

1 THEORY AND RESEARCH

SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL AND UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOM

Dramatic works by William Shakespeare became popular as school texts toward the end of the nineteenth century. In that period, as Homer Swander points out, the English-speaking nations were moving "more fully into systems of universal education" and educators wanted classics composed in English to replace "the classics in Greek and Latin that had served well enough in more aristocratic times" (1985, 875). Yet, as teachers everywhere know, the Shakespearean English that these nineteenth-century educators selected to replace the Latin of Virgil and the Greek of Homer is itself no easy language for students. As the product of a period removed nearly four hundred years from our own, the English of Shakespeare's dramatic characters seems somewhat foreign to us in both content and idiom. Further, as the creation of a playwright who possessed exceptional goals and talents, Shakespeare's dramatic language also seems somewhat foreign to us in manner and style. It is, first of all, an English for performers, not for general readers: an English directed by a playwright to a group of fellow actors who could interpret and finish his scripts in what he called a "theater" and a "play-house"—a seeing and a pretending place. Second, it is an English used often to form a special kind of discourse—a poetic, blank verse discourse—that is animated and governed in part by rhythmical considerations. Finally, it is an English that frequently manifests its shaper's intelligence, ingenuity, and daring in being highly compressed and elliptical and, thus, in asking a superb concentration of us all.

In fact, so far from easy is Shakespeare's dramatic language—so different from the English of our students' homes and playgrounds—that only the rarest of teachers can claim to have no significant problems with it in the classroom. When struggling with a Shakespearean text, our students frequently have trouble making out its "prose sense"—to borrow some phrases from I. A.

Richards—"its plain, overt meaning, as a set of ordinary, intelligible, English sentences . . ." (1929, 12). Consequently, many students come to believe themselves incapable of ever reading Shakespeare's plays well, and thus, being discouraged, they demand that Shakespeare's works be removed from the curriculum; or else they look eagerly for summaries, paraphrases, condensations, modernized editions, and comic-book versions that they can substitute for the true Shakespearean texts.

Such attitudes from students have their impact on teachers and publishers alike, many of whom respond by recommending materials or actions that will relieve students of some or all of the burdens imposed by Shakespeare's language. Among the teachers, for example, Abraham Blinderman (1975/76) suggests that we simply drop Shakespeare's plays from all but special classes in secondary schools and junior colleges. Richard Eastman (1982) recommends that we provide partially translated versions of the plays, and Ben Renz (1942) recommends versions that are not only partially translated but also condensed. Michael McKenna (1975/76) recommends versions that mix summaries and commentaries with quotations, and Peter Thorpe (1967) argues that we should simply use much of our time in the classroom to develop translations of selected passages for our students.

As for publishers, they produce many of the very substitutes that students look for when they feel pushed either to save face or to save time. A stroll through a well-stocked bookshop or library shows, for example, a comic-book *Othello* published by Sidgwick and Jackson; a scene-by-scene summary of *King Lear* in the persistently popular series known as Cliffs Notes; a line-by-line paraphrase of *Macbeth* prepared by Alan Durband for Hutchinson's Shakespeare Made Easy

Series; a slightly altered (and heavily publicized) *Hamlet* prepared by A. L. Rowse for the Contemporary Shakespeare Series of University Press of America; and a shortened *As You Like It*, with bits of paraphrase and commentary and with statements about movement inserted to accompany the dialogue, prepared by Diane Davidson for Swan's Shakespeare on Stage Series. Although such offerings, at best, condescend to students and, at worst, promise much and deliver little (see, for example, points made about Rowse's work by Feingold 1984), and although all try to simplify what "cannot be 'easy' and still be Shakespeare" (Editorial, 1985, 6), their appeal remains strong. Students simply have trouble conceiving of, or finding, works that are more immediately helpful.

Nonetheless, students really do want works better than these. They want, and need, materials that will help them understand the lines of Shakespeare's passionate and difficult dramas in the most basic of ways; materials that will enable them to increase their powers as readers and to cast out intermediaries; materials that will prepare them to explore Shakespeare's language in theatrical exercises and to use that language to express themselves, intensely and dramatically, as performers. And because students really want these materials, teachers need to conduct research to find out exactly what those materials are, and they need to do so by paying close attention to the habits, attitudes, and deficiencies of the students themselves. Only through such research can we isolate those practices of Shakespearean characters that most frequently trouble students, and only through such research can we develop approaches that are suitable for the presentation of Shakespeare's language in the modern classroom. As Gladys Veidemanis remarked more than two decades ago, "both the teaching and studying of Shakespeare are exacting, often frustrating tasks, necessitating thorough, perceptive, informed study, for which there are no painless shortcuts or easy formulas" (1964, 240).

Previous Research

Approaches

Researchers have left us more information about the methods we should use in teaching Shakespeare's language than about the troublesome characteristics on which we ought to focus. First, even though they have

not discussed the teaching of Shakespeare's language in particular, those concerned with schema theory have provided valuable information about general pedagogical principles. They have indicated that all of us accommodate new information by relating it to information we already possess; that knowledge does not consist of strings of independent details but rather of structured collections in which details have relationships; and that we sometimes require not only new information about subject matter (content schemata) but also new knowledge that will help us understand structures used to organize discourse (textual schemata) (Mayer 1984; Barnett 1984; Carr and Wixson 1985/86; Nagy 1988, in