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Karen Viars
n/a, karen.viars@gmail.com

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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

A peek inside the personal library of a librarian

by Karen Viars

Let me begin with a confession: I don't like *Hamlet*. I know, I know – it's a classic. Despite multiple readings and quite a few English classes, it still fails to win me over like Shakespeare's comedies. A few years ago, I gleefully watched a production of Paul Rudnick's play *I Hate Hamlet*, silently agreeing with the protagonist's every complaint about the Prince of Denmark. Despite my less-than-fond feelings toward *Hamlet*, my own private library contains not one but two copies.

I bought the first one because it was required for a high school English class. Though I'd read Shakespeare before, thanks to an amazing teacher, this time I enjoyed it. Instead of listening to a recording of actors reading each scene (as my previous classes had done), we read them aloud ourselves, pausing to discuss whenever someone had a question. When I flip through the dog-eared paperback now, I see the margins full of notes about the words, characters, and ideas that inhabit the play. I was fascinated not only by the layers of meaning in each line, but also by how much of human nature remained the same from the Renaissance to my suburban high school. After my class read the entire play, we watched selections from different film versions and compared each director's and actor's choices. Reading *Hamlet* taught me about literary and dramatic interpretation.

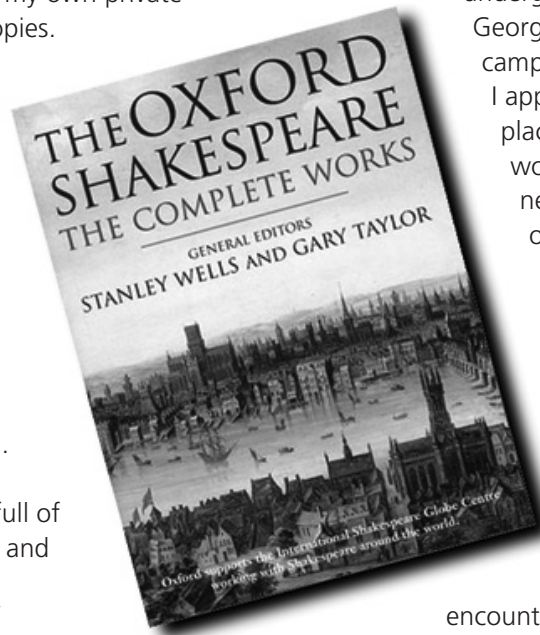
As the subject of my first research paper, *Hamlet* was also my introduction to college and university libraries; I

delved not only into my high school's literary criticism collection, but also found sources in many of the academic libraries in Atlanta. I took breaks during my research to wander the stacks, intrigued by the unfamiliar call numbers and amazed that there seemed to be books on every possible subject. My affinity for academic

libraries continued during my undergraduate years at the University of Georgia, and when I needed an on-campus job, the library was the only place I applied. I was lucky enough to be placed in the Digital Library of Georgia, working on historical book and newspaper projects. The digital aspect of libraries was entirely new to me, but I learned about it eagerly and incorporated digital preservation into one of my school projects.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can trace my choices of undergraduate major and minor (English and theater, of course) to my experiences with *Hamlet*, though I did not

encounter the play itself again until a summer studying abroad at Oxford University. Just as before, it was a required text, though this time for a class on Shakespeare studies. I purchased *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works*, a weighty volume that my professor recommended not only as reading for the class, but also as a souvenir and doorstop. I still preferred the comedies to *Hamlet*, but revisiting the play with the guidance of a Shakespeare scholar helped me to see its comedic moments more, and to appreciate how they heighten the tragedy.



When I was assigned to write another paper on *Hamlet* that summer, I had the vast and wonderful resources of the Bodleian Library to explore. I loved the Bodleian from the moment I walked through its arched doors and took the oath required of all its patrons (which includes promising not to “kindle therein any fire or flame”). I spent a lot of time in the library, whether researching, taking a guided tour or visiting the open stacks. The Bodleian’s policy of keeping most of its eleven million volumes in closed stacks left me plenty of time while waiting for items I had requested to be retrieved; I visited the different reading rooms, and thought about what it might be like to one day work in a place where so many fascinating resources were available.

That summer at Oxford also nurtured my interest in theater. There were, thankfully, no productions of *Hamlet* while I was there; instead, I saw a boisterous version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* starring Oxford undergraduates and two more plays in London’s West End. The Shakespeare class included a field trip to

Stratford-on-Avon to see *Much Ado About Nothing* put on by the Royal Shakespeare Company. At our next meeting, my professor encouraged us to examine the company’s interpretation. That discussion turned out to be one of the best of the semester, and one that reminded me of watching film versions *Hamlet* in high school.

I owe a great deal to *Hamlet*, in spite of my impatience with its main character: research and writing skills, curiosity about interpretations of classic works, a love of theater, and time in some truly fantastic libraries. So these two copies of *Hamlet* will always have a home on my bookshelves — right next to the comedies. ►►

Librarian and Instructional Designer Karen Viars is an archives volunteer at the Atlanta History Center’s James G. Kenan Research Center.



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LIST Program Coordinator
770-274-5088
Stephen.Koplan@gpc.edu