RELIGION AND THE RISE OF ENGLISH STUDIES

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I.

The phrase “the rise of English” could be employed to name any number of phenomena. To native speakers of English it might suggest a narrative that celebrates the unprecedented global currency of their language. In the narrower academic world, however, for at least half a century it has served to name a historical development so successful that its principal outcome is assumed to have been in place from time out of mind: the making of literature in English into a school subject. That universities now offer courses devoted to vernacular literature seems utterly natural. Such courses routinely proceed as if there were nothing anomalous about re-addressing to persons making their way into adulthood works that were long ago composed in vastly different circumstances. Few students know anything about when and how English literature began to be considered a worthy part of a curriculum leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree. Even their instructors are likely to regard as of merely antiquarian interest the history of the pedagogical innovations by which English was made into a respectable academic subject.

The story of origins, even if it is barely known, inevitably bears on the self-understanding of those engaged in English Studies, whatever they judge their current purposes to be. This essay means to probe the prevailing story about the rise of English. The standard narrative, besides tending to celebrate the displacement of the study of the Latin and Greek classics, was framed in ways congruent with the assumption that in the progress of civilization “religion” would largely disappear. This feature of the story warrants rethinking.

Since the publication of D. J. Palmer’s book of 1965, The Rise of English, the account furnished there about how Oxford University came to institute a School of English has been made the basis for a generalized narrative about the origins of an academic discipline. Told in relation to England by Palmer and, more recently, in relation to North America by Robert Scholes, it re-inflects the trope of progress with the idea of organic maturation. Palmer recounts the ways in which the subject, once it was rendered worthy of the university, eclipsed the earlier promise of an “English” that would provide a poor man’s classics adaptable for the likes of foreigners, workers, and women. Both he and Scholes (in The Rise and Fall of English) organize their materials into a plot that emphasizes that many of the earliest instructors in English literature were clergymen who confounded the subject with religion. Both duly tell how other
obstacles (put up by stodgy old classicists in England, for instance, and by denominational overseers in the U.S.) were overcome. Both stories climax when the discipline, having developed disinterested protocols that freed it from biases inherent in traditional religion, achieved maturity. These features of the narrative long served to establish boundaries within which leading professionals in the field were expected to operate and to reassure them that theirs was an autonomous discipline.

The most widely disseminated version of “the rise of English” is found in the opening chapter of Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory*, where the author deftly couches in a hypothetical an influential claim about why literary study expanded so rapidly and dramatically in the nineteenth century: “If one were asked to provide a single explanation” for how it came to be that people study English literature, “one could do worse than reply: ‘the failure of religion.’”\(^4\) Eagleton’s account gives little consideration to other grounds for the spread of literacy in the period. Nor does it acknowledge that the word “religion” carries many more senses than the historically specific one that prevailed in Victorian England. It ignores the possibility that the purposes for which English literature was made a legitimate object of study in the Academy could have differed significantly in various locales. Proposing that literature was made to replace religion at a moment when “every creed” was “shaken” and every “dogma” “questionable,” Eagleton slips easily into one of the hallmark linguistic displacements employed by his predecessors in relating the story, allowing that Matthew Arnold might be regarded as the movement’s patron saint.

It is curious that the so-called “Arnoldian replacement theory,” which relies upon a foundational binary opposition between literature and religion, should have proved durable long after similarly influential binaries were deconstructed in gender and race studies. Observing this lag, Michael Kaufmann has called for a thoroughgoing re-examination of the origins of literary study in the Academy, one that does not presuppose that the categories of the religious and the secular are stable and the demarcation between them clear. Already in the late nineteenth century, when “English” became a minor but compulsory subject in the London University B.A. examination and in the colleges of North America came increasingly to be integral to attaining a Bachelor of Arts degree, the Academy itself had begun to redefine “religion” to open up the study of phenomena outside Christianity and Judaism. Religion, contrasted by some with theology, came gradually to constitute an academic subject in its own right. Today, what we call religion, far from occupying the merely marginal spaces to which the standard narrative about the rise of English relegated it, has neither disappeared nor been replaced by Arnold’s “poetry.” Beyond this, from Lisbon to Nairobi to Singapore, universities have been creating new programs of English Studies with no thought of finding in England’s literature a substitute for Christianity or for religion generally.

