A Time for Developing Interests

If college is a time for asking questions, it also is a time for broadening your interests. Why should Shakespeare be one of those interests that you seek to develop at CUA? The obvious argument to the contrary is that reading Shakespeare is hard work—and not particularly rewarding, at least the first time round. I would like to begin by addressing what I take to be a perfectly honest response to a first reading of Shakespeare, namely "I don't get it; is it really worth the effort?"

Let me try to explain by comparing Shakespeare to music. We all know that some kinds of music are easy on the ears. This is the ear candy that you like the very first time you hear it. And after you've heard it ten thousand times in twenty four hours, it turns into an ear worm that drives you crazy.

There also is music that you don't particularly like the first time you hear it. But, if you give it a chance, it grows on you. And you discover something new about it every time you listen. At a certain point, if you listen enough, you realize that what seemed random is really better described as "complex." What had been annoying now instead strikes you as appealingly edgy. And what initially seemed weird now looks strangely wonderful. This is the way Shakespeare works. He gives you a serious headache the first time you try to understand him—and the second. But if you stick with him, you can expect a breakthrough, and the excitement and satisfaction of being able to say, "I get it."

The first time you listen to a piece of complex music, you hear but don't hear. Why should it be any surprise, then, that the first time people read Shakespeare they don't get it? What would be surprising—and a genuine cause for concern—would be if someone read Shakespeare and thought they'd understood him.

This phenomenon of people having difficulty understanding Shakespeare is hardly new. It predates by centuries our truncated attention spans and our preference for the fast cuts of modern video. It is a problem that the editors of the First Folio addressed in 1623, just seven years after the death of Shakespeare. The editors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, were two of Shakespeare's fellow players and shareholders in the Globe. Addressing the "great variety of readers" of the volume, they wrote:

Read him, therefore; and again and again. And if then you do not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him.

They did not expect readers to understand Shakespeare's works the first time they read them—and that's why they recommend rereading—"again and again." They recognize that Shakespeare is difficult, but they insist that he is worth the effort—and that if someone doesn't like Shakespeare, it's their fault, not his.

A Time for Exploring

The question Heminge and Condell don't answer—and the one I still haven't answered—is what you've understood when you've understood Shakespeare. When you get "it," what did you get?

I'd like to answer this by addressing in particular those who just don't see themselves as, well, the literary type. Some of you out there are thinking, "Reading Shakespeare—that's just not me: I'm just a normal guy, and the simple pleasures are good enough for me. Besides, what would my bowling buddies say?" I can hear others out there thinking, "I'm in a professional school, and I just want to get into my professional studies as quickly as possible." Still others are thinking, "I much prefer something more scientific—I believe in studying "real" things: fiction is fun to read on summer break, but..."

In response to these serious-minded objections to reading Shakespeare, I would like to suggest that what you find in Shakespeare is as serious as the subject matter of your other courses. We think of biology and chemistry, history and politics, psychology and sociology as subjects that are focused on the real world. Well, as with these subjects, Shakespeare offers us a lens on the real world in which we live.
In Shakespeare's time, great books were thought of as mirrors. When you read a great book, the idea is, you are looking into a mirror—a pretty special mirror, one that reflects the world in a way that allows us to see its true nature. What is more, as we hold the volume of Shakespeare in front of us, we see that it reflects not only the world around us, but also ourselves. What is it that we find in Shakespeare? Nothing less that ourselves and the world—certainly worthy subjects to study in college.

Indeed, some of Shakespeare's contemporaries justified the seriousness of literary fictions by pointing out that Christ Himself used them. Take the parable of the prodigal son: in this fiction you learn about sin and forgiveness. And you also learn about yourself. You realize that the story is about you—you are the prodigal son. The problem is that you are not only the prodigal son but also the resentful, self-righteous older brother. As you interpret the parable, you find that it interprets you—and in multiple ways. As you discover the true meaning of the parable you discover the truth about yourself.

In the case of Macbeth, we have a supreme reflection of ambition. But what makes the play terrifying is not that Macbeth looks like a fascist dictator—a popular staging these days—but because he looks like us. If you don't see your own overreaching in the phantasmagoric restless ecstasy of Macbeth, you need to read again. Either you don't understand the true nature of Macbeth's ambition or you don't know yourself. Or, quite possibly, both.

