

2020 Workshop: On Difficulty
Leader: Eric S. Mallin, University of Texas, Austin

1.

I'd like to use this workshop to come to grips with the difficulty of teaching Shakespeare's difficult language. Though I devoted more space to gender than to language in my first message, it occurred to me that I have typically been more inclined to complain about language trouble than to do something about it, and that maybe I should seize this opportunity to reform. Jen's and Loreen's comments about wanting to help students move beyond plot to language and textual analysis resonated with me. Similar to Maurice, I often find that I have underestimated how difficult my students will find a given passage, derailing my best-laid lesson plans. While I do find—as Tim observed—that students generally end the semester reading Shakespeare more fluently than when they began, I wonder if I could do more to accelerate this process. It strikes me that after many years of reading Shakespeare, my own understanding of how the playwright's language works is mostly tacit, and therefore I'm not equipped to actually *teach* comprehension strategies. Over the next few weeks, I plan to consult books such as John Porter Houston's *Shakespearean Sentences: A Study in Style and Syntax* (1988) and Jonathan Hope's *Shakespeare and Language: Reason, Eloquence, and Artifice in the Renaissance* (2014), along with teaching resources such as the Folger Library's *Shakespeare Set Free* series. (With respect to pedagogical texts, my initial forays into this topic have given me the strong impression that I'll have more luck with materials designed for secondary school teachers than with the *MLA Approaches to Teaching...* series and suchlike books and articles aimed at post-secondary instruction.) I plan to bring what I'm learning to bear on the Shakespeare course that begins next week, making a point to gather student feedback on what I'm trying. With luck, I'll have some insights or helpful exercises to share in mid-February.

Sincerely,

Gregory Foran
Nazareth College

2.

One of the difficulties that Shakespeare's texts pose for my undergraduate students is the moral ambiguity of many (if not all) of the main characters. Is Petruchio a hero or a villain? Do Edmund's valid concerns about being marginalized and stigmatized mean that he isn't responsible for any harm he caused? Is Emilia's willingness to give Iago her lady's handkerchief without asking questions proof that she is complicit in his schemes? Are we supposed to laugh at or empathize with the French in *Henry V*?

These are the kinds of questions that many of my students wrestle with as they try to put Shakespearean characters into the categories of "good guy" or "bad guy." In an increasingly-polarized political and social climate in the United States, my students often want to (or feel forced to) take sides in almost every conversation. Are they pro- or anti- a certain movement? Are they allies with this group and against that one? They are

encouraged by many different forces to engage in dualistic thinking, and this often spills over into their work in the Shakespeare classroom, making it difficult for them to see or grapple with the complexities that the texts offer them. Conversations about whether they liked a play or not sometimes evolve into conversations about whether or not we should be studying a play at all, given its depiction of characters who might embody or embrace ideologies or identities that run contrary to contemporary trends.

Parry's Stages of Cognitive Development suggest that dualism is an early phase in intellectual growth and that students will move beyond it to more complex ways of understanding the world around them. But the current socio-political discourse seems to challenge that assertion, since many highly-educated and experienced individuals publicly vilify or idealize others. Perhaps it is overly ambitious to think that one Shakespeare class can help students move beyond dualism in a meaningful way, but that is still what I want to explore. How can I help students recognize and grapple with the moral complexity of almost all of Shakespeare's characters? And how can I help them apply that understanding in useful ways to their dealings in the world? I hope to use my participation in this seminar to find out.

Jen Black
Boise State University

3. Close Reading from Afar: A Difficulty of Shakespeare Pedagogy

From my participation in this workshop, I would like to learn ways to help students analyze a play more deeply and to acquire a better understanding of what we mean by the term "student engagement."