There are many reasons to re-examine the complex relations of literature and religion in the period when vernacular literary study was incorporated into higher education. The preceding essay by Joshua King makes plain that the assertion that English studies emerged into a vacuum created by “the failure of religion” involves a highly selective appropriation of Arnold’s authority. Chris Baldick has shown, moreover, that it was not until after the First World War that Arnold was made to play a large role in constructing the claim.\(^5\) Arnold had helped to create a rationale for supposing that the study of English literature could be understood not simply as supplementing the Bible. The study of the Bible for its “poetry” entailed a significant refinement of Protestantism’s foundational self-representation as having eclipsed Judaism and Catholicism. He demonstrated how biblical literature and Christian ritual might be emptied of a “fleshly” or “Judaizing” literalism that had yielded dogma. There is no doubt that this model was important to many persons who felt that they had “lost” their religion but
loved literature, including the literature of the Bible. This kind of story is movingly told in the autobiographies, for instance, of Edmund Gosse (*Father and Son*, 1907) and Logan Pearsall Smith (*Unforgotten Years*, 1938). It would be worth looking into how personal narratives such as theirs were made to contribute to a general theory about the social utility of literary study. As important as literature was to those who looked to it for the challenges, comforts, and moral guidance that they did not find in religion, it also offered to others, unaccustomed to accepting a ready separation of the sacred and the profane, a genuine enhancement to living religiously.

II.

To develop an account of the rise of English that respects the myriad means by which it was brought about will require something like an “archeology of the classroom.” I borrow this phrase from Caroline Winterer, whose investigation of the curricular innovations wrought by classical scholars and teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offers a model. Familiar as English Studies are, the canons for recognizing excellence in the discipline have directed scholarly inquiry away from evaluating the effects that teaching literature has on students. Specialists, valuing original contributions to scholarship, often deign mere pedagogy unworthy of historical investigation. Historians of higher education have taken a far greater interest in the development of graduate research programs than in what went on in the undergraduate classrooms where most people make serious acquaintance with many authors for the first time. Existing scholarship offers large abstractions: English studies rose due to a failure of religion, they contributed to the creation of a professional class, they provided an elite with cultural capital. These broad claims discourage looking into how, concretely, lecturers and the makers of textbooks managed to induct English literature into higher education. They also suppress curiosity about the experiences of students qua students, which have received relatively scant attention in histories of the discipline.

To carry out a study of how English literature came to be taught is more complicated than we might suppose. Productive investigation of the cultural work done in the classroom starts with openness to discerning contingencies. It benefits from attending to local circumstances. While English studies were made institutionally legitimate earlier in North America than in England, and colleges developed programs independently of one another, only a few institutions took sufficient interest in their own curricular innovations to preserve relevant materials. Some archives hold annotated textbooks, notebooks, and essays and memoirs written by students, professors’ class-notes, correspondence that touches on teaching and learning, diaries, and the like.

The richest trove of materials is found in the same geographical locale where religion first became the object of university study. In James Turner’s recent study of the origins of the scholarly study of religion in America, the starting point is similar to Palmer’s in *The Rise of English*: Turner probes the reasons that it took so long for such study to enter the Academy. From Antiquity onwards, although Christian and Jewish apologetics had been prolific and had given rise to schools of divinity, until the later nineteenth century there was no comparative academic approach to religion, that is, to “religion” as referring to many of the myriad phenomena with which the several essays in this volume engage. While acknowledging that Max Müller began studying religion at Oxford in the 1870s, Turner charts early academic treatments of the subject in the U.S., where in 1873 Boston University’s appointment of a “professor of comparative religion” apparently marks the first creation of this sort of academic position. Crucially, he emphasizes that New England Unitarianism provided a climate conducive to the development of the new discipline. It
bracketed out the assumption that Christ is central to religion, which involved a commitment that discouraged interest in spiritual phenomena that were not recognizably Christian. It held out the possibility that non-Christian materials might offer supplements to the Bible and promote progress in religion. In particular the Transcendentalists cultivated an interest in religious traditions that had three common characteristics, two of which bore profound affinities with the objects of literary studies: ancient scriptural texts, historic longevity, and geographic range. The approach was rooted in an assumption that religion was a universal phenomenon. The religions first judged apt for scrutiny in the university were therefore those that presented familiar characteristics.