What we see in these examples is a fairly complex interplay of life and literature. Literature teaches you about life, and the better you understand literature, the better you understand life. It also is true, though, that the more you know about life, the better equipped you are to understand what you find in literature. This two-way mirroring means that learning about literature and learning about life go hand in hand. And it means that finding beauty and meaning in Shakespeare is a sort of proving ground for finding beauty and meaning in life.

Indeed, as you learn to read Shakespeare, you are learning to read the world. As you interpret Shakespeare's characters, you are practicing figuring out life's characters. Struggling with the complexities involved in interpreting Shakespeare is a superb preparation for struggling with the complexities of life. Shakespeare offers a world of vicarious experience—a virtual reality, a sort of flight simulator—that gives you a great advantage when it comes time to venture out into the real world.

So Shakespeare isn't just for literary types, he is for anyone who is interested in navigating the real world.

A Time for Self-Knowledge

By getting to know Shakespeare, you have a tremendous opportunity for getting to know yourself. Not only can you see your own ambition reflected in that of Macbeth, you also can see your own indecisiveness in that of Hamlet, your own lovesickness in that of Orsino, and the tension you feel between duty and pleasure figured forth in the struggles of Antony, torn between Rome and Egypt.

There is, however, another sense in which reading Shakespeare allows you to get to know yourself. Although we tend to think of our thoughts as our own, in fact very few if any of our thoughts are original. It follows that you don't fully know what you think until you know where your ideas come from. And many of our ideas come from Shakespeare.

A famous literary scholar wrote a book about a decade ago called Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human. He grossly overstated his case, and fails to acknowledge how much of what Shakespeare had "invented" was itself borrowed. But if we formulate his point more modestly, there can be no doubt of its truth: many of our ideas about what it is to be human can be traced back to Shakespeare. Take, for example, our ideas of romantic love. We tend to believe that love and marriage go together like a (yes) horse and carriage. For most of recorded history, however, the ideal marriage was an arranged marriage. Where did our idea of marrying for love come from? Within the complex web of sources, one place to look certainly would be Shakespeare's great comedies, in which frustrated lovers are, in the end, united in marriage. It was Shakespeare who, long before Rogers and Hammerstein, helped establish the expectations that we unquestioningly adopt.

The saying is you are what you eat; much truer is that you are what you think. Getting to know Shakespeare is getting to know where your ideas come from. And getting to know where your ideas come from is a fairly profound way of getting to know yourself. Lots of people put a lot of effort into researching their genealogy. During college, make a hobby of intellectual genealogy. Trace your ideas back to their origins. Discover the traditions that you are part of.

University as Place for Exploration
As I said before, my points about Shakespeare can be applied more broadly. And just as the Book is a mirror of the world, so too is the university. It is not an accident that the word "university" sounds like "universe." The idea is that a university is a place where you should be able to find the entire universe of knowledge. The university, like Shakespeare, is for exploring the world and, through that exploration, better understanding yourself.

Wordsworth has a beautiful image of the mental exploration that he thought appropriate for universities. He described how lying in bed at night, he could look out of his dormitory window and see a statue of Isaac Newton. Looking at the "silent face" of the statue he saw "a mind for ever / Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone." What he admired about Newton was that he was an explorer, a bold adventurer. And that is what Wordsworth became—but in poetry rather than in physics.

If you adopt this attitude, your major—whatever it may be—is not something you acquire; it is sea or a territory that you explore. Consider thinking of your major as your Major Area of Exploration. And philosophy, theology, natural sciences, social sciences, humanities—they are not distribution requirements that you dutifully fulfill, they are strange lands in which you should look for adventure.

**A Different Take on Skills**

I think I can hear some of you thinking that "this idea of exploration sounds nice, but the reason I'm here is to prepare for a career." It is true that college is a time for acquiring skills that you will need after graduation. And, believe it or not, even as an English professor I have no objection to people being gainfully employed after college.

Nevertheless, much of the current emphasis on skills is, I think, misplaced. With some frequency, I read about how employers want college graduates with skills. What is funny, is that in one article, employers are looking for communication skills; in another article, it's critical thinking; in yet another article it's people skills. When I see these articles, I can't help but recall that scene in Napoleon Dynamite, in which Napoleon famously declares that "girls want guys with skills." Of course, this is true, but what is funny are the skills he lists: numchuck skills, bowstaff skills. In his emphasis on skills, it is clear that Napoleon has no idea what girls really want.

