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"Lessons Learned From Killing Caesar" or

"How to Involve Your Students, and Slay Your Audience, While They Slay You"

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**"Lessons Learned From Killing Caesar" or
"How to Involve Your Students,
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by Michael Boecherer

Shakespeare can be a tough sell in any classroom, as undergraduates often describe his language to be "hard" and his plots "difficult." One sophomore told me she hated Shakespeare because it did not speak to her; as she put it, she had had "better conversations with cheese." Though these descriptions are nothing new to English Instructors (the one about the cheese, however, is certainly unique), they do point to a primary challenge: our undergraduate audience is often closed off to Shakespeare long before and sometimes even after we open our mouths. Though it is easy to fall into the trap of directly translating difficult language for one's students, this method easily kills any hope of having undergraduates engage the text on their own. Language aside, it can also be hard for students to envision what a play should look like while reading it. Connecting with a play-text can become even more of a burden due to context. Does one need to know when the drama was composed, or who it was originally written for, in order to initially understand or enjoy it?

These issues of language, stage action, and context are important to consider when understanding any drama. Shakespeare also recognized these problems and one would do well to take his guidance into consideration when tackling them. During III.i of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck stumbles across the Rude Mechanicals as they prepare for their own dramatic performance. Wishing to know what these "hempen homespuns" are doing, Puck simply inserts himself into the action – first as "auditor" then as "[a]n actor" – to get to the bottom of things (77, 79-80).^[1] While Puck is interested in learning the circumstances surrounding these individuals, he is also interested in joining the fun. We would do well to follow Puck's, or rather Shakespeare's, advice with our own students. In order to unlock Shakespeare, undergraduates must be forced to actively engage the text by *listening* to it rather than simply *reading* it. Secondly, students must be shown that context and engagement are interconnected; in order to truly understand and visualize what is going on, students must insert themselves into the action.

Such ideas fall under the category of active learning, or what J.L. Styan would call "performance teaching." Styan states:

In performance teaching, the peak of creative educational achievement – the moment when Shakespeare and the class are one – arrives when the thinking and analyzing have been done and all the elements of the drama have come together in the synthesis of *performance*, tested on an audience of peers (3).

True understanding of drama lies in the experience of it. Yet, in order for this to happen, one must be able to “thin[k]” about and “analyz[e]” the “elements of the drama” that one has at their disposal. These elements not only consist of what playgoers hear and see, but also depend upon some knowledge of *why* the actors perform the text in the manner that they do. What is the player’s motivation for delivering his or her lines in a certain way, or even for how he or she physically interacts with those on stage? The classroom becomes a testing ground for instructor and student alike, where individuals can read parts in a variety of manners or even physically act them out.

Having one’s students physically enact something for all to see may sound difficult, but it can be easily accomplished given the right exercise – and educational. The classroom theater space is closer to the Shakespearean stage than one would think, as it is devoid of those things that modern audiences associate with today’s drama: elaborate sets and intricate effects. When enacting a Shakespearean scene or bit of dialogue in front of their peers, students and their audience are forced to use their imaginations to fill in the missing gaps. Such was also the case in Shakespeare’s day and age. As many modern theorists have noted, Renaissance drama was more “symbolic [...] than realistic” as “[a]udiences had to work to visualize the spectacles *the words* described” (Gurr and Ichikawa, 1, italics mine). *The Tempest* begins with violent descriptions of chaotic topsails, howling winds, and a vessel so beset by storm and

waves that it is said to “split” open, exposing the mariners to “a thousand furlongs of sea” and the threat of drowning (I.i.62, 65). *Henry V's* Prologue demands that the audience use their “imaginary forces” to picture the “vasty fields of France,” the “air at Agincourt,” and “[c]arry” kings and soldiers from one battlefield to the next, all while “turning the accomplishment of many years / Into an hour-glass” (12, 14, 29-31).

Though costuming and simple props were also used to dress the scene, (i.e., the usage of cloaks signified an outdoor/forest location, while torches represented night, etc...) players primarily relied on language to set the stage.^[2]

Simplicity, improvisation, and imagination worked for the early modern theater; all of these ideas revolved around language. Getting one's students to recognize these facts not only makes for better readers, but also sets the stage for larger classroom discussions that focus on the responsibilities of audience and actor alike. Renaissance playgoers were given unique tasks that modern spectators often take for granted. Rather than let the actors do all the work of presenting an entertainment, early modern playgoers had their own parts to play; they had to be active auditors and spectators to truly visualize what was going on. Renaissance players, however, also had an important responsibility. Whereas the artistic shape of today's performances lies primarily on the shoulders of one individual, the director, Elizabethan and Jacobean entertainments were defined by the actors themselves and their interpretation of the author's lines.