The loosely Unitarian ethos of Harvard University proved especially hospitable to devising various ways of studying and teaching both religion and literature. Allegiance to the institution’s roots in Puritanism had long since been repressed. The dogmatic features of Christianity were quietly downplayed. In the 1870s, the Overseers altered traditional policies and boldly hired the agnostic Charles Eliot Norton to create a new Department of Fine Arts. Compulsory attendance at daily prayers ceased in the 1880s. By the mid-1890s, somewhat belatedly compared with other colleges, Harvard resolved to make its English Department the largest and most influential in the U.S. The growth of “English” owed a great deal to the University’s president, Charles W. Eliot, who liked to think that his institution was more responsible than any other for the radical change in the principal medium through which higher education was increasingly being conducted: in a modern university a new set of disciplines coded in the vernacular was dislodging the classical languages and mathematics from their dominant position. Books in English were central to the enterprise. It was becoming possible—and Harvard set the decisive precedent—to receive the A.B. degree without studying any Latin or Greek.

The transformation by which English became the default medium of instruction brought new prestige to the language itself. More influentially than anyone else, Eliot promoted the idea that there was a reciprocal relationship between the language in which university education was now to be carried out and a body of literary works that was larger, more diverse, and more aesthetically accomplished than any other in world history. Greek and Homer, Eliot insisted, are “infantile” compared to English and Shakespeare. “It cannot be doubted that English literature is beyond all comparison the amplest, most various, and most splendid literature which the world has seen.” Although the study of this literature had begun earlier in Scotland and in India, Eliot envisaged for it a more integral role in American education, where there would now be unprecedented opportunities for teaching young people to deploy the “tongue of nations which are preeminent in the world by force of character, enterprise, and wealth, and whose political and social institutions have a higher moral interest and greater promise than any which mankind has hitherto invented.”

When Eliot published these views fifteen years into his presidency, courses on English literature were surprisingly under-subscribed at Harvard. The only literature courses that to his mind were attracting a satisfactory number of students were those on Shakespeare and on nineteenth-century literature. Taking a risk, he decided to augment the English faculty and to increase dramatically the range of course offerings. In the event, Eliot and Francis Child sought to exploit the interest in Child’s course on the Bard and to direct the students’ attention to literature from the Elizabethan period. “Elizabethan” literature (understood as extending into the seventeenth century) was midway between the periods in the history of the language that required a heavily philological approach and the contemporary period in which students were inclined to take an interest almost by default. Studying Elizabethan literature required instructors and students to confront linguistic instability. Indirectly, it often entailed their coming into contact with materials connected with religion.
In 1887, a new brochure for students announced that the Department would hereafter be teaching two different kinds of literature courses. The first was epitomized in the sort that Child had been teaching: “the method of study” was “a minutely critical examination of a limited number of works” geared especially to illustrating the development of the language in works by Chaucer, Spenser, Bacon, and Milton. A new set of courses, listed under the rubric of Group Two, would eventually “attempt to cover the field of English Literature” from about 1600 to “the present time.”

The new Group Two courses actually on offer featured the name of the Bard in their titles, even though none of his works appeared on their syllabi. English 14 was called “The Drama (exclusive of Shakspere) from the Miracle Plays to the Restoration.” English 15 was called “English Literature (exclusive of Milton) from Shakspere to Dryden.” (“Shakspere” was the preferred spelling at Harvard well into the twentieth century.)

Within a generation, both courses proved extraordinarily influential. English 15, taught by LeBaron Russell Briggs, was the first university course in the world to present John Donne, rather than Milton, as the most influential English writer of the seventeenth century. English 14, invented by Barrett Wendell and taken over three years later by G. P. Baker, became the country’s best-known drama course and remained so well into the twentieth century. For both courses, there are to be found in the archives—not only at Harvard but at other institutions where students of Briggs and Wendell and Baker went on to teach—unusually ample traces of how they were taught. In the remainder of the essay, as an earnest of what an archeology of the classroom can contribute to developing a richer picture of the emergence of English studies in higher education, I mean to explore some ways in which the relations between religion and literature were negotiated in Harvard’s drama course. Wendell, despite teaching a Group Two course (which was supposed to cover literature after 1600), began with the origins of native English drama, the better to show where Shakespeare came from and what he had to work with. He started with the medieval miracle plays and the moralities. Compared with what can be reconstructed about how these plays were taught elsewhere, we can say that Wendell’s teaching of them was not characteristic. The archival data show that at Harvard the standard narrative about the rise of English studies was already taking shape in the design and execution of Wendell’s course.

