Interpretations of Shakespeare: Exhibitions from Special Collections and Denison Library

This spring we celebrate Shakespeare with two exhibits. The exhibit in the Special Collections gallery is “Interpretations of Shakespeare, or, What You Will.” The exhibit at Denison Library is “Interpretations of Shakespeare: Images of Women.” These exhibits were curated by three Pomona College students: Emma Fredgant (2017), an English major; Alana Friedman (2016), an English major; and Pieter Hoekstra (2017), a Religious Studies major. During Summer 2015, they were SURP/CCEPS Fellows in Pomona’s Summer Undergraduate Research Program and the Library’s Claremont Center for Engagement with Primary Sources. Mentored by Colleen Rosenfeld, Pomona English, and Lisa Crane and Gale Burrow, Honnold/Mudd Special Collections, the students explored primary and secondary sources to discover their own approaches to Shakespeare in order to create exhibits commemorating 400 years of Shakespeare’s legacy. Read on to learn about their process in their own words and discover some of the questions they hope their exhibit will raise.

This exhibit is the product of a no-reigns liberal arts approach to research. Faced with the looming, extensive array of Shakespeare scholarship and materials in the Consortium’s possession, we were tasked with creating something new. Each of us approached this project with different interests and different strategies, and our varied backgrounds gave rise to our exhibit’s theme: the variety of interpretations of Shakespeare over the last four centuries.

Rather than starting with a vision of the exhibit we wanted to craft, we sought to incorporate anything we found interesting and relevant, without worrying about sticking to a particular notion of “Shakespearean.” In choosing these materials, exploration was essential; we each spent many days wandering Special Collections before even considering what to present. As a result, we have prose, poetry, plays, operas, and religious texts in the exhibit. We have used a wide range of theoretical frameworks in constructing our cases, drawing not only from literature but from the humanities more broadly. Some cases take an historical angle, while others produce theological or philosophical approaches to the plays and materials at hand. It was intellectual exploration that determined our selection of themes and materials, rather than vice versa.

All but one of our items comes from Special Collections at Honnold-Mudd and Denison libraries. Our materials range in period from the early 1600s to present day and come from England, the United States, and France. The objects you see here reflect the richness of our library’s collection, but barely scratch the surface of available works on Shakespeare and his legacy.

If there is anything we want to demonstrate through this exhibit, it is that Shakespeare is wide-reaching, Shakespeare is accessible, and Shakespeare is not set in stone. The breadth of Shakespeare inspired the inclusion of such varied materials as a King James Bible, an opera, and what is essentially Shakespeare fanfiction in this exhibit. The elements of accessibility and play are best exemplified in our case on Hamlet, which includes paper dolls, a toy theater, and a choose-your-own-adventure book. Our Lear case is centered on Nahum Tate’s drastic rewrite of the masterpiece that dominated theaters for more than a century.

As you examine this exhibit, consider the following: How does this exhibit work with or challenge your pre-conceived notions about Shakespeare? How do your own intellectual passions shape the way you interpret his work? What does the variety of the materials on display tell us about Shakespeare’s writing? Finally, what do the various interpretations on display say about us as directors, actors, readers, and audiences?
Interpretations of Shakespeare, or, What You Will

The Tempest

*The Tempest* is a fantastical play of magic, revenge, and reconciliation. Prospero, the ousted Duke of Milan, and his daughter Miranda live on a remote island. Ariel, a powerful spirit who can control tides, winds, and other spirits, acts as Prospero's assistant, while the creature Caliban is his servant or slave. Prospero creates a storm that brings his brother and company to the island, where after wandering and facing trials, the entire group is reunited. Prospero forgives his usurping brother, and they travel back to Italy, where Prospero assumes his rightful title.

This case features reincarnations of *The Tempest*. Reproduced time and again, perhaps there really is something magical about this play. The scope of the items, from operas, to children's editions, to censored works, shows the mutability and pervasiveness of the Bard's works.

