

**Why You Should Study Shakespeare**

**Instructor Maggie Trapp discusses the Elizabethan-era writer’s lasting impact**

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“*Nay, an I tell you that, I’ll ne'er look you i' th’ face again: but those that understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads; but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me.*”  
              —Casca, *Julius Caesar*

William Shakespeare died more than 400 years ago. Yet, high school and university students are still required to study his plays and sonnets. I was one of those students who in 12th grade was lost reading all of the “thou”s, “thy”s and “doth”s. At the time, I found analyzing Shakespeare’s work complicated and irrelevant to my life. What I didn’t realize was just how wrong I was. *Et tu*?

Despite the collective scholarly agreement that [Shakespeare’s work itself adapted and borrowed(link is external)](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36114485) from history, mythology, the Bible and even his contemporaries, people are still fascinated with his writing. Why? Maybe because his timeless storylines continue to speak to us through reinventions and new interpretations in popular culture, such as the musical *West Side Story* and teen flicks *10 Things I Hate About You* and *Mean Girls*. As a teenager, I might not have been able to appreciate the insights of early 17th-century William Shakespeare, but that doesn’t mean what he wrote is irrelevant to life in current times.

Quite the contrary. [Shakespeare(link is external)](https://extension.berkeley.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=41132&utm_source=voices&utm_medium=blog&utm_campaign=shakespeare) instructor Maggie Trapp explains the Bard’s literary longevity and the cultural importance of studying his writing from yesteryear in today’s context.

**Current work we love is reinvented from his adaptations.**  
From The Lion King’s plot being loosely based on that of Hamlet, to the fictional band the [Weird Sisters in the Harry Potter series(link is external)](http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Weird_Sisters) being based on the three witches in Macbeth, Shakespearean influence and references continue to pop up in modern-day entertainment.

“Shakespeare’s plays have an openness to them,” says Trapp. “They inspire thought, and his capacious works invite reinvention. The plots we think of as quintessentially Shakespearean—Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Hamlet and King Lear, among others—are based on old stories, histories and myths that he reworked into his own material. Shakespeare was a masterly adapter, and his work is largely based on borrowing and interpretation. It’s only fitting that his plays have in turn been reworked endlessly.”

It’s not just movie storylines that rework Shakespeare’s plots. More and more television shows, including [Game of Thrones(link is external)](http://www.unboundworlds.com/2017/01/parallels-shakespeare-george-r-r-martin/), have been influenced by Shakespearean culture, and in turn, they have become their own popular culture phenomena. Part of the reason for that could be seeing Shakespearean-inspired drama performed on screen—the modern equivalent of the stage from The Bard’s own time. Being able to see his work performed live—albeit pre-recorded and on TV—makes us appreciate his work from a different perspective.

“As George R.R. Martin noted in a [Rolling Stone(link is external)](https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-20140423) interview, Shakespeare borrowed almost all of his plots from others,” explains Trapp. “And Martin himself makes no bones about the fact that his hugely popular story (both the books and TV series) is taken from others’ stories—Shakespeare among others. Fans of Game of Thrones readily see traces of Lady Macbeth in Cersei, Falstaff in Robert Baratheon, Iago in Littlefinger—the list could go on. The characters that populate Game of Thrones are complex, multifaceted and vivid. They resemble the rich, layered characters we find in Shakespeare, and these characters are so real that they have practically become types over the centuries—we know a Portia or a Henry V or a Banquo or a King Lear or a Richard III when we see them, no matter what the context. These recognizable characters could become shopworn and stale over time, but in both Shakespeare’s and Martin’s hands, they are fresh and real, rich and memorable.”

Current books also reimagine the world of Shakespeare for modern times. “The [Hogarth Shakespeare(link is external)](http://hogarthshakespeare.com) project is a wonderful new series of books in which Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Anne Tyler and Gillian Flynn, among others, have reinterpreted and reimagined one of Shakespeare’s plays in light of modern sensibilities,” Trapp says. “In Atwood’s take on The Tempest, for example, an aging and (wrongfully) disgraced Shakespeare producer winds up staging Shakespeare’s play in a prison as part of an elaborate revenge plot against his former theater colleagues. Another amazing adaptation of Shakespeare is Jane Smiley’s novel A Thousand Acres. In it, Smiley takes the King Lear plot and turns it inside out to spectacular effect.”

**Shakespeare’s work is pertinent, no matter when it is read.**  
“Shakespeare’s contemporary Ben Jonson wrote that Shakespeare’s work was ‘not of an age but for all time,’ which has proven to be prescient,” says Trapp. “There’s something about the plays that makes them more than topical, more than of their own time. They can teach us about the politics and the psychology of our current moment, about the intricacies of hubris and the fluidity of desire, the perils of blind ambition and the satisfactions of true connection. These plays have managed to speak complicated truths to all manner of audiences and readers for hundreds of years.