III.

Harvard’s Group One and Group Two represent, respectively, courses with a philological orientation and courses with a historical one. The way that the brochure articulated the difference between them helps to clarify an aspect of how Wendell maneuvered between religion and literature in a seminal course that was taken by men who went on to teach at Dartmouth and Oberlin, Brown and Chicago, Columbia and Yale (to name a few institutions that hired students whose English 14 class-notes are extant). While both kinds of courses gave the instructor a platform, those labeled Group Two, meant to provide coverage of periods, invited (but did not necessitate) organization according to a narrative. The Group One courses stuck closely to the central task of trying to establish just what the language in a given passage means. The Group Two courses promoted more ambitious theorizing, about cultural periods and the dynamics of history.

When Harvard instituted its first Group Two courses, there was nothing unusual in the fact that the lecturers’ own views would color their selection, arrangement, and presentation of literary texts. Although this was not a conspicuous feature of Child’s teaching, it was commonplace elsewhere. But the new goal of providing discrete courses that would contribute to “cover[ing] … the field … to the present time” set in motion a larger collaborative agenda that
at once inflected every, and transcended any, individual course. Temporally defined starting and ending points signaled pieces that fit within a grand narrative larger than any course could begin to exhaust. When “[t]aken together,” the department’s brochure promised, the Group Two offerings would give students a picture of the whole of English literature. In only a few years these courses became so numerous that no student could take them all. President Eliot discouraged undergraduate specialization, and no curricular concentrations in one field or major subjects were to be defined while he was president. (“Majors” began to emerge in U.S. colleges in the first decade of the twentieth century.) As a concession, in 1894 the Department added to its offerings English 28, “History and Development of English Literature in outline.” It was an acknowledgment that everywhere English literature was now a subject being studied piecemeal and that students needed some orientation to a larger whole. Unlike Wendell’s English 14, however, the new course, taught by four or five different instructors, provided no controlling narrative to which authors and their works were made to contribute.

Something similar may be said of Briggs’s English 15 (the Seventeenth Century), but not of English 14 (the drama). Briggs played host to a succession of writers, first the poets, then the prose writers. He delighted in calling attention to what later seventeenth-century poets owed to Donne and to Ben Jonson. Wendell organized his treatment of the predecessors and contemporaries of the Bard within a particular chronological framework. Beginning with the anonymous medieval dramas enabled him to fit each play on which he delivered his impressions into a story about how the genre began, developed, climaxed (with Marlowe and Shakespeare), and then decayed. Shakespeare was the elephant in Wendell’s classroom. Every play was to be measured in relation to the Bard’s achievements.

By contrast, Milton may have seemed to Briggs’s students to have never written a word. Ostensibly, this other twin pillar of English literature was omitted because his output would have dwarfed everything else. There was, in any event, already a Group One half-course devoted to a “minutely critical examination” of Milton’s minor poems. If any part of Paradise Lost came into the ken of Harvard students, it was only the first two books, treated in the waning days of the term. The political and religious energies in Milton’s writings were successfully muted. The neglect of Milton’s major poems, all on biblical subjects, was consistent with a nearly pervasive reticence among the English faculty when it came to literature that was connected with religion.

That by the 1880s such a reticence, regarded as manly behavior, was well in place is revealed in some remarkable documents found among Wendell’s papers. Wendell had been hired as an assistant to mark essays for composition teachers. The principal experience of teaching literature that he brought to his course on drama he had gained at the new institute for women (later, Radcliffe College). Child entrusted to him the teaching of Shakespeare at “the Annex,” and Wendell took the course in an altogether new direction. Whereas Child’s year-long “Shakspere” for Harvard men met three hours a week and covered five or six plays in “minute” detail, Wendell’s met for one hour a week, each time taking up a different play, on which the lecturer would give “the girls’’ his “impressions.” We know both that Wendell referred to the students as “the girls” and that he delighted in proclaiming his status as a mere amateur who did not descend to doing “drudge-work” because, after each week’s meeting, he recorded in a notebook the gist of what he had said and, sometimes, how the students had reacted. It was on the day that he lectured on Richard III that his jottings reveal what expectations he had learned, from his own Harvard education, to bring to matters that touched on religion.

