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Shakespeare Untexted

Abstract

Gary Taylor's recent discovery of a new lyric by William Shakespeare provides a pedagogical opportunity in literary detective work for the study and understanding of Shakespeare's work in the high school English class. This essay explores that opportunity and moves from the immediate possibilities of this found lyric to the relationship between text and performance in the study of the bard. As Taylor has suggested in his work that too much stock has been placed in a single fixed Shakespearean text, so this essay dares the teacher to consider an approach to Shakespeare which gives the primary emphasis to the (filmed) performance of the play, rather than to the script. Recent technological developments allow the English class in this manner to fully realize the textual intentions of the playwright, to engage in the evolving spirit of the plays, and to appreciate the merging crafts of writer, actor, and director which constitute Shakespeare's art.

Impact of a discovery

Gary Taylor, a doctoral-student drop-out turned editor at Oxford, tripped into the unlikely condition of being an overnight academic hero and front-page news. His discovery of the first fresh bit of Shakespeare since the seventeenth century put his picture on the front page of *The New York Times* (November 24, 1985). The accompanying article led with a certain national pride and sense of irony: "A 32-year-old-American from Topeka, Kan., has discovered a previously unknown nine-stanza love lyric that is attributed in the manuscript copy to William Shakespeare." It was unusual news, good news. Gary Taylor had happened upon, in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, what he has demurely described as "a Sleeping Beauty, a

nameless poem awakening from the ancient sheets in which it had lain undisturbed for centuries, a poem without a critical history." The untitled poem begins, as a surprising number of people now know, "Shall I die? Shall I fly" and goes on for nine stanzas of uneven internal rhyme and weak conceit expressing the trepidations of an unsure lover; it was attributed to Shakespeare in an elegantly inscribed manuscript collection of poems, a collection which has slept in the Bodleian Library since 1756.

Asleep yet not unobserved, as the poem had been catalogued in 1969 and later publicly displayed with other Shakespearean works without receiving recognition or publication. Taylor, in the middle of putting together a new edition of Shakespeare's works for Oxford University Press, hesitated over the catalogue description of the poem. He wondered at why he had not seen the poem before, thinking that the lyric may well have been overlooked all this time simply because it was unlooked-for. His momentary hesitation and subsequent investigation thrust him out of the obscurity which shelters a co-editor of yet another edition of Shakespeare and into the limelight of television-news cameras and newspaper flashguns.

I cannot help but suspect that with Taylor and Shakespeare having recently made a small splash in the newspapers, and on television news, there must be something in it for teachers of the bard. Teachers in high school are, after all, instructing students who are media experts, people of the here and the now. Though literature may be the news that stays news, as Ezra Pound once described it, literary stories rarely make the front page. That should be enough to give us pause, to have us scramble to introduce this instance of diverse cultures – the literary heritage meets the daily news – into our numerous classes on Shakespeare. Yet the possibilities of those lessons, garnered from Taylor's breakthrough, are but part of what I want to consider here. The fact is that there is something more to this event than a fascinating and contemporary supplement to the typical Shakespearean unit plan. But first of all there is that.

A month after the story broke, Taylor scored yet another media coup for literature and himself. On a Sunday morning in December, he had major pieces about the discovery appear on both sides of the Atlantic, one in *The New York Times Book Review* and the other in *The Sunday Times* (December 15, 1985). Taylor used the New York paper to provide a thorough proof for the poem's claim to be included in the Shakespearean canon; he traced the history of the manuscript and presented over a hundred "verbal parallels" of the new poem with Shakespeare's plays and other poems. As he summed up the case in favour of the poem's inclusion in the canon: "An early document attributes it to him; we have no particular reason to doubt that document; the poem's style is compatible with the document's attribution."

The process of establishing the poem's rightful place is a fascinating bit of literary detective work based on certain qualities of the ancient manuscript it was found in, as well as employing the latest in computers and concordances to calculate matters of style. But for all of the intricate cross-checking, this intrusive claim on the established canon inevitably runs up against others' ears and taste. "One needs to be a practicing poet, and these scholars have no ear for poetry," A.L. Rowse of Oxford University wrote in a letter to *The New York Times*. He wisely but still inconclusively reminds us that, "a computer is no judge of what is poetry" (December 8, 1985). Another letter that day took on the poem's style pointing out "the mishandling of the internal, leonine rhymes," while a third writer proposed that it was merely a parody, possibly by Ben Jonson or Michael Drayton, which was innocently picked up by the scribe of the manuscript. On another front, *The Economist* was quick to respond with its own dissenting sonnet closing with the couplet: "I wish these fresh-faced scholars would abjure / Let sleeping doggerel lie, and not endure." Clearly the final word on "Shall I die? Shall I fly" is not in.

