



# Exploring the Whys and Wherefores



Dr. John Cox '67 is respected internationally as a leading authority on William Shakespeare and for connecting faith with scholarship. Reflecting his passion for helping students making connections of their own, he directed the college's Interdisciplinary Studies program for two decades.

By Greg Chandler

When Dr. John Cox '67 teaches a course on Shakespeare at Hope, he doesn't rely solely on what others have written about the English playwright.

Dr. Cox, the DuMez Professor of English at Hope, draws upon his own research that he has conducted over the years. He believes strongly there's a connection between his study of Shakespeare and his effectiveness in front of the classroom.

"I can be a better teacher because of my scholarship," said Dr. Cox, who has taught at Hope since 1979. "I can only help (students) understand what the scholarly conversation is if I know it myself."

Dr. Cox is one of the nation's leading authorities on Shakespeare, having written three books and edited two others. "He truly has not only a national reputation, but an international reputation," said Dr. William Reynolds, Hope's dean for arts and the humanities and professor of English.

One of Dr. Cox's primary areas of study about Shakespeare over the years has been how faith influenced his works, an area that until recently had not been studied much in the academic arena.

In his most recent book, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith*, published last year as the first book in a series on Christianity and literature by Baylor

University Press, Dr. Cox explores Shakespeare's works in the context of 16th century thought. At that time, such leading thinkers of the day as Thomas More and Erasmus wrote about the weakness of Christians, without casting doubt on the truth of Christianity.

A colleague of Dr. Cox's, Dr. Debora Shuger at the University of California, Los Angeles, says the book "makes apparent how fully the faith informing Shakespeare's plays registers the duplicities of false consciousness and the opacity of mortal suffering."

"I think Shakespeare was much more strongly shaped by his culture's religious assumptions than other academic models have suggested," Dr. Cox said.

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In addition to the role of religious faith, Shakespeare was also influenced greatly by the change in English society from medieval to modern, he said.

*Seeming Knowledge* – the title comes from Shakespeare's play *All's Well That Ends Well* – was written with support from a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship Dr. Cox received during the 2004-05 academic year. It was the third NEH award he has received, with other awards being used to study and write his other two books – *Shakespeare and the Dramaturgy of Power* (Princeton University Press, 1989) and *The Devil and the Sacred in Early English Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). His other books, which he co-edited, are the Third Arden Shakespeare Edition of *Henry VI, Part 3* with Dr. Eric Rasmussen (Thomson Learning, 2001) and *A New History of Early English Drama* (Columbia University Press, 1997) with Dr. David Kastan.

Dr. Cox has carried his reputation for connecting faith with scholarship into his position as president of the Conference on Christianity and Literature, to which he was recently elected for an unprecedented third two-year term.

"He's stayed on because of his commitment to the organization and to its growth," Dr. Reynolds said.

While Dr. Cox is known in the academic community for his study of Shakespeare, he has certainly not limited his teaching to that topic. He has taught a full range of courses in his nearly 30 years at the college, ranging from freshman composition to Cultural Heritage. He also makes himself readily available to students and the campus community—this fall, for example, he delivered the college's Opening Convocation address.

"He's not the sort of person who comes in to teach, has an office hour once in awhile and is invisible the rest of the time," Dr. Reynolds said. "He's very visible in the department, he's very visible in faculty meetings. When he speaks, people listen to him with respect."

Dr. Reynolds considers Dr. Cox a "triple threat" – effectively combining his academic research with his passion for teaching, as well as a gift for encouraging learning across disciplines, as Dr. Cox showed in his 20 years as director of interdisciplinary studies at Hope. "It's hard to carve out time in a teaching institution to do research during the academic year, but he has done it without sacrificing on the teaching and administrative work (and the committee work," Dr. Reynolds said.

Dr. Cox believes humanities are a vital part of study in a liberal arts setting, regardless of the vocational or professional direction a student decides to pursue.

"Students at Hope who are going to major in the humanities have to take a natural science course," he said. "Meanwhile, students who are going to major in the sciences, even if they're pre-med, have to take classes in the humanities."

Dr. Cox joined the Hope faculty as an

assistant professor in 1979, after having taught at Westmont (Calif.) College and the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. He was promoted to associate professor in 1982 and became a full professor in 1989, then was named the first recipient of the DuMez Endowed Professorship in 1996. He says a great deal has changed in the academic environment during his career. For example, he has appreciated seeing greater emphasis placed by the academy on gender equality.

"When I started teaching, feminism was unknown," said Dr. Cox, who also served as director of interdisciplinary studies at Hope from 1984 to 2004. "There isn't a young person out there today that is not aware of some of the issues related to feminism."

Dr. Reynolds believes one of Dr. Cox's greatest strengths is his willingness to consider new ideas as he conducts his academic research. "He's never met a good idea that he didn't think was worthy of being explored further," he said.

During his address at the 2008 Opening Convocation, Dr. Cox told incoming students that Hope's emphasis on education in the context of the historic Christian faith will provide them a source of hope and confidence.

"It means, for one thing, that though the truth is in pieces, and though human beings can never know it all, or even know any piece of it with absolute certainty, it nonetheless exists entire in God's view of things," Dr. Cox said during the address. "Knowing that, we undertake the quest for truth with respect and humility." 🙏



Dr. Cox's scholarship informs his teaching. Students benefit not only from his insights as one of the world's preeminent Shakespeare scholars, but from the way that he models active engagement with and enthusiasm for his discipline.