It must be remembered that “in Shakespeare’s time plays had no director” to tie the action together (Stern, 88); all that a performance had to go on were the clues imbedded in the text itself. When enacting a drama, Renaissance players were given those lines associated with the character(s) they performed. In order to know when they should speak, players were also provided with the first few words of dialogue that preceded their own. These prompts, or cues, were anywhere from one to three words in length and needed to be listened for; the actors had no idea when these cues would come, or who would say them.^[3]

By today’s standards, this form of constructing a performance can be difficult as it demands a great deal of attention. Modern dramas provide readers with the luxury of a complete text that specifies when the characters speak, enter, and exit the platform. Modern texts also spell out where characters are to locate themselves once on stage, and even give direction as to how actors should physically interact with one another. Comparing and contrasting these different methods with students can be extremely beneficial before one begins a thorough discussion of any Shakespearean play; both provide entry points into the text and allow for different visualizations of dramatic action.

After a plenary discussion of today’s performance methods versus those used by Shakespeare, students must be allowed to put these ideas into practice. To begin, my

students are given the opening of III.iii as it would appear in any modern edition of *The Merchant of Venice*:^[4]

Shylock: Jailor, look to him, tell not me of mercy.
This is the fool that lent out money gratis.
Jailor, look to him.

Antonio: Hear me yet, good Shylock.

Shylock: I'll have my bond; speak not against my bond
I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond.
Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause;
But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.
The Duke shall grant me justice. I do wonder,
Thou naughty jailer, that thou are so fond
To come abroad with him at his request.

Antonio: I pray thee, hear me speak.

Shylock: I'll have my bond; I will not hear thee speak.
I'll have my bond; and therefore speak no more.
I'll not be made a soft and dull-ey'd fool
To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield
To Christian intercessors. Follow not;
I'll have no speaking, I will have my bond. *Exit Jew.*

Solanio: It is the most impenetrable cur
That ever kept with men.
(1-19)

In this section of the drama, Shylock dominates the action as he angrily argues with Solanio and Antonio over the repayment of his money or "bond." Shylock is also angry at being called a "cur" or dog and, it would seem, the threat of constant interruption

from Antonio. The scene is rather straightforward in its simplicity and students easily grasp the context of the situation without too much discussion.

However, upon closer examination of this scene, students ultimately encounter various questions which lack obvious answers. Aside from wanting his money, why is Shylock complaining? If one pays attention to the language as it appears in modern editions, Solanio insults Shylock by calling him an “impenetrable cur” (18). Solanio’s insult, however, is hurled *after* Shylock’s tirade and *after* the money lender has exited the stage.^[5]The other question students have revolves around Antonio: why isn’t he angrier? Shylock continually tells Antonio to be quiet, yet it is Solanio who hurls the insults. When asking students about these problems, the most common answer given is that the argument involving all three men began off stage and simply continued as the actors entered the platform.

Though this is a plausible solution, different conclusions can be reached if students perform the scene according to early modern acting standards. After reading III.iii as it appears in modern editions, I ask my students to attempt the scene again – this time using Shakespearean cues as their guide. In order to accomplish this, students are given their lines and the cues preceding them as any Renaissance player would. For example, the individual reading Solanio’s part would receive something like this:

_____ my bond.

Solanio: It is the most impenetrable cur
That ever kept with men.

Students are then asked to listen for their cue, and told to read their lines whenever appropriate.

The opening of *Merchant's* III.iii plays out quite differently if one performs it according to Shakespeare's cues; one need only look at Solanio and Shylock's dialogue for an example of this idea. The short cue prompting and preceding Solanio's insult, "my bond," is uttered by Shylock no fewer than six times – twice in line 4, and once in lines 5, 12, 13, and 17 respectively. If the student playing Solanio were given a longer cue of three words, "have my bond," he or she would hear this phrase from Shylock a total of five times. Upon seeing this, the student playing Solanio generally wishes to know when to insult Shylock. Should the student come in after the first cue or after one of the preceding cues? If Solanio tries to speak *every time* Shylock utters the words "my bond," the scene becomes increasingly complicated, acquires realism, and ultimately makes more sense. As Solanio attempts to say his line, "It is the most impenetrable cur..." Shylock continually cuts him off with phrases such as "speak not" (line 4) or "speak no more" (13). Shylock's rebuke – "Thou call'dst me dog *before* thou hadst a cause; / But since I am a dog, beware my fangs" (lines 6-7, italics mine) – also makes more sense based on this performance method.

