

Article

The Crisis in the Humanities—What Would Shakespeare do?

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Abstract: In this essay, I turn to Shakespeare for advice about how to alleviate the crisis in the humanities. University faculty and PhD students develop what I’ve called a dispositional immobility, a disposition to do what they do only in an academic setting. I think humanities faculty and doctoral students can learn from Shakespeare a good deal about how to mobilize themselves and what they do as well as a lot about how to change the institution of the humanities, especially by following his practice of institution blending. Shakespeare, I will argue, can teach us how to move.

Keywords: crisis in the humanities; dispositional immobility; academic underemployment; institution blending; knowledge translation

In this essay, I want to turn to Shakespeare for advice about how to alleviate the crisis in the humanities. The crisis, we should note, seems to have been going on for a surprisingly long time—since at least 1964, the year that saw the publication of J. H. Plumb’s edited collection that announced the crisis [1]. I have no quarrel with the word, just so long as we recognize that the problem is in fact a long-term chronic condition that happens to get elevated to crisis level from time to time. What we could call the chronic malaise of the humanities is, I suggest, an effect of the long-term institutionalization of the practices of humanistic, book-based reading, writing, scholarship, and teaching—an arrangement that has conferred certain benefits but has also bred a number of weaknesses.

The main one, I think, and the one underlying the present crisis, is a widespread condition of immobility. Essays and books made within the world of the university don’t travel well outside that world. University faculty and PhD students develop what I’ve called a dispositional immobility, a disposition to do what they do only in an academic setting [2]. Dispositional immobility is an effect of the success of academic institutionalization, which has made the university seem like a world apart. I think humanities scholars and teachers can learn from Shakespeare a good deal about how to mobilize themselves and what they do, as well as a lot about how to change the institution of the humanities, especially by following his practice of institution blending. Shakespeare, I will argue, can teach us how to move.

First of all, however, it has to be said that Shakespeare is no admirer of scholars or of book learning. “Pedants” like Holofernes in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* are just fools whose classical learning keeps them from knowing anything of real value. The four young noblemen in the play are just lucky that their plans to create “a little academe” (1.1.13) turn to air when they fall in love with their four female counterparts (all Shakespeare quotes are from [3]).

The plays broadcast disdain for formal learning. The villain Iago dismisses his rival officer Cassio for lack of real battle experience: Cassio, Iago says, “never set a squadron in the field”; all his experience is “bookish theoretic” (*Othello*, [3], 1.1.22, 24). We might think that Iago’s contempt for learning (since he is a villain) means that Shakespeare must admire scholarship, but two of Shakespeare’s greatest protagonists—Hamlet and Prospero—are men who let their learning and hypertrophied intellects

impede their real life tasks. Hamlet, fresh from university in Wittenberg, swans around the castle at Elsinore reading the latest satirical publications and “thinking too precisely on th’ event” (4.4.41) when he should be avenging his father’s murder and acting decisively to bring justice back to Denmark. When he was ruler of Milan, *The Tempest*’s Prospero loved his books, especially his books of occult knowledge, so much (“my library/Was dukedom large enough”—1.2.109-10) that they prevented him from carrying out his responsibilities as Duke and led to his ouster and exile. His love of books almost led to the death of his child. Toward the end of the play, he realizes that he must “drown [his] book” (5.1.57) and turn away from scholarship and the study of the occult in order to return to the world of government and fatherhood.

It is ironic that Shakespeare does not have a good word to say about scholarship, especially since he was himself an extraordinarily well-read man, whose literary works have become one of the keystones of modern humanities teaching and research. It even looks like the popularity of his plays over the past two hundred years or so has had something to do with a certain disdain for book learning and scholarship, especially in the Anglo-American world. From the start, Shakespeare himself was held up as a model of a kind of natural genius—a creator of a literary canon that owed nothing to other books. The students at Oxford embraced him for his apparent freedom from study. In the university play, *The Return from Parnassus* (1601), we are told how “Few of the university men pen plaies well, they smell too much of the writer Ovid...Why here’s our fellow *Shakespeare* puts them all downe” ([3], p. 1962). (The students’ praise was no doubt partly tongue-in-cheek, given Shakespeare’s evident love of Ovid.) A dedication to the 1640 edition of his poems praises Shakespeare for his *lack* of classical learning, “Nature onely helpt him, for looke thorow/This whole Booke, thou shalt find he doth not borrow, / One phrase from Greekes, not Latines imitate” ([3], p. 1972; [4]).

