

TO BE OR NOT TO BE: SHAKESPEARE IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

By Amanda Anderson and Jane S. Shaw

“Lord, what fools these mortals be!”
 — William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

About half the colleges and universities in North Carolina no longer require English majors to take a course in William Shakespeare.

- Only 8 of 15 campuses in the University of North Carolina require students majoring in English to take a course in Shakespeare. Of 34 private colleges and universities in the state, only 17 require Shakespeare for English majors.
- N.C. State does not require Shakespeare; UNC-Chapel Hill does.
- Some of North Carolina’s best-known private colleges, including Duke, Davidson, and Elon, do not require Shakespeare.

The study of Shakespeare has traditionally been the centerpiece of courses in English literature. Shakespeare (1564-1616) is widely considered the most outstanding exponent of the English language. He is known for his insight into human character, revealed in his tragedies, comedies, and sonnets, and for the richness of his language, all of which have helped shape modern English.

“Shakespeare encapsulates the entire Western tradition up to his time (and is in many ways prophetic of what is to come) in the most compact and beautiful fashion,” said Larry Goldberg, a veteran teacher of Shakespeare at UNC-Chapel Hill.

BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

This study was inspired by a nationwide report conducted by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA). Concerned about a possible neglect of Shakespeare in higher education, the curriculum reform group reviewed the course requirements for English majors at 70 colleges and universities to determine whether a course in Shakespeare was required.¹

The organization found that 55 out of the 70 schools, or over 75 percent, no longer require English majors to take a course in Shakespeare. Two North Carolina colleges were included in ACTA’s study – Davidson and Duke. Both have removed Shakespeare as a requirement for English majors. Columbia, Princeton, American University, Georgetown, and Vanderbilt all omit Shakespeare as a requirement, the study found. Harvard, Stanford, and the University of California at Berkeley still require a course in Shakespeare for English majors.

THE POPE CENTER STUDY

In our study, we followed ACTA in broadly defining what it is to “require” English majors to take Shakespeare. Like ACTA, we considered Shakespeare to be required if English majors must take a course in Shakespeare or must take two out of three courses in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton (the courses must focus on a single author).

For our study we looked at the Web sites of all schools offering a bachelor’s degree that belong to North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU), and we looked at 15 of the institutions that make up the University of North Carolina. (We excluded the North Carolina School of the Arts, a public university, and the Cabarrus College of Health Sciences, a private school, because both have unique missions, and we excluded Louisburg College, a private school, because it is a two-year school.) We followed up by asking school personnel to clarify requirements that seemed ambiguous.

The result: just under half (48 percent) of all the campuses surveyed, both public and private, do not require Shakespeare.

Within the UNC system, seven out of 15 schools, or 47 percent, do not require Shakespeare. Seventeen of the 34 four-year private institutions, or 50 percent, require Shakespeare.

DOES IT MATTER?

Should we be disturbed about the decline of Shakespeare? Yes. “A degree in English without Shakespeare is like an M.D. without a course in anatomy,” say the authors of the ACTA study. “It is tantamount to fraud.”² Yet about half of the branches of North Carolina’s university system are awarding degrees in English without a comprehensive study of Shakespeare.

Why the change? An N.C. State official said that many English departments want to give students more choices in their education. “Several years ago the English faculty as a whole voted to make Shakespeare an option rather than a requirement. Like many other English departments in the country, ours has moved in the direction of becoming less prescriptive,” said Sharon Setzer, N.C. State advising coordinator.

There may be other reasons why some schools do not require Shakespeare for majors. Shakespeare analysis is difficult, says former Elon University English department head Robert Blake, who regularly teaches Shakespeare's tragedies. He said removing the Shakespeare requirement for English majors is another example of the "dumbing-down" of higher education in the United States.

Perhaps a more fundamental reason for the demise of Shakespeare is the growing role of "theorists" in English departments nationwide and their introduction of postmodernism in the study of literature. Although postmodernism is difficult to define (and differs in meaning from one discipline to another), it is a viewpoint or ideology that emphasizes relativism and subjective interpretation rather than objective standards. Postmodernism can be infused with a Marxist or feminist ideology and is usually hostile to authors who uphold Western traditions.

Many postmodernists see Shakespeare as a key representative of Western traditions, which they consider rife with exploitation of the underclass, racism, and sexism. These academics represent "the counterculture born in the 1960s [that] gained momentum in the 1970s and 80s, and is still very alive in 2007," says Nan Miller,

a retired professor of English at Meredith College. A final reason for the decline in courses on Shakespeare is that most professors prefer teaching courses in their research areas, which are often quite specialized. A course that surveys Shakespeare's dramas and poetry is simply not that attractive to many faculty.