Much can be gained by highlighting these ideas inside the classroom. Students are forced to become active readers and listeners, picking up on language that they would otherwise miss. Undergraduates are also given the opportunity to see the play-text as something that is three dimensional. The opening of III.iii is no longer so cut and dry, but becomes a realistic argument where both Solanio and Shylock trade jabs with one another and inhabit the role of aggressor. Finally and perhaps most importantly, contrasting modern and early modern performance methods forces students to rethink how a Shakespearean play-text can be performed. By today's standards, "[p]art of the problem in the way that text and performance are conceived has to do with reductive assumptions of the formal consistency of published texts, of texts as material objects that house the work of the author" (Worthen, 7). All too often, actors and readers view modern play-texts as authoritative, formalized blueprints that cannot be deviated from. Instead of looking at the genre in this way, we should think of drama as something that is bendable, shapeable, and plastic. By doing so one opens the subject up to interpretation and, perhaps, generates enthusiasm from those looking to understand it. Editions should resemble performances, not the other way around. Having these various conversations allows one to push this agenda.

Such activities and discussions not only give students a better understanding of Shakespeare, but also allow for more complicated classroom exercises. One such exercise is the death Caesar, as taken from III.i of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.^[6]I have

used this activity for many years, in graduate and undergraduate classes alike, to great success. Aside from pulling students into the action, this exercise provides an opportunity to view Shakespearean drama as the author intended. To quote Hamlet, players needed to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action” without “o’erstep[ping] [...] the modesty of nature” (III.ii.17-19). “[W]ord” and “action” go hand in hand towards educating the audience, “the very age and body of the time,” on the effects of both “virtue” and “scorn” (III.ii.22-24). “[W]ord” and “action” also allow players to emphasize the “nature” and/or meaning of any scene. Enacting the death of Caesar places Hamlet’s advice into context. This exercise also allows students to see how the aforementioned dramatic facets can turn play-text into performance.

To begin, students are initially given a copy of III.i as it would appear in any modern edition of *Julius Caesar*. Parts are assigned and students are asked to read out the various lines until Caesar is dead. Students are then asked a variety of questions to ascertain exactly what is happening in the scene itself. How do Brutus and the conspirators behave towards Caesar? How does Caesar treat the people of Rome? Such discussion is important as it provides students with a basis for understanding how various characters operate and interact.

As Caesar dominates the scene, classroom conversation revolves around how he views himself and others. Caesar’s speeches are full of imagery that students can grasp:

he describes himself as being “constant as the northern star” and “Unshak’d of motion” (III.i.60, 70). Caesar also characterizes those that surround him as no more than “flesh and blood, and apprehensive” (III.i.67). These descriptions, amongst others, characterize Caesar as pompous, stubborn, and proud. He is no mere mortal, but someone who views himself as being above the common man. Whereas the people of Rome are seemingly aimless, Caesar provides steadfast direction by comparing himself to the “northern star.” Students easily pick up on these ideas when focusing on the language Shakespeare provides. A discussion of these points is crucial before one asks their students to physically enact the scene.

Once discussion is over, one needs at least three brave volunteers to play those conspirators closest to Caesar – Metellus, Brutus, and Cassius. I play Caesar; students are more likely to participate if instructors involve themselves in this activity. After assembling one's actors, the class is asked to direct the scene using their modern edition and Shakespearean cues as their guide. Everyone is asked where the first conspirator – Metellus – should physically position himself in relation to his victim. Modern editors always locate Metellus at Caesar’s feet, and insert the direction “[Kneeling]” (line 35) to give readers a sense of stage placement. Such direction is in keeping with Metellus’ description of himself: “Metellus Cimber throws before thy [Caesar’s] seat / An humble heart” (III.i.34-35).

