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From Metaphor to Metonym: Shakespearean Recognition in the United States University

Abstract: This essay historicizes the Shakespeare curriculum at UC Berkeley’s English department over the last one hundred years. An elite research university in the United States, UC Berkeley’s extensive course offerings have expanded due to changes in undergraduate education and external cultural shifts. With a growing number of courses on sexuality, race, gender, etc., that became part of the purview of an English department, the teaching of Shakespeare expanded as well. I demonstrate how the emphasis on Shakespeare in the U.S. undergraduate curriculum shifts over time from one form of recognition—an acknowledgement of his value or worth—to a recognition of identifying with his work based on prior experience. Distinguishing between courses that combine “Shakespeare and” and those that combine “Literature and,” I expose the consequences each has for the canonicity of both Shakespeare and subject fields with which his works are placed in conversation, explicitly and implicitly. I argue that the expansion of Shakespeare in the American undergraduate curriculum coincides with and depends on the compression of key aspects of interpretation that pose challenges for the new knowledges it seeks to create. I illuminate how an expanded Shakespeare curriculum saw a compression of Shakespeare into metonymic mythic status, which has implications for the teaching of literature from various identity and cultural groups. I demonstrate how the origins of an expansive undergraduate Shakespeare curriculum in the United States positions Shakespeare as the interlocutor for a wide range of topics.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Berkeley, college curriculum, English major, canonization, recognition, metonym

At the first meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) in 1973, scholar R.L. Widmann chaired a panel entitled, “Shakespeare and the Computer” (“Shakespeare Association of America”). The scholars on the panel delivered

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papers about how this once-modern technology could be used in conjunction with Shakespeare Studies. Amidst panels about pedagogy, textual studies, and various critical approaches, this forward-looking panel put Shakespeare in conversation with a twentieth-century invention, ostensibly to create new knowledges about Shakespeare, computers, or the conjunction of the two. By 1976, SAA included panels and discussions on psychology, film, translation, and international Shakespeares.

Today, Shakespeare Studies has expanded well beyond the purview of early modern literature, theatre, and culture to place Shakespeare in conversation with new theories, technologies, methodologies, and cultural perspectives—just about anything. This paper examines the origins of an expansive undergraduate Shakespeare curriculum in the United States and how it positions Shakespeare as *the* interlocutor for a wide range of topics. In the United States, Shakespeare Studies has been largely located in English departments, with Theatre departments founded from the mid-nineteenth century forward as professional schools, oftentimes structurally and theoretically distinct. While numerous factors outside undergraduate education inform Shakespeare’s status within U.S. educational culture, the expansion that a wide-ranging undergraduate Shakespeare curriculum fosters is simultaneously a compression of Shakespearean meaning that extends the reach of his canonicity. I argue that the expansion of Shakespeare in the American undergraduate curriculum coincides with—and in fact depends on—the compression of key aspects of interpretation that pose challenges for the new knowledges it seeks to create.¹ This has come about, I argue, as the teaching of Shakespeare has harnessed his global and long-term cultural authority to use the plays to teach “Shakespeare and” an ensemble of other subjects—often to the benefit of both, but not without a diminution of meaning.

From Metaphor to Metonym

In Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974 in Spanish, 1979 in English), he credits Shakespeare with moving away from typology and abstraction to characterization (Boal 64). The early modern idea of personation “was a new form of characterization” (Mullaney 102), and today’s acting approaches to Shakespeare align with Boal’s contention and depict Shakespeare’s characters

¹ Scholars have argued that newer theoretical lenses depend on a compression of possible interpretive meanings of Shakespeare’s works. For example, in 1993, Paul A. Cantor declaimed the resulting minimization of Shakespeare’s universality as a consequence of New Historicism.

through “emotional-realist acting” (Mazer).² Boal’s assertion that the poetical construction of Shakespeare’s characters allows for more rounded characters than those of his predecessors has been the subject of much scholarship and one of the reasons for Shakespeare’s enduring popularity in the theatre and on film.

