ADVICE | teaching Shakespeare

BY STAGES

AS WE APPROACH THE BARD’S 450TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS,
JEROME MONAHAN LOOKS AT THE IMPORTANCE OF INTRODUCING
STUDENTS TO THE PLAYWRIGHT’S PRACTICAL SIDE...

It may not be conclusive, but when you have stood at the Globe
on a damp day to watch a performance of The Tempest and
heard the tears of ‘the good old lord Gonzalo’ described by Ariel
as running ‘down his beard, like Winter’s drops from eaves of
reeds’ – only to see rain droplets falling in just this manner off
the thatch over the galleries, it seems incontrovertible that this and
other plays could only have been written by someone steeped in the
theatre of his day.

We know that Shakespeare was an actor. His name appears as such
in court records and in cast lists, and when the writer and university
man Robert Greene went for him in 1592 in his Groatsworth of Wit,
his criticisms fastened on Shakespeare’s being a ‘player’ – supposing
‘he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you’. Less
reliable evidence of the playwright’s acting pedigree comes via
Nicholas Rowe (1674–1718), the first modern editor of his works, who
claimed he was a specialist in old men parts such as Adam in As You
Like It and the ghost of Hamlet’s father.

One of the main challenges facing anyone teaching Shakespeare is
to provide students with a sense of the plays being enacted, so lifting
the events off the page and enabling them to imagine the characters in
three-dimensions, relating to one another ‘in space’. Understanding,
and reminding learners, that these works were written to be
performed by a performer, can help enormously.

It is considered a higher order skill for students to be able to discuss
the plays ‘in performance’ like this, but there is an additional
dimension that also needs to be appreciated, and that is the extent to
which the actual public playhouse settings in which Shakespeare’s
plays were presented are highly influential when it comes to their
content. Shakespeare, actor and playwright, wrote plays that were
superbly practical, adapted to the precise demands and possibilities of
the early modern theatrical spaces for which they were created.

Beyond the boards
It is perhaps unsurprising how much Shakespeare borrows images...
...melancholic characters for whom the perception of the world as essentially illusory or made up of performance or role-playing suits their disillusionment. Jaques’ ‘Seven Ages of Man’ speech from Act II Scene 7 in As You Like It is a perfect example and one that is heaven-sent for an enjoyable opening activity. I often read this speech with a class and then give them in pairs or threes the task of creating a ‘human sculpture’ encompassing as many ingredients as they can from the speech attributed to a single ‘age’. As each tableau is presented, I invite another student to act as interpreter, identifying all the elements it contains drawn from the original speech. This reinforcement is helpful in embedding the language; done well, and you’ll have students recalling the absurdity of a soldier “seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon’s mouth,” months after the lesson has ended.

I follow up this work with a discussion of what might occasion such an outlook and how strange it is to have a character making reference to something that draws attention to the illusory nature of what is unfolding on the stage itself. To what extent such speeches enhance or detract from the verisimilitude of such early modern dramas is a fascinating debate.

Then and now

The remarkable 1596 Johannes de Witt/Arend van Buschell sketch of the Swan Theatre [fig 1.] is the only extant contemporary picture of the interior of an Elizabethan playhouse, and as such, it provides the ideal prompt for a discussion and cataloguing of the differences between such a playhouse setting and a modern conventional theatre – indoors; artificially lit; viewed from a single perspective as if through an invisible ‘fourth wall’. The key departure that needs highlighting is the exceptional possibilities that playhouse day-time performances offered actors for interacting directly with audiences – especially those at their feet, standing in the yard. This can best be conveyed by getting students to act out a short scene, such as the Witches’ opening speeches at the start of Macbeth. I establish from the beginning the fact that they will be having to engage with an audience that is literally on all sides of them – and even behind them, given the presence of the Lords’ Gallery, where seats cost 6d. Many students will doubtless fall into the trap of turning their backs to the audience and performing a kind of intimate, TV-inspired scene in the middle of the acting area. It is wonderful turning them around, and inviting them to share anything they can with the maximum numbers of audience members.

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...and metaphors from the theatre, but students need to be sensitive to this tendency and also how extraordinary it really is. It is often said that the one thing that makes soap operas like East Enders unrealistic is the fact that no-one ever refers to the plots of TV serial dramas in their conversations. The same cannot be said of Shakespeare’s characters – for example Fabian in Twelfth Night, who, on witnessing a plot against the officious Malvolio going to plan, proclaims: “If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction.”

Such references to the theatrical conventions and construction of events in a play are defined as ‘metatheatrical’ – a catch-all term encompassing all sorts of fascinating and complex occasions and first coined by literary critic Lionel Abel in 1961. He may not have known the word, but Shakespeare was a master of the metatheatrical, employing it to achieve all sorts of effects – even, as in the case of Fabian’s words above, using it as a kind of credibility-restorative at a point in a play when events may have seemed quite improbable. Shakespeare’s most elaborate metatheatrical speeches are particularly associated with
in the playhouse, but they will start to feel the power they have to shock an audience by directing a call to a familiar spirit: “I come Grey Malkin”; into their midst (if it makes students jump now, the frisson there may have been in 1606 among groundlings for whom witches and the demonic were very real fears...)

This exercise can be followed up by students considering another extraordinary scene in the same play, when Lady Macduff and her son are murdered (Act IV Scene 2). Terms that will be helpful here are ‘locus’ and ‘platea’ – derived from Medieval theatre and yet still highly relevant to the work of Shakespeare and other early modern playwrights. The challenge to students is to map this brief scene; identifying those elements of it which are firmly the stuff of the play’s main narrative and which belong therefore to the ‘locus’ portion of the stage where stories are enacted, and those bits that invite interaction with the audience, with a character almost stepping briefly out of the tale to engage in discussion with the audience in a front-stage ‘platea’ position:

“But I remember now
I am in this earthly world, where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly; why then, alas,
Do I put up that womanly defence,
To say I have done no harms?.”

It is this dynamic that is always at work in Shakespeare’s plays, and studying it is that has this right on occasion to step into the platea and so interact with the audience is both fascinating and rich.

An interesting follow up is to challenge students to research the novel theatrical possibilities that arose when Shakespeare’s company increasingly enjoyed the privilege of invitations to court and finally gained an indoor playhouse setting after 1608 with the Blackfriars Theatre [fig 2.]. In these more intimate settings, lighting and other effects could be controlled – and therefore far more elaborate. I like to set students the task of considering how this new environment may have enabled the masque in Act IV scene 1 of the Tempest, with its descending classical gods and elaborate scenes involving ‘rich leas’/‘of wheat, rye, barley, vetches, oats and pease’; ‘turfy mountains, where live nibbling sheep’, ‘flat meads tatch’d with stover’, and ‘broom – groves/Whose shadow the dismissed bachelor loves. Being last-lors’ (and this just in the first speech of the play within the play!) and coming up with one or more illusory scene ‘flats’ upon which these and other images might have been depicted, and which could now be deployed.