

New-Minting Shakespeare: Old Currency in a New Classroom Economy (1993 SAA Research Seminar Paper: Postmodern Pedagogies/Early Modern Classrooms)

What is much less clear is how we can get beyond this particular ideology. For Shakespeare as fetish has, in this time of perceived crisis in the humanities, become the ideology of our age. (Garber 250)

What all this activity means for Shakespeareans mainly concerned with teaching the works of the playwright to the relatively uninitiated is not immediately clear. (Willson 207)

Given developments in contemporary literary theory, especially as they address our own personal, pedagogical, and political concerns, given the changing function of the teacher in the classroom, and given the changing constituents of the undergraduate classroom, teaching Shakespeare today can be rather confusing, an endless succession of compromises that compromise.

On the one hand, our institutions, students' parents and families, and even students themselves often expect (and sometimes demand) courses in "greats" like Shakespeare. The motivation may be unabashedly materialistic: potential employers might be impressed by students' liberal education, so some students want names that they can trade on. Or it may be a subtler but equally troubling matter of self-worth, one that our very means of making a living—teaching Shakespeare—validates: familiarity with Shakespeare signifies being educated, intelligent, etc. On the other hand, many of us who teach Shakespeare want to disrupt both universalist views of the Bard as a reservoir of abiding truths and the often unconscious connections between the study of Shakespeare and the worth of one's education. At the very least we want students to recognize and question the 'value' of Shakespeare in several senses.

The problem above—so common a topic of discussion at professional encounters, formal and informal—is further complicated by the gradual change in the make-up of our classes themselves: many of us are no longer teaching simply 18-22 year-old, financially secure, white students. These changes are exhilarating. For instance, at Augsburg College I teach Shakespeare in the Weekend College, a regular degree program for non-traditional students—in this case a mixture of women and a few men, between the ages of about 25 and 60, from the suburbs and the inner city, from wealthy and disadvantaged homes, working both in and out of those homes, of various sexual orientations, in and out of committed relationships, with and without children, and predominantly but seldom exclusively white and/or native speakers of English. Moreover, some have suffered various forms of abuse and dependency—sexual, physical, and chemical; their education may constitute an important stage in their recovery and the establishment of a new life. Indeed, I know so much about these students because discussing Shakespeare with adults who have a broad range of experiences outside the academy means talking about their lives.

But there are problems. For a few of these students the identification of Shakespeare with the enhanced personal and professional status they are seeking through education may be particularly strong and resistant to inquiry; questions about the value of Shakespeare undermine in their eyes the worth of the education they may be making great sacrifices to obtain. Other students are inordinately insecure about reading literature generally and Shakespeare in particular. Often, the greater the number of years since high school, the greater the anxiety when Elizabethan blank verse and diction don't make sense at first glance. Many students want lectures that will give them the magical key to Shakespearean texts and illuminate those Shakespearean truths they've heard about; indeed the very sense that there is a demand of this sort is hard to resist: like most members of SAA I can fill three hours of a Saturday afternoon with talk about my Shakespeare. The decentering effect of the group performance project I assign students in the traditional undergraduate program is not easily transferred to the Weekend program; because of their complicated personal obligations and/or full-time employment, the necessary collaboration outside of class is nearly impossible. Sometimes I think it would be better to avoid the whole problem of satisfying these various needs and tastes: I could just feed students

the Shakespeare I was taught, spiced up with a little current critical pepper—the educational equivalent of institutional meat loaf. But that can't be what either education or teaching Shakespeare is about.

This paper outlines some implications—for new Shakespeare classrooms—of the conjunction of a non-traditional educational constituency and recent trends in literary and pedagogical theory and practice.

