

Shakespeare, Still Our Contemporary

Why the bard lives on.

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By [Steven Mintz](#)

With York City has been awash with Shakespeare. A Hamlet opera. A Black, queer riff on *Hamlet*. A modern-dress *Hamlet*. A *Hamlet*-inspired Broadway musical set in the African savanna complete with a happy ending. (“[To roar or not to roar](#),” isn’t that the question?)

Alongside *Hamlet* and its various adaptations, there is *&Juliet*, in which Anne Hathaway concocts a new ending to the tale of star-crossed teenage lovers, as well as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the spirited comedy of gender politics, would-be seduction and male fears of cuckoldry. We might add *Sleep No More*, an adaptation of *Macbeth* with a Hitchcock-like film noir aesthetic, and *Drunk Shakespeare*, a boozy, comical take on *Macbeth*. Even *Hamilton* contains references in its dialogue and songs to Shakespeare’s Scotland-set tale of madness, witchcraft, ambition, guilt and revenge.

More than half a century ago, Jan Kott, the Polish and later American critic, professor of rhetoric and political activist, published *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), which has had a powerful and ongoing influence on [the serious theater](#). Perceiving “a direct connection between Shakespeare and the modern European drama of Brecht, Beckett and Durrenmatt,” Kott laid bare ways that Shakespeare’s plays spoke to contemporary issues with a distinctively modern sensibility—a viewpoint that “[subconsciously or not, affects productions](#).” He also inspired playwrights and directors to adapt Shakespeare’s plays to address contemporary issues.

As the critic Michael Billington [put it](#),

“Don’t we now accept as a matter of course Kott’s arguments that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is packed with animal eroticism, that Shakespeare’s histories are about grand mechanistic forces and that *Hamlet* is a deeply political play about surveillance, fear and corruption that ends with a foreign military invasion?”

The United States, at least since the 1830s, has had an ongoing love affair with Shakespeare. As Columbia University's James Shapiro argued in *Shakespeare in a Divided America*, his award-winning 2020 study of the playwright's persistent presence in American culture, Shakespeare's plays and plots have served as a reference point and a screen on which Americans have projected and played out cultural concerns over despots, miscegenation, immigration, gender roles, marriage, infidelity and class conflict.

A number of recent and not-so-recent plays, television shows and films draw upon Shakespearean plots, characters and language to address contemporary themes. Thus, James Ijames's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fat Ham*, a Black riff on *Hamlet* set in a backyard in the upper South, transforms the story of a murdered father, a mother's new marriage and a son's ambivalent quest for revenge into a "skewering" of traditional definitions of masculinity and a celebration of coming out.

Somewhat similarly, *10 Things I Hate About You*, the 1999 teen rom com, reimagines *The Taming of the Shrew* through a feminist lens. *My Own Private Idaho*, the 1991 Gus Van Sant queer cult classic that was [Midnight Cowboy](#) for Generation X, not only [helped bring LGBTQ cinema into the mainstream](#), it drew upon *Henry IV* to transform the iconic American road movie into a haunting exploration of youth, freedom, societal norms and loneliness across the contemporary American Western landscape.

Many of the more recent Shakespeare-inspired plays, films and television series [bear only a superficial resemblance to the bard's plays](#)—just enough to ensure that those works acquire a patina of the gravity associated with Shakespeare's works. Few go as far as Mike Bartlett's extraordinarily perceptive 2014 *Charles III*, his dramatic take on the future of the British monarchy and King Charles's tormented, flawed yet omnipresent figure, written in unrhymed iambic pentameter. (Perhaps you recall the ending: as Charles becomes "—an old / Forgotten gardener, who potters round / And talks to plants and chuckles to himself.")

Still, a striking number of key cultural productions feature a leading character experiencing Hamlet-like self-doubt or a Lady Macbeth-like ruthlessness and ambition (for example, in *House of Cards*).

Shakespeare's enduring presence should remind us of the importance of common cultural reference points that much of society shares across lines of class, ethnicity, gender, race or religion.

I, perhaps like you, worry that this society has fewer and fewer cultural touchstones. It's as true in popular culture as it is in high culture. In 2021, there were [just 10 TV shows](#) or special events with an average 18-to-49 demo rating greater than 1.0, compared to 77 in 2015. Network viewership [fell 84 percent](#) between 2011 and 2022.

Of course, when academics talk about the decline in common cultural reference points or shared frames of reference, they're not referring to TV medical dramas, police procedurals, reality shows, sitcoms or soap operas or even popular music, but, rather, to public familiarity with the traditions, values, symbols and referents that underlie civic discourse and cultural and ideological debates.

These days, however, cultural literacy tends to be regarded as an inherently conservative enterprise, and defenses of any kind of common core of knowledge are often dismissed—for good reason—as Eurocentric, elitist and exclusionary and as a matter of rote memorization.

