

7-2-2017

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Recommended Citation

Romero, A. 2017. Kolb studies, teaches Shakespeare and his times. *College Talk* (29):1-1. 2 July 2017. (URL: <http://www.aromerojr.net/Publications/979.Kolb.pdf>)

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Kolb studies, teaches Shakespeare and his times

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Laura Kolb was not sure what she wanted to major in when she went to college at Columbia University, but at some point she decided in favor of English. This was not surprising, given her upbringing. “Ever since I was really small my parents read to me, and I loved to read,” she says.

A native of South Bend, Indiana, she grew up in Floyd, Virginia, went on to do her masters in Humanities and her doctorate in English at the University of Chicago, and today she is an assistant professor in the Department of English in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, CUNY.

The literature she chose for her specialization is Early Modern English. That may sound antique to many, but at least one figure from the period is actually very familiar to us: Shakespeare. “The period I work on in England runs roughly from 1550 to 1660. The language that is spoken and written is recognizably modern English. The grammar, the syntax, most of the vocabulary—it’s the language we have today,” says Kolb.

Since the Renaissance began in continental Europe much earlier, in the 14th century, one wonders why it took so long to arrive in England and to affect English literature. “England is an island, and things sometimes come later to islands: the Renaissance, the rebirth of classical learning, and at the same time the celebration of the possibilities of the vernacular language, of English or, in Italy, of Italian. In many cases, the English are following Italian models and French models, but we really do get a Renaissance. We get a flowering, especially of literature,” explains Kolb.

Obviously, Kolb studies a lot of Shakespeare, given that the native of Stratford-upon-Avon flourished towards the end of the 16th century. But why is his work so relevant even today, four centuries after his death? “I think about this all the time because I teach Shakespeare, and my students are sometimes astonished at how certain moments speak to them.” Kolb has an explanation. “Shakespeare’s very basic insight



Photo by Yulia Rock

Dr. Kolb at work.

is that in social life we are always acting. When I am in front of the class, I am, of course, performing. I have a persona that I don’t necessarily have in my home, that I don’t necessarily have when I’m riding the subway. That’s a different face that I present.”

Were Shakespeare and others at that time expressing some of the social concerns of their generation so dominated by Elizabeth I? Kolb thinks so. “Writers in the period were constantly addressing, sometimes in veiled ways and sometimes in more explicit ways, anxieties about succession.”

Although we admire Shakespeare today, that was not always the case and some even think he was not a real person. “I think people love conspiracy theories. There’s too much evidence from the period. We have records of his birth and death, we have his will, we have records that he wrote plays. He had

enemies and his enemies wrote about him. He was called an upstart crow who thought of himself as the only Shake-scene in the country, so this older guard of playwrights didn’t like this young guy, and that seems to me sort of irrefutable evidence. Who would make that up?” asks Kolb.

Although we live in a celebrity-crazed era dominated by people in show business, actors were not that highly regarded in Shakespeare’s era. “Being on stage and being looked at, this was understood as a fundamentally sexualized relationship. Actors at that time were all males and were often compared with prostitutes—they’re selling themselves, they’re not self-same, they’re being other than themselves,” she says.

Other aspects of theater in the time of Shakespeare were sociological in nature. Theater was

the really big show in town, and performances were attended by many people of many different backgrounds. “There was an enormous mingling of classes and genders. Women went to the theater. One of the critiques of the theater was that you saw kings mingling with clowns. You saw the upper-class characters, who belong in a tragedy, onstage with the lower-class characters, who belong in a comedy. The theater was somehow challenging literary categories but also social categories,” she explains.

Kolb has also studied the economy of that time, and she discovered that the lack of cash made most people conduct transactions on credit, and that this was reflected in many plays. “Playwrights built plots around this phenomenon, and even on a very small scale you’ll have one character tell another, ‘If you want to get rich in the city, don’t bother trying to make money, wear the right clothes and pretend you have wealthy friends, that’s how you build credit.’”

The other issue that was in many people’s minds at that time had to do with race, and Shakespeare handled it very well. “By the time he’s writing *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, he’s much more interested in the way race is socially constructed. And he’s really interested in how racism works by the time of those plays. I love teaching those plays because they are so smart on the social construction of otherness, especially *Othello*.”

Another thing that differentiated Shakespeare from other authors was that he loved to set plays in exotic places, whereas other playwrights of his generation preferred to confine their stories to London. “Thomas Heywood, Thomas Middleton, his contemporaries, they love to set plays in London and to name the particular streets. And there’s a pleasure for the London audience of being in the know—‘Oh, you know on that street, that’s where you buy cloth,’ or ‘that’s where you buy fish’—and this kind of interaction will happen there.”

*Aldemaro Romero Jr. is Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/218604694>
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