

SAA 2013-Toronto
Seminar Leader: Mark Bayer
Seminar

Historical Perspectives on Shakespeare and Education Paper Abstracts

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Asking Questions About Shakespeare

Shakespeare has been a mainstay in college and university English departments since the nineteenth century. Yet despite this remarkable stability in subject matter, the *ways* in which Shakespeare has been—and should be—taught has remained a topic of considerable debate. Throughout the years, scholar/teachers have proudly announced their unique approach to teaching Shakespeare plays, suggesting that their pedagogy mirrors dominant research paradigms and therefore offers students a more authentic, productive, and life-enhancing engagement with the plays.

These claims to curricular innovation, however, are belied by a more careful look at the questions that instructors have asked about Shakespeare's plays for the last century and beyond. Contrary to what we might expect given the pervasive rhetoric of continual improvement, these questions have not changed that much—suggesting perhaps that these claims to originality are, at best, exaggerated.

I choose to look specifically at questions as a useful entry-point into historical debates about Shakespeare and education for two reasons. For one, looking at questions illuminates an incredibly rich yet relatively little-known body of published work that concentrates exclusively on the questions educators should ask their students to examine and enhance their study of the plays. Secondly, these questions, I argue, are perhaps best able to distill the various theoretical and institutional agendas underwriting various pedagogical methods free from narratives of steady advancement that typically accompanies them.

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Shakespeare and the Quaker Friends Schools of Philadelphia

In her 1942 memoir, *Westtown through the Years*, Helen Hole recalls that Shakespeare was not taught at the Friends school in Chester County, PA, before 1910. And while the playwright's work received earlier treatment at the Quaker-founded colleges of Haverford and Swarthmore, the relatively late arrival of Shakespeare at Westtown and other Friends schools points to the challenges of incorporating secular literature into the program of "plainness and moderation" that characterized Quaker education.

The resistance to Shakespeare was not due to any specific bias against the playwright but rather was part of the ongoing distrust of what Quaker educators, borrowing a phrase from Quaker founder George Fox, termed “heathenish literature.” This distrust extended to a range of pursuits that were considered frivolous, including picture-taking, dance, and oratory. In the new colony of Pennsylvania, William Penn was especially outspoken about the requirements of practical education. For him, theater amounted to still one more of the “vain arts and inventions of a luxurious world” that children should be taught to avoid at all costs.

It is against this backdrop that I reconstruct the incorporation of Shakespearean drama into the curricula of Philadelphia-area high schools and colleges affiliated with the Quakers. My project is particularly concerned with the growing Quaker awareness and acceptance of Shakespeare once his work became the focus of scholars and societies centered in Philadelphia in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. That the “guarded” education of the Quakers came to enthusiastically embrace Shakespeare is not in dispute. But how exactly it did so is a story that remains untold—a story that helps explain the high reputation enjoyed by the Friends schools of today.

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Shakespeare at Sea and Ashore

In the process of developing courses to teach at New York State’s maritime college, I have been struck by some recent claims for the centrality of Shakespeare to recent developments in teaching and scholarship of maritime literature. (Two seminar sessions at last year’s SAA were devoted to sub-fields of maritime literary studies, as they relate to Shakespeare.) Is Shakespeare really all that salty? Or, is his name invoked as a synecdoche for the category of imaginative literature?

My paper attempts to survey the ways in which Shakespeare has been taught at three different kinds of American institutions of higher education: Maritime Colleges, Service Academies, and Shakespeare-at-Sea programs. A second type of comparison is made with the teaching of Shakespeare in the English educational system. The goal is to try to isolate the institutional work, and the cultural work, that Shakespeare is being asked to perform in U.S. maritime and military institutions. The larger objective is to try to evaluate the place of Shakespeare in the field of Maritime Studies.

My working hypothesis is that claims for the sea-worthiness of Shakespeare’s texts are often inflated. I am testing that hypothesis through the examination of existing (and, to a limited extent, historical) syllabi from my sample institutions.