But by the twenty-first century, and especially for students, Shakespeare’s characters have colloquially become metonym for the abstract: Romeo as love or young love, Othello as jealousy, Hamlet as indecision. These concepts are not monolithic; Guisela Latorre defines abstraction as “not a unitary concept, but a situation of malleable and situated knowledges adaptable to our individual and subjective collectivities” (Gutierrez). Interpretations of these characters’ primary attributes have shifted over time, as Shakespeare’s plays moved beyond vehicles used in the classroom to teach moral, rhetorical, and poetical excellence to metonym of what his characters, his stories, and his own persona represents today.

The abstracted and somewhat simplistic shorthand that Shakespeare connotes today developed gradually over the last century. This dualistic expansion of Shakespeare into all modes of narrative while simultaneously compressing interpretations of his works stems from a desire for recognition. Recognition has two primary definitions: acknowledgement of value or worth and the identification of someone or something based on prior experience.³ The initial draw for Shakespeare’s inclusion in the undergraduate curriculum in the U.S. was due largely to the former definition; this value is crucial to Shakespeare as canonical.⁴ But what has developed over time is primarily the latter form of recognition. As Shakespeare is taught in high schools and even in some elementary schools, and adapted to be performed for younger audiences, by the time students reach the university level, he is both familiar to students yet retains an elevated status, causing many university instructors to negotiate prior instructors’ Shakespearean teachings—challenging students with new and unfamiliar interpretations—in a recursive cycle of learning and re-learning.⁵

² Mazer’s critique of “Stanislavski 2.0” addresses the consequences of such acting approaches for Shakespeare. See also Dawson on early modern personation.

³ Per *The Oxford English Dictionary*, these are the “Acknowledgement of something as true, valid, legal, or worthy of consideration” (“recognition” 3a), and “The action or an act of identifying a person or thing from a previous encounter or knowledge” (“recognition” 8a).

⁴ Aleida Assmann notes, “Elements of the canon are marked by three qualities: selection, value, and duration.” (100).

⁵ See Burton, Coeyman, and Haughey for Shakespeare in secondary education. To note, Shakespeare is the only author who is required in Common Core standards, which were adopted for California secondary education in 2010. When people other than Shakespeare scholars say they are familiar with Shakespeare, they are often referring to at most eight of his plays.

I turn my attention here to the origins, and consequences, of an expanded Shakespeare curriculum that over the last century saw a compression of Shakespeare into metonymic mythic status.

To evaluate this premise, I look to the curricular changes within the English department at the University of California, Berkeley, over the last one hundred years as an indicator of cultural shifts in undergraduate education on Shakespeare. The University of California, Berkeley, was established in 1868 as the original University of California. As one of ten campuses in today's University of California system, it stands alongside UCLA (Los Angeles), UCSD (San Diego), and UCI (Irvine) as consistently one of the top-ranked universities and always among the preeminent public universities in the country. Notably, Berkeley is one of the few top twenty-five English departments to still require Shakespeare for undergraduate majors, as it has for over one hundred years.⁶ With a lengthy history (by American terms) and a large undergraduate population, the changes in curriculum over the last century provide a window into the motivations and consequences for the position of Shakespeare in the American undergraduate curriculum, even in departments without Berkeley's reputation and breadth of course offerings.

Using changes in undergraduate education as an insight into larger cultural consequences is laden with methodological pitfalls.⁷ With over 2,800 four-year colleges and universities (those that grant an undergraduate Bachelor's degree), generalisations about American undergraduate education are often comprised of conventional (and oftentimes faulty) anecdotes that cannot and should not be extrapolated to all U.S. colleges and universities.⁸

⁶ "Of the top twenty-five national universities (as ranked in the *U.S. News and World Report*), only Harvard and Berkeley explicitly require Shakespeare, and of the top twenty-five liberal-arts colleges, only Wellesley and the US Naval Academy do so" (Maxwell 67).