Whether in a face-to-face, hybrid, or online class, my undergraduate, upper-division Shakespeare classes of 35 majors and non-majors are mainly discussions based on close reading as well as the digital tools—narrative summaries and study questions—I provide at the beginning of the semester. I use topics and themes for all my classes to help students have a lens through which to approach a text, which I find helps generate class discussion more quickly and encourages students to make connections within a play and across different plays. Student feedback, higher student grades, and more robust class discussions which focus more on the content of and characters in the plays rather than my explaining or clarifying the plots of the plays indicate that these digital tools are helping my students engage more deeply with Shakespeare's plays. Yet, many students that use them still struggle with close reading, textual analysis, and interpretation.

I am eager to learn new ways to help students both in face-to-face and in online courses analyze Shakespeare's plays at deeper levels. As I mentioned in my introduction, being able to read a Shakespeare play to understand the plot on their own is the semester goal for many of my students. Engaging with, examining, and interpreting characterization, language, themes, imagery, dramatic devices, etc. are far outside the range of many students' preparedness. Online courses can exacerbate these declining levels of student preparedness, can increase the intimidation students feel when studying Shakespeare, and can hinder close reading since, in entirely digital courses, students work

individually, in different locations, and almost always at different times of the day; they thus lack an immediate, collaborative academic community with its weekly meetings of spontaneous and free-flowing discussions and individualized attention and support. Furthermore, the historical distance from a play also makes close reading more difficult, especially with respect to contemporary versus modern ideologies and legal, social, and cultural practices (i.e. Petruchio's treatment of Katherine in Acts 4 and 5).

In addition, I look forward to the clarity this workshop will provide me about the key term, "engagement," which will, in turn, aid my course design and assignment development. Developing these digital tools for my online courses and then using them in my face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses have made me question what I mean by "engagement," which I have come to understand is a more complicated and vexed term than I previously thought. Does it, for example, mean students' having a general understanding of the events and characters of a play, being able to read a play more closely, synthesizing different critical perspectives, making a play relevant or relatable to themselves, or taking ownership of their learning? How and to what extent does the class' medium—being either face-to-face or online—affect what is "student engagement"?

Loreen Giese
Ohio University

4.

I am interested in problems raised by Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*,--especially by its end. Here, Dauphine secures his uncle Morose's promise to adopt him and make him the familial heir in return for finding a way to dissolve Morose's marriage to Epicoene, the not-so-silent woman. This is accomplished by pulling the wig off the bride's head and revealing that s/he is a boy after all. In so doing, Dauphine effectively pulls the rug out from under the other characters—including his fellow wits-- and unsettles audiences as well. His actions are usually taken nowadays as pointing to the facts of performance, but that has not always been the case. Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary his delighted experience of several performances of the play. The first time he saw it, he declared it an "excellent play," adding,

Among other things here, [Edward] Kinaston, the boy; had the good turn to appear in three shapes: first, as a poor woman in ordinary clothes, to please Morose; then in fine clothes, as a gallant, and in them was clearly the prettiest woman in the whole house, and lastly, as a man; and then likewise did appear the handsomest man in the house.

Interestingly, the actor's appearance in the clothes of a different social station is viewed as making as much of a difference in "shape" as his change of gender. Perhaps even more surprisingly, Pepys's pleasure was not at all mitigated when women began to assume the title role: after seeing the first actress to do so, he notes that the play is "the best comedy, I think, that ever was wrote" and that [Elizabeth] Knepp did her part mighty well." His reaction and the casting decision it records (which was repeated in following years) have often been dismissed in modern criticism as simply wrongheaded. But that dismissal seems overhasty to me, and I would like to think more about the difference (or lack of it) the casting makes. How does one understand the play with a woman (possibly) playing the title role? This question seems directly related to others raised by the play concerning

gender, performance, prosthesis, facts, and “truth”—and also connected, somewhat less directly, to the concern with patrilineal inheritance and adoption that appears here and throughout Jonson’s works.

Judith Haber
Tufts University

5.