Halévy, F. *La Tempest: Opéra en Trois Actes, Précédé d'un Prologue*. Translated into Italian by Giannone. Paris, [185-?]. Special Collections M 1503 H29 T4


Court Masques: Shakespeare Fanfiction

Court masques were performances put on for the court or commissioned private plays. Sometimes the masques would dance with the audience, and at court members of the Royal Family would even act themselves. Varying in length and audience participation, the court masque was a popular form of entertainment in Shakespeare's time. His contemporary, Ben Jonson, played a key role in furthering the genre. He wrote and put on many masques, often in collaboration with the designer and architect Inigo Jones.

Interpretations of Caliban

One prominent character in *The Tempest* is Caliban, a native to the island and the child of an evil sorceress. When Prospero lands on the island, he takes Caliban in and Miranda, the noble's daughter, teaches him their language. When Caliban tries to rape her, Prospero makes him their slave as punishment.

In the play, characters refer to Caliban as a monster, a fish, and a mooncalf. In typical Shakespearean fashion, there is no other specific description of the character.

In visual representations, whether in illustrations, on stage, or in film, Caliban's appearance ranges from a literal monster, to a disfigured man, to an unattractive man. Depending on how Caliban is represented, modern audiences may see the play through a colonialist or an ableist lens. But regardless of what form Caliban takes, the colonialist references in *The Tempest* still remain; nearly every man who comes ashore attempts to claim the island for his own.


This case provides contextual information about court masques and shows how Shakespeare’s legacy continued into the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, as inspiration for masques and other works for performance. Authors drew upon Shakespeare’s complex style and his vivid characters. Many of the works, from one act masques to short prequels about the lives of Shakespeare’s heroines, to burlesques, take on the feel of fanfiction, not altering Shakespeare’s canon, but moving around it and branching off from the Bard’s work.


Kenrick W. *Falstaff’s Wedding: A Comedy, Being a Sequel to the Second Part of the Play of King Henry the Fourth Written in Imitation Of Shakespeare*. London, 1760. Special Collections PR 3539 K22 F3


**King Lear**

*King Lear*’s stage history presents a curious case of reinterpretation. The original is a famously grandiose bloodbath, so ambitious that many have thought it unsuitable for the stage. From 1681 to 1838, however, the primary version performed on stage was something rather different. Written by Nahum Tate, *The History of King Lear* makes substantial changes to Shakespeare’s play, the most notable being the infamous “happy ending.”

The basic plot holds for both versions: at the outset, King Lear has abdicated his throne, dividing his power among his three daughters. When his youngest, Cordelia, refuses to give him the praise he wants, he becomes enraged and perhaps mad, and is cast out of his own home by his elder daughters. As Lear lives outside his court, his mental state deteriorates to the point of insanity. In Tate’s *Lear*, impending tragedy is resolved in the end. Instead of the deaths of Cordelia and Lear, Lear’s sanity appears restored and Cordelia and Edgar marry.

Lear’s intriguing jester, known as the Fool, is entirely absent from Tate’s play. As you view some of the artwork and read on, notice what is lost when the Fool is removed and the tragedy averted, and how these changes affect meaning in the play.

Shakespeare, William. *The History of King Lear, The History of King Lear, Reviv’d with Alterations, Acted at the Queen’s Theatre*. Alterations by Nahum Tate. London, 1689. Special Collections PR 2878 T3 1689


Howard, Henry. *Lear and Cordelia*. Watercolor on board. 1820. (A proprietary study for the large oil painting which now hangs in the John Soane Museum in London.) Special Collections, Philbrick Art


**Hamlet: From Tragedy to Comedy to Children’s Toy**

*Hamlet* is regarded by many as Shakespeare’s masterpiece, performed and adapted around the world, from “traditional” Elizabethan stagings to Kurosawa’s film *The Bad Sleep Well*, to Disney’s *The Lion King*. Shakespeare’s* Hamlet*, the crown prince of Denmark, mourns his father’s death and sulks over his mother’s marriage to her brother-in-law, Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle. Hamlet is visited by his father’s ghost, who reveals that Claudius was his murderer. Hamlet struggles to decide whether to avenge his father’s murder. His decisions and his actions ultimately lead to violence, bloodshed, and tragedy.