⁷ For this reason, scholarship on Shakespeare curricula often focuses on a singular university. See *Shakespeare on the University Stage* (ed. Andrew James Hartley) for many excellent examples of this type of research. In 1997, Bruce R. Smith evaluated the changes to the curriculum, the rationale for those changes, and the (sometimes adversarial) responses to the changes during his twenty-five years as a professor at Georgetown University. More recently, in 2020, Lynn Maxwell writes about teaching Shakespeare at Spelman College, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and historicizes a professor's rationale for teaching Shakespeare to Atlanta University students more than one hundred years earlier. For a history of how Shakespeare criticism became part of academic scholarship in the United States, see Bayer.

⁸ Paul Menzer refers collectively to "Campus Shakespeare" based on anecdotal suppositions about the entirety of U.S. university curricula.

My attention to Berkeley is twofold: to investigate its curricular changes as a top-tier research intensive university that has had a Shakespeare requirement for English majors for over a century, and to mark how strategies for “Shakespeare and” within university curricula became an origin point for Shakespeare’s metonymic value in US culture. Resources and curricula vary drastically by state with public universities reliant on state funds and significant government pressure to reduce student tuition while private universities have a considerable donor base and the latitude to charge significantly higher tuition. Other factors that influence curricula include the resources of public state university systems, the presence of two-year colleges that award Associates’ degrees and enable Bachelors’ students to complete lower-division requirements at a fraction of the cost, the cost of housing and expenses in the location of the university, and the value of the Arts and Humanities to university administration. Again, Berkeley is an anomaly based on the size of its English department, its national ranking, and its Shakespeare requirement and course offerings, but it provides a long-form case study of how Shakespeare’s purview within the English major can work alongside a growing and diverse curriculum.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the importance of individual scholars who have comprised the faculty at Berkeley over the years.⁹ In the United States, the curriculum is developed and approved by the faculty with near-absolute autonomy for the selection of readings, assessment, and teaching methods. Yet it would be methodologically questionable to ascribe sustained changes in curriculum and influence over the direction of the undergraduate major to any one faculty member, and perhaps even to a group of faculty, in isolation from larger changes to the department, university, literary studies, and artistic and theoretical movements—though several of Berkeley’s faculty founded and shaped these movements. Not all faculty have ongoing, direct influence over departmental course offerings, teach their areas of specialisation, or make their research explicit in the undergraduate classroom.¹⁰ Even at elite universities, faculty are not immune from national disciplinary trends; the way they stay elite is by not straying too far from the current norm, even if they gain the reputation for being trendsetters.

⁹ Some notable long-time faculty focused on early modern studies and/or critical theory from the last fifty years include: Janet Adelman, Joel Altman, Stephen Booth, Joel Fineman, Stanley Fish, Catherine Gallagher, Stephen Greenblatt, Jeffrey Knapp, Sharon Marcus, Stephen Orgel, Norman Rabkin, and Hugh Richmond. Alan Nelson became involved with Shakespeare studies after retirement.

¹⁰ I can attest to this in the specific case of Berkeley. I attended Berkeley in the mid/late 1990s and earned my BA in English in this department. I took undergraduate courses with Janet Adelman, Joel Altman, and Stephen Booth.