I. Shakespeare's Currency

At the University of Dayton, where I had my first opportunity to teach the regular Shakespeare course (1986-88), I felt like friends of mine elsewhere who had been to graduate school during the theory wars of the seventies and early eighties and then done an itinerant stint of one-year positions from, say, Maine to Minnesota: my relief at finding steady work allowed me the time to think about the disjunction between what I had been doing in the classroom—the close reading that characterized my own undergraduate classes—and the scholarly and critical projects I had pursued in graduate school and after. Having done most of my reading in theory after a fairly traditional graduate education, I was particularly excited about engaging students in the theoretical considerations that had so recently and deeply affected my own ways of reading and views of literature. But since I hadn't yet found an easy or effective way to bring the Elizabethan translations of Seneca into the typical Shakespeare class, I wasn't at all sure how to bring in Derrida. I have always been a little slow about such matters—and still am.

"Shakespeare has written . . . " I looked up from the stack of English 102 compositions I was attempting to reduce—and to avoid. That name, so familiar in class, rarely comes up on commercial TV. What was going on? Snapshots of famous golf pros were appearing and disappearing against a sky-blue background. Beneath them were captions, read aloud by the same anonymous voice that had originally intoned the hallowed name: "Some are born great . . . Some achieve greatness . . . And some have greatness thrust upon them." Well, either the writers were using the Shakespeare found in Bartlett's or Madison Avenue was pulling a fast one on the promoters of the golf tournament. The latter greatly appealed to me: there was something amusing about the Malvolio-like pretensions of those who had bought an ad that used Shakespeare to aggrandize a pastime of the middle class and well-to-do, when the context of the original suggested precisely the opposite—the deflation of the subject's self-importance. I felt quite self-satisfied.

But should I have been? I was relying, as so many American academics do, on familiarity with Shakespeare as the hallmark of a superior education:

"Diverse groups insist that they have the true Shakespeare because, almost like a religious relic, he constitutes a powerful cultural token" (Sinfield, "Introduction" 130). For many educated Americans, Shakespeare is the touchstone of good breeding and proper schooling. How amusing if the ad execs and the promoters did not get it right? My knowing a little Shakespeare would allow me to feel superior—a small consolation for making so much less money for teaching them and their children just enough Shakespeare to abuse in this way. Or if the ad does contain an in-joke, then I am one of the lucky few to snicker with self-satisfaction—Shakespeare as the cultural talisman betokening membership in a club I could not otherwise afford and would consciously and conscientiously object to.

But like most American academics I have not taken up Shakespeare in lieu of golf. I teach Shakespeare because I enjoy reading and re-reading these texts (such enjoyment is not quite or always the same as liking them or what they say). What is troublesome and exciting, however, about teaching Shakespeare in light of current critical theory and debates over literary canonization is that one is constantly mining the ground one is standing on: one may feel compelled, as I have at times, to introduce traditional views of Shakespearean texts in order to undermine them; when one doesn't rehearse canonical

readings, one may discover, as I have, that students find a theory less than compelling because literary discourse and current academic debate are alien to most of them.

Derrida has said of his own re-reading of the classical texts of Western metaphysics "that the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually consists of philosophizing badly), but in continuing to read philosophers in a certain way" (288). The question, concerning Shakespeare, is not only how to read him "in a certain way" but also how to suggest ways in which such "alternative Shakespeares" make a difference. As Shakespeareans, how effectively can we circumvent what Alan Sinfield calls "culturism"—"the belief that the wider distribution of high culture through society is desirable and that it is to be secured through public expenditure [and, in America, through corporate and private donation, as well]" ("Royal Shakespeare" 164)? Moreover, in this country, for the educated middle and upper classes and for many of those aspiring to such status, Shakespeare continues to constitute and betoken individual sensibility, intellectual prowess, and membership in a cultural elite: "The problem, of course, is Shakespeare—the whole aura of elusive genius and institutionalized profundity . . . The underlying preference is toward deference and inertia" (Sinfield, "Royal Shakespeare" 178).