What exactly is the problem that I would like Shakespeare to help solve? What exactly is the present crisis in the humanities? It is, as I’ve suggested, the latest flare-up in the long-term chronic condition of humanistic scholarship and teaching. As Blaine Greteman said recently in *The New Republic*, “the humanities have been going down that drain since at least 1621, when Robert Burton blamed their decline for the rampant disease of melancholia attacking scholars of his generation” [5]. Burton was not alone in his unhappiness. The early seventeenth century saw a crisis of underemployment among university graduates [6]. Shakespeare didn’t attend university, of course, but many of his contemporaries did; many were disappointed by the outcome of their education at Oxford or Cambridge. A good number of those who could not secure gainful employment found their way into the new entertainment industry that Shakespeare helped to found.

As in Shakespeare’s time, the crisis today has been triggered not by a precipitous decline in enrollments but by critical uncertainty about outcomes. William Deresiewicz reports an alarming shift from traditional humanities majors such as English to programs in Business, especially at elite American universities [7]; but Peter Mandler’s survey of undergraduate enrollment trends since the 1950s in the UK, USA, and Australia demonstrates significant stability in humanities enrollments across the decades and a robust increase in terms of raw numbers of humanities undergraduates commensurate with overall increases in university enrollments [8].

The news about graduate education on the enrollment side is even better. Enrollments in all PhD programs in Canada have risen by 450% since 1970 [9]. On the outcomes side, however, the PhD in the humanities looks more like the sharp end of the stick. The White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities reports that, of all people who enter humanities PhD programs in Canada, approximately 50% don’t complete; of those who do complete, only 20%–30% get academic jobs. “Doctoral programs that regularly lose half their students before completion”, the White Paper says, “and ultimately see only 10%–15% of the total incoming cohort achieve the principal goal for which the programs were designed in the first place must be acknowledged to be experiencing some level of systemic failure” ([9], p. 7).

I should note that the White Paper makes a case for the educational, social, and political value of humanities research at the top of its form, argues for the need for humanities PhD programs, and argues against cutting programs or enrolments. It recommends reforming both the programs and the culture of the academy itself so that the PhD leads and is seen to lead to a multiplicity of career pathways rather than to only one pathway and so that humanities work becomes capable of a much greater degree of mobility and usefulness inside and outside the university. The project that led to the White Paper is one of a number of initiatives dedicated to enhancing the mobility and public life of humanities knowledge and ways of knowing. Another excellent example is the Futures Initiative at CUNY (<http://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Initiatives-and-Committees/The-Futures-Initiative>) [10].

I'll have more to say about how a sustained conversation with Shakespeare could contribute to this work and could help us mobilize the humanities, but first we need to have a closer look at the crisis itself.

The outcome statistics reported in the White Paper and in other studies have occasioned a good deal of debate, analysis, and soul-searching see [11,12]. The crisis, however, does not consist precisely in the various career pathways on which BA, MA, or PhD graduates often find themselves embarked. After all, while the data are still inadequate, it nevertheless seems that humanities graduates do reasonably well in their careers, inside and outside the academy. A good study of undergraduate outcomes with an especial focus on the competitive earning power of humanities BAs in relation to other disciplines is the Education Policy Research Initiative (<http://www.epri.ca/>). The TRaCE project (<http://iplaitrace.com/>) is collecting data on outcomes for humanities PhD cohorts in Canada, 2004–2014.

The telling problem is that the majority of humanities PhD grads, as the White Paper reports, does not secure tenure-track assistant professorships; and the normal expectation in the academy—after all these years and in the teeth of the evidence—is that PhD graduates are supposed to secure such positions. I suggest that the present crisis has much to do with the apparent crisis in the academic labour market—itself a serious flare-up in what has been the chronic academic underemployment of PhDs going back at least fifty years.