On November 24, 1884, Wendell reports that teaching is helping him understand the plays. Suddenly, and uncharacteristically, however, he tells how something he remarked in class led
to things going wrong. “Human beings,” he writes, slipping into making a virtual transcript of the relevant moment in his lecture, “always take more interest in a villain than in an equally complete honest man.” Then, reflecting on this, he added, “To analyze the reason of this state of things, in the character of Richard I did not attempt.” The reflection was provoked by questions that had profoundly upset him. One woman had asked, whether “the portrayal of evil character demand[s] higher or lower literary qualities than the portrayal of good,” and, “In what respect does the religious attitude of Shakspere resemble or differ from that of other dramatists of his time?” These were questions of a sort that, partly by training and partly by a disinclination to allow literary study to involve “drudge-work,” Wendell was wholly unprepared to entertain.

Writing later that day, still discombobulated by “the sudden arrival” of questions that he referred to as “bombshells,” Wendell reports:

In a feeble effort to rally from the shock caused by this unexpected & undeserved bombardment, I passed the rest of the hour. I failed, I think, to expound to my fair interlocutrix the full horror of her questions, or of the state of mind which they proved to lurk behind an engaging countenance.

Here the implicit audience for Wendell’s jottings has taken a turn. The experience is recorded as a rehearsal of a “Can you believe this!” anecdote to be shared with like-minded men. They would recognize the impertinence of the woman’s intervention. They would not tell him that his “failure” to make plain why such questions ought not to be asked owed anything to his assumption that the girls should be delighted that a Harvard man would give his time to deliver his impressions. They would recognize its source in the fact that women were unfamiliar with the manly protocols whereby talk about anyone’s religion is discreetly to be avoided and whereby students should never expose the ignorance of their teacher.18

By the time Wendell gave his first literature course in Harvard College, he had learned his lesson. The set of notes composed while he first taught English 14 suggests that the young men knew to avoid “bombshells.” It shows that Wendell was creating a knowing “we,” who would themselves be shocked by any impertinent questioning of the lecturer from the floor. Wendell had a story to tell, and it was hostile to Christianity in its medieval and Catholic forms. Its inspiration derived from the opening pages of John Addington Symonds’s recently published (1884) Shakspere’s Predecessors in the English Drama, where the author launched a compelling account of how English drama had emerged via a longstanding and permanent antagonism between the Theatre and the Church. In particular, Wendell found there what he would implement as a decisive criterion for separating literature from religion: that Shakespeare had materialized as an artist of “single-hearted sincerity” was manifest by “the exclusion [from his writing] of religious comment, of marked political intention, [and] of deliberate moralising.”19

The temporal scope established by starting with the miracle plays made for a tale of evolution and near-triumph. It climaxed with Marlowe, when, as the last section of Symonds’s chapter on the miracle plays has it, “Humanity was liberated; and our playwrights dealt with man as the material of their emancipated art” (104). For this story of liberation, the fact that plays had begun in the context of the church’s liturgy was foundational.

Symonds reminded readers that in the early Christian centuries ecclesiastical authorities had considered theatrical performances “an abomination” (94). In the later Middle Ages, however, the clergy had allowed the native instinct of the English people some scope when they initiated dramatic readings at mass; in this way they became the unwitting undoers of their own stultifying regime. As the miracle plays, thanks to “a kind of natural paganism”
(95), developed out of the dramatic exchanges in the liturgy, the Church tried to use them “to enforce the principal dogmas of faith upon an unlettered laity” (98). But because “a spirit survived from the old heathen past, antagonistic to the principles of Christian morality,” creative impulses beyond the Church’s control “invaded the monasteries” and gave rise to modern literature. Not only plays, but fabliaux, lyric and epic poems, social and political satire, the romance, eventually even the novel, emerged, eclipsing the authority of religion (96–97).

Wendell commanded this narrative to organize his course, adapting it to allow also for coverage of a period of “decay” that extended into the seventeenth century. He suppressed the social history and social theory carried in Symonds’s polemic, and substituted a powerful individualistic analogy to motivate students’ interest in the overarching narrative. He told them that he wanted them to see for themselves, beginning with Christopher Marlowe, who had “a manly sense of fact,” how “fresh” and “vital” English drama once was, and then how, in the next century, it “fell away in corruption.” It all happened as quickly as “a single lifetime.” The parallel between the relevant stretch of literary history and the students’ sense of their own lives was likely not lost on young men just on the verge of a break-through into their own “efflorescence.” Their decay was far in the future, whereas that of the older generations, whose familiarity with the Bible and whose education in the classics were being rendered otiose, could be seen all around them. From such a perspective, the study of English literature was not simply an innovation; it marked a maturation. Current students were beneficiaries of a new dispensation.