Five years later, though some things have changed, I am still struggling with some of the same concerns: I want my students to be able to read, but also in a sense to see through, Shakespeare. And I want them to recognize their relation to these texts as constituted by and constituting the culture. Certainly, it helps that I have found work at a small urban college, where there is institutional support—financial and intellectual—for pedagogical inquiry and experiment and a lively faculty exchange on methods and new developments. Certainly strategies like those outlined by Sharon A. Beehler and Martha Tuck Rozett demonstrate how theory can inform the classroom—both the constitution of its dynamics and the students' own inquiries into the texts—without (or with less) imposition by the instructor. But for me the central contradiction remains: by teaching Shakespeare, one may be engaged in re-constituting the culture as it is, especially with so much emphasis on returning to the "basics," of which the canonized Shakespearean texts form a central part.

II. Performance and the New Classroom Economy

Though I agree with Ann Thompson's assessment that the 1984 Special Issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly* on "Teaching Shakespeare" is notable for "the almost total absence of literary theory and cultural politics" from its many essays (139), I am not quite so sure that implicates performance in a grand scheme to re-mystify Shakespeare studies and classrooms. Indeed, in an article that examines the intersection of "Pedagogy, Psychoanalysis, and Theatre" in the Shakespeare classroom, Barbara Freedman speaks indirectly to the potential of performance: "A pedagogy based on theatricality keeps changing definitions, boundaries, and activities in relationships; it accepts that blindness is constitutive of insight and that such blindness can only be displaced, not replaced" (186). Edward Rocklin asserts that as a pedagogical method performance complements theoretical inquiry into the plays; he articulates well one reason for my own gravitation to this method: "in order to explore the performance possibilities of a playtext, they [students] must explore the social dimension of the characters who comprise that play's world, and at the same time they must explore their own social world in the collaborative effort with their peers" (154). Though I was late in coming to it, the performance project has helped me alter the dynamics of the Shakespeare class in ways that developed students' capacities for independent inquiry, speculation, and experimentation.

The performance project I assigned to students in Augsburg's regular undergraduate program had two components: production of a scene or scenes, lasting at least 10 but not

more than 20 minutes; a collaborative paper that explained why they had chosen their scene(s), why they had performed it as they had, how it reflected their view of the entire play, what alternative interpretations they had considered, and virtually any other matters they wished to raise. I should note that the last time I taught this course in the regular "Day" program as opposed to the non-traditional Weekend College, it was still open to non-majors fulfilling distribution; the recent institution of rather innovative General Education requirements and a new pre-requisite for intermediate and upper level English courses has meant that "Shakespeare" is now a course primarily for majors. So my assignment was also designed to encourage collaboration between majors and non-majors, experienced students and novices.

Because the course is set up to cover the histories, comedies, tragedies, and romances, I usually encouraged productions focused on either problem comedies and romances (*All's Well*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*), where comparisons with works in the other genres are fairly evident and particularly fruitful. If more than one group had to work on a single play, we tried to focus their concerns differently: for instance, a group also engaged in Women's Studies and/or active in issues of gender and sexuality on campus chose to work on feminist approaches to *Cymbeline*; a largely female group, part of their commentary dealt with compulsory cross-dressing in their production of the wager scene. Their fellow 'Cymbelinian' group consisted of English majors with a decidedly aesthetic-formalist bent; their version of Posthumus's dream—a scene that no other group before or since has chosen, I believe, because of its resistance to the largely realist or naturalist impulses of most students—was wholeheartedly operatic: they moved us out into the cavernous foyer of the old building we were in, took into account the effect of the setting sun behind them, made use of an unused staircase with an elaborate balustrade, and (even before we entered) had transformed the entryway through an atmospheric musical accompaniment. Though not all productions and commentaries were as polished as these two, they are nonetheless fairly typical of performance projects for the class.

Several refinements, worked out in an 'interim' course (Augsburg's January term) on contemporary drama, society, and politics, helped the Shakespearean performance projects: plays and groups were chosen early; students turned in regular progress reports, which also indicated who participated; I met with groups formally two or three times in the term and at any other times they requested. I also suggested ways to write collaborative papers: divide the topic into sections, assign the paper to a sub-group less involved in the production, have everyone write papers and then decide what to include and how to organize and revise it, etc. Everyone was responsible for all aspects of the project, right down to proofreading the paper (actors had to demonstrate an understanding of the commentary; writers, of production decisions and effects); everyone had to field questions from the class and me. This system balanced fairly well the autonomy of the groups' work with what I see as my responsibility to help them succeed and to offer the rest of the class an instructive experience.

