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Since many of you associate me with embarrassment, it seemed appropriate today to talk about a form of embarrassment that I think is peculiar to us as Shakespeareans—and to suggest how I think we might recover from it. This form of embarrassment—indeed like most forms of embarrassment—betrays a consciousness divided against itself. It is constituted by a fundamental affection for Shakespeare and belief in his works' greatness. But it is also constituted by more complex emotions, even ambivalent ones—compounded of a deep dismay at the various forms of expression that loving Shakespeare has taken over the centuries. Some of the people in this room have devoted themselves to the critique of these historical crimes and misdemeanors committed in the name of Shakespeare and have earned themselves Harold Bloom's high opprobrium as being "critics of resentment."

These colleagues have earned their battle scars in the culture wars so often fought with Shakespeare at the symbolic center, and I am sure they, unlike Coriolanus, would display them gladly. But I do not ask them now to do so! Given such attacks from cultural conservatives or even from right-wing ideologues using Shakespeare for their own polemical purposes, to be misrecognized as a critic of resentment becomes a badge of honor.

But such badges of honor have little to do with the kind of embarrassment on which I focus now, and which comes—in the last analysis—with having to share the object of our affections with so many others. My own awareness of this peculiarly Shakespearean form of embarrassment has grown over the years of being a Shakespeare scholar. But my awareness has been sharpened of late in my recent move from the classroom to the Folger Library. All of us who identify ourselves as Shakespeareans are public representatives of a particular vocation. But some of us work at that small number of institutions with "Shakespeare" in their proper name—and we must deal with Shakespeare as an even more public phenomenon. Perhaps even more than you, we become addresses of a set of all-too-familiar questions about authorship, about greatness, about genius, about Shakespeare's sexuality, about ranking the plays. These are questions that I find embarrassing and uncomfortable, and rarely know how to answer with grace. Or, like the Ancient Mariner, we become hostage to long and painful recollections of the suffering imposed by required high school reading lists in which *Julius Caesar* looms large. At such moments, Shakespeare greatness becomes the albatross that we wear around our necks.

In taking on my present position at the Folger, I anticipated the likelihood that it would involve a certain amount of delicate footwork from me around the topic of Shakespeare's genius. The Folger is fully invested in Shakespeare's surpassing genius. The Folger owes its very existence to it. But let us think hard and long about this consequence of bardolatry—if that is what we wish to call it. The world of research and scholarship in Shakespeare would be far poorer had Mr. Folger's passion for collecting books taken another form, non-Shakespearean form. It is the passion for Shakespeare—as we all know—that originally fueled many of the great bibliographical and textual discoveries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—discoveries about the nature of early printing house practices, for example, or discoveries about the early canons of English drama. The passion for Shakespeare contributes greatly to the history of the book, to the history of early modern theater, to the production of those standard works of reference on which so much subsequent scholarship has been founded. In ways impossible to enumerate, the whole world of early modern studies has been a beneficiary from the passion for Shakespeare.

But when I was teaching Shakespeare to undergraduates, I found that Shakespeare's genius was an inconvenient presence in the classroom. It was a presence that seemed to impede the development of critical faculties in students. Many of them—eager and bright and literary in their tastes—seemed to feel that the most direct route to pleasing me was by proving how enthusiastically they could express

appreciation for the beauties of Shakespeare's language and the greatness of his characterization. Warm and fuzzy adjectives—perhaps especially the adjective “incredible,” as in “Shakespeare's incredible characters” or “Shakespeare's incredible vocabulary”—loomed large in such papers. Appreciation and criticism seemed distinctly at war and my advice, usually voiced early in the semester before the first papers were due, was usually to tell my students to park appreciation at the door—to bracket it, to take it for granted, in effect—and go on to do their critical business in other terms. And, on the whole, this was a strategy that worked for me, and probably has worked for many of you, too, faced with a similar predicament.