Consider for a moment humanities graduate education as if it were the system of artisanal training as it was practiced in Shakespeare's time. Young artisans were indentured by formal contract for the term of their apprenticeship, normally seven years. They were servants in the shop of their master. They could not marry; their freedom of movement and activity was severely limited. If they completed their apprenticeship successfully, they would become members of the livery company. To be acknowledged a master of the craft specific to the company, say the Goldsmiths, a young smith would complete a "masterpiece", a work accomplished enough to represent the company to itself, advertise the achievements of the craft to other people in the city, and enroll the young artisan as a full-fledged master in the company.

Imagine that you have laboured for years as an apprentice goldsmith, endured years of hard service, been prevented from having a normal adult life. After those years of hard living, you have finally demonstrated your mastery of your craft by creating a "masterpiece." Now imagine that the commercial world has gone sour, the company of Goldsmiths is under economic pressure, and you and most of your fellow new-made masters are turned away from the profession and the livery company. There is no place in the craft for you or them. Or, worse perhaps, you and your fellows are invited to stay, but only as if you were still apprentices (poorly paid, unfree) for the remainder of your working lives.

At this time of crisis, then, which is what has been precipitated by both the university system's failure to hire its own graduates into the professoriate and also the system's exploitation of thousands of PhDs as underpaid adjunct teachers, the academic institution of the humanities begins to feel, not like an enriching home for the work its inhabitants love doing, but rather like a kind of bus shelter in a winter without end (see [13]). In times like these, when the core values of the institutional

community are close to breaking—since we eject or exploit most of those who aspire to become, and whom we foster to become, permanent members of the community—all that seems left of the institution is a hard shell with sharp edges.

I am exaggerating the actual situation of PhD students and PhD graduates. The students are not indentured, their freedom is not curtailed, they own the work they craft, often they are well funded. Approximately 30% of the grads secure tenure-track jobs, up to perhaps 20% do not seek academic employment in the first place, and many (we do not yet know how many) end up in worthwhile, fulfilling, remunerative careers outside the academy. But my imagined picture of a collapsing academic craft guild nevertheless serves to capture some sense of the crisis that besets us.

In these straits, what help could we possibly expect from a man without university education, someone who started out a journeyman actor in a risky entertainment business, who became popular for his plays in his lifetime, and a man who has, since his death and as if by a kind of miracle, become the central figure in the global literary canon?

Shakespeare translated the literary resources of antiquity and those of his own age into marketable and socially creative theatrical products. These resources comprise a large and varied library—Ovid, Virgil, Horace, the Geneva Bible, King James, historians such as Plutarch, Holinshed, and Hall, thinkers like Michel de Montaigne and Machiavelli, many other historians and thinkers, and a vast assortment of fiction, poetry, and drama (see [14]). He seems to have been able to dramatize major contemporary matters of concern in history, philosophy, theology, and state and domestic politics by mobilizing into dramatic form an extraordinary range of bookish knowledge.

I am not suggesting that we try to write like Shakespeare—that would be a tall order—and I am not recommending that we shift entirely away from the traditional forms of humanities scholarship and publication, but I do want to propose that we undertake to follow his practice of translating and mobilizing bookish knowledge on a large scale. There are wonderful recent examples of popular, highly innovative scholarship, like *Unflattering*—Nick Sousanis' philosophical comic book dissertation turned Harvard UP publication—or Amanda Visconti's web-based, interactive doctoral project, *Infinite Ulysses* (<http://www.infiniteulysses.com/>). To scale up from innovation at the level of the products of the institution to transformation of the institution itself, however, we need to enlist the participation of many others—artists, activists, community workers, public intellectuals, journalists—in the work that we have been doing by ourselves. One example of how humanities scholarship can move is the Making Publics (MaPs) Project. CBC Radio IDEAS produced a fourteen-episode series, *The Origins of the Modern Public*, based on the project. The work reached an American audience when NPR picked up the series. One of those listeners, American business writer and media expert, Jeff Jarvis, credited MaPs as the key influence behind his book, *Public Parts* [15].

The goal of this and all such collaborations must be the strategic de-institutionalization of the university, the fashioning of multiple windows and doors in the outer shell of the academy so that it becomes less like a world apart and more like a node within a network of researchers and teachers inside and outside the university as well as of many others who have an active commitment to the worth of arts and humanities.

To a degree, it must be admitted, Shakespeare sought to transform the infant theatrical industry into an institution, a social entity marked out by established practices and by a professional habitus—something as legitimate and durable as a craft guild or a university.