Shakespeare in the high school

For that very reason, high school students would do well to pursue the case through a number of journalistic sources, many of which I have listed in the bibliography. They could follow the initial proclamation, the stunning proof from Taylor, and the quick dissent in the Letters column, weighing as they went the nature of the evidence and the strength of the arguments. In the process of comparing the stylistic parallels, students would pass through nearly the entire Shakespearean corpus, if only fleetingly at least with an eye to Shakespeare's style and play in the language. This formidable author would become more approachable as a writer as it became clear that his work might prove to be humanly uneven, rather than indelibly stamped with genius in every line. The students would also come face to face with not only Shakespeare, but with the nature of the academic project which surrounds the playwright. They would discover the hot argument of interpretation and documentation, the ways of subtle reasoning from slippery texts. In doing so, in trying to make up their own minds about the evidence and the poem, they would participate in what might be termed a "real-time," "real-world" literary decision, rather than in a re-enactment or a simulation; it is news still breaking. The incident also introduces the students to the elusiveness of a critical consensus in the study of literature as they witness these seeming authorities delightfully at odds over the matter of this poem's authorship.

I realize that many students confronted with this material will simply look up and ask, "What is the fuss about?" Such insightful, critical questions are at the heart of this project. The fuss is real; there is no questioning the coverage and the sentiments it has aroused, and the fuss is

exactly what Shakespeare's central place in the English curriculum is all about. The coverage and the controversy reflect the deep investment of concern that scholars have in the works of Shakespeare. The disturbance speaks both to the reverence they have for what has been established as the unflinching quality of his work, as well as to the importance of having his text firmly established and set in place. The centrality of the Shakespearean text over, say, its performance also dominates the high school English classroom. While there is homage paid to the fact that the plays of Shakespeare are masterpieces of drama, they are more often treated in schools as cultural artifacts which we ask students to examine, that they might at least know the look of our language's great literary heritage. For the first time in recent memory, the archaeological and bibliographical status of these artifacts has made the news and become a public question. Interestingly enough, Taylor picks up this question of textual status in the article which was published in Britain on the same day as he offered his proof of the poem's authenticity in the United States. As it turns out, he has used the well-lit public platform which his poetic discovery has afforded him to shake up more than the margins of the literary canon with a poem which he realizes is, at best, less than one of the master's masterpieces.

The Shakespearean revolution

In *The Sunday Times*, "Fresh-faced" Taylor, as the paper described him, and that balding stand-in for Shakespeare sat head to head on the front page of the *Review* section (December 15, 1985). As Taylor tells the story this time, however, the discovery is no longer an isolated happenstance that made his academic fortune, it has become a part of what he terms in his title for the piece "The Shakespearean Revolution." And this is where the second promise of this event for the high school English classroom lies – in Shakespearean revolutions. What Taylor would throw over with this talk of insurgency is some part of that textual reverence afforded the works of Shakespeare; he suggests that the field of Shakespearean scholarship, which until this moment has burrowed along in relative obscurity, is moving toward a textual reform of the master's works. As my own title for this piece betrays, I am willing to take this movement among scholars to the extreme, if only because I think that in such a form it has much to offer the English classroom. But to that soon enough. Taylor's description of this unsettling of the canon among the scholarly community introduces a writerly topic which has recently become an issue in English classrooms – the importance of revision in composition. The current question for scholars is whether Shakespeare dabbled in it.

As Taylor describes it, the dilemma has resulted from having to face two extant versions of the same play. *King Lear* is a prime example. The Quarto (1608) edition of the play contains almost 300 lines which are not

found in the Folio (1623) version, which in turn has over 100 lines absent from the earlier one. Taylor does a marvelous job in explicating the logical bind this sort of discrepancy has provided for the text purists. How could genius, after all, question its own genius? "Two texts could thus be Shakespearean," Taylor sums it up, "only if the revision neither weakened nor strengthened the original; but Shakespeare's genius would not waste itself in such inconsequential fidgeting; hence one version or the other must be textually correct." Taylor's own discursive style, it can be noted in passing, is part of the charm this investigation holds. But the solution that scholars such as Taylor have found to this knotty problem is startlingly simple: Shakespeare was a playwright, working for the stage both as an actor and as a one-tenth share-holder in the theatre; the plays he wrote were forged in the theatre not primarily as texts but as performances.

The revolution which Taylor speaks of is one which begins with the working reality of Shakespeare's writing. The first principle of this reality is the fact that "good playwrights can learn from what good players do to their text in rehearsal," as Taylor puts it in the *Sunday Times* article. The result of this shift to a theatrical rather than academic grounding of the bard's works has been slow coming: "Scholars are only now beginning to acknowledge this obvious truth, in editions which recognize – and applaud – his restless, revising, inextricably theatrical intelligence." Slow coming to academe, perhaps, but would this change in regard have ever reached the field of public education and the high school, if this recent discovery had not brought the question into a public forum? But now that we have the matter before us in this way, perhaps we can consider it as a way of improving the recognition of this restless theatrical intelligence in high school classes.

In surveys of high school students' opinions on why Shakespeare is on the curriculum, which teachers have informally conducted, the reasons given are predictably a reflection of how the plays have been taught, from learning about Elizabethan times to the fact that Shakespeare wrote good stories. But what has been missing from the surveys I have seen is this very matter of theatre and drama; what is missing is some recognition that the plays come to life on the stage, both in word and deed. Of course, many classes are shown a filmed version at the end of the class unit on the play, or if more fortunate and the timing is right they are taken to a local production of it. But in both cases the performance is something of an extra and secondary to the textual study on which the teaching and assignments are based. The field trips are especially gratifying for the teacher as the text comes alive and parts fall into place for the first time in the cases of many students. One student recently told me after seeing *Twelfth Night* in a local theatre production that it was much better than her reading of the play because the company had updated the English; I went to the play and discovered that they hadn't, of course. The student had simply taken that much more meaning and pleasure from the play as it was acted out before her.

In order to capitalize on this power and, as it turns out, this scholarly interest in the making of Shakespeare's plays, I want to consider how far we might go in untexting the plays, in treating the performance whether on the screen or the stage as the primary creation, with text playing only a supporting role. The value of this undoing, if it is worth doing, will lie in increasing the students' engagement in the plays, in their appreciation of the theatrical intelligence which Taylor refers to, and, finally, in their interpretive struggle with what they experience as the works unfold before them. The resources for this exploration of the living words and works of Shakespeare are now available on a large scale for classroom use. Multiple productions of the major plays can be wheeled into the English classroom as part of another revolution – the one in video cassette recorders.

The ease and availability of this technology is the first factor in moving the performance to the centre of the lesson, while the variety of productions available on cassettes for a single play plays a strong second. There are the classic film performances and productions of Oliver's *Hamlet* (1947) and Marion Brando's *Julius Caesar* (1953) to Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971). To support the selection of such resources, an excellent guide to the films and their making is Roger Manvell's book *Shakespeare and Film*¹. But for the television screen, the BBC Television Shakespeare series (1978-84) works the medium like no other; done under a number of producers, most notably Jonathan Miller; they have a range in style and staging from sumptuous *tableau vivant* after paintings by Rubens and Vermeer to minimalist studio sets from the theatre of the absurd. In looking at, for instance, scenes from among Polanski's, Peter Brooks', and the BBC's *Macbeth*, the students are confronting the play as it was meant to live, not in one fixed form but as it continually and variously comes alive on the stage. They can go as far as to examine another culture's interpretation of the play with Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), which Grigori Kozintsev, for one, has called "the finest of the Shakespeare movies." As the text is considerably altered in Kurosawa's film, moving loosely into Japanese and that black out through sub-titles, the absence of Shakespeare's poetry on the manner in which the story moves us may become appreciable.

The objection that with films the students are looking at someone else's interpretation of the play rather than at what Shakespeare actually wrote is again to slip away from the reality, the textual reality, of the playwright's work, to which Taylor has recently re-introduced us. Shakespeare must have envisioned his works as interpreted and living through actors – there were no directors in his day, Taylor reminds us – rather than as they might be studied in their poorly published versions. For Shakespeare, it seems safe to assume, the plays had no real meaning outside of their performance, and this is the case I am arguing on behalf of many students. Equally so, to object that the students would experience only

contemporary interpretations made for the modern stage and screen is to imagine that students sitting with the text in the classroom are somehow able to recapture the flavour of the Elizabethan stage, perhaps on the basis of a picture of the Globe theatre accompanying the play's introduction.

The modern production, however, is as likely to borrow from the Edwardian period as the Elizabethan in stage design and characterization. In the filming of the plays, there are also interesting carryovers in theatrical techniques, as actors directly address the camera which can be compared with the soliloquy delivered from the protruding stage of the Shakespearean stage. This element of transformation, as different productions move the play through time both in staging as well as in meaning, is but another topic this approach encourages. Another objection raised over filmed versions of the play has been the manner in which the film comes obtrusively between the audience and the play. Catherine Belsey, for example, in her article "Shakespeare and Film," has argued that the play's meaning is considerably more closed and fixed when our view of the play is controlled by the movement of the camera.² In the theatre, it might be countered, our view is equally fixed and closed by the economic and chance determination of the seats we can afford or luck into. On the same issue, Graham Holderness has introduced a useful distinction for discussing the different productions of the play with a class: In order to make students more sensitive to the impact of the medium, he distinguishes between those films which obscure their control by seeming to be natural projections of the action and those which dare to draw critical attention to it by their unusual camera work.³ These delicate matters of the medium's influence on interpretation would seem hardly out of place in the education of students for today's world.

But as well, in comparing the multiple film versions of the play, the students are gaining an entrance into a literary future which differs considerably from textual-artifact study. After the fashion of our compressed lifestyles, the students are experiencing close to a decade's worth of exciting productions of a play in different theatre centres, the sort of varied productions which contribute to a lifetime of appreciation and understanding of Shakespeare's work. But just as important as this gain in appreciation and understanding is the possibility of warm familiarity with the plays, as the students become increasingly comfortable with the story, the characters, and the sound of the language. This familiarity represents the first element of an immersion in a rich literary culture; it is immensely more likely to occur through this exposure to various theatrical performances than through the more distant archeological study of literary artifacts. Fostering such a sense of cultural participation in literature, rather than simply studying it, has long seemed a worthwhile, if inaccessible, curriculum goal. With a concentration on the performance, the plays stand to take on a richer association with images and sounds in the student's mind than they might when the plays are read, even when read while listening to tapes, fellow

classmates or, if particularly lucky, an inspired teacher. The basis of this richer association arises with their exposure to actors who are full of dramatic presence, whose words sound ripe with a meaning and a forcefulness which students reading through the text can hardly be expected to envision.

The students' grasp of the play is bound to increase both through the repeated screenings of a single performance and comparative work with different productions. On first viewing the play, inevitably, chunks of the dialogue will be lost, while only hints of the wit and traces of theme will be gleaned. But as scenes are gone over and compared, the repeated experiences with the play will suggest to the student that meanings build in layers as new senses of the language are discovered; the play has a richness which rewards another viewing. This element of repetition, as the film supports the class discussions and analysis of the play, is the key to greater comprehension. The importance of repetition for richness of meaning is a principle the students already live by; they turn repeatedly to the same pop song, only gradually picking up the lyrics and having these words in melody grow in significance for them. The teachers and critics of Shakespeare, who often appear to the students to have a mysteriously facile grasp of the plays, are of course working from repeated exposures to the works. These differences in experience may distinguish the culture of students and teachers, but through the common medium of film an increasing familiarity and richness of association with the works of Shakespeare may go some distance in bridging that distance.

Using the technical versatility of the video cassette recorder, the repeated exposures to the play could begin with a single performance by previewing key parts before the play is studied, through viewing the production as a whole, and then through illustrated discussions of different scenes. Like a text, the performance can now be started and stopped, scenes can be compared, changes in expression and character closely followed. This method is a way of gradually fixing the performance in the mind of the student, as well as providing a context for the class to engage in the critical language of assessment in examining the play. The teacher would probably do best to initially focus on one production in the class, turning to it repeatedly to open up its approach with the students, while using the other productions for points of comparison and interpretation once the play is considered to be in hand.

The interpretations which these different productions necessarily argue can be seen to stand or fall by the way they live on the screen. Will the play, the students must ask themselves, sustain the understanding of human motives portrayed in this performance? Is the performance consistent with its own interpretation of the script? At what point has the action or a character betrayed what the students judge to be the dominant spirit and

intention of the play? One means of approaching the interpretation of performance is to turn to *Ian McKellan Acting Shakespeare* (1982) which is distributed by the Public Broadcasting Corporation in the United States. It brings to the screen a wonderful Shakespearean actor reflecting on his role as interpreter and critic in a one-man romp through many of the major parts in the plays. What is soon and healthily realized by students through this approach is that the play is not fixed by a correct and singular meaning but is made to come alive with meanings produced by a company of actors, and this is, in part, a comment on the genre as well as the author.

Obviously, in order to pursue such questions of interpretation the script needs to be on hand. The text is not about to be banned from the classroom with this shift to a study of the play in performance; it will continue to serve as a source of certainty and evidence in considering different aspects of the play, particularly in focusing on crucial lines and moments. The significant difference in the classroom is that the teacher treats the text as serving the performance rather than the currently more common instance of the reverse. This also does not mean turning the class into a drama or film class taken up with matters of learning a craft in acting or cinematography. The teacher is still treating the play as a work of literature that raises questions about language and life, about art and meaning, all of which have been designed to come together in Shakespeare's works on the live stage rather than in a text.

In turn, this greater exposure to performance will, I think it safe to say, also enhance the students' reading and critical handling of the text. In hearing the cadences and rhythm of the language turned to the meaning and performance of what is being said, in feeling the sharp exchange of wit and pathos in the dialogue, the students' reading of the play should improve both as they read over parts of the text to themselves or try to work up dramatic interpretations with their classmates. The students' written work in matters of character and theme will now be grounded in a number of experiences with the performance of these parts and ideas which should provide a new level of confidence in addressing the work; the students will be guided by a greater sense of the impact which different interpretations can have on the shape of the play. All of these features as well as developing a new rapport with the plays should also stand the student well in facing traditional examination questions on the play. These questions often concern the students' interpretation of theme and character in the plays, and interpretation, I have been at pains to point out, is the natural medium of discussion in this approach. But teachers might also begin to experiment with new forms of examining students on the plays which might include student proposals for certain directions in staging the play as a matter of an interpretation which can be soundly defended on the basis of what the text and the times will support.

Concluding comments

It may still be objected that this is an inadequate introduction into the academic study of Shakespeare of the sort the student will experience in university, which may well be true. For that sort of introduction, we have among other things the "Shall I die? Shall I fly" supplementary unit which I have described above, although that unit may seem a little too realistic a view for many students into the nature of Shakespearean studies. Instead, this movement toward an untexting of Shakespeare in the high school English classroom offers, from what Gary Taylor suggests, a more accurate view of Shakespeare's literary project. But it offers as well, I have argued, an engaging and critical approach to these great works which bridges aspects of literary and contemporary culture through performance on film and television. Quite simply, it stands to engender a greater familiarity with the power of the Shakespearean play. As a final note, the fact that Shakespeare revised in light of how the play was working on the stage does lend credence to schools' stress on students taking the time to edit their work to increase their ability to move an audience; this revisionist notion, as it is shared by playwright and students, also invites the sort of critical comments and judgements on the plays which the traditional approach of textual and critical reverence generally forbids. The exact shape of the lessons and student activities have yet to be worked out for this untexting – the story has just broken – but the possibilities are there to be explored, beginning with the simple act of bringing the performance of the plays to the centre of the classroom's concern with what Shakespeare has created. Gary Taylor has given us reason to believe that Shakespeare would applaud such a move.

NOTES

1. Roger Manveil, *Shakespeare and film* (South Brunswick: A.S. Barnes, 1979); for a more critical view see Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on film* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1978).
2. Catherine Belsey, "Shakespeare and film," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 11 (Spring 1983).
3. Graham Holderness, "Radical potentiality and institutional closure: Shakespeare in film and television" in *Political Shakespeare*, J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield, Eds. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1985).

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