UC Berkeley English: The Early Twentieth Century

In the first half of the twentieth century, undergraduate education in the United States served vastly different goals than it does today. But Shakespeare was always part of the curriculum at Berkeley. The 1910 course catalogue from UC Berkeley lists one upper-division Shakespeare class, 117D—Studies in Shakespeare. It included just three plays for the ten-week course: *King Lear*, *Henry IV*, and *All's Well That Ends Well* (1910-11, 78). By 1915, there were two quarters of reading and interpretation of Shakespearean plays offered, 117C and 117D, covering twelve plays (1915-16, 113). At this early juncture, the number of upper-division Shakespeare electives—easily more than any other singular author—foreshadowed his position in the curriculum for the next century. In 1922, the upper-division electives morphed into 117J, described as “Shakespeare’s development and characteristics as a dramatist; the relation of his work to the Elizabethan theatre and to contemporary thought and literature; the text of Shakespeare” (1922-23, 99). An additional course, 117I, “Reading and analysis of 15 plays” was temporarily introduced in the mid-1930s as a precursor to 117J (1935-36, 235). This suggests a deep textual understanding of his dramatic literature was considered a vital prerequisite to understanding his works in the larger context of early modern theatre and culture, and to the larger genre of dramatic literature.

In 1922, Shakespeare became a requirement for English majors at Berkeley; all undergraduate English majors were required to take 117S during their junior (third) year. By placing Shakespeare as a centrepiece of upper-division coursework, one might infer four key assumptions about Shakespearean recognition and canonicity at this time. First, it positions him as aspirational—the study of Shakespeare requires the completion of lower-division courses, and it can only be entered into after a baseline familiarity with other writers. Second, it sets the standard for *how* to read in upper-division courses, no matter the genre, time period, or subject matter—Shakespeare becomes the template for advanced literary study. Third, it establishes the model for in-depth study of a single author. And finally, the requirement marks a point of commonality among all English majors at the same juncture in their literary studies, suggesting that Shakespeare is a benchmark for aptitude required before any further study.

A few years after Shakespeare was made a requirement for English majors, in 1925, the department introduced an upper-division Shakespeare course specifically for non-English majors, Course 117E—Shakespeare, “Lectures on fifteen plays of Shakespeare,” (1925-26, 106), which remained in the curriculum until 2003. This disabuses the perception that the student of English is the *only* student qualified to study Shakespeare, and at the same time, it distinguishes the capability and expectations of the student of English from those

in any other major: it generates and responds to interest from the larger student population that a Liberal Arts education offers advanced Shakespeare to everyone, and it suggests that some familiarity with Shakespeare is beneficial to all undergraduates. But the inclusion of this second course also speaks to Shakespeare's perceived difficulty: any undergraduate might study Shakespeare, but only specially trained English majors might become proficient in this subject. The course material was delivered via lecture without a stated limit on the number of students in contrast to 117S, a restricted course for English majors, limited to forty students per section. The department understandably reserved a smaller faculty-to-student ratio for their majors, and in so doing, made the Shakespeare course for non-majors less interactive through lecture-style delivery, a model of learning that involves a more passive listener rather than an engaged seminar discussion.

In 1944, Shakespeare electives consisted of two quarters of Shakespeare, 117A-117B, described as "Lectures on the entire works of Shakespeare, including nondramatic poems. Open to both majors and nonmajors. 117A is not a prerequisite to 117B" (1944-45, 256). That year, the required junior-year course ceased to be the mandatory Shakespeare class. It was reformulated as ENGLISH 100: Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism, I and II, and limited to twenty students per section. Along with the change to the junior seminar, the senior seminar became an intensive single or dual author course, which remained intact until 1988. In 1943-44, seniors could choose from a course on either Milton or Chaucer. In 1944-45, they could choose from the following: Milton and Donne, Shakespeare, Chaucer, or Yeats. Only Shakespeare was offered twice during the academic year.

The options for the senior seminar focused largely on pre-twentieth-century authors. In 1960, Milton and Chaucer were each taught six times, Shakespeare and "Contemporary Authors" each taught twice, and all other authors taught once. By 1970, the single-author as a capstone-style course was waning: Shakespeare was taught twice, Chaucer and Milton each taught once, but "Major Authors" was taught all three quarters. In 1980, Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare were each taught once. In 1988, the single-author senior seminar was replaced by English 150, which is described as "Senior Seminar. Mandatory. Topics will vary" (1988-89, 187). The new Senior Seminars were small discussion-based courses, often centred on the faculty member's area of speciality, and they exited the curriculum sometime between 2007-11.