But on the whole Shakespeare was more a blender of institutions than a builder of one. He brought together the school and the playhouse under the aegis of an emerging entertainment marketplace. He blended the bookish practices of reading, note-taking, and writing with the arts and crafts of acting, dance, music, stage and theatre design, and costume making. His innovative work was made easier because the commercial theatre was a new, highly malleable venture and because early modern London was a changeable place with a hugely expanding population of foreign and domestic immigrants, including Shakespeare himself.

The companies of professional players adopted the livery company system of training and internal advancement and, as David Kathman has shown, a large number of players were members of the livery companies whose status as “freemen” of the Goldsmiths or the Drapers gave them the right to recruit apprentices into the playhouse, many of whom became free of the companies in their turn even though their training had nothing to do with gold or cloth [16].

Shakespeare’s company of players was always on the move. They were until 1603 the liveried servants of the Lord Chamberlain and therefore the leading entertainers of the rulers of England. When James became king in 1603, they became the “King’s Servants.” They wore the royal livery in the new monarch’s triumphal entry into London. To a degree the players bound themselves to the Court—the institution of the State itself—but they never performed exclusively for the Court. They maintained one and then, after 1609, two commercial playhouses in London, where they traded on their association with the Court for the pleasure of playgoers who were attracted to the glamour and power of their “social betters.” The players also put courtly gesture, idiom, and costume in dialogue with urban commercial and artisanal forms of expression and styles of living. The back-and-forth movement on stage between the Court and City engendered a drama that was both charismatic and critical. By virtue of the collaboration among men of letters, actors, costumers, and others, and on account of the oscillation between aristocratic and artisanal cultures, the theatre created a new domain of cultural production, new ways for artists and writers to earn a livelihood, and an important new site for discussion and debate among people of both genders, and of all social ranks, occupations, and confessional identities. Shakespeare created, not an institution, but rather a public (see [17–19]).

The modern university is already an institution, so its transformation into something far more mobile, variegated, and public will require an approach different in part from Shakespeare’s. By the way, I don’t think we need fear that the university might fall back into its nascent state, before the loosely-knit groups of teachers and students in a number of European cities gained political and ecclesiastical recognition and support and before they were granted the legal charters and afforded the permanent spaces that grew into the great universities of medieval and early modern Europe (see [20]).

In some respects, the university is to artists and activists today what the royal Court was to Shakespeare and the players. It is a site of power and wealth whose legitimacy is nevertheless held in question. The way forward for us inside the academy is to use the visibility, the performance and gathering spaces, the material and intellectual resources, and the considerable cultural capital of the academic institution to foster the growth of collaboration among those inside and outside the university and the blending in of non-academic sectors (some institutionalized, some not) of artistic, social, and intellectual work.

If this de-institutionalizing program is to take hold, the collaborations and blendings will need to develop into long-term relationships of trust and shared inquiry, publication (of various kinds), and action across disciplinary, institutional, and social boundaries. The good news is, these kinds of long-term relationships are already growing at a number of universities by way of particular projects, programs, and departments, faculties, and institutes.

Here are three examples: “Illuminations” at the University of California, Irvine, directed by Shakespeare scholar Julia Reinhard Lupton (<http://illuminations.uci.edu/>), brings the arts to all undergraduates regardless of their area of specialization and builds connections between the university and regional arts and culture centers and institutions. The remarkable Adaptive Use Musical Instrument (AUMI) Project (<http://ccc-rpi.org/research/aumi/>) uses music and technology to awake severely disabled children to their own agency and creativity. It was developed by musician Pauline Oliveros (founder of the Deep Listening Institute at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) and has grown with the support of therapists, musicians, and scholars across North America. McGill’s Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas (IPLAI) created the Thinking Art program, which brings together artists, scholars, and people of all walks of life (including business people) to learn how to make works of art together and to thereby foster new modes of collective creativity and action [21].

These and many other initiatives are opening windows and doors in the outward shell of the academic institution of the humanities. The success of these initiatives can provide impetus for the expansion of practices and structures that mobilize bookish knowledge and blend institutions. Shakespeare can provide model strategies for this expansion; and his art, because it is itself a product of mobilization and blending, can serve as a valuable currency between the university and the many sectors of art and action that together can recreate the public life of learning.

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