I mentioned my interest as the difficulty of separating racial and gender stereotyping by characters in Shakespeare’s plays from possible attitudes of Shakespeare himself. Students as well as instructors cannot assume that Shakespeare did not have an attitude, or attitudes, to specific characterizations as he composed. Illustrating the difficulty are the obvious plays *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. To take just the latter. Antonio and others speak of Shylock in terms of the stereotype of the hard-hearted, wolfish, cruel Jew. Shylock appears to fulfill that stereotype. But he does seem to undercut it when he enumerates the traits of himself that make him human. But this evaporates when he immediately will not extend this empathy of his appeal to his daughter Jessica, wishing that she were dead with the stolen jewels in her ear. He never understands her suffering in his house. He thus tends to fulfill the stereotype. Characters in other plays who swear negatively in terms of the Hebrew Jew cause one to wonder if anti-Semitism resides in Shakespeare, for he could have had the character in each case swear by something else, or someone else. My astute undergraduate student is aware of the problem here, but almost always he or she doesn’t have courage or confidence to voice her confusion. It was only recently in my career that a student point-blank asked me what Shakespeare’s attitude toward women was. Take the notorious case of how much more interesting and complex Shakespeare’s women are compared to the men they love. Orsino is a sap through much of *Twelfth Night*. Viola has so much more going for her than does. Why would she love Orsino so much? Neither she nor Shakespeare ever explain why. This amounts to absence, a void, in the play. Why should Portia love Bassanio so much? He has been a prodigal, and has elsewhere indicated by the ordering of her qualities that he values her fortune over her beauty and her beauty over her virtue (1.2.161-63). And yet he professes a profound, admirable love for her in his casket scene, as she does for him. A gap appears here. And Portia does nothing to fill it when she, through marriage, commits her gentle spirit “to be directed / As from her lord, her governor, her king” (3.2.164-5). This troubles my modern-day female undergraduate. My explanation that this is orthodoxy in Shakespeare’s time, and that we see later she knows how to get her way with Bassanio, does little to dispel her perplexity. The student who asked me about Shakespeare’s attitude toward women was specifically troubled by her wanting to idealize certain of Shakespeare’s women in comedy, specifically Viola, with the possible autobiography of the Sonnets wherein Shakespeare betrays his marriage with a squalid adulterous affair—one wherein he doesn’t respect either himself or his mistress. This student couldn’t fill a gap that had appeared in Shakespeare’s attitude toward women. And I couldn’t give her a very satisfactory answer. I ended up saying I didn’t know.

Maurice Hunt

6.

The third category in Eric's most recent email, "Shakespeare among the Moderns," caught my eye, particularly "the problem of sheer historical distance and the ways we bridge that gap" as I often describe my function to students as exactly this "bridge," someone fluent in the language and culture of the Shakespearian period who can help them access the plays. This particular metaphor highlights two ways of measuring difficulty. The first is a very teacher-centric idea that seems common in a lot of older pedagogical conversations, gauging how much student understanding of the text falls below what we as "experts" feel there is to be gleaned. (So, for example, they enter class understanding Hamlet is contemplating suicide in his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, but then will, as a class, tease out a lot more nuance over extended classtime close reading). Second, and more interesting, are student led inquiries, moments where individuals or whole classes point to a passage or scene and ask what is happening or even why the scene is included in the play at all. These questions, while difficult, often generate fantastic and wildly varied discussion, particularly when there are no clear "right" answers.

Last semester when I taught Shakespeare, I took note of a number of passages that elicited this response from students. *Hamlet* 2.1, in which Polonius instructs Reynaldo to engage in subterfuge toward Laertes, is probably the best-known example of a scene that seems to not belong (and is often cut from performance). Sly's Induction from *Taming of the Shrew* and at least two scenes from *Henry V* (1.1 between Canterbury and Ely and 3.4 between Catherine and Alice) also qualify, as do large swathes of the last two acts of *The Winter's Tale*. Unless I change my mind between now and next month, however, I think I would like to use this lens to explore *1 Henry IV*, 2.1, the innyard conversation between two Carriers, Gadshill, an Ostler, and a Chamberlain as part of the lead-up to Falstaff's ill-fated highway robbery. Every time I have taught this play, I have, with the trepidation of uncertainty, leaned a bit more into this scene, and to my delight the discussion has become more generative and interesting each time. The scene allows us to both explore broad conceptual topics (a further complication of the hybrid genres of the play, questions of historiography and multivocality, issues of dramaturgical necessity and performance history) as well as narrower glimpses into the nitty gritty of Elizabethan life (the scatological breeding of fleas always becomes a hot topic of conversation). In all, I hope to use this particular peculiar scene as a kind of test case to ponder how we, as teachers, can allow difficulty to open up the way our students approach and envision the plays.