English 117J was a course number that ran consistently in the 1920s through 1940s, and it shifted in focus with the fluctuations and additions of the other courses on Shakespeare. When it reappeared in 1953, it was described as "Studies of selected plays, with practice in various critical approaches; e.g., establishing text, relations to source, changing concepts of comedy and tragedy, *influence of physical conditions on technique*" (my emphasis) (1953-54, 158).

This marks a turn away from formalist and New Critical approaches that focused strictly on the text of the plays to increased attention to performance/literary genres and a turn to more materialist concerns and the intersection with Shakespeare and other subjects. This amounted to a diminished emphasis on idealist and humanistic notions that art makes people better, or poetry can improve a person and began to acknowledge the political, social, and economic circumstances under which certain works attained their revered status. Predating the advent of New Historicism, Ethnic Studies, and even the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, the approach taken in 117J departs from a reverential value-based form of recognition toward a more recursive acknowledgement that diverse and multiple disciplinary concerns might shed light on Shakespeare (and vice-versa), whether they be historical-cultural contexts or critical and theoretical approaches originating in other disciplines.

Expansion: The Later 20th Century

The San Francisco Bay Area was home to much political activism in the 1960s and 1970s, and UC Berkeley was central to that agitation. The Free Speech Movement (1964-65) on Berkeley's campus drew national attention, the Black Panther Party was founded in adjacent Oakland in 1966, and the Delano Grape Strike (1965-70) in central California drew attention to El Movimiento, the Chicano civil rights movement. The assassination of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968 coincided with protests against the Vietnam Conflict (1955-1975) that escalated during this time. The first Ethnic Studies department in the United States was founded at San Francisco State University in March 1969, and UC Berkeley established theirs later that year.

In 1976, the English department added a number of "Literature and" upper-division courses, including Literature and Arts, Psychology, Popular Culture, Philosophy, Science Fiction, and Literature and the Supernatural. In the mid-1970s-80s, the early years of film theory and computer technology reached the English department; new classes included The Language and Literature of Films beginning in 1976-77 and a course on Computers in the Humanities: Literary Applications beginning in 1984-85. The expansion of topics for the study of English also extended to the introduction of courses that explicitly addressed identity groups. Beginning in 1970, Berkeley's English department offered an upper-division course on Black Literature. The first course in the department to address literature from a racially specific group, it was several years before it was joined by courses on Women Writers, Literature and Sexual Identity (both first taught in 1976), American Studies (1984), and Studies in Third World Literatures in English (1985). More cultural studies-centred upper-division courses were introduced in 1991-93 including Literature of American Cultures, The Cultures of English, and Studies in World Literature in English,

and a lower-division class in Multicultural Literary Perspectives. These courses were all optional compared to the mandatory Shakespeare requirement and breadth of Shakespearean offerings, suggesting that Shakespeare was not positioned to directly absorb a myriad of topics but instead that students could draw connections, if they wished, across their classes.

In 2001, Black Literature was expanded to three additional upper-division courses, African American Literature and Culture Before 1917, African American Literature and Culture Since 1917, and Topics in African American Literature and Culture. By 2005, lower-division classes on African American literature and culture and Chicana/o literature and culture were added, along with three upper-division Chicana literature classes that followed the model of African American Literature: Chicana/o Literature and Culture to 1910, Chicana/o Literature and Culture Since 1910, and Topics in Chicana/o Literature and Culture. In 2017, a Special Topics course on Literatures of the Asian Diaspora in America was first offered, and in 2019, Asian American Literature and Culture were introduced at both upper and lower-divisions along with Literature and Disability in 2005. The addition of multiple classes for both Black and Chicana literatures somewhat mirrors the canonization process previously reserved for Shakespeare, with both lower and upper-division courses in the same subject of study.

