

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Johannes Steffens

New exhibition explores many lives of Shakespeare's texts

William Shakespeare's plays transcended their origins almost immediately. Even during his lifetime, his unforgettable characters and indelible lines were already escaping the stage, taken up by others and repurposed in diverse ways. Today, more than 400 years later, printers, publishers, artists and filmmakers have continuously adapted his words into every possible medium, from fine art and opera to modern cinema.

This sprawling cultural legacy is the focus of ["Infinite Variety: The Many Lives of Shakespeare's Texts"](#) a new exhibition at the UC Santa Barbara Library. Co-curated by Professor [James Kearney](#), Chair of the Department of English and renowned Shakespeare scholar, and [David Gartrell](#), the library's curator of rare books and manuscripts, the exhibition explores the many forms and afterlives of Shakespeare's art, tracing a lineage from a single scrap of his handwritten text to 21st-century digital media.

The exhibition features — in the words of Shakespeare's contemporary Christopher Marlowe — "infinite riches in a little room." The centerpiece in the small but impressive collection of rare and unique materials is an original Fourth Folio (1685), generously loaned by Sara Miller McCune, longtime UCSB Library supporter, local philanthropist and the namesake of the Arts Library in which this exhibition is housed. Miller McCune's gift of this rare volume to the UCSB community made the exhibition possible. The four Shakespeare folios — stately, large-format posthumous

editions published in the 17th century — cemented the Bard’s fame and preserved plays like “Macbeth,” “As You Like It” and “The Tempest” that might otherwise have been lost.

“A folio is a commitment, on the part of the publisher as well as the purchaser,” Gartrell noted, emphasizing the distinct physical presence of these rare volumes compared to other historical materials. “Where archives and manuscripts reveal the messiness of human nature, books conceal it, or at least they usually try to.”

“Infinite Variety” features 1734 duodecimo editions — the first mass-market pocket-sized plays — and stretches into the 20th century with items like a 1944 audio set featuring Paul Robeson’s Broadway-record-setting “Othello” as well as examples of modern cinema history, such as a draft script for Akira Kurosawa’s acclaimed 1957 adaptation “Throne of Blood” and a script from Gus Van Sant’s grunge-era “My Own Private Idaho” (1990). All of these materials are drawn from the library’s [Special Research Collections](#).

For the curators, placing these disparate items together is the point. The exhibition’s title borrows a description of Cleopatra from “Antony and Cleopatra”: “Age cannot wither her. Nor custom stale / Her infinite variety.”

“I love thinking about this exhibition gallery as a conversational space, a collaborative space — where Shakespeare speaks to and inspires these other writers and artists, who in turn speak to and with and through Shakespeare,” Kearney said. “And I love the idea of Kurosawa’s 20th century Macbeth script and Shakespeare’s 17th century folio in a room together, conversing across cultures and centuries.”

Whether through the 1587 Holinshed’s “Chronicles” that originally inspired Shakespeare, or a flyer for a 1992 production of “The Merchant of Venice” for San Francisco’s Asian American Theater Company, “Infinite Variety” presents Shakespeare’s texts as living artifacts, continuously breathing new inspiration into the world.

“Infinite Variety” is on display until June 12 in the Jackie Laskoff Exhibition Alcove, located in the Sara Miller McCune Arts Library ([1st Floor, Mountain Side](#)), and is co-sponsored by UCSB Library and the Department of English.

Two special events will be held in conjunction with the exhibition. On May 1, at noon, the library and English Department will host a [student performance of “The Strangers’ Case”](#) in the library’s Mountain Courtyard. Considered the greatest Shakespearean speech no one knows, “The Strangers’ Case” features a powerful defense of refugees and is believed to be the only surviving creative manuscript written in Shakespeare’s own hand. On May 14, at 5 p.m., the Carsey-Wolf Center will host [Storytelling for the Screen: Hamnet](#). This event features a screening of Chloé Zhao’s acclaimed 2025 film, followed by a discussion on how the Bard’s personal history continues to inspire modern cinema.

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