More information, however, can be discerned from Caesar's depiction of the action; students are asked to pay close attention to the words being used in order to direct the scene accordingly. Caesar describes Metellus as "couching" and making "lowly courtesies;" he also accuses the first conspirator of performing "Low crooked curtsies, and base spaniel fawning" (III.i.36, 43). We are finally told that Metellus "bend[s], and pray[s], and fawn[s]" to get Caesar's attention (line 45). Students quickly pick up on this wording, and conclude that Metellus does more than simply kneel at Caesar's feet: "bend[ing]" and "pray[ing]" implies that Metellus is laying prostrate; "[F]awn[ing]" involves touch; "spaniel fawning" implies doglike groveling. According to the information embedded in Shakespeare's dialogue, it is not too farfetched to have Metellus physically latch on to Caesar's leg, or foot, while pleading his case.

This action not only plays into Caesar's ego, "I am [...] the northern star," but also keeps his attention from the other would be murderers in the scene. In order to play into Caesar's ego, and pull his focus in various directions, the other conspirators need to be just as physical and demanding of their victim. Brutus inserts himself into the action with the line, "I kiss thy hand, but not in flattery, Caesar" (III.i.52). Students interpret this line by directing the individual playing Brutus to grasp one of Caesar's available hands. In this way, Caesar's attention is taken away from the groveling Metellus. The final conspirator, Cassius, then enters and takes his place: "As low as to thy foot doth Cassius fall" (III.i.56). Again students are asked to direct the scene based

on cues embedded in the Shakespearean dialogue. The student playing Cassius takes hold of Caesar's remaining foot, once more shifting the murder victim's attention.

Interesting things occur by having students direct the scene according to early modern acting standards, particularly when matching the action being performed to Caesar's final words:

*I could be well mov'd, if I were as you;
If I could pray to move, prayers would move me;
But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fix'd and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.
The skies are painted with unnumb' red sparks,
They are all fire, and every one doth shine;
But there's but one in all doth hold his place.
So in the world: 'tis furnish'd well with men,
And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
Yet in the number I do know but one
That unassailable holds on his rank,
Unshak'd of motion; and that I am he,
Let me a little show it, even in this –
That I was constant.... (III.i.58-72, italics mine)*

In this sense, words and action take on an ironic double meaning. Based on physical staging, Caesar *is* the only character who “hold[s] his place” on stage (III.i.65); he cannot choose but do anything else with three individuals attached to various limbs. Whereas the conspirators have the capacity to move about, “I could be well mov'd, if I were as you” (III.i.58), Caesar remains “fix'd” in place, “[u]nshak'd of motion,” and “constant” (III.i.61, 70, 72). Caesar figuratively characterizes himself as immovable and is trapped,

in more ways than one, by his massive ego; it is in this way that Caesar finds himself “[a]ssailable” from destruction (III.i.69).

Words and action play an important role in determining the true nature, or meaning, behind Caesar’s death. I cannot help but be reminded of Hamlet’s advice to the players when enacting this scene with my students; it often helps to talk about both scenes in conjunction with one another. Though students may initially find such activities daunting, they do learn to visualize the play-text in ways previously not thought of by paying attention to particular words and phrases. They may even begin to enjoy themselves against their better judgment! Such ideas are important when trying to engage one’s students on a topic that they are less than enthusiastic about. If one can get their students to use their imaginations, the task of tackling Shakespeare becomes easier for all involved. Tying language, stage action, and context together can be beneficial to understanding any dramatic play-text, Shakespeare or otherwise.

Endnotes

[1] All references to Shakespearean plays come from the Riverside Editions of the text.

[2] See Gurr’s *The Shakespearean Stage*, p. 198. Gurr’s discussion on costuming and stage properties in general, pgs. 193-200, is also of interest.

[3] See Stern, p. 125.

[4] I have found the opening of *The Merchant of Venice's* III.iii to work the best when explaining the importance Shakespearean cues may have on a performance. This example, and my implementation of it, has been modified from Tiffany Stern's excellent discussion of cues and early modern play-text formation. See pgs. 126-127 for Stern's discussion of cues as found in the opening of *Merchant's* III.iii. Stern's extensive research on early modern play-text formation translates well to any classroom setting. For more on this topic, and her discussion on other plays, see Stern, pgs. 113-136.

[5] Shylock's exit at line 17 is an original staging direction, as per *Merchant's* First Folio edition (1623).

[6] My great thanks go to the actors and actresses of the Blackfriar's Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia, for initially showing me the following method during their performance of *Julius Caesar*. Though I have seen *Caesar* performed many times, this production at the Blackfriar's Playhouse was the first to draw my attention to both action and language.

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