

After Four Centuries, Still Gaining Devotees: 'Shakespeare is so ...

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Tomorrow is the 433d anniversary of Shakespeare's birth and, from box office grosses to book sales to a survey by the Modern Language Association, the evidence suggests that more people are watching him, reading him and studying him than ever before.

Consider the recent annual conference of the Shakespeare Association of America in Washington, where more than 600 Shakespeareans from 18 countries took in topics like "Whither Attribution Studies," "Unpopular Shakespeare" and "Sex Me Here," a talk on breast-feeding and Lady Macbeth.

"The national media is exercised about fewer students' taking Shakespeare," Barbara Mowat, the outgoing president of the association and the editor of The Shakespeare Quarterly, observed in a speech at the convention. "But Shakespeare is thriving." The association's membership has increased by a third since 1990.

The Shakespeare business is so good these days that W. W. Norton is introducing a huge new anthology of the plays into the already crowded field just in time for tomorrow's birthday anniversary. Priced at \$44.95, "The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition" runs for 3,420 pages, offering introductions, illustrations and notes and three versions of "King Lear." The general editor is Stephen Greenblatt, a founder of the new historicism, a critical method that seeks to situate a work of art in its historical context.

Despite competition from "The Complete Works of Shakespeare" (Addison Wesley Longman) and "The Riverside Shakespeare" (Houghton Mifflin), Julia Reidhead, who edited the anthology for Norton, estimated a potential pool of 50,000 to 60,000 readers for the book.

The surge in activity is all the more striking because it comes at a time when some academics are concerned that interest in Shakespeare had waned. In December, the National Alumni Forum, a nonprofit educational organization, found in a survey of 67 elite colleges and universities that fewer departments than ever required English majors to take Shakespeare.

"Everybody was very shocked by the National Alumni Forum study," said Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the Modern Language Association. But research by the association had not found a decline in interest, she said. A survey of 344 colleges showed that the proportion of English departments requiring majors to take Shakespeare increased from 54 percent in 1985 to 60 percent in 1992. And Shakespeare, the association found, is still the most frequently studied author of all.

"We don't have a Shakespeare requirement, but Shakespeare is so popular you don't even have to tell students to take it," said James Sha-

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microfilm.

Stephen Greenblatt, general editor of the new "Norton Shakespeare."

piro, a professor at Columbia University. "There are two times as many students as there are seats."

One of Professor Shapiro's students is Nomi Victor, 22, a Columbia senior from the Boston area. Her favorite among this semester's works is "Troilus and Cressida," inspired by Homer's account of the Trojan Wars. "I feel this distance from the 'Iliad,'" Ms. Victor said. "Shakespeare brings them down from the heroic. I'm interested in things from a feminist perspective. When Cressida is traded back to the

A classic author who is undergoing a kind of 're-canonization.'

Greeks, all the Greek generals are kissing her. You can read that as about molestation."

Maurice Charney, a professor at Rutgers, said: "Shakespeare is a tremendous growth industry. We have more than 1,000 students taking Shakespeare of their own free will." He added: "Shakespeare is an icon of Anglo-American heritage. There are very few white Anglo-Saxon Protestants in my classes. The children of immigrants want to study an assured canonical figure."

At smaller colleges and public universities, Shakespeare studies are also flourishing. "We have to deliberately limit the size of classes," said Thomas Cartelli, a professor of English at Muhlenberg College in Allen-

town, Pa. "We have three sections devoted to Shakespeare. We could have four and enroll 30 to 40 in each."

Shakespeare's popularity in the United States has seldom flagged. Americans have always been fascinated by the notion of the individual alone on the stage of the world, by reckless, brazen characters who seize their fate and master it, Lawrence W. Levine observed in his 1988 book, "Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America."

A century earlier, Richard Grant White wrote of "Shakespearism," calling it "a cult, a religion, with priests and professional incense burners." De Tocqueville found Shakespeare performed in the remote settlements and mining camps of the New World. In 1849, New Yorkers rioted over the casting of "Macbeth."

When journalists and politicians are at a loss to describe the truly awful, or the truly important, they often look to Shakespeare for a metaphor. Hillary Rodham Clinton is "Lady Macbeth"; Nicole Brown Simpson is "Desdemona." Even Dick Morris, President Clinton's disgraced adviser, likened himself to a figure out of Shakespearean tragedy.

Today, movies and videos have made the plays even more accessible. Last year, "William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet" was No. 1 at the box office when it opened, and it grossed nearly \$50 million. In New York in January, crowds lined up in the freezing cold to see Kenneth Branagh's four-hour "Hamlet."

Movies stimulate book sales. After "Romeo and Juliet" opened, sales of the play at Borders Books were "stunning," said Jodie Kohn, a spokeswoman for the chain. "And

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there was a definite increase with Al Pacino's 'Looking for Richard.' With Kenneth Branagh's 'Hamlet,' sales of the regular critical edition also doubled."

Much of last month's Shakespeare convention in Washington was devoted to using films to teach. "I've done a Siskel and Ebert approach," one professor said at the session on "Shakespeare for the Class of 2000." "The students select a scene and then have a violent discussion about it." Influenced by films, professors are increasingly teaching students by having them perform the plays.

Shakespeare continues to appeal to scholars because his work provides a fertile field for virtually every new scholarly trend. "Shakespeare is a big tent," said David Bevington, a professor at the University of Chicago and editor of the Addison Wesley Longman anthology, known as "The Bevington."

"With all the 're-canonization,' Shakespeare responds to every kind of post-modern question," Professor Bevington said. "You can ask him feminist questions, anthropological questions. It responds to all the theorists. Could you ask for a better text on imperialism than 'The Tempest,' for instance?"

The new Norton Shakespeare represents a kind of apotheosis of the new literary scholarship. It is a great big petri dish in which flower all the new scholarly trends — feminist studies, gay studies, deconstructionism. There is "The Tempest" as a reflection of explorations of the time. There is Mr. Greenblatt, the book's general editor, musing on Shakespeare as a reflection of the "virtual clothes cult" of Renaissance England.

Jean E. Howard, a professor at Columbia, views "The Taming of the Shrew" against the backdrop of contemporary sexual politics: "In Petruccio's farmhouse, Kate is deprived of sleep, food and the protection of family and female companionship — techniques akin to modern methods of torture and brainwashing."

And in an introduction to "As You Like It," Professor Howard weighs in again, with a riff on cross-dressing.

Still, Mr. Greenblatt said that despite all the new scholarship in the Norton, "Shakespeare is around not because of the conspiracies of professors, but because he is incontestably wonderful."

"We live in a world in which it is easy to lose track of who we are," he added. "Shakespeare is a way of getting your bearings."