CONCLUSION

No writer has had a greater influence on Western culture or, indeed, on culture throughout the world. Shakespeare's plays are still performed, studied, and analyzed, and his influence still permeates our daily language—often without our conscious awareness. For example, anyone who has ever uttered the cliché "one fell swoop" is quoting Shakespeare unknowingly.

Yet Shakespeare in higher education is being steadily demoted, as faculty seek to undermine the literary canon, make English easier, and concentrate on specialized research. This disturbing trend is occurring around the country and is evident in North Carolina's system of higher education.



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

¹American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), "The Vanishing Shakespeare" (Washington, DC: April, 2007). The schools surveyed included the *U.S. News and World Report* "top 25" universities and "top 25" liberal arts colleges, the Big Ten universities and schools in or near the District of Columbia. MIT was excluded because it does not have an English department. Online: www.goacta.org/publications/Reports/VanishingShakespeare.pdf.

²ACTA, p. 11.

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PUBLIC CAMPUSES

The seven schools within the University of North Carolina system that do not require Shakespeare for English majors are:

School
Appalachian State University
North Carolina State University
University of North Carolina at Asheville
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
University of North Carolina at Pembroke
Western Carolina University

The eight UNC schools that still require Shakespeare for English majors are:

School
East Carolina University
Elizabeth City State University
Fayetteville State University
North Carolina A&T State University
North Carolina Central University
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
University of North Carolina at Wilmington
Winston Salem State University

Note: North Carolina School of the Arts was not included because of its unique mission.

PRIVATE CAMPUSES

The 17 North Carolina private colleges and universities that do not require Shakespeare are:

School
Brevard College
Davidson College
Duke University
Elon University
Greensboro College
Guilford College
Lenior-Rhyne College
Livingstone College
Mars Hill College
Methodist University
Mount Olive College
North Carolina Wesleyan College
Peace College
Saint Augustine's College
Salem College
Shaw University
St. Andrews Presbyterian College

The 17 private schools that require Shakespeare are:

School
Barton College
Belmont Abbey College
Bennett College
Campbell University
Catawba College
Chowan University
Gardner Webb University
High Point University
Johnson C. Smith
Lees-McRae College
Meredith College
Montreat College
Pfeiffer University
Queens University
Wake Forest University
Warren Wilson College
Wingate University

Note: The schools surveyed are members of North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities.

APPENDIX

The following charts reprint (with permission) findings from “The Vanishing Shakespeare,” published by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (Washington, DC), pages 18 and 19. The complete report is available at www.goacta.org. ACTA selected its schools from the “America’s Best Colleges 2007” list of *U.S. News and World Report* (2006). The first chart lists the “top 25” national universities; the second lists the “top 25” liberal arts colleges.

NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES

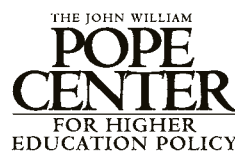
Rank	School	Requires	Does Not Require
1	Princeton University		x
2	Harvard	x	
3	Yale		x
4	California Institute of Technology	x	
4	Stanford	x	x
4	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	(no English major)	
7	University of Pennsylvania		x
8	Duke University		x
9	Dartmouth College		x
9	Columbia University		x
9	University of Chicago		x
12	Cornell University		x
12	Washington University in St. Louis		x
14	Northwest University		x
15	Brown University		x
16	John Hopkins University		x
17	Rice University		x
18	Vanderbilt University		x
18	Emory University		x
20	University of Notre Dame		x
21	Carnegie Mellon University		x
21	University of California at Berkeley	x	
23	Georgetown University		x
24	University of Virginia		x
24	University of Michigan		x

Source: American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), “The Vanishing Shakespeare,” April 2007, p.18.

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

Rank	School	Requires	Does Not Require
1	Williams College		x
2	Amherst College		x
3	Swarthmore College		x
4	Wellesley College	x	
5	Middlebury College	x	
6	Carleton College		x
7	Bowdoin College		x
8	Pomona College		x
9	Haverford College		x
10	Davidson College		x
10	Wesleyan University		x
12	Vassar College		x
12	Claremont McKenna College		x
14	Grinnell College		x
14	Harvey Mudd College		x
16	Colgate University		x
17	Hamilton College		x
18	Washington and Lee University		x
19	Smith College	x	
20	Colby University		x
20	Bryn Mawr College		x
22	Oberlin College		x
23	Bates College		x
24	Macalester College		x
24	Mount Holyoke College		x

Source: American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), “The Vanishing Shakespeare,” April 2007, p.19.



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