Based on self-evaluations and anonymous course evaluations, I have few doubts about the success of this performance assignment: it empowers students by playing to their strengths; transforms the sometimes competitive, often hierarchical dynamics of the classroom by fostering collaboration; and encourages students to use what they've been reading and learning during the term. As they get into the project, I find that students' interest in the other plays is heightened and that students participate more readily in discussions. Almost all groups turn to some critical and scholarly work on their play—primarily to take what they can use. And here, of course, I'll admit the kind of trap that Thompson hints at: performance has its own seductions and blindness. Since it tends to favor what 'works' over what doesn't, amateur performance at least tends to exclude ideological critique of its own practice; though the paper helps to compensate for flaws in execution that obscure intention, the essay is often not sufficiently meta-critical to expose contradictions and problematic assumptions in the group's own interpretive process. Certainly, the pedagogical benefits of this performance project, though considerable, do not always coincide with post-structuralist theories, and I'm not at all sure I would call this classroom post-modern in any more than a temporal sense.

And yet collaboration—though resisted most by the best paper writers, who are reluctant to relinquish total control over their work and grade—has raised historical questions

among students about the company for which Shakespeare wrote as well as questions about contemporary production of the plays. As mentioned above, the necessity of cross-dressing in their own productions has led to discussion of the feminist and historicist debates about the practice in the Renaissance. Moreover, these questions arise and are often pursued with a minimum of intervention on my part: this undergraduate initiative and engagement outweighs for me any lack of theoretical rigor.

III. Old Shakespeare in a New Market

Having told my success story, I wish to end with an outline of and questions about my current quandary. I mentioned at the outset that I am now teaching students of non-traditional age (i.e., adults whose median age is 32-33) in a program that has, as I see it, a twofold goal: to make the undergraduate education and experience of a small college accessible to those for whom it is considered no longer possible and to do so without diluting the requirements and courses we offer in the traditional program. In other words, Augsburg has been trying to avoid the kind of two-track program in which "continuing education" courses are less rigorous and hence devalued by those both in and out of the institution. Leaving the success or failure of the Weekend College (WEC) program aside, I would like to discuss the pedagogical bind resulting from this rather admirable aim.

Like my colleagues in other fields, I began adapting the Shakespeare course by 'covering' in eight three-and-a-half hour bi-weekly sessions the same ten to twelve plays I would cover in a regular semester. Though the contact hours are reduced, there are some advantages: The long sessions foster uninterrupted discussion of key issues, especially since WEC students are much less inhibited than traditional undergraduates; it is not unusual for every member of the class to participate voluntarily at almost every meeting. Moreover, WEC students are very rarely unprepared; indeed they come to the first class session having already read several sonnets and a comedy, as well as having completed some introductory assignments. Because their circumstances or their own inclinations prevented a traditional college education, these latecomers to higher education are motivated in ways that most undergraduate instructors welcome: they are as likely as not to enjoy learning for its own sake, concerned about doing well (in part to qualify for tuition reimbursement from employers) but no more "grade-grubbing" than the traditional undergraduate, willing to put in long hours of hard work, responsible enough to seek help on their own initiative, and able to draw on rich and varied personal experiences in connection with what they read—including Shakespeare. Though I, unlike Michael J. Collins, am sometimes uncertain about how and why we are studying Renaissance drama and Shakespeare in particular, WEC students—apprehensive and yet curious as they are about the plays' "otherness"—seem to have an innate sense that historicist "contextual readings neither foreclose other lines of inquiry nor of themselves claim greater authority" (258): no Ph.D. (certainly not this waffler) can browbeat these independent, open-minded, inquisitive, various students into a monolithic approach to the texts, however intellectually engaging they may find it.

