

# SHAKESPEARE IN AMERICA PERFORMANCE, SCHOLARSHIP, AND TEACHING

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Shakespeare. One name with instant recognition in our world today, Shakespeare may be as close as we can come to a cultural universal in this multi-ethnic, polyglot, global village. My thesis for today is a simple one:

If one is to study and teach English or American literature, one must know Shakespeare because Shakespeare has been and continues to be central to English-language culture and education in North America.

First let us review some facts, which I have set down in the handouts. The breadth and depth of Shakespearean activity in America is simply staggering.

## 1. Performance

### *Theatre*

More than 38 Shakespeare festivals playing during the summer months bring live Shakespeare to audiences easily numbering 1 million annually. Throughout the year Broadway and many community and university theatres continue to find Shakespeare a boxoffice bonanza.

### *Television*

The BBC Shakespeare on Television 1980-87 drew audiences estimated at 3-5% of the American viewing audience, or something like 10 million people for an average broadcast. Commercial television and film makers continue to invest in new Shakespeare productions, the most recent being the acclaimed *Henry V* starring Kenneth Branagh.

## 2. Scholarship

### *Publications*

*Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Shakespeare Studies*, and *The Shakespeare Newsletter*—to name only the three best known of several American publications—have paid circulations of 2,000 to 3,500. Each year two dozen or more books on various aspects of Shakespeare and Shakespeare criticism are published in the United States.

### *Professional societies*

The Shakespeare Association of America draws 500 scholars to its annual meetings; its membership includes twice that number. Shakespeareans also take an active part both in larger organizations—the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English—and more specialized ones—the Malone Society that reprints Renaissance texts, for instance. All are welcome.

### *Research centers*

Preeminent is the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D. C. Other important centers for the study of Shakespeare include the Huntington Library in Pasadena, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the Humanities Research Center in Austin, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These are all open to scholars and students from everywhere.

## 3. Teaching

### *Secondary schools*

Every high school (excepting some vocational-training schools) includes one or often three Shakespeare plays—*Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Julius Caesar* are most often taught—as part of the required course of study. For the 33,000 high schools in the United States, enrollment in Shakespeare classes amounts to more than 1 million annually.

### *Colleges and Universities*

Publishers of Shakespeare editions estimate that annual enrollments in Shakespeare courses (their market) total 250,000 students. Many, probably most, of these students of Shakespeare are *not* specializing in English or American literature; in most American colleges and universities a Shakespeare course is recommended as part of one's essential education in the humanities.

### *Shakespeare institutes*

Shakespeare institutes, offering intensive three-to-six week specialized training for high school and college teachers, have appeared in connection with such research libraries as the Folger and such major theatre festivals as those in Stratford, Ontario; Boulder, Colorado; or Ashland, Oregon.

### *Editions*

Several one-volume editions of all the plays and several single-play editions (easier to carry) offer of background information and critical apparatus. Many families possess heirloom copies of Shakespeare.

### *Audio*

All the plays were recorded years ago by Caedmon records. Many high schools, public libraries, and university libraries have copies for general use.

### *Video*

The BBC Shakespeare and other productions (including those originally made as films) are available on videotape and videodisk for classroom use (or home viewing). Lectures and lecture-demonstrations on interpreting Shakespeare may be purchased from *Films for the Humanities*.

These then are the facts. The numbers may not be exact—who can say how many televisions are really being watched, or how many tickets to Shakespeare plays were actually sold in a given year? Never mind. The universality of Shakespeare in American culture is axiomatic. It is so axiomatic that a television commercial for an orange juice company that offers to contribute a nickel to the Olympic Games for every can of orange juice sold begins with: «To be or not to be, that is the question.» Certainly they do not expect everyone in their audience to know *Hamlet* by heart, but they are counting on the familiar words to focus their viewers' attention—and probably to add a touch of class to the commercial.

The vastness of Shakespeare in America raises three questions: (1) How did Shakespeare come to be so prominent in American culture? (2) Granted Shakespeare's centrality to American culture and education, what are the newest developments in performance, scholarship, and teaching? (3) How do these developments impinge on the interests and concerns of the Association—that is, what practical suggestions can I offer to my colleagues here based upon my experience with Shakespeare in America? Let me take up these questions in order.