H. Austin Whitver
University of Alabama

7.

I hope there is room for defensible concerns about the decline of critical thought and

about the failure of students today to see in Shakespeare the meditations on social justice that do serve contemporary crises and agendas quite directly and well. I think students should be able to see that issues they passionately want to resolve in simple, binary terms are actually human affairs that are a) neither new nor simple, and b) treated dynamically in the plays.

I've been thinking about Gary Taylor's prediction in "The Incredible Shrinking Bard"—now twenty years old—that Shakespeare was becoming less relevant for the generations matriculating at the turn of the century. The prediction always seemed off to me, but maybe it was just a couple decades early. My sense of my own students suggests that they care less and less about Shakespeare as cultural capital and are increasingly less likely to have a personal investment in the plays: the balance here seems to be shifting from what used to be a dominant or prevailing curiosity and trust in Shakespeare as a figure and as poetry / drama, toward an even distribution of attitudes on either side: the Shakespeare curious and the Shakespeare averse. That is, I have more students who are taking a Shakespeare course because it fulfills a distribution requirement, and I definitely have more students who are willing to declare antipathy for Shakespeare. That in itself is not as troubling for me as is an emerging reluctance or failure on their part to see in Shakespeare much that is worthwhile once the semester has started and we have begun to look at the plays. Sharon O'Dair and Tim Francisco's new collection *Shakespeare and the 99%* traces this phenomenon further.

Students increasingly seem to register only two positions on any given matter and only one type of dynamic for articulating a position: a person (or a text, etc.) either condemns or embraces a given iniquity, and any further deliberation or discussion indicates a willingness to support the iniquity. It is difficult to read Shakespeare in that context.

Three caveats: first, I'm at pains here not to suggest a "good people on both sides" position. I am not interested in defending people who take hateful positions, even if it is their right to do so. Second, my concern for the waning of critical thought might come near to a chummy "save liberalism!" naïveté. I'd like to think I'm too theoretically self-aware for that, but I'm not sure. Third, the decline of critical thought is probably overrepresented in the above sketch—it's probably not as bad as it seems to me today.

Matt Kozusko
Ursinus College

8.

Provocation/Trigger

I joined this particular workshop because I'm not just struggling with the question of teaching Shakespeare in an era of rampant sexism and white supremacy, but with engaging a diverse body of students on a campus that has in recent months been repeatedly traumatized by acts of racism, hate speech, transphobia, and misogyny. The difficulties that I'm experiencing in managing and channeling classroom affect feel greater now than they have in the past. Once upon a time, students seemed able to tuck

away the virulent misogyny of a text like Joseph Swetnam's *Arraignment of Women* into the realms of the affectless, despite my own presentist pedagogical bent. Recently, though, my emphasis on the political, interpersonal, and cultural stakes of the readings seems to have sharpened students' feelings of precarity. For the first time ever, last semester I was confronted by a student who explained that Swetnam's screed should have come with a trigger warning because it left her feeling vulnerable and unsafe.

In order to study this question more deeply, I'll be delving into the politics of "trigger warnings where you wouldn't expect to need them in the Shakespearean classroom" in light of overt everyday sexism in the mainstream.