What concerns me now is first that I cannot effectively offer them what I do their Day-school counterparts and, second, that I am only offering them what I do their traditional fellows. Though these students invariably enjoy reading, studying, and discussing Shakespeare, cramming twelve plays into the eight sessions inevitably creates an unfortunate "rushed feeling," as one student politely put it on a mid-term evaluation. And given the lively, extensive, and intense discussions, I feel it, too. So the obvious solution (I don't need an SAA session for this!) seems to me to worry less about "coverage."

The other half of the problem is what I don't offer these students but certainly could—given their own curiosity and motivation, the long seminar sessions, and the ample time for preparation. So I am planning more direct contact with current criticism of and theoretical approaches to the plays: supplementing those Riverside introductions with more recent developments in theory and Shakespeare studies. Indeed, if the project works here, I may try taking it back to the regular Shakespeare class when I return to it the

year after next. I should note an institutional change that will foster these developments in both programs: the English department's decision to make Shakespeare one of several "capstone" options—a decision made more for practical than for canonical reasons. Since the course will be populated increasingly by upper level majors, the integration of theory into the subject matter of the course—as opposed to its invisible presence as the instructor's question-generating apparatus—is more likely to succeed. Or so I hope.

Finally, I would like to offer WEC students the same intimate contact with the text that performance affords Day students. Though I devised a watered down dramatic reading exercise, coupled with a "translation" and interpretive essay, it has not had nearly the impact on students and class dynamics that performance has had. Needless to say, accommodating my perception of WEC students as too besieged for collaboration outside of class has meant denying them an educational experience before risking its failure. Though students speak well of the reading exercise, it is evident to me that they would get much more out of working together. A revised syllabus should allow not only for the introduction of criticism and theory but also for regular use of a half an hour to forty-five minutes of class time for group meetings, where I would be available for consultation and students could set assignments and out-of-class sessions. I am at any rate ready to try—despite Edward Pechter's insistent whispering in my ear:

"It's one thing to decide in May [or March] what you should be doing in the eighth week [or third session] of your Shakespeare course next November [or January]; but when November comes, what you should be doing may look different altogether, and what you wind up actually doing yet something else again" (172).

Works Cited

Beehler, Sharon A. "'That's a Certain Text': Problematizing Shakespeare Instructions in American Schools and Colleges." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 195-205.

Booth, Stephen. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time and All Others." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 262-68.

Collins, Michael J. "For World and Stage: An Approach to Teaching Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 251-61.

Dollimore, Jonathan, and Alan Sinfield, eds. *Political Shakespeare*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

Drakakis, John, ed. *Alternative Shakespeares*. New York: Methuen, 1985.

Freedman, Barbara. "Pedagogy, Psychoanalysis, and Theatre: Interrogating the Scene of Learning." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 174-86.

Frey, Charles. "Teaching Shakespeare in America." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35 (1984): 541-59.

Garber, Marjorie. "Shakespeare As Fetish." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 242-50.

Graff, Gerald. *Professing Literature*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987.

Jameson, Fredric. "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate." 1984; rpt. in *Contemporary Critical Theory*. Ed. Dan Latimer. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989. 369-83.

Pechter, Edward. "Teaching Differences." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 160-73.

Rocklin, Edward L. "'An Incarnational Art': Teaching Shakespeare." Shakespeare Quarterly 41 (1990): 147-59.

Rozett, Martha Tuck. "Holding Mirrors Up to Nature: First Readers as Moralists." Shakespeare Quarterly 41 (1990): 211-21.

Sinfield, Alan. "Give an Account of Shakespeare and Education." Dollimore and Sinfield 134-57.

----- . "Introduction: Reproductions, Interventions." Dollimore and Sinfield 130-33.

----- . "Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology." Dollimore and Sinfield 158-81.

Thompson, Ann. "King Lear and the Politics of Teaching Shakespeare." Shakespeare Quarterly 41 (1990): 139-46.

Willson, Robert F., Jr. "Why Teach Shakespeare? A Reconsideration." Shakespeare Quarterly 41 (1990): 206-10.