## 1. How did Shakespeare come to be so prominent in American culture?

It has not always been so, but it has nearly always been so. We are reminded by history that New England was settled by people who had fled from England to practice their religion in peace. These Puritans were of the same persuasion as those who pulled down Shakespeare's Globe and forbade the performance of plays during Cromwell's interregnum. Yet, as Charles Shattuck has written with such wit and verve in his *Shakespeare on the American Stage*, no sooner did cities spring up on the Eastern seaboard than in them arose theatres and theatre troupes travelling from one city to another. Shakespeare was the standard fare.

As the country matured, its theatres began to feature performers from overseas and eventually to send some of its own abroad. Again, Shakespeare stood at the center of the repertory. Pressing westward, in the mining camps we hear of Shakespeare or scenes from Shakespeare. In *Huckleberry Finn* Huck and Jim meet up with the Duke and the King, two drifters who use Shakespeare as the come-on in their con game. Even in Angels Camp or on the rough-and-ready Mississippi River, it seems Shakespeare's popularity was established.

Come forward in time a little and we find Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre when the famous Shakespearean actor from a family of famous Shakespeareans shoots him. Or look around the country at the end of the century to find Shakespeare featured at the chataquas, those summer festivals of culture and learning that would later grow into summer Shakespeare festivals, sometimes, as in Ashland, Oregon, using the very amphitheatres built for the original chataqua.

The turn of the century is a good place to pause and ask —what about Shakespeare in the schools? Shakespeare enjoyed pride of place in the East Coast private colleges. In the public schools, with their emphasis on elocution and the assimilation of immigrants, Shakespearean soliloquies were often set as speeches to memorize, points of common reference among a nation of immigrants. I myself recall being made to memorize Portia's speech on the quality of mercy when I was still in grade school. I had no idea whatsoever of what the play it came from was about. The exercise remained as part of the traditional teaching material.

With the fading of the classical tradition in the early twentieth-century, educators turned to Shakespeare as a natural replacement, easier than Greek and Latin because written in English, but no less worthy because steeped in traditional cultural values.

In part the respectability of Shakespeare was helped by the efforts of scholars, that grand chain of editors stretching from Shakespeare's friends Hemings and Condell down through Alexander Pope to the infamous Thomas Bowdler who published his expurgated Shakespeare in 1818, and thence through the lavishly illustrated «family editions» of the last century. The

culmination of these centuries of editorial commentary is the «Variorum» Shakespeare, still being updated, in which all commentary for any given line is printed.

Nor was scholarship solely concerned with the elucidation of the text. The rigors of Germanic textual studies of the scriptures had, by the turn of the century, spawned a search for «corruption» in Shakespeare, and with this search came the first of many crackpot theories that Shakespeare did not write the plays attributed to him. Archaeologists and Cryptographers unearthed Troy; Shakespeareans, led by the great English scholar E. K. Chambers sought to discover the conditions of performance under which Shakespeare and his contemporaries worked. Other scholars, delving through forgotten literature, hunted down the sources and analogues of Shakespeare's plays, now helpfully placed between two covers in Geoffrey Bullough's standard reference on the subject *Sources and Analogues of Shakespearean Drama*.

Just as English literature was making its way into the curricula of the colleges, the colleges in turn were placing Shakespeare on the list of authors upon whom high school students seeking admission would be tested. As college education came to be more and more the norm for American students, so too did familiarity with Shakespeare, a secondary school phenomenon that began in the last century and that is still going strong today.

Widespread acquaintance with Shakespeare's work and the highbrow tone associated with it have made Shakespeare a natural box office attraction. The movies capitalized on it — witness Mickey Rooney as Puck in the Hollywood *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1933. After World War II, New York founded its own summer Shakespeare festival and other cities followed suit. Especially worth noting are Ashland, Oregon, and Stratford, Ontario. Stratford, at least, had its name going for it when the town fathers decided to initiate a festival in the late 1940s. And they had the prestige of Tyrone Guthrie to boot. At the same time, Ashland had only a visionary named Angus Bowmer and an empty chataqua amphitheatre. Now Stratford boasts not one but several permanent theatres and a booming tourist industry. And Ashland, with three theatres associated with the festival, has become a summer artists' colony that draws people from all over the country — at latest count there were another *nine* theatres in a town with only 15,000 year-round residents!

Looking around the country at the twentieth century draws to a close, one sees Shakespeare taught in virtually every high school, often with the aid of video performances. We see audiences numbering hundreds of thousands flocking to summer festivals, Broadway and college productions of Shakespeare. Indeed, if one broadcasts Shakespeare on television, a new *Hamlet* was telecast this Fall, and chances are copies will be made for the family's video library. It is doubtless possible to live in some parts of the United States without hearing about Shakespeare from one end of the year to the next, but it would not be easy.