Difficult Language/Language Difficulty

"Niggardly": Although dictionaries and etymology itself assures us that this word has no relation to its racist homophone, it still poses a very unique difficulty in the early modern classroom. In reading aloud from *Twelfth Night* (2.5.5), *Julius Caesar* (4.2.280), or the *Sonnets*, students invariably stumble upon this overfull word, whose utterance risks traumatic rupture of the classroom community. I'd like to find a way to use these affectively charged moments more deliberately, as an opportunity for anti-racist pedagogical intervention that also keeps the conversation about Shakespearean meaning at the forefront.

Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* provides some useful entrance points into talking to white people about racism, but I'm still searching around for criticism that speaks to racist *feeling* rather than meaning or implication. Megan Watkins's "Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect" also offers a starting point for talking about managing affect productively in the classroom.

Melissa Jones
Eastern Michigan University

9.

In *Shakespeare's Late Style*, Russ McDonald makes the case that the notoriously difficult language of the romances justifies itself in formal terms, each instance of obscurity in the language bearing a fractal-like relation to a corresponding pattern of suspension or circuitousness in the plot. This clever thesis, though flawed because unfalsifiable, is nevertheless a useful starting point for confronting the many types of difficulty that the student of Shakespeare faces. I like to introduce McDonald's approach in the classroom because it keeps students anchored to the self-contained dynamics of the text, the ways in which the meaning of the part and the meaning of the whole take shape interdependently. Adopting the hermeneutic circle as a heuristic can help our students address the text on its own terms before grappling with questions of ideological estrangement. On the one hand, I understand the impulse to prioritize ideology, which tends to lead to more lively classroom discussions, at least in my experience. On the other hand, when we put the cart of ideology before the horse of explication, we incentivize reading strategies that approximate the meaning of a given speech or stretch of dialogue according to our

students' precalibrated ideological bearings. While the desire to keep Shakespeare "relevant" might seem to warrant taking every opportunity to find parallels with modern ways of thinking and knowing, we should be wary of uncritical presentism, especially if it comes at the cost of overlooking more elemental forms of difficulty -- difficulty which might be, as McDonald suggests, part of the point, and as such, might mock our attempts to make definitive judgements about ideological content based on paraphrasable gist.

In my final statement for the workshop, I want to explore other ways besides Russ McDonald's of returning obscurity to the text, with the ultimate goal of empowering students to do something productive with their feelings of confusion. I will construct a hypothetical pedagogical scenario around the following difficult passage from *The Comedy of Errors*, in which Adriana's perception of deteriorating marriage bonds descends into nonsense:

Sister, you know he promis'd me a chaine,
Would that alone, a love he would detaine,
So he would keepe faire quarter with his bed:
I see the Iewell best enameled
Will loose his beautie: yet the gold bides still
That others touch, and often touching will,
Where gold and no man that hath a name,
By falshood and corruption doth it shame.
(TLN 382-89)

First referenced here, the promised "chaine" will soon take physical form as a prop at the center of many of the play's eponymous errors, a potent symbol of misplaced value. The speech also comes shortly on the heels of comic banter between Adriana and Dromio of Ephesus about physical violence as a mode of communication: "Nay, [Antipholus] strooke so plainly, I could too well feele his blowes; and withall so doubtfully, that I could scarce understand them" (TLN 328-30). Rather than assume that Adriana's speech is corrupt, might Shakespeare here be using the blunt force of palpable nonsense, in conjunction with the introduction of an object important to the plot, to make a broader point about theatrical communication and understanding? If so, in what ways are our students like and unlike the original audiences for which this speech was intended? Four hundred years later, how does the speech condition us to respond to its "Iewell" and "gold" metaphors? How does their vague contribution to an obscure meditation on value and reputation affect our apprehension of thematic significance (in relation to the play's mercantile setting) and narrative significance (in relation to the physical chain)?

Marc Juberg
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

10. The pedagogical challenge that I wish to address is how to do something other than ignore with embarrassment those *performance practices* in early modern theater that might strike us (and our students) as quirky, pointless, odd, or unfashionable. (I'm intensely interested in the other kinds of difficulty that others are addressing here, but I'm

hoping in this exercise to bracket off, for the sake of clarity, what we might call “ideological” or “linguistic” difficulties).