The inclusion of the identity-based courses had important consequences for the teaching of Shakespeare. Rather than being excised from the roster of required courses, Shakespeare expanded along with the reach of diverse literatures, maintaining his presence in a growing department that embraced a wide range of knowledges. By this time, Shakespeare could be studied for perceived aesthetic and humanistic value of the plays and poetry, or with the premise that “Shakespeare and” elevates a topic and simultaneously widens Shakespeare’s purview—just as “Literature and” invigorates the English department with cultural studies methods.

Within Berkeley’s English department, Shakespeare studies branched out to different media with classes on film and theatre, both of which still exist today. In 1974, Shakespeare and Film (117F) was an ancillary course of only two hours per week—barely enough time to watch an entire movie—tacked on to the textual study of Shakespeare.¹¹ Two years prior to the addition of the

¹¹ The film major for undergraduates was founded in 1976 “in response to demands by undergraduates to be able to major in Film” (“Film and Media at Berkeley”). It is important to note that Berkeley’s film department writes its history through the literary lens—“During the period of rapid expansion in the academic study of film nationwide, Berkeley film culture continued to make its mark. In the early 1970s, three major film *journals* (my emphasis) were founded ... which opened film studies to the intellectual currents of structuralism, semiology, feminism, and Marxism” (“Film and Media at Berkeley”).

course on The Language and Literature of Films, Shakespearean films were worthy of their own course, but only when studied in conjunction with the primary texts. Described as “[s]tudies in filmed versions of Shakespeare’s plays. Discussions and analysis of films; cinematic techniques; relationship of film techniques to interpretation of dramatic texts. The course will be offered in conjunction with a regular course in Shakespeare, and enrolment will be limited to students concurrently enrolled in the lecture course” (1974-75, 267). By 1980, 117F became a stand-alone course, of four to four and a half hours per week. The course involved textual analysis, the growing fields of film theory and adaptation studies, and was described as “[c]lose study of the texts and of films based on 8-10 plays. Lectures will emphasize the critical implications of transposing plays to film” (1980-81, 138). Yet the study of cinematic narrative structures through Shakespearean storytelling was not the primary goal. Instead, “the goal of the course” was the “critical understanding of Shakespeare, and the course satisfies the departmental requirement of a course in Shakespeare in the major” (1980-81, 138). Unlike the earlier version designed to focus on cinematic techniques, here the objective was to utilize film as a technological-pedagogical tool for the literary analysis of Shakespeare. Shakespeare and Film ran until 1995, and a wider range of non-Shakespearean courses on film appeared on the course roster beginning in 2013.

Another important shift was an emphasis on theatrical practice. Although since 1953, 117J had focused on the “influence of physical conditions on technique,” (1953-54, 158) in 1970, that part of the course description changed to “influence of theatrical conditions on technique” (1970-71, 320). The remainder of the course description retained the language of its 1955 precursor. Both theatre and film—actual avenues of performing dramatic literature—were secondary to textual study. Following the introduction of Shakespeare and Film in 1974, Shakespeare in the Theatre (117T) became a course offering in 1975. It took up both early modern and twentieth-century performance, and it was described as “[t]he interrelation of Elizabethan plays and stage practices. Classroom exercises, written assignments, and a final examination” (1975-76, 89). Like the film class, it was introduced as a two- or two-and-a-half-hour class, and students had to have taken or be taking 117A, 117B, or 117S to have permission to enrol. After several fluctuations, 117U was retired after the 1981-82 year, and 117T became a stand-alone class that later involved student performance as well as textual study.¹²

¹² I took this course in 1998 with Stephen Booth. We read only one play, *Twelfth Night*, and no criticism or theory, over fifteen weeks. All students had to perform in one of two casts, the full production of the show (which was cast as all-female, due to the high number of women in the course) and the “Ren Run” or cue-to-cue production,