But cultural literacy in the 21st century need not be narrow, insular or parochial. The expert commentator on legal education who goes by the pseudonym Unemployed Northeastern notes the failure of most core curricula to include monumental non-Western works of literature “from the Mahabharata to the Four Classic Novels of China to the Tale of Genji to the Popol Vuh to the Sunjata ... That is to say the original (and often still today) canon was inescapably suffused with cultural and racial prejudice, to say nothing of sexism (hence Cervantes as the creator of the modern novel rather than Murasaki Shikibu, who lived 500 years before him in Japan).”

Shouldn't we introduce our students to “the Golden Age of India, the Golden Age of the Islamic World, the Golden Age of the Maya, the flowering of fiction in China and Japan, etc. etc. etc. The Shahnameh, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, The Outlaws of the Marsh, The Conference of the Birds, Vis and Ramin (the explicit inspiration for Tristan and Isolde), the Popol Vuh, The Tale of the Genji, the Tale of the Heike, various retellings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata—all of these are monumental contributions to literature made by non-Europeans”? As Unemployed Northeastern rightly adds, “Many more contributions could be listed in history, philosophy” and other fields.

So what might a broader lens on cultural literacy involve? It should be:

- **Multicultural, Cross-Cultural and Global.** Shouldn't a college graduate acquire a basic familiarity and fluency with diverse literary and philosophical traditions; religious traditions and texts; masterworks of architecture, art, music, theater, film and dance; histories?
- **Dialogic.** Shouldn't a college graduate be able to engage in productive, evidence-based conversations, discussion and debate, be able to respectfully consider and assess contrasting perspectives and points of view and be able to make reasoned arguments and challenge ideas in a civil manner when appropriate?
- **Skills-Based.** Shouldn't our graduates understand diverse cultures' histories, customs, values, beliefs and social practices, be able to see through the eyes of others and empathize with their experiences and develop a capacity to reflect critically on their own cultural assumptions?

A number of recent studies stress the importance of [background knowledge](#) if K-12 schools are to improve elementary school students' reading proficiency and [reduce performance gaps](#). A skills focus on phonics, phonemic awareness and word decoding techniques, it turns out, is not enough. [Foundational knowledge matters.](#)

If this is true for elementary schools, it is also true in colleges. A "knowledge-building" curriculum would seek to ensure that students do acquire the cultural literacies that an educated person ought to possess. Unfortunately, the gen ed curriculum, consisting of a smorgasbord of options, fails to do that.

You might respond that anything that resembles a core curriculum is an impossibility on today's college campuses, because such a curriculum is impossible to scale and conflicts with students' desire for options and choice. It is also the case that most faculty members feel reluctant or unqualified to teach such courses and that most campuses could never agree on the content to be covered. You'd certainly be right. That's why no institution of higher learning has adopted a core curriculum since World War II.

But there are paths forward. Honors colleges often offer core "Human Situation" courses that examine classic texts in literature and political and moral

philosophy that address enduring issues involving divinity, ethics, evil, identity, justice, love, rights and the nature of the good life. However, a growing number of institutions are experimenting with alternative models that reach beyond their campus's most privileged students.

You might consider the following approaches:

- Create an optional gen ed track, like Purdue University's Cornerstone certificate program, which allows students to meet many of their lower-division requirements in a more structured, integrated and coherent way.
- Offer a set of classes, like Harvard's Humanities 10 courses, that offer a model curriculum that explores masterworks of literature, music, art and moral and political philosophy.
- Develop first-year seminars, along the lines of Austin Community College's Great Questions initiative, that combines academic success training with intensive conversations about classic texts.
- Provide something like Hunter College's Humanities 20100: Explorations in the Arts experience, which combines visits to neighboring museums and performance venues and meetings with artists, playwrights and curators along with a signature seminar in which students discuss what they've seen.

I'm of the view that the humanities of the future won't and shouldn't resemble the humanities of the recent past—however much that past strikes many as an ideal. To thrive in the years ahead, the humanities must:

- Engage with enduring and existential issues and also with the urgent challenges of today.
- Connect more closely with rapidly growing technical disciplines, such as computer science and engineering and with the professions, including law and medicine.
- Embrace the public, the applied and the innovation humanities, from museum studies to cultural heritage management, historic preservation, public anthropology, history, science and sociology and the arts and

emerging technologies, including animation, serious gaming, user interface design, website development and video production.

But the humanities also bear another responsibility: to ensure that students do acquire fluency in the diverse cultures they will navigate as adults.

To be a college graduate should involve something more than successfully completing 120 credit hours and a major or acquiring a basic level of proficiency in research, writing, close reading, critical thinking and the manipulation and interpretation of numbers. It should also entail developing cultural literacy, for knowledge of one's own and other people's cultures is the essential foundation for creativity and innovation.

If we are to see farther than others, we, too, must stand on the shoulders of giants.