Perhaps it is due to the great popularity of *Hamlet* that, in spite of its violence and bloodshed, many adaptations have been created that are humorous or were written for children.

Measure for Measure: The Duke as King James

Measure for Measure, generally considered one of Shakespeare's problem plays, was likely written in 1603 or 1604, following the death of Queen Elizabeth I and the coronation of King James I. Critical tradition has often compared the play's central authority figure, Duke Vincentio, to James I.

The plot, in brief: with the Duke away, his deputy Angelo must deal with the case of young Claudio, who consummated his marriage with Juliet before they were legally betrothed, an offense punishable by law. Angelo orders the death penalty, but offers Claudio's sister Isabella the chance to save her brother: she must sleep with Angelo. The Duke, however, hasn't really left Vienna. Disguised as a friar in the court, he advises Isabella not to sleep with Angelo and tricks him into sleeping with his own fiancé instead.

This intervention from the Duke is our point of departure for comparison to James I. From scholarly accounts of James' courts, we know that he used sermons and religious hierarchy to promote political ends. Contemporary accounts say that James sometimes engaged in political and religious conversations as another voice in the debate rather than as king. Some scholars argue that the Duke's disguise as a friar to shape outcomes represents these two important characteristics of James I: the Duke deals with Isabella's and Claudio's woes as a religious authority and as an ordinary member of the court.
During the second half of the 17th century, when appreciation of classical literature grew, Shakespeare’s reputation had declined. But by the mid to late 18th century, people were ready to love him again. Ireland’s work provided another reason to talk about Shakespeare in the midst of a Shakespeare craze.


Special Collections PR2950 A21


Special Collections PR 2950 A2


Special Collections DA 130 H732 1586 V.1

Ireland, W. H. Vortigern, an Historical Tragedy in Five Acts, Represented at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. And Henry the Second, an Historical Drama. London, [1799].

Special Collections PR 2950 V92

Unknown Engraver. [Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth]. 1784.

Special Collections, Philbrick Art

Unknown Engraver. [David Garrick as Richard III]. 1777.

Special Collections, Philbrick Art

Unknown Engraver. Mr. Garrick as Hamlet. [n.d.].

Special Collections, Philbrick Art

Richard III

In 1592, Shakespeare wrote Richard III, a play detailing Richard, Duke of Gloucester’s usurpation of the throne and his brief reign as King of England. After his brother King Edward dies, Richard kills the king’s sons, and eventually weds and then murders the crown prince’s widow. This play has long been a popular choice for actors because of the challenges posed both in making such an evil character the protagonist and in the extreme physical transformation required to play Richard, who is described as being deformed, with a hunchback, a clubfoot, and a withered arm.

For years scholars in the field of disability studies have analyzed this play, focusing on the question of a connection between Richard’s evil nature and his physical deformity. Richard’s physicality will be referred to as “deformity” rather than “disability,” as the idea of disability contains a social element in addition to the physical. Separating those two ideas is necessary for some of the analysis here.


Clara Fisher as a Young King Richard III, 1820. Special Collections, Philbrick Art

Edwin Booth as Richard III, 1863. Special Collections, Philbrick Art

Kruger, George E. Martin Harvey as King Richard III, 1910. Special Collections, Philbrick Art

Hurry, Leslie. [Costume Design for Richard III], [1957]. Special Collections, Philbrick Art

Interpretations of Shakespeare: Images of Women

Some of Shakespeare’s most interesting characters are women. Although few are protagonists, their roles are vital to the drama. Whether they are women of power, women in tragic circumstances, women who dress as men to save themselves or the ones they love, or women of magic, their characters are often stronger, wiser, or more determined than those of men. This exhibit highlights women in Shakespeare’s plays as they have been represented by many different artists. We hope that you will consider the significance of how these different artistic interpretations make sense of such compelling, complex characters.


