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Introduction: The Global Origins of Shakespeare Studies

“[He] mines my gentility with my education”
As You Like It (1.1.18)

During the past decade, the study of English and history at the collegiate level has fallen by a full third. Humanities enrollment in the United States has declined over all by seventeen per cent... What’s going on?

Nathan Heller, *The New Yorker*, February 2023

What’s going on indeed. The well-known dispute that begins *As You Like It* between Orlando and his brother revolves around education, something that he feels is fundamental to his proper upbringing as a gentleman, to his gentility. The genteel instruction that Orlando speaks of here is something that we have referred to for centuries as humanism, and for almost as long Shakespeare has been considered central to a humanistic education. Over the last few decades, however, we have been inundated from both within and outside academic institutions with declamations that the humanities are in decline, that the genteel, diverse, and well-rounded education so important to Orlando is no longer understood as essential to a populace increasingly reliant on science and technology. Nathan Heller’s “The End of the English Major” is only the latest of what have become sadly familiar prognostications.

While there is little doubt that the humanities are in decline, are we also witnessing the demise of Shakespearean education? The current health and breadth of organizations like the International Shakespeare Association and publications like this journal may suggest otherwise, and instead attest to a robust international culture of Shakespeare teaching and scholarship—implying that, perhaps, Shakespeare is doing quite well in the current educational climate. Pronouncements like Heller’s, I think, are not wrong; they

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are well-researched and we ought to take them seriously. They do, however, fail to account for the unique, expansive, and global dimensions of Shakespeare study. Assessing the current state of Shakespeare studies therefore requires a more international perspective and one that turns not to a hypothetical future, but to the origins of Shakespeare studies in various national cultures, academic disciplines, and educational institutions throughout the world; by looking backward perhaps we can more easily predict future disciplinary trends. How did Shakespeare enter global circulation on such a mass scale, allowing for the establishment of formal organs of teaching and research in so many different nations? How has a majority of the world's population accrued at least a passing familiarity with Shakespeare? Perhaps most importantly, how did Shakespeare come to enter curricula and permeate academic institutions in such diverse global educational traditions?

Recent studies have attempted to diagnose the current crisis in literary studies, explicitly linking its current institutional precarity with their formation over century ago. John Guillory, for instance, has incisively identified a peculiar disjunction between literary scholarship's character as both an academic discipline organized around an identifiable field of study and shared methodologies, as well as a profession that demarcates credentialed experts qualified to engage in it. On this account, the present demise in literary studies, and the consternation among its practitioners, has occurred because the still vibrant profession of literary teaching and scholarship now presides over a discipline that has lost considerable purchase among the general public (Guillory 24-27). Shakespeare studies may not always take on the specific disciplinary cast that Guillory describes, but it nevertheless plays a signal role in humanities education and has in some ways become a synecdoche for literary studies in general—even if, in many parts of the world, teaching Shakespeare does not always take place in dedicated Departments of English.

Because Shakespeare studies necessarily integrates important elements of performance and popular culture, it also stands as something of an anomaly among the more familiar histories of literary study. These important differences may speak to Shakespeare's enduring educational value and malleability in a scholastic climate where the role of the humanities has diminished, but it also alerts us to multiple potential origination narratives, ones that differ from more familiar accounts by Guillory, Gerald Graff, and others that offer a trenchant overview of literary studies more generally but do not account for the unique position of Shakespeare who straddles several distinct disciplines with widely different professional conventions and expectations.

Just as the subject of Shakespeare and education has become heavily scrutinized, situating the plays in an international context is also commonplace. These studies, however, typically centre on performance, propaganda, and geopolitical conflict without accounting for the basic curricular infrastructure

necessary for citizens to achieve sufficient familiarity with Shakespeare to make the drama useful in other aesthetic or political contexts. Dennis Kennedy's collection *Foreign Shakespeare* (1993) is a groundbreaking forerunner in this regard, but it misses an important point that the essays in this issue continually turn to: the mechanisms of Shakespearean education that evolved in various countries were largely attempts to domesticate Shakespeare. For instance, in calling Shakespeare *ganz unser* ('entirely ours') August Wilhelm Schlegel seems to be trying to eradicate Shakespeare's foreignness and suggest that knowing Shakespeare is in some way vital to embracing a *German* heritage. In this way, Shakespeare gains currency as a potentially unifying figure in a globalized cultural economy and as a figurehead for more parochial national and regional concerns.

Deliberately adopting a broader perspective than most disciplinary histories, the essays in this issue trace the origins of Shakespeare Studies across various nations. They also canvass and interrogate the diverse methodologies that scholars use to study the plays, and how these variegated approaches have made Shakespeare so malleable and adaptable to various national and ethnic traditions. Earlier generations of commentators stressed Shakespeare's universality; these essays focus on his particularity. These papers demonstrate what Michael Bristol has called Shakespeare's "uncommon capacity to represent the complex pathos" (130) of modern life. They show how situating Shakespeare in an increasingly globalized environment works not to unify the plays into a univocal set of meanings, but allows for a proliferation of interpretations to suit distinct ideological and political agendas unique to specific nations at various stages in their history—something especially conspicuous when considering Shakespeare education in distinct national contexts.

Collectively, these papers recognize that Shakespeare's plays are formally studied and taught in almost every country in the world, but the authors also acknowledge that the ways that Shakespeare entered academic culture differs radically based on discrete local and historical circumstances. For instance, while it might seem natural that Shakespeare is almost universally studied in the United Kingdom based on his status as the 'national poet,' his institutional stature in other countries is more puzzling. While various forms of colonialism might explain his educational positioning throughout the commonwealth, what about countries like the United States that for well over a century defined itself against England? Perhaps more importantly, how has Shakespeare become an indispensable part of academic culture in nations that don't share an Anglophone heritage? These essays seek to canvass the various ways that Shakespeare studies, and different approaches to Shakespeare, emerged throughout the world in an effort to understand the vigorous academic commitment to Shakespeare in various nations. In other words, this issue focuses on the infrastructure that allowed for the development of the global Shakespeare we celebrate today.

Taken together, these papers explore the development of Shakespeare scholarship and teaching in multiple national and transnational circumstances. They trace Shakespeare's place in the curricula in different countries; explore the figures instrumental in making Shakespeare studies plausible, possible, and desirable; and examine the different emphases in Shakespeare scholarship in various cultural traditions. While no single volume could offer an exhaustive account of the international prominence of Shakespeare studies, the essays included here offer a remarkable geographical and methodological sampling of the history of the institutions, people, and ideas that have made Shakespeare's plays a vital global currency to interrogate everything from critical theory, to cultural autonomy, and even political revolution.

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