Well, what employers seem to want (judging from these articles) are neither specialized professional skills nor numchuck skills. What they want are basic skills that are useful in any field. With people changing careers more frequently than ever, these broad and transferrable skills are increasingly valuable. Statistics indicate that most of you will not end your working life in the same career in which you started. Even if you remain in the same field, as you advance in your career as architects, engineers, nurses, musicians, you will find that your responsibilities extend beyond the bounds of your professional skill set. And you will find that "soft skills" become more and more important. So as you are acquiring professional skills, don't neglect those foundational skills that will serve you throughout the rest of your life, whatever you are doing.

Now, while affirming the need for the skills that the newspapers cite, I also feel obliged to point out that a liberal arts education is not just about adding skills; it's also about eliminating defects. Let me illustrate with a comparison between cultivating land and cultivating the mind. If you want to grow crops, the first thing you have to do is to clear the land. And once you have all of the trees and rocks and debris cleared away, you have to plow the land, and dig up roots and hidden rocks. Only then are you ready to plant seeds. Likewise with the mind. A liberal arts education is designed to help you clear your mind of prejudices, biases, and habitual errors so that you plow, plant and produce a rich harvest.

A contemporary of Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, precisely identified some common defects that education should seek to eliminate. Some of these defects are part-and-parcel with being human. We all tend to jump to conclusions. Similarly, we all tend to confuse what is true with what we want to be true. A liberal arts education teaches us to identify these natural tendencies and to correct for them.

Other defects are acquired—such as Oprah speak. A liberal arts education trains us not to let our language do our thinking for us—not to think that we have analyzed Othello when we say that he has "issues." Or to think that when we talk about "thinking outside the box" we are anywhere but in the dead center of the box.

And since a little learning is a dangerous thing, a liberal arts education teaches us to guard against the tendency to make the world fit the confines of our philosophy or ideology. It teaches us instead to open up our minds and to modify our ideas to accommodate
the complexity and messiness of reality.

In discussing the need to correct these biases, natural and acquired, Bacon thinks of the mind as a mirror—you shouldn't be surprised. But it is a mirror full of defects that make it reflect the world in a distorted way. By education, we polish out the defects in the mirror of the mind—so that it is a more accurate reflection of the world around us.

Whatever course you are in, whatever your major, your job is to polish the mirror of your mind. This is the skill of skills.

**There is Knowledge and there is Knowledge**

As I conclude, I would like to remind you that college isn’t just about your head, it’s also about the heart. And, returning to Shakespeare, I can say that he can be particularly helpful in understanding the heart. Read Shakespeare and spare yourself a world of bad dates.

Shakespeare shows how the head and the heart need each other. One of the most important things for you to come to understand is your own emotional life. Why do you feel the way you do? Have other people felt this way before? What have they done about it, and how has it turned out?

By reading about the heart, your head and heart become more fully integrated. This integrity, when you understand what you feel and you hear with an understanding heart, is the mark of an educated person.

And if you are a person of faith, which I hope is the case, as your ability to reason about the world and the human condition grows, so should your faith. Of all the areas of exploration ahead of you, none is as vast and exciting as the realm of belief. As your faith grows, it should increase your desire to know—to know God, his creation, and the pinnacle and centerpiece of his creation—humankind. And to know humankind not just with your head, but with your entire humanity. This implies growing in emotional intelligence—and the good manners that flow from this intelligence. And it means growing in wisdom, that intelligence that encompasses intellectual and emotional understanding, and rises above them.

So, again, "Why read Shakespeare?" I’ve proposed a link between getting to know Shakespeare and getting to know the world and ourselves. I encourage you to test out this hypothesis and to see if in becoming better at the art of reading Shakespeare, you become better at the art of living—to see if through reading Shakespeare you become someone better equipped to find happiness in life, someone who more highly values what is truly valuable in life.

My wish for you is that you discover a richer life for yourself here at CUA, a life that is full of the blessings you deserve and—what is much better—full of blessing that you know good and well you don’t deserve. Good luck with your reading; good luck with college; good luck with your life.