Unlike courses on literatures of identity groups that remained distinct from Shakespeare—both granting these literatures autonomy from Shakespeare and implying that early modern dramatic literature and contemporary conversations about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality need not intersect with his works—performance and media forms entered into the curriculum as appendages to the literary study of Shakespeare. In addition to departments devoted to theatre and film that were formed and expanded during this time,¹³ these disciplines gained credibility as subjects within the English department ostensibly due to their introduction via Shakespeare. Further, Shakespeare's expansion into various narrative forms such as film and media insinuate the possibility, even the desirability, of his expansion to race, gender, and sexuality at the curricular level.

In 1983, when Berkeley transitioned to the ten-week semester, they introduced a lower-division course on Shakespeare, students could then fulfil the Shakespeare requirement in lower-division coursework, thereby opening up space in upper-division to focus on other writers or genres. By 1985, several other Renaissance/early modern classes had been added and the upper-division Shakespeare course offerings included 117A, 117B, 117J, and 117S, as well as Shakespeare and film (117F) and Shakespeare and Theatre (117T), and Shakespeare for non-majors (117E). Since then, the Shakespeare course offerings have remained the same: English 17 as a lower-division option and seven upper-division options. This is a substantial number of course offerings in Shakespeare in comparison to other U.S. universities—eight in Shakespeare plus an additional three in Renaissance literatures.¹⁴

which did not permit the actors to rehearse, and they only received their part/role. I was assistant to the director Don Weingust, then a graduate student in Theatre, and I worked with the actors in the Ren Run doing improv exercises in lieu of rehearsing their lines. I also played a non-speaking lady in Olivia's court in the full production.

¹³ The Department of Dramatic Art was founded in 1941, and the undergraduate theatre major began in 1945, although the first record of a production on campus is from 1870 (Berkeley was founded in 1868). Several drama clubs arose immediately after the founding of the university, and in “in the early 1890s, Louis Dupont Syle, a member of the Department of English, directed students in the production of full-length plays of serious content” (“Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies”).

¹⁴ During the same period, Bruce R. Smith wrote of the course offerings at Georgetown, a university of comparable size, “Comparison with an MLA survey indicates that our 9 sections of Shakespeare each year are more than three times the national average for universities of comparable size. (The average, according to statistics collected by the MLA for 1989-90, is 2.6 courses.)” (Smith 453).

Compression: From Canon to Myth

For Shakespeare, or any other author, to become canonical, his value must be based on the selection and organisation by authorities who present his works in an elevated relationship to the larger field. Eric Weiskott argues, “[a]rchives and canons are both selective structures, and they point in the same direction in literary time—toward the past—but to different effect. The archival procedure is accumulation; the canonizing procedure is excision” (202). Indeed, Shakespeare’s works, or a metonymic understanding of a select few of his plays in abstraction, become the basis for explanation of anything in our larger culture; “It’s Shakespearean” is almost a meme, revealing the arrested development of an entire generation to analogize everything to Shakespeare. His works have become shorthand for nearly all narratives, an expansion of his cultural use predicated on a compression of understanding of his works in mainstream media. For instance, in having the title characters get married, Taylor Swift’s immensely popular “Love Story” (2008) gets *Romeo and Juliet* completely wrong, but it hardly mattered to listeners who were already predisposed to understand Shakespeare’s play as the greatest love story ever told. Berkeley’s curricular changes, like Swift’s “Love Story,” demonstrate that canonization is not static, and Shakespeare’s repetition within the curriculum and the broader culture integument for more than a century makes evident that what a Shakespearean education is designed to do changes with each iteration.¹⁵

