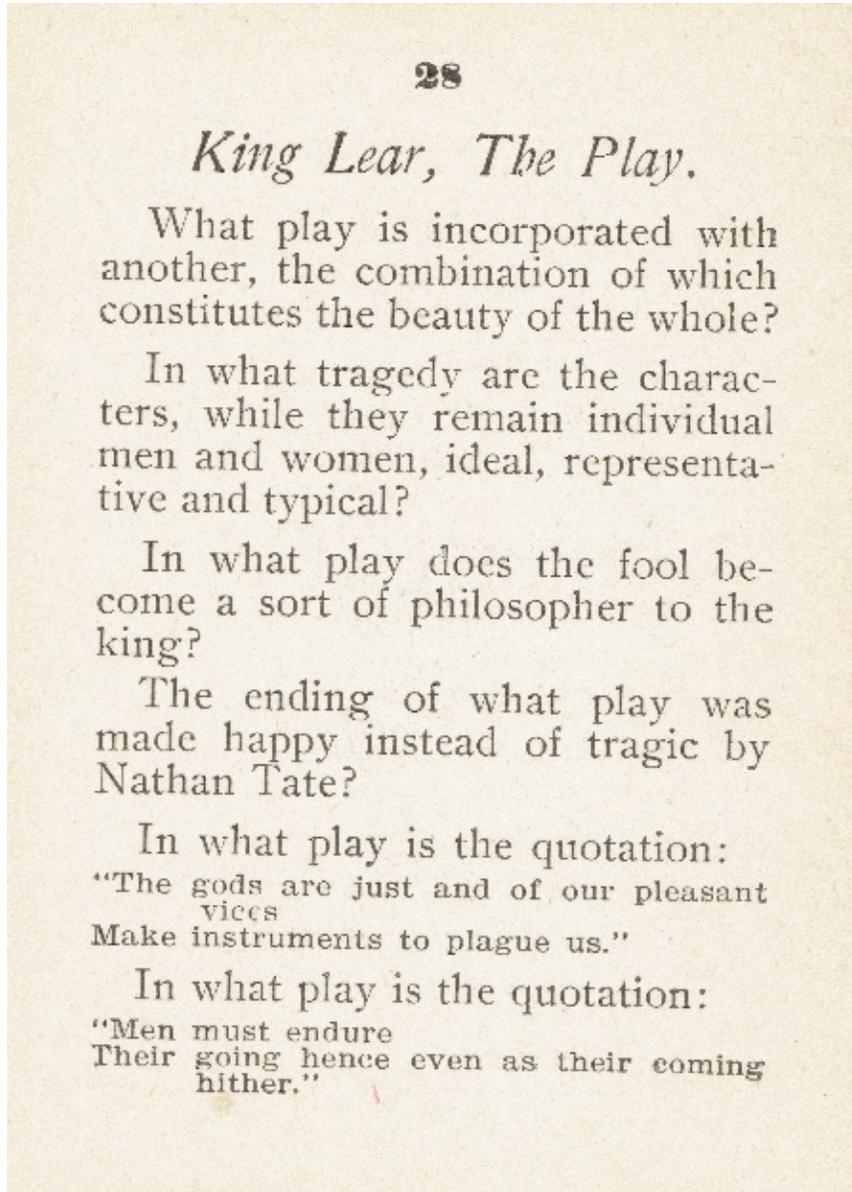


Figure 7. *King Lear, The Play* card.

The answer may be confluations of the 1608 quarto and 1623 folio versions of *Lear*, but other plays have divergent quarto versions, such as *Othello* (1622) and *Richard III* (1597). The question implies this is true of only one play. My answer may not be the answer intended, but what else can this question mean? The question does not have enough information.

The *Henry VIII* character card goes outside the play for answers. Question four is about one of the books King Henry wrote and there is a quotation from Sir Walter Raleigh in the

penultimate question. The game otherwise teaches about Shakespeare's characters, stories, and quotations, so it is surprising that this card alone uses outside biography.