2. **Granted Shakespeare's centrality to American culture and education, then, what are the newest developments in performance, scholarship, and teaching?**

I take performance up first. At the turn of the century the ideal Shakespeare production featured realistic sets and costumes done in the period in which the play was set—togias and fluted columns in the Forum in *Julius Caesar*, for instance, a barren heath for *Macbeth*, and so on. Nowadays the setting could just as easily be abstract and timeless, or another time and place—as in the famous voodoo *Macbeth* Orson Welles staged in New York the 1930s. Nowadays no one knows *what* to expect in terms of setting and costume. That's part of the fun. Topless *Macbeth* at CSF, what audiences *can* expect is that the production will strive to present the play as fresh, even when that means anachronism; that the text will be nearly uncut, and the action will go forward with a minimum of interruptions for set changes—the last two principles derived from scholarship that showed Shakespeare's practice. And of course we can expect that every television and film star will aspire to «do» Shakespeare, from Dustin Hoffman to *Top Gun's* Val Kilmer. At the Shakespeare play one can expect to see people prepared to enjoy themselves, relaxed and easy-going, not anxiously awaiting a grand event.

Shakespeare scholarship today is no less varied than the styles of Shakespearean production. For a useful compendium turn to «The Year's Work in Shakespeare Studies» in *Shakespeare Survey* or, for more detail, to the annual bibliographies of *Shakespeare Quarterly*. There one may expect to encounter research along traditional lines, investigating the historical and literary contexts of Shakespeare. The «new historicism», as it has been termed, is busy re-evaluating and questioning earlier assumptions about society and politics in Shakespeare's time and in his plays. The discovery of the foundations of the Globe and Rose theatres in London two years ago has given a sharp injection of new information into speculative questions that were once thought to be beyond proof. We now have a much better idea of the dimensions and layout of those Shakespearean theatres. Pressing further amidst contemporary Shakespearean scholarship, one may discern other special approaches—feminists have scrutinized the plays of late, as have Marxists, deconstructionists, and semiologists. One hears little about patterns of imagery these days, much about paternalism, dialectic, signifiers, signs, and other concepts in the contemporary critical lexicon. Of these concerns, the ones that most consistently leap from the pages of learned journals to heated discussion in conferences and classrooms are those having to do with Shakespeare's portrayal of women.

Yet perhaps the greatest change in Shakespeare scholarship over the past two decades has been the avid scholarly interest in Shakespeare in performance, whether one means by «performance» the study of actual perfor-

mances in theatre history, performances staged in the mind's eye, or verbal reconstructions of performances as they might have been staged in Shakespeare's Globe theatre. No longer are Shakespeare's works treated as closet drama to be read and understood principally as literary texts. They are to be understood as scripts for performance.

The tacit assumption that Shakespeare's plays must be encountered as both drama and theatre underlies so much of today's scholarship that it is worth a moment to pause and consider. In earlier centuries, the division between text and script or drama and theatre in Shakespeare could not have been greater. One text appeared in print—sometimes censored to remove the bawdry, otherwise complete. A very different one was enacted onstage; in the eighteenth century revised outright, in the nineteenth, shortened and rearranged to allow for changes of the cumbersome scenery. In our times the stage and the study have come together: in its own way the theatre has dropped traditional stagings in favor of contemporary interpretations a la modern dress, even as it has embraced the scholars' insistence on continuous staging and a space approximating the Globe theatre's thrust stage, two entrances, and an upper acting area. And on its part, literary criticism has come more and more to focus on staging—investigating the plays' rich theatre history, reconstructing their staging in the Globe, or investigating their stage dynamics in space and time. Even when a critical question is not directed towards matters of stagecraft, as often as not, literary scholars will include in their analyses a consideration of staging. Not surprisingly, this interest has carried over into the classroom.

Perhaps it was the insistence on «relevance» by the earnest students of the late 1960s (I was one of them) that shifted the teaching of Shakespeare away from line-by-line analysis—translation or paraphrase might better describe it—and the production of student papers recapitulating the findings of scholars: source studies, patterns of imagery, and the like. Students asked, «What has this got to do with today?» One response was to direct paper topics towards current events, not always an easy analogy given the very different politics of Renaissance England and modern America.

