

Is Teaching Shakespeare in Prisons Critical?

William Casey Caldwell

In 2018, I co-taught a course on “Shakespeare, Justice, and Politics” at Stateville Correction Center in Illinois. Wendy Wall, my dissertation advisor, designed the course and invited me to help with the student selection process and trade teaching class sessions with her. We covered *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*. In my class sessions, students were highly engaged and seemed to genuinely enjoy learning together and along with me. At the end of the semester, a graduation ceremony was held for the various classes in an actual theater building constructed on Stateville grounds. This has been my main experience with incarcerated students.

My seminar paper will be an exploratory piece based upon my experiences co-teaching this course. I would like to engage with the work of scholars, like Robert Scott, who want to think about what a critical prison pedagogy would and could look like. More specifically, I will reflect on the intersection between concepts of justice and power in Shakespeare’s plays and the legal and political power structures shaping the prison classroom. With a focus on my approach to teaching the trial scene in *Merchant* at Stateville, I will discuss what I perceive to be the possible strengths and failures in my teaching the trial scene from the perspective of a critical pedagogy. I will draw upon the work of specific scholars to critique my approach and ask how Shakespeare’s engagement with justice and power in *Merchant* can be critical in a prison classroom.

“Prisoners of our Actions”: Teaching Shakespeare at Rikers Island

Brian Chalk

In the hope of creating a relatable entry point into a discussion of *Hamlet* in a course I co-taught at Rikers Island, I decided to have the students listen to an episode of the popular podcast *This American Life* alongside their reading. The episode, aptly entitled “Act Five,” tells the story of a group of inmates in a high security prison who gain new insight into Shakespeare’s most famous play by rehearsing and staging its final act. The students, which consisted both of inmates at Rikers and undergraduates from Manhattan College, found the testimonies of the actors empowering; in fact, their enthusiastic response inspired my colleague and I to incorporate performances into our syllabus, an assignment that proved the most popular of the semester. The students were less impressed, however, with the episode’s narrator’s decision to discover what crime each cast member had committed and then reveal this knowledge to the inmates prior to their performance. One student, who was nearly eligible for parole, said that listening to this excerpt made her feel as if she belonged in prison. Another left the room crying soon after the recording ended. At one point during the podcast, the narrator claims that watching these “hardened criminals” perform *Hamlet* taught him that the play questions whether “we are

doomed always to be prisoners of our actions.” To the students in my class, based on his behavior, it seemed that his answer to this profound question could only be yes.

Taking this session as a key example, my essay considers the pedagogical missteps and successes I experienced teaching Shakespeare at Rikers Island. More specifically, I examine the value of teaching Shakespeare as a formative experience and a potential redemptive tool for inmates hoping to continue their education after release. The course, entitled “Shakespeare, Prison, and God,” combines discussion of Shakespeare’s plays with a selection of theological readings that focus on topics such as violence, the ethics of incarceration, and the possibility of redemption. Our hope in introducing these topics in conjunction with Shakespeare was to inspire the students to reflect productively on their experiences and life in prison without inadvertently imprisoning them within that aspect of their respective identities. As my colleague and I gradually discovered, however, and as the “Act Five” experience made clear, sometimes both results were possible within the same session.

From Theory to Practice: Applying Research on Prison Shakespeare to a Higher Education in Prison Program

Jenna Dreier

In my contribution to our seminar, I share an overview of my work as a prison arts researcher who wrote a dissertation on Prison Shakespeare performance programs. In addition to outlining my background and summarizing the key questions and case studies explored in the dissertation, I also speak to the new context I find myself in as a member of a working group at the University of Minnesota that is developing a higher education in prison program. I conclude with a series of essential questions, born from the dissertation, that now directly inform my work as an aspiring prison educator and administrator, which I look forward to discussing during our seminar meeting.

Making Shakespeare in Prison, Together: Shakespearean Adaptation and Collaborative Learning

Gina Hausknecht

Experimenting with the collaborative learning of inside and outside students, in the first term of 2020 I taught linked courses on *The Tempest* and Shakespearean adaptation at Coe College and at IMCC, a state men’s prison, in a college program with an inclusive admissions policy. Between the two, the students were widely disparate in their academic preparation, prior experience with Shakespeare, and educational goals: teaching Shakespeare in this context affirms that there is something radically available about these plays. In teaching adaptations of *The Tempest* alongside the play and assigning creative projects asking students to enter into the artistic lineage of those making original work in response to and out of the materials of Shakespearean drama, the course uses Shakespeare not as a totem of high culture but an entry point into a shared cultural arena. This paper, a narrative of my experience with this course, is

motivated by questions about why, how, and to whom we teach Shakespeare in prison: how can Shakespeare and Shakespearean adaptation support a student-centered pedagogy for incarcerated adult learners? What are the ethics and what is the value of co-learning in a prison context? How can prison teaching attend to the dynamics of oppression and engage with what incarceration means in American culture? Ultimately, what are the potential impacts of such teaching on the prison itself and the carceral state?

Teaching Shakespeare and the Law's Violence inside Prison

Sarah Higinbotham

Throughout *King Lear*, Shakespeare enacts disproportionate and visual acts of punishment in the play that has famously been called “the most terrible picture that Shakespeare painted of the world.”¹ Shakespeare creates such a terrible picture, in part, by repeatedly subjecting the audience to witness unjust and inequitable pain, imposed not by those who break the law, but by those who are charged with enforcing it. Kent’s stocking, Gloucester’s eye-gouging, Edgar’s fugitive status, Cordelia’s hanging, the incessant threats of whipping: the play unfolds as a film reel of conspicuously legal violence. Four hundred years later, we may envision the law’s violence as solitary confinement, as the death penalty, as mass incarceration, or as police brutality. We envision 8 minutes and 46 seconds on the Minneapolis pavement. Elizabethans likely envisioned the gallows, the stocks, the whipping pole, or heads on pikes at the northern gate of London Bridge. They may have also envisioned *King Lear*. I have taught *Lear* inside two men’s prisons and a women’s prison, as well as in undergraduate classrooms, by *foregrounding* the law’s violence and asking students how the play blurs the comfortable distinctions we draw between extralegal violence and the violence that law itself imposes. In this essay and discussion, I aim to explore how the play addresses the violence of the law, especially when read with people who are living out such violence inside prisons.

Devil-Portering in Hell: Teaching *Macbeth* in Prison

Jean Howard

In this essay I will talk about how Shakespeare is often transformed when I teach the plays in a prison setting. Suddenly, Duncan’s castle is more than a castle; the porter is more than a porter; race becomes unmistakable as a vector of understanding; the expectations of typical college undergrads are replaced by more urgent demands that my students bring to the table. My paper will have several parts. I will focus on the framing that I bring to the class, a framing that invites students to use their own life experiences and their unique knowledges to access the text. Part of the paper will focus on specific assignments I have created to deepen the students’ initial approaches to the play. And a final section will focus on site-specific exercises that we use to talk about how meaning is always made in relation to particular locations of production and

¹ A.C. BRADLEY ON SHAKESPEARE’S TRAGEDIES: A CONCISE EDITION AND REASSESSMENT, ed. John Russell Brown, p. 100 (Palgrave, 2006).

reception and collaboration. Sometimes, in discussing collaboration, we include exercises involve racial awareness exercises, too.

Prison Education in Missouri: The Humanities and Shakespeare

William Kerwin

I am pursuing, as I said in my introduction to the group, a different program than the other members of the seminar, and so I won't be offended if you decide not to read the undisguisably off-topic paper I will be writing. I will be presenting a history of prison education in Missouri, first as a very brief overall survey, then focusing on programs that foreground the humanities, and finally looking at the Shakespeare programs that I can find. The foremost example will probably be "Prison Performing Arts," a group that has been working out of St. Louis for over twenty years. They have not shied away from making connections between Shakespeare and contemporary racial issues; one example of this is their *Hip-Hop Hamlet*, produced in a women's facility in 2018. Washington University of St. Louis has also had courses that included Shakespeare in recent years. And St. Louis University and Rockhurst University (in Kansas City) also have established programs with a strong humanities component. My goal for now is to get a better sense of a) how these programs came to be, b) how they incorporate the humanities within the curriculum, and c) how they employ Shakespeare. My goal for later is to take best practices from these organizations and from your own papers to help get something started in Mid-Missouri. My initial contacts with Missouri's Department of Corrections have included several moments of clear preference, on the part of that structure, for vocational and "practical" courses. I hope that existing Shakespeare programs can help counter that bias.

Shakespeare in the Long Term

Simone Waller

This paper will argue for the need to orient course outcomes toward action when working with students serving long prison terms. I reflect on my experience teaching an upper-level seminar designed around *The Tempest* in response to students' interest in education as a practice of freedom. This course was offered as part of the Prison+Neighborhood Arts/Education Project at Stateville Prison in spring 2020. I intended for the historical distance afforded by working with Shakespeare, combined with the play and its adaptations' intertwined themes of education and imprisonment, to create a space for students to write critically about freedom and education in carceral contexts. Discussing these texts inside a prison proved more potent than anticipated, though, in that the conditions under which Shakespeare's characters suffered deeply resonated with students' present, lived realities. After evaluating classroom interactions and insights in the writing that resulted from the course, I end the piece with an invitation to imagine ways my pedagogy and course design could better employ Shakespeare to activate the productive potential of these moments of identification and students' desire to act in response to them.

“Come and Take Choice of all my Library”: Shakespearean Texts in American Prison Libraries

Kevin Windhauser

In late 2016, Texas prisons briefly made headlines by barring prison libraries from keeping a copy of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, a decision that swiftly brought condemnation. The condemnation of this decision was stringent, but also vague; commentators either decried the decision by way of comparison to obviously odious texts that were not banned (“Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* are Banned from Texas Prisons, but Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* is Allowed” read one representative headline) while others made gestures toward the general benefits of reading for incarcerated individuals (“Books have the Power to Rehabilitate. But Prisons are Blocking Access to Them”).²

This essay takes a first step toward answering the question, in light of these objections, *why* a prison library might ban Shakespeare’s work, a question which more appropriate in its inverse: what might encountering Shakespeare in the prison library—specifically, as distinct from the prison classroom—afford the project of resistance to mass incarceration? Through a reading of Malcolm X, of one of the most famous prison library patrons of the twentieth century, alongside narratives of contemporary Shakespearean readers in American prison libraries, I explore the idea that a prison library with Shakespearean texts allows for independent discovery of the plays and poems, a phenomenon that produces different reading responses from the more structured environment of the prison classroom. While the prison library remains a part of the educational and, at their core, rehabilitative efforts of many prison education programs, it also opens spaces for radical readings of Shakespeare that employ Shakespeare as either a tool for or object of critique. The experience of incarcerated individuals encountering Shakespeare in the library space is thus, I claim, distinct from the experience of prison education, and a necessary complement (and sometimes corrective) to it.

² Mary Papenfuss, “Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* Are Banned In Texas Prisons. But Hitler’s ‘*Mein Kampf*’ Is Allowed,” *HuffPost US*, 2017. [Link](#); Samantha Michaels, “Books Have the Power to Rehabilitate. But Prisons Are Blocking Access to Them.,” *Mother Jones*, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2019/11/prison-libraries-book-bans-california-sacramento-reading-rehabilitation/>.