Like others in this workshop, I’m interested in how to help my students read for form, but specifically for what we might call *theatrical* form, not only *linguistic* form.

What should I do in class with, for example, the dumb show in *The White Devil*? (or the weirdly duplicative and redundant-seeming dumb shows in any play?) What should I do with moments of unexplicated “whispering”; think of King Lear, who asks to speak “one word in private” with Poor Tom (although we never learn what that “word” was), or of Lorenzo and his sister Bel-Imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy*, who (the stage direction tells us) “whispereth in her ear,” although what he whispers is oddly never revealed.

I’m very much looking forward to hearing about how others in our seminar have taught these plays as exploring a particular kind of theatrical practice, one that might be different from our own assumptions and sensibilities about what makes good theater.

Michael West
University of Dallas

11. In Eric's original letter outlining some proposed contours for this workshop, he concludes with a question that I will use as a springboard for my own reflection: "*Is it best to propose or reward a single comprehensive 'reading' of a play, or does a more flexible, capacious approach to interpretation work better for particular students or classroom formats?*" In a general and perhaps even capital-t Theoretical sense, I am interested in the ways in which difficulty can sometimes be productive rather than a problem to be solved, and would like to foreground this idea as part of our discussion. Put another way, one of the difficulties *I* have had as a teacher is the expectation [some] students [sometimes] bring to my classes that my job or my role is to tell them what the texts we are studying "mean" so that they can copy down the correct interpretation in their notes and rehash it later in an exam or a research paper. This is a kind of ambassadorship (to borrow another term from Eric's original letter) that I try to avoid. I am referring here more to the "big" level of interpreting plays as a whole; in my classes, I do try to model the kinds of close reading others of you have indicated are central to your teaching practices in different modalities; by sidestepping nitty-gritty questions about how to, for example, parse Shakespeare's syntax, I do not mean to suggest such tasks are negligible or easy. However, even in teaching close reading, I tend to stress rather than downplay the ambiguities inherent in Shakespeare's--or indeed *anyone's*--language, such as the numerous puns and other forms of polysemy, or the different readings of a line that can emerge when it is read by an actor in performance (e.g., Lady Macbeth, 1.7.59, "WE fail" vs. "we FAIL"). I do this because, circling back to Eric's question, I do not seek to propose or reward single, comprehensive readings of texts; rather, I discuss with students the various possible meanings of a play that have been advanced over the years. For me, *The Taming of the Shrew* has been the paradigmatic example of how this works, and I usually begin my course on Early Shakespeare with that play to set up this method. Is the play just deeply misogynistic; does it condemn the male characters' misogyny; is Petruccio merely a benevolent teacher showing Katherine how to more

productively inhabit a useful social role? Many students find this method difficult or frustrating, at least initially, but my objective is to help them see that in studying and discussing the play, they are entering into a conversation about it; that there is no reason to shy away from the fact that the questions this raises are, indeed, difficult; and that there is nothing wrong with this. For me, in fact, this is part of the pleasure afforded by Shakespeare's writing (and, in fact, of literature in general). [I do discuss with students how this openendedness may be characteristic of Shakespeare's writing, with reference to works like Joel Altman's *The Tudor Play of Mind* to support the point.] But it is also related to what I guess I would call the ethics of my teaching, a pretentious formulation perhaps better expressed by an old cliché: I don't seek to teach them what to think, but how to think.

I also want to conclude by noting that Eric is rightfully careful to qualify his question-- "...does a more flexible, capacious approach to interpretation work better for particular students or classroom formats?"--and acknowledge that the privileged context in which I usually teach makes the approach I am describing here more desirable or possible than it might otherwise be in different contexts. I (almost) exclusively teach English majors in small, seminar-style, upper-division courses, with students who have (mostly) voluntarily enrolled in them. This, of course, makes all the difference.

Timothy Turner
University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee