

‘Shakespeare and the Canon: New Directions’
Paper Abstracts

Katrina Cutcliffe

Shakespeare’s Banality: Originality and genius within variants of the Lear legend

Traditional source studies seeks to identify the works Shakespeare utilised in the creation of his own. Frequently, its concomitant aims are to articulate Shakespeare’s “originality” in doing so, and thus demonstrate and validate his “genius”, perpetuating Shakespeare’s centrality within the canon and scholarship. As a consequence, variants of his work have been seen as just that, variants of *his* work: sources, appropriations, or irrelevant. The new source study scholars seek to challenge this notion. By focusing on the interrelationship of texts within their cultural and historical context, and privileging one version of a story no more than the other, new source study scholars move the methodology forward and the focus wider.

This paper, inspired by the new source study scholars, removes Shakespeare’s centripetal force from study of early modern variants of the Lear legend to reveal a diverse array of texts. It suggests that Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, when contextualised against other variants of the Lear legend, is simply one of a crowd, equally as dependent upon context, and no more original than any other. This paper explores this inherently interrelated crowd of Lears, seeking their “genius” and their “originality”.

David Haley

Edward III and the Future of the Canon

Published anonymously in 1596, *The Reign of King Edward the Third* has at last made its way into the canon. The play's modern critics, however, while they welcome *Edward III*'s inclusion in the Shakespearean corpus, are unwilling to concede that the playwright is solely responsible for its structure, even though Shakespeare's company decided to release it for printing. My essay highlights the critics' urge to break down the play into its disparate sources and to limit Shakespeare's contributions to just 40% of the whole. I argue that this modern, disintegrative approach to the play is at odds with the views of early modern readers who admired Shakespeare's "comprehensive soul" (Dryden), and that it even contradicts the Romantic critics who celebrated the universality of his "genius." By examining *Edward III*, I try to demonstrate the integrative power of Shakespeare's ironic perspective, both in the scenes where the King assails his hostess the Countess and in the play's final act where the novice playwright foreshadows a scene that he would write close upon his meditations in *Hamlet* and several of his Sonnets. These "recyclings" of his early work suggest that Shakespeare's mastery of his dramatic art, present from the beginning, continues to inform and reinvigorate the canon.

Lauren Liebe

Shakespeare/Not-Shakespeare in Eighteenth-Century Drama Editing: The Case of Dodsley's *Select Collection of Old Plays*

Robert Dodsley's *Select Collection of Old Plays* (1744) is remarkable for its status as the first anthology of early modern drama, as well as for the questions about canonicity that it raises, questions which are increasingly salient in today's ever-shrinking anthologies. The collection includes a lengthy preface that argues for the importance of preserving "ancient" plays, ranging from early Tudor offerings to late Caroline drama, while also criticizing the frequent republication of highly canonical authors like Shakespeare and Jonson. At the same time, however, Dodsley's own editorial process is haunted by the numerous editions of Shakespeare's works alongside which it had to compete, a trend that continues into the editing and reproduction of early modern play anthologies today.

In this essay, I will demonstrate how the prevailing interest in Shakespeare during the mid- and late-eighteenth century influenced Dodsley's initial printing and the subsequent eighteenth-century editions of the *Collection*, as well as how their editorial practices and the continuing elevation of Shakespearean works have shaped our present reception of early modern drama. As the *Collection* evolves through different editions and editors, it becomes increasingly concerned with its own representation of itself as a preservationist act that opposes the popularity of Shakespeare, "*the God of our present idolatry*." Even so, it is Shakespeare that these editions continuously come back to in their footnotes and editorial practices. Dodsley's work echoes the now-familiar obsession with validating early modern drama through Shakespeare, suggesting that current problems with canon are not new problems. Examining the *Collection* in light of current digital projects, anthologies, and debates about the limits of Shakespeare can suggest new possibilities for how we think about the canon of early modern drama.