Amid the dominance of materialism in the twenty-first century lurks some idealism, brought on in part by establishing Shakespeare as the interlocutor par excellence. But the move from one type of recognition to another also has to do with replacing the faulty notion of universality by situating Shakespeare in a broader contemporary cultural context. This tension is exemplified in Aleida Assmann’s distinction between the work of Harold Bloom and Stephen Greenblatt.¹⁶ She writes, “Bloom writes in the spirit of the canon, developing a praising style, venerating the text and its author with a semireligious fervour. Greenblatt, on the other hand, establishes a relation of distance and estrangement to his object of research” (102). UC Berkeley’s English department canonized Shakespeare initially through championing the timelessness of his works, but

¹⁵ In 1997, Bruce R. Smith wrote of his twenty-five-year tenure at Georgetown, “What has changed is the context in which Shakespeare is being taught. The new curriculum in effect substitutes critical orientation for chronology as an organizing principle. Literary history remains a way of approaching texts from the past, but it is only one of three” (Smith 453).

¹⁶ Assmann reminds her reader that Greenblatt was Bloom’s student at Yale. Her remarks are in light of Bloom’s 2003 *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* and Greenblatt’s 2004 *Will in the World*. “Both books became bestsellers, although they could not have been more contrary in their approaches” (Assmann 101).

maintained his canonicity by demonstrating that cultural context is paramount—to the study of Shakespeare and to all types of literature—with Shakespeare as the model for engaging cultural context. Berkeley actualized this not through “Shakespeare and” courses to explicitly tie his works to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, but through “Literature and” courses that focused on cultural groups and theoretical lenses historically absent from Shakespeare studies.

This has implications for the cultures and knowledges that are taught in conversation with Shakespeare. In theatre (and film), racial and ethnic representation typically is funnelled through metonym, signifiers, and attributes to convey an affective identity that goes beyond a monolithic, static construct. Performance scholar Bert O. States writes,

“We might say that the loss of metaphor led to the discovery of metonymy [...] Metaphor is a device for getting in more world on the principle of similarity, or correspondence [...] Metonymy and synecdoche [...] are devices for reducing states, or qualities, or attributes, or whole entities like societies, to visible things in which they somehow inhere.” (States 65)

Shakespeare’s transition from creator of metaphor to harbinger of metonym in the public consciousness has accorded him mythic status in western culture, a cultural touchstone that has become a stand-in for storylines and character types. Indeed, Shakespeare encompasses all the primary definitions of myth: his works are considered traditional stories that are understood to explain a wide variety of human situations with remarkable clarity, his popular reception usually involves a widely held but inaccurate belief or idea of his universality, and his talismanic stature is as a revered person or thing (“myth”). At Berkeley, and at many American universities, Shakespeare’s mythic status has rested on an intersection of these strains, distinct from the study of identity at the curricular level.

Scholars have been making these connections for decades, and during a conversation on “Engaging Race & Renaissance Studies” in 2021, Michael Witmore and Ian Smith concurred that Shakespeare functions as a place or a medium that we consult to determine, among other things, who gets to speak and who and what gets remembered. Smith commented that racial literacy is necessary for “learning how to be in relation to others, and learning how to be in relation to oneself.” Shakespeare became compressed when he shifted from a reputation solely for rhetorical and metaphoric virtuosity to his metonymic mythic status. As literary studies have expanded over decades to engage more diverse topics and epistemologies, Shakespeare’s value continues to extend to new knowledges. The Berkeley curriculum fostered a conversation between Shakespeare and other literatures across course offerings that, more recently at other universities, has been compressed into autonomous “Shakespeare and”

courses. “Shakespeare and ...” is typically posited as conflicting with a more traditional pedagogical approach to the plays. The productive dialogue instantiated over several decades in the Berkeley curriculum demonstrates that this is a false binary, that on the one hand other disciplines have benefitted from their exposure not only to the current construction of Shakespeare as a myth, but from the interpretive possibilities embedded in his plays. At the same time, Shakespeare’s metonymic status and enduring cultural value are reproduced through an encounter with disciplines not automatically associated with literary study and literatures that extend beyond the consciousness of his works.

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