But I have no such option to tell people who come to the Folger to park their belief in Shakespeare's universal genius at the door. Nor do I wish to! To do so is, of course, to besmirch the Folger's welcome mat, to foul our nest, to imperil an institution that has been central to Shakespeare scholarship and served as home away from home for some of you here. Appreciation for Shakespeare is not only the Folger's wellspring, but fostering it is the Folger's life blood. Now I must change my tune—now I must say, “Please bring your appreciation of Shakespeare into this building and let us grow it into something finer, something more substantial and more informed with our exhibitions and public programs.” Perhaps the tasks of the teacher and the rare library director are not so different after all.

One of our most generous donors has told me that he thinks our political leaders would be smarter, would think more clearly if they read more Shakespeare. I am not willing to say that he is wrong, though I would prefer to make the case more broadly and state instead that our political leaders would be smarter and more articulate if they read lots more imaginative work of all kinds. (And of course some of them do.) But because I am not willing to say he is wrong, I have had to rethink my skeptical assessment of what appreciating Shakespeare means. I have had to recognize that the business of appreciating Shakespeare is not—as it often seemed to me—a zero sum game. I used to think that appreciating Shakespeare more was to participate in the oblivion to which so many of Shakespeare's contemporaries have been consigned. I used to think that it meant denigrating the contribution of the theater that fostered Shakespeare's creativity and gave it a permanent home. But this is not true. It takes away nothing from the greatness of Shakespeare's contemporaries—from Ben Jonson, or Christopher Marlowe, or Thomas Middleton—to praise Shakespeare. Nor does praising Shakespeare today take away our obligation to promote the greatness of these other writers and give Shakespeare a more complete context—for anyone who is willing to listen. Surely we in the SAA have done much to promote that wider appreciation of his contemporaries and his culture by larding our panels and our seminars with questions pertaining to other playwrights and to topics that, to the general public, have only an oblique relation to Shakespeare's plays.

And I would also argue that appreciating Shakespeare without embarrassment, with a full spirit, is not to regard him—as Harold Bloom does—as the inventor of the human or the inventor of the modern English language. Such claims are polemical, political, designed to attract wide public attention, and promote book sales. Such claims fly in the face of everything that we know about the collaborative nature of theater, the communal creation of linguistic meaning, and the historical nature of authorship. Such claims disregard the historical contingencies that might have prevented any of Shakespeare's works from being written—contingencies such as a different pace of development of the English commercial theater, of the English language, to name just two—or the historical contingencies of English world dominance that have made Shakespeare's language the universal tongue.

To appreciate Shakespeare more is not to appreciate his historical embeddedness less—though that once seemed to me to be part of the same problem, since Shakespeare is widely praised, as we all know, for “not being for an age but for all time.” But such a statement as Jonson's praise quoted here is true—as the centuries since the publication of the First Folio have demonstrated. Shakespeare, as we all know, has become a global phenomenon, represented in genres unimaginable to his own age and

performed in nearly all the world's languages as well as his own. If that is not being "for all time," I don't know what such a phrase could possibly mean.

I have wanted to rid myself finally of the anxieties that come with loving Shakespeare and especially with having to share him with so many others. What I needed to do—and what I think we may all need to do in our own individual ways—is to invoke the doctrine of necessity here, as suggested by a line from *Taming of the Shrew*—"what cannot be eschewed must be embraced." What cannot be eschewed is Shakespeare's mass appeal in our present culture, and hence we should embrace it as fully as we can. We can refine the nature of our appreciation for Shakespeare so that it is compatible with rather than hostile to our well-honed critical sensibilities. We can refine our appreciation of Shakespeare without sacrificing our delight in cultural ironies of all kinds. And I think the best way to move in that direction is to cherish the recognition that Shakespeare simply cannot be contained by any single set of interests—our own included—for the very reason that Shakespeare is what Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek after him, have called a *point de capiton*, a quilting point where various ideological interests come together. It is because Shakespeare cannot be contained that we ought to be able to recognize that unequivocally positive things are established and produced every day in the name of Shakespeare, even if we as critics have often focused on the negative things.

As an example of the unequivocally positive, I wish to cite the recent initiative announced by the National Endowment for the Arts called "Shakespeare in American Communities." Launched in 2003, the program is bringing professional productions of Shakespeare's plays to 100 communities in every state and to 16 military bases. This is the largest touring program in the history of this country. It involves 28 professional acting companies, 1,000 actors, 25,000 teachers, and it will introduce 1 million high school students to live professional theater. For many students, who have only seen Shakespeare on the movie or TV screen, this will be a transformative experience. As NEA Chairman Dana Gioia's announcement declared, the touring program and its educational component are "designed to share with the next generation the excitement, joy, and educational richness of the greatest playwright in the English language."