Wendell gave barely three lectures to medieval drama. His notes show that his procedure was to define everything medieval as “conventional.” He used this term repeatedly to characterize medieval dramas, in whatever the genre. He insisted that reading such material required a “childish imagination” (his italics). Moreover, as a student’s notes show (and Wendell’s own do not), he observed that the techniques employed in these plays, which “arose out of ignorance, … [are] very much the same thing as darkies make use of in telling Biblical stories.”20 Medieval plays, he told his students, were full of vulgar, realistic material, sometimes amusing to the audience but “incongruous with the subject in hand.”

The notes are extraordinary for their bluster and their repetitions. No sooner does Wendell mention morality plays than he says, “But we have no time to study them curiously. We must group them, glance at them, and hurry on.” This dismissal of medieval religious literature was of a piece with a general departmental disposition whereby there was little, or at least little good, to be said about literature tinged with theology.21 While there was a potential at Harvard to think of the maturation of the discipline as including the sort of serious scrutiny of religious materials from perspectives akin to those being implemented in newly created departments of religion, there was a large inhibition to tapping this potential in classrooms where “literature” was the object of study.

IV.

The tendency to pit religion and literature against one another, found in the traces of how Harvard’s first drama course was taught, was not pervasive. Other models for creating a drama course were available elsewhere. Five years before Wendell framed English 14 as an adaptation of Symonds’s narrative, Moses Coit Tyler offered a course on the history of English drama at Michigan; it surveyed the terrain and emphasized information. In 1883, Smith College began offering a senior elective called “The Development of Drama”; it provided an opportunity to compare plays by Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Jonson. Yale and Wellesley introduced drama courses in the same year that Harvard did; Brown, Dartmouth, Penn, and
even the newly founded Stanford, were close behind. Traces left by some of these courses show that other teachers who treated the early history of English drama had more to say than Wendell, and something quite different, about the origins and development of a literature that had been inspired within and addressed to religious communities. This is especially the case with the drama courses taught by John Matthews Manly, George Pierce Baker, and William Lyon Phelps. All three were involved in English 14 at Harvard and went on to become the most influential teachers of drama in the U.S.

A prodigy, Manly received an A.M. degree in mathematics from Furman College at age 18. After teaching his subject for five years in the American Midwest, a period during which he read extensively in English literature, he came to Harvard seeking an advanced degree from the English faculty. It is intriguing to imagine what Wendell’s lectures on medieval drama sounded like to this young man who, within two years, became one of Harvard’s first Ph.D.s in philology. While teaching at Brown for several years before he became the University of Chicago’s renowned medievalist, Manly published his learned two-volume anthology, *Specimens of the Pre-Shakespearean Drama* (1897), which provided the texts of dozens of medieval plays, along with a scholarly introduction that probed into the liturgical origins of the genre. It became a standard resource for advanced courses on the drama.

Shortly after Manly took his course, Wendell handed off English 14 to a fellow amateur. Although Baker had not received post-graduate training, he undertook what Wendell had scorned as “drudge-work.” His papers, which include extensive notes on early medieval drama, show that in the first days of his course he gave out bibliographical information about learned studies. His students’ notes show that, when lecturing on particular plays (e.g., the Townley “Jacob and Isaac” and the York “Resurrection”), he emphasized their dramatic interest apart from any religious and cultural significance that they may have had. He also sought to develop criteria for judging when something that had begun as a religious service could be rightly called a “play,” insisting in particular that the tipping point came when everyday experiences displaced biblical materials.22

A still more striking contrast with Wendell’s disdain for medieval drama is to be found in the case of Phelps. When, as a student at Yale, “Billy” Phelps first heard that native drama had sprung from liturgical origins, he was intrigued by the possibility of discovering a parallel development among the ancient Israelites, who had created lasting literature but were commonly thought to have lacked a dramatist comparable to Aeschylus. Phelps consulted George Fisher at Yale Divinity School and, following up on his bibliographical leads, began working up an essay about ritual sacrifice in ancient Israel and in medieval Europe. He broke it off, having got as far as he could, with a sense that he was not yet ready to compose a convincing scholarly piece on the subject.23 Still, this evinced one of many developed interests that, after receiving his A.B. and having spent a year privately annotating English literature, he took with him to Harvard. There he enrolled in as many Group Two courses as he could, including Baker’s English 14. When he returned to Yale, he introduced his own version of the course into the curriculum. Notebooks kept by students show that his approach was much more like Baker’s than we would suppose on the basis of his earlier interest in comparing biblical and “secular” literature. Whether and to what extent Phelps had learned at Harvard the manly behaviors whereby “religion” was not to be brought up in the literature classroom, or whether his swerve away from it was merely practical, it is clear from the records of his other courses that he was uninhibited when it came to contemplating the relations between religion and English literature. In *The Rise and Fall of English*, Scholes presents him as the very epitome of the old-fashioned English professor who, before the discipline became fully mature, confused his academic position with that of a Christian minister.
The size and complexity of the project by which English literature was turned into an academic subject warrants more investigation than it has received, not least because so many foundational choices were inextricably intermingled with momentous changes in what was beginning to be defined as religion. What has been glimpsed here about the early teaching of medieval drama opens out onto broader prospects yet to be explored: onto other features of how Wendell and Baker taught the drama course, especially when they took up Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*; onto how students who took the course taught their own drama courses elsewhere; onto how teachers and students in other Harvard courses and in courses at other colleges negotiated the complex relations between literature and religion. Beyond listing the writers who were considered canonical and supposing that their race and class and gender explain what work the canon was performing, it will be valuable to look into the many ways in which instructors defined and approached each writer and framed their courses. No “single explanation” for why literary studies first entered the Academy is possible, nor would one be desirable. The reasons for studying literature vary from one person to another, perhaps from one day to the next, certainly from one time in life to another and from one classroom to another, across boundaries of time and space. A revised history of the emergence of English studies needs to be more capacious than the makers and disseminators of the standard narrative envisaged. It might also explore materials and methods that brought the emerging discipline near to the new field of comparative religion, with which it shared an active interest in the workings of imaginative structures. Universities still organize, after all, the study of literature and the study of religion into separate departments. Their members need not fear, however, that trespassing arbitrary boundaries is likely to be mistaken for a manifestation of immaturity or of disloyalty to the autonomy of their disciplines.

Notes

1 A broad spectrum of resistance, some of it desperate, some thoughtful, was gathered in *English Literature and How to Study It*, published in 1887 in the *Pall Mall Gazette Extra*, No. 32.
7 John Guillory’s broad claims for the residual influence of religious perspectives in the history of teaching English literature, though not based on diverse concrete evidence of the sort that Winterer has unearthed, have been widely influential. See *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
9 For an apt critique of this development, which contributed to the idea (still prevalent) that although their expressions might vary with local circumstances, there were “major” or “world religions” to be studied comparatively, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
10 See the reports from “twenty representative” institutions that first appeared in *The Dial* and were reprinted in *English in American Universities*, ed. William Morton Payne (Boston, MA: D. C. Heath, 1895).


12 The *Annual Reports of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College* for 1884–85 report data about enrollments for the previous half dozen years; for enrollments in English electives, see 99–100. The majority of English instruction was devoted to composition courses.


17 Barrett Wendell, “[Shakespeare Course at Radcliffe” (1886–88)], HUG 1876.54.14, n.p., Harvard University Archives. By Wendell’s own error internal to the notebook it has been wrongly dated. The vast majority of notes were composed in 1884–85.

18 While Kim Townsend’s *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others* (New York: Norton, 1996) criticizes Wendell’s notorious attitudes towards women, the book tends to be uncritical of his and of other Harvard-connected persons’ attitudes towards religion.


21 Briggs was an exception. When taking up George Herbert, for instance, he remarked that his poems were more widely read in the present time than those of any other religious poet; and he observed that they have long been thought beloved by different sorts of persons, from simple folk to intellectuals. Still, even as Briggs had many laudatory things to say about Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, he made it clear that the working-class dissenter who wrote it, unlike all the other writers encountered in his course, was not one of “us.”


23 See the papers of William Lyon Phelps, Yale University Archives, MS Group 578, Series III, Box 16, Folder 197.

**Further Reading**