Among Denison’s collections of fine printing and artists’ books is a rare and exceptionally beautiful set of Shakespeare’s works, which belonged to Ellen Browning Scripps. The set was edited by William Ernest Henley and printed in Edinburgh for Grant Richards, 1901-1904. The Scripps set is from the very limited “Connoisseurs’ Edition of the Extra Illustrated Henley Shakespeare.” There were only 26 lettered sets in this edition; the Scripps set is letter S. These volumes are elaborately illustrated with prints, illuminated title pages, and hand-painted watercolor portraits of many of the characters throughout the texts.
King Lear: A Tragic Plot


Denison Library PR 2819 A2 A4 1986

Vermont artist Claire Van Vliet’s woodcuts for *King Lear* capture a remarkable range of human expression, eloquently conveying the characters and emotions in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Her woodcuts show the many faces of Lear’s three daughters, revealing the devious nature of elder daughters Goneril and Regan and the innocence of Cordelia.

Shakespeare’s Tragic Women

All illustrations in this case are from the works of William Shakespeare, edited by William Henley, published in Edinburgh, 1901-1904.

Shakespeare’s tragedies are not kind to characters. As we read a tragedy, we develop certain expectations for the behavior and fate of the characters, but our responses may change as those characters develop. Artists’ representations of characters can also affect how we understand them.

In this case are artists’ interpretations of some of Shakespeare’s tragic women:

- Ophelia in *Hamlet*
- Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*
- Cordelia in *King Lear*
- Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare’s Cross-dressing Women

All illustrations in this case are from the works of William Shakespeare, edited by William E. Henley, published in Edinburgh, 1901-1904.

Cross-dressing serves different purposes in Shakespeare, but usually, women don men’s apparel to gain power or to protect themselves or those they love.

In this case are artists’ interpretations of some of Shakespeare’s cross-dressing women:

- Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*
- Rosalind in *As You Like It*
- Viola in *Twelfth Night*

Magic in Shakespeare


Denison Library PR 2833 A1 1908


Denison Library, Henley Shakespeare

Shakespeare employs magic and the supernatural in several of his plays. Comparing representations of magical persons in *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*, there seems a gender divide between the types of magic practiced. In *The Tempest* Prospero is able to stir up storms and command spirits with his spells. He is a force to be feared, but he ultimately sacrifices his power in order to return to civilized society with his family and friends. Prospero is in control of his power, his magical abilities, his fate, and he chooses to give up the practice of magic in favor of a more moral, conventional lifestyle.

On the other hand, the witches, or Weird Sisters, in *Macbeth* have a limited power that comes from serving the Goddess Hecate, an external source, meaning that they are reliant on someone else for their magic. We see them tell Macbeth’s fate and parade dead monarchs in front of him to haunt the murderous king; they make potions and prophecies and produce ghosts or specters. But we never see the witches perform grand magic. Unlike Prospero, the witches’ power is dependent on the Goddess.

Comparing these images, we see the result of Prospero’s magic in the storm, but the power and emotion that goes into the Weird Sisters’ spells. Prospero is calm, while the witches are wild. This, too, may be an expression of gender—the man maintains stoic control, while the women involve strong emotions to bring about change.

Shakespeare’s Women in Power

All illustrations in this case are from the works of William Shakespeare, edited by William Henley, published in Edinburgh, 1901-1904.

Shakespeare’s comedies, tragedies, and histories alike feature women in positions of power, often queens. Their nobility does not always translate into real personal power, but tracking the difference between personal, political, and superficial power leads to some new understandings of the Bard’s representations of powerful women.

In this case are artists’ interpretations of some of Shakespeare’s women in power:

- Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*
- Anne in *Henry VIII*
- Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*
- Elizabeth in *Richard III*