This is recognizably a language close to bardolatry, but what part of it—I wish to ask you here—do we wish to disagree with, and why would we do so? We may be uncomfortable with the language of critical celebration; we may wish to notice that Shakespeare is a very safe place to put the American taxpayer's dollar in support of the arts; we may question the priorities of a Federal budget that underfunds critical education and social welfare programs, and has kept its support of humanities and the arts well under historical levels. Journalists in the audience at the NEA announcement of its recent initiatives suggested skeptically that NEA had ceased to fund experimental work and was no longer interested in artistic innovation.

But we as Shakespeareans surely should endorse a proposal to bring professional theater to 100 small and mid-sized American communities that have never seen it before, to bring Shakespeare productions to audiences that would otherwise not have access to them—audiences in Hazard, Kentucky; Hammond, Louisiana; and Fremont, Michigan. I want to express enthusiasm—and a full degree of ironic awareness—about the prospect of Shakespeare being performed on American military bases by professional touring companies, with funds appropriated from the Department of Defense. Some of you may have already seen one of these productions and brought your students to it.

I do not wish to underestimate the power of amateur or student performances of the plays, where invention can take over where finances are lacking or to enshrine well-established professional companies just for their "professionalism" alone. But, if we do not endorse the idea of well-established theater companies touring Shakespeare, I think we can properly be accused of bad faith—indeed of lacking faith in our product. We can be confident that Shakespeare cannot be tied to a single political agenda—that

Shakespeare cannot be contained—especially perhaps Shakespeare in performance. And I think we can be confident that Shakespeare cannot be contained or co-opted by a commercial agenda. As we know from Hamlet’s anxious advice to the players, when he tells the First Player to have the clowns “speak no more than is set down for them,” there are an infinite number of ways to evade the intentions encoded in a written text, no matter how specific the playwright wishes to be in limiting meanings.

Shakespeare’s texts are literary history’s best example of the superfluity of the signifying chain, of meanings proliferating endlessly in the endless contexts provided by a large body of work being performed globally every day of the year. Shakespeare’s plays have become universal in a practical sense—at the level of practice—simply by becoming a global phenomenon. Yet as our colleagues working in post-colonial studies have demonstrated brilliantly, in transplanted soil Shakespeare’s works mean differently and particularly, and are never self-same. It is their demonstrable particularity in each and every performance or reading that ensures our confidence that this work cannot be contained or enlisted to support the needs of a particular interest.

Thus we in the professional world of Shakespeare studies should recognize that we are on the Shakespeare bandwagon—whether we want to be or not. Rather than eschew this phenomenon I think that we should find ways of happily going along for the joyride. To recognize our position is not to discard our critical sensibilities. Far from it. But it does mean relinquishing the peculiar embarrassment that some of us may feel in assessing the full weight of numbers of those who confess to loving Shakespeare. The result is something of a paradox. We are lucky that we do not have to explain our interest in this author to the general public, as so many of our colleagues in other subspecialties do, although we are then left in the somewhat odd position for intellectuals of having not a specialized taste but a widely shared one.

Finally, though, I think we can look with a real degree of psychological comfort at what our professional love for Shakespeare moves us to do. I take that to be to promote Shakespeare on the stage and on the page in the wisest, most thoughtful terms. For me, those terms involve using Shakespeare functionally to enhance the critical thinking and writing skills of our students, believing that a knowledge of the plays is something that every literate person should aspire to, and knowing that our mission in this organization is a sound and important one. We should try to improve upon the general, public appreciation of Shakespeare, to make it a more sophisticated and critical appreciation, even a more historicized one. We should try to use Shakespeare as a powerful tool in the fight against historical amnesia. I sometimes fear that this battle against historical amnesia may well be a losing one, but I assure you that we ennoble ourselves in fighting it. I am proud, I am unembarrassed, to share my love of Shakespeare with you, dear colleagues. Thank you.