In the 1970s and 1980s came the movement to engage students through acting and rehearsal exercises, transforming them from passive listeners to active doers. Across the country, Shakespeare teachers began to emphasize reading Shakespeare aloud with expression, often asking their students to «perform» in a rudimentary way. At the annual meetings of the Shakespeare Association of America, actors from the Stratford Festival or the Royal Shakespeare Company demonstrated their art and answered questions about it. Workshops for college and high school teachers encouraged them to experiment more with performances by students in the classroom. So too, teachers began to integrate the viewing of Shakespeare films into their class schedules, in the meantime opening «Shakespeare on film» as a new area for critical analysis. All this was already going on when in 1978 the BBC

and the United States Public Broadcasting Service announced the grand plan to produce and telecast all of Shakespeare's plays.

The result, over seven years, was a virtual flood of Shakespeare on television. Time-Life Television marketed the video tapes and soon they were standard fare in high schools and public libraries throughout the country. For the first two years, a National Advisory Committee of educators (on which I served), helped to produce teaching materials to accompany the broadcasts; these were sent to every high school in the United States. Other materials made possible «telecourses» —courses taught by correspondence with the broadcasts as an integral part of the course material. It would not be an overstatement to say that, for both Shakespeare teachers and for the larger society, Shakespeare in America today is alive and thriving.

**3. How do these developments impinge on the interests and concerns of the Association, that is, what practical suggestions can I offer to my colleagues here based upon my experience with Shakespeare in America?**

By way of a beginning, a beginning that I look forward to extending in informal conversation during the course of these meetings, let me take the shortest way and look at the Shakespeare course that I have designed and used for the past several years. A copy of the syllabus is in your handouts.

As you can see, it incorporates the reading of nine Shakespeare plays with classroom lectures and discussions. These lead in turn to papers by students on a variety of literary topics that students propose and I approve. «Is Hamlet truly mad?» for instance, or «Why are the young women in Shakespeare's comedies so often disguised as young men?» Ten pages of typewritten analysis is the minimum. «Open rehearsals» in class begin to get students out of their seats and trying out the plays in performance. «The director's notebooks», usually prepared by groups of four or five students, provide an opportunity to work on the staging of a scene on paper.

As the course enters the final weeks, the emphasis shifts from discussion to doing. The director's notebooks are presented to the class. From the BBC Shakespeare we view those scenes that the class performed did as open rehearsals. Students form «acting groups» and choose scenes to prepare, thereby actively making Shakespeare part of their own experience. To encourage a sense of group identity members sit together and choose a group name, usually something whimsical like «The Pretenders,» in homage to the rock group; or, say, «the English Theatre Company», ETC. for short. In my lectures I try to address the larger context of the Shakespeare experience—the history of Shakespeare onstage and in print. Then, at the end of the term we have the Acting Projects, a festive evening of Shakespeare that brings the



course to a close. (Let there be no mistake, it is not all play. There are quizzes, hourlies and a final examination as well).

The aim of the course is to help students understand and enjoy Shakespeare's plays. Although it uses the concepts of literary analysis and the techniques of performance, the course does not seek to produce Shakespearean scholars or actors. Rather it tries to open wide the doors to a full appreciation of the plays, putting its students firmly and confidently on one of the pieces of common ground that our society shares. And it works, year in and year out. I am reminded of its success when I receive, as I do again and again, a postcard from some distant Shakespeare festival. Years after graduation they write, usually just a few words: «I made it. It's great. Thanks.»

How happy for Michael Mullin, you are probably thinking to yourselves, but what has it to do with what I do in my teaching and research? The answer to that question I cannot presume to know. Yet I *can* suggest that, scaled back to allow for the difficulties of working in a foreign language, many of the activities I have described are applicable across cultures. Certainly the shift of emphasis from the teacher imparting an interpretation to the student formulating a personal interpretation and then expressing it through acting can begin just as soon as the meaning of a speech or scene is clear. The staging of a scene —with costumes, setting, lighting, and stage directions— leads directly to questions of interpretation —why is Hamlet dressed in black? The use of videotaped performances, now widely available, can bring the theatre into the classroom.

«Not of an age», Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare, «but for all time». The experience of Shakespeare's plays in America argues strongly that, rather than being an *English* author, Shakespeare is equally an *American* author, as he is, indeed a *world* author. If we can help our students to understand that world better, we will be better teachers. To that end, I urge the Association to keep Shakespeare at the heart of its teaching and research, thereby to remain true to a heritage that spans centuries, cultures, and continents. Thank you.