“We can perceive our postmodern predicament in Richard III’s power plays; our culture’s grappling with gender binary can be discerned in Twelfth Night’s probing of gender roles and expectations,” Trapp explains. “Shakespeare most likely did not imagine that his works would be so integral to our culture 400 years after his death.”

**His characters and themes live within each of us.**  
“Shakespeare’s plays and poems still matter to us because his plots still resonate, his characters still leave their mark, his language still moves and startles,” says Trapp. “His characters are ones we identify with. We understand Hamlet’s despondency; we recognize Othello’s envy; we feel Lear’s decline. These characters are, at once, types and revelations. Shakespeare’s characters are familiar, and at the same time they surprise us out of our complacency—and in this way they are endlessly fascinating.”

We can all relate to the feelings evoked by his stories, too. “Shakespeare’s language is gorgeous, his characters complex and the themes—love, honor, betrayal, envy, jealousy, fear, pride, lust, grief—are all issues that matter to us today,” adds Trapp. “We look to Shakespeare to make meaning of our experiences. And our experiences—concerning everything from gender, family and political intrigue to fame, race and class—are nimbly and memorably explored in these plays. Shakespeare’s characters and plots are both of his time and for all time. His plays allow us to see ourselves anew.”

**Audiences today can connect onstage and with his words on the page.**  
Because his themes are universal and timeless, interpretations of Shakespeare’s work appeal to various audiences. Andrew Dickson, author of Worlds Elsewhere: Journeys Around Shakespeare's Globe, explores how the [same Shakespeare play is able to please different audiences(link is external)](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36114485): “One afternoon Shakespeare would find his work being performed for the royal court; the following day the same piece would be played before the groundlings of Blackfriars.”

“In Shakespeare’s time, audiences were much more attuned to words and aurality,” says Trapp. “They experienced the plays live; they would have very rarely read the plays. On the other hand, today we more often experience these plays in our own minds in a solitary act of reading. We ascribe much to the generative power of the words on the page, whereas Shakespeare’s audience—who were primed for his language and allusions in a way that we no longer are—was more invested in the live moment of entertainment being enacted in front of them.”

That disconnect between live performance and “in our mind’s eye” performance can make studying The Bard’s work even harder. But teaching his work in a way that is relatable to today’s current events can bring his fascinating work to life—and make it easier to understand.

“Shakespeare wanted his audience to react in the moment; he welcomed a physical connection to his work,” says Trapp. “He wrote for live audiences, and his plays were made to be performed. The plays also provide ample material for analysis in a classroom setting, but our experience of his work should also include watching the plays performed. [In class(link is external)](https://extension.berkeley.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=41132&utm_source=voices&utm_medium=blog&utm_campaign=shakespeare), we weave in discussions of the plays’ plots, characters and themes with attention to the plays as performance, and we encourage students to see live performances of these works whenever possible.”

Watching live performances of Shakespeare’s plays isn’t always an option when you are taking a course. Trapp says, “By incorporating videos of local Berkeley Shakespeare actors, dramaturges, academics and other specialists who dig deep into specific staging issues, plot points, and language choices in the plays, students learn how to respond to these recordings through mini-essays of their own, commenting on how the ideas they hear can be put to work in new viewings of the plays.” This is just one way Trapp’s [Shakespeare course(link is external)](https://extension.berkeley.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=41132&utm_source=voices&utm_medium=blog&utm_campaign=shakespeare) makes the subject matter relevant to each of her students. Trapp continues, “Students also can draw from their own experiences as high school students who watched the plays. We explore what these previous viewings mean in light of what they're learning now, or how they can see the issues raised in these recordings in terms of how we view politics and political machinations in our own time (for example, this comes to light when we read the Richard plays and students compare those plays' plots to Trump or House of Cards).”

Through Shakespeare’s plays, we can learn about ourselves and connect with others via the comedy and drama of everyday life. Still think reading and understanding Shakespeare isn’t valuable or relevant today?

**We cite Shakespeare even when we don’t realize it.**  
Have you ever said “with bated breath,” that something is the “be-all and the end-all” or that you wanted to “break the ice”? Have you asked, “Knock, knock! Who’s there?” If so, you have quoted Shakespeare.

“If for no other reason, students today should study Shakespeare simply to appreciate how much of our daily discourse we owe to his wordsmithery,” Trapp asserts. “If you’ve ever said ‘green-eyed monster,’ ‘in a pickle,’ ‘tongue-tied,’ ‘standing on ceremony,’ ‘wild goose chase,’ ‘cruel to be kind,’ ‘hoodwinked,’ ‘to wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve,’ ‘it’s Greek to me,’ ‘the clothes make the man,’ ‘forever and a day,’ or any of these other now-common sayings, you’ve cited Shakespeare. His turns of phrase were unconventional and ingenious, and today they’ve entered so fully into the English language that they seem to be beyond coinage. We’re so steeped in Shakespeare that we’re not even aware of it anymore. He was a deft crafter of the English language, and his metaphors have made each of us all the richer as readers and writers.”