To e or not to e? 
US statue sparks debate over how to spell Shakespeare

The University of Southern California’s decision to spell the Bard’s name as ‘Shakespear’ sparks some gentle joshing – but is it wrong?

Amid other, far uglier confrontations around statues in America, it’s strangely heartening to note the kerfuffle over the University of Southern California’s erection of a statue of Hecuba, queen of Troy, this week. The university chose to inscribe the statue with a quote from Hamlet – the lines spoken by the prince of Denmark as he contemplates the passion an actor has given to a monologue in which Hecuba reacts to the death of her husband, Priam. “And all for nothing – For Hecuba! What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba / That he should weep for her?”

The missing, final “e” caused USC’s rivals at UCLA to tweet: “USC. The only place in America that can unveil a statue as the centerpiece of a $700 million project and manage to misspell Shakespeare.”

But did they misspell it? Martin Butler, professor of English renaissance drama at the University of Leeds, is intrigued...
at USC’s choice. There’s a “lot of variation in the way the name is spelled when it appears in contemporary legal documents and the early printed texts of Shakespeare's works,” from Shakespeare to “Shakspeare, Shakspere, Shakespeare, Shaksper, Shackspeare, even Shagspere,” he admits.

But, Butler says, spellings “settle down” when they get standardised in print. “The bulk of Shakespeare’s early printed texts refer to him as ‘Shakespeare’ (sometimes with a hyphen, sometimes not), including (unhyphenated) the famous first folio (1623), the earliest volumes of poetry (Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece, for both of which Shakespeare wrote and signed a prefatory letter), the early texts of Hamlet (both hyphenated and not) and (hyphenated) the 1609 Sonnets,” he explains.

But USC’s choice of Shakespear “became popular in the 18th century,” and is “rare in the original sources.” “The biggest cluster of appearances comes in a Stratford legal document of 1605, but it was given a boost by the third collected edition of the works in 1664, where it is used on the title page though not, curiously, inside the body of the book,” says Butler. This spelling was then picked up by some important 18th-century editors, including “Nicholas Rowe and Alexander Pope – though, notably, not Dr. Johnson – but it does have a rather ‘antiquarian’ quality to it,” he says. “Since Victorian times, most editions have used the spelling ‘Shakespeare’ and it is universally dominant in academic writing today. Leaving the ‘e’ off is probably an attempt to make Shakespeare seem to belong to a more distant past; it feels more antique, but it doesn’t really have any special claim to be the preferred spelling.”

“True spelling” or not, USC had a rather excellent answer to the criticism: “To E, or not to E, that is the question,” a spokesperson told the Los Angeles Times in a statement. “Over the centuries his surname has been spelled 20 different ways. USC chose an older spelling because of the ancient feel of the statue, even though it is not the most common form.” And why not? I like USC for thinking about this so hard, and I like UCLA for caring enough to tease them.