Jessie Herrada Nance

De-Centering Shakespeare in the Shakespearean Classroom

In 2019, Kimberly Anne Coles, Kim F. Hall, and Ayanna Thompson argued that the future of early modern studies depends in part on showing students that knowing the period is key to “understanding systems of power and epistemologies of race, indigeneity, gender, and sexuality.” This is one way, they argue, to attract more students to studying the period, thus diversifying the field, while also undermining those who attempt to use such texts for far-right, white nationalist purposes. Many of us teach in departments where the only continuously offered single-author courses are ones on Shakespeare, thus these classes might be the only chance many of us have to answer Thompson, Hall, and Coles’s call to action. While these classes focus solely on Shakespeare, there is room to let students explore and question his centrality to the canon and to the academy. This paper argues that play-based pedagogy (PBP), an approach that creates a more culturally responsive classroom, encourages students to engage with the material while ironically de-centering Shakespeare in Shakespearean courses. PBP places the students’ own interests and experiences at the center of textual inquiry, allowing them to build their awareness of how his works relate to the “epistemologies of race, indigeneity, gender, and sexuality.” In this paper, I will offer techniques beyond performance-based activities (which are an example of PBP) to show how providing students the freedom to “play” gives us them the chance to learn how Shakespeare’s works are just one part of a larger constellation of historical and contemporary sources, all of which can aid their understanding of how early modern English history and literature contributed to current “systems of power.”

Philip Goldfarb Styrt

(Why) Do Students Want Shakespeare?

In this paper, I intend to take a close look at a strange effect I've noticed in my English literature survey course: when given the chance to tell me what they want, students almost always choose Shakespeare. I've taught this course with multiple approaches to this question, both directly asking in a short essay prompt whether Shakespeare deserves to be as central to the early modern canon as he is and more broadly asking students what they would like to add or subtract from our syllabus, and in both cases I have found students are arch-supporters of Shakespeare's place in the syllabus and in the canon. In fact, in one version of the course that already included two Shakespeare plays and a number of his sonnets, I had multiple students advocate for dropping other early modern texts to add a third Shakespeare play. I did not do this (I actually scaled down to one Shakespeare play on the syllabus), but it made me think: why do students want Shakespeare, and what should we do about this? Complicating this question is the additional fact that at my institution "Shakespeare" is the only single-author course offered, and it is always *under-enrolled*, which implies that the response in the survey course is not a result of an overwhelming love for and desire to read his texts on their own. What contributes to this expressed desire for more Shakespeare, and how might we use it for a more effective pedagogy of early modern literature?

Jessica Winston

“When Dramatic Margins Support the Theatrical Center: Early English Radio Plays on the Post-WWII BBC”

In the mid-1950s, BBC radio’s Third Programme presented *The First Stage*, a series of early English plays adapted for radio by John Barton and produced by Raymond Raikes. The series was ambitious, consisting of thirteen, sixty- to ninety-minute episodes broadcast over the course of a year and covering drama from the medieval mystery plays through *The Spanish Tragedy*. In doing so, the series offers some of the only existing professional productions of many sixteenth-century plays, such as *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*—rarely performed dramas that listeners, if they knew them at all, would likely only have known from reading them at school or university.

It is striking that aspects of the series – framing lectures, editorial cuts, and musical soundscape – construct the plays as audio renditions of written texts. Other aspects, however, present the plays as lively, if esoteric experiences in radio theatre, performances that would be comprehensible and enjoyable, even if a listener missed the framing lecture or had never encountered the play before. In this way, the series constructs each play as both audio text and free-standing artistic artifact. This paper explores why the series so deliberately constructs the plays as both, and yet not quite text or performance.

I argue that construction of the series implicitly intervenes in post-war debates about the function of radio drama in the changing media landscape of 1950s Britain. The series presents radio drama as an educational tool existing in a third space and a third medium, separate from but defined by other spaces and modes—that is, different from but defined by school, with its written texts, and different from but defined by professional theatre, with its embodied and visual modes of performance. By offering a developed presentation of plays that listeners would have only encountered in a limited way, if at all, in these other spaces, the series presents radio drama as a way to bridge school and theatre—as a way to offer backgrounds and contexts to more canonical plays taught in school and performed on the professional stage, particularly those of Marlowe and Shakespeare.