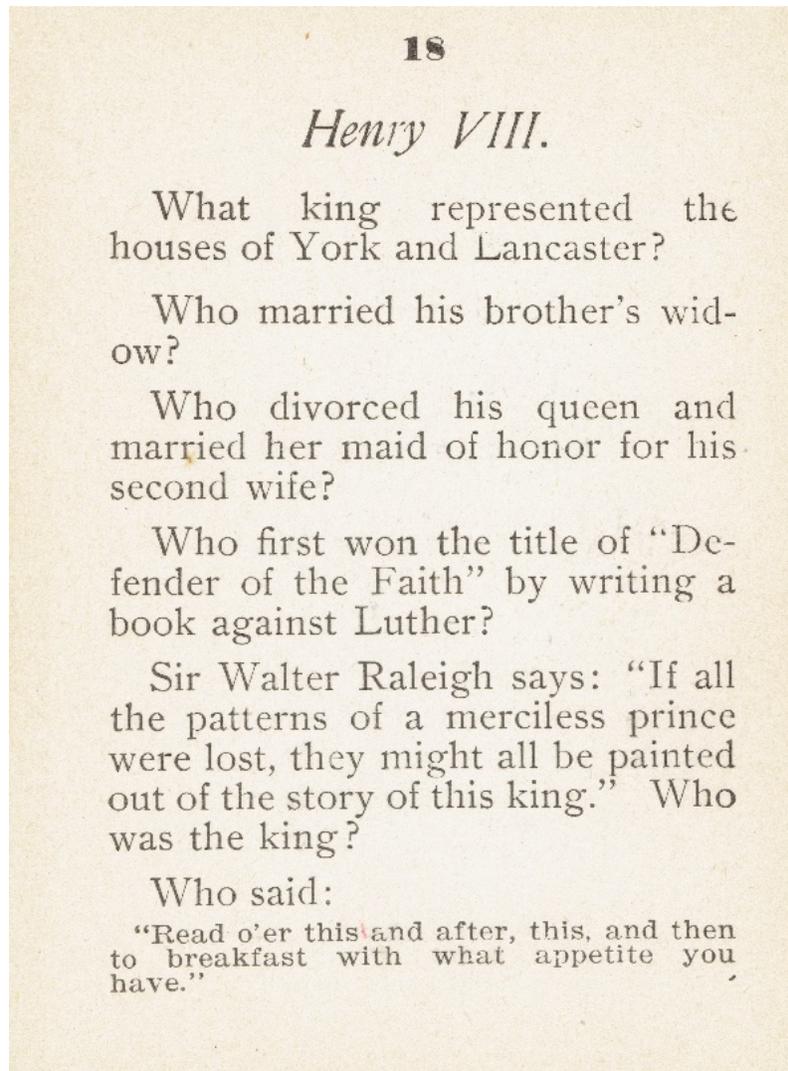


Figure 8. Henry VIII card.

The cards do not ask about Shakespeare's life, stages, early modern dramaturgy, or performance history, all standard when teaching Shakespeare today, and indeed Nicholas Rowe included a not always accurate biographical sketch in his 1709 edition of Shakespeare's plays. The questions instead reveal the study methods of the club, according to the anonymous review of the game in the *Bowdin Orient*.

At this remove it is easy to question the effectiveness of what we would call trivia questions to teach some of Shakespeare's dramatic works. This game fails to touch the often-

complex ideas and debates vocalized by Shakespeare’s characters and contrasted in his plots and subplots. Many questions reduce the plays to the characters and reduce the characters to the traits that interested the Club members who created the game. This approach was supported by some rather famous Shakespeareans of the time, as seen in the endorsements at the bottom of this advertisement.

Are You Interested

In Shakespeare?

The Shakespeare Club, Camden, Maine, have issued a game compiled from the plays and characters of Shakespeare. It can be played by any number or used as a study in the home. As a sample the cards read as follows:—

Ophelia.

What woman lost her mind after the death of her father and developed a fondness for flowers and singing?
Who said:
"Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind."

Hamlet, the Play.

In what play was Edwin Booth best known?
Where is the following quotation:
"A little more than kin and less than kind."

It is copyrighted. There are six or more questions on each card, sixty cards in a pack. Answers are found at the top of each. Price 50 cts. For sale at stationers, or address

The Shakespeare Club,
CAMDEN, MAINE.

TESTIMONIALS.

From Prof. W. J. Rolfe—The plan of the game is a good one and is well carried out. It ought to be of service in schools and academies, where only a few of the plays are studied, by leading the young people to extend their reading and thus get better acquainted with Shakespeare's large company of men and women. I shall take pleasure in commending it.

From Horace Howard Furness—Surely this charming game, like mercy, is twice blessed—it blesses him that gives and him that takes, and all must arise from it with a knowledge of Shakespeare deepened and familiarized by playing it. I greatly doubt that age can wither it or custom stale its infinite variety.

From Prof. H. L. Chapman, Bowdoin College—I wish to congratulate the club on the ingenuity and good judgment shown in the construction of the game. I hope it will have the success it deserves, and it will certainly give me especial pleasure to commend it.

From the Outlook—The Shakespeare Club of Camden, Maine, has turned its knowledge of the great dramatist's works to excellent account by the game called "The Study of Shakespeare." The game cannot be played by an ignorant person nor can it be played without gaining additional knowledge of Shakespeare's plays and characters.

Figure 9. Advertisement.¹

Rather than judge the game and its creators from our position in the future where we can condescend without directly engaging the people we judge, we might better regard this game as an opportunity to see Shakespeare fans from over 130 years ago go about the business of being Shakespeare fans, an opportunity to understand Shakespearean engagement from their perspective, and consider how we might look to Shakespeareans 130 years in the future.

¹ Note the claim of at least six questions per card. A dozen of the cards have five.

The author wishes to thank Tara Olivero for confirming some impressions about Shakespeare clubs.

Further Reading

Bradley, A. C. 1904. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. London: Macmillan and Company.

Henry VIII. 1521. *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*. London.

Scheil, Katherine West. 2012. *She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

References

Anonymous. 1898. "Book Review," *Bowdin Orient*, 28:7, 12 October 1898. 115.

Mabie, Hamilton W. 1897. "Reading for Children," *The Outlook*, April 17, 1897. 1027.

Rowe, Nicholas. 1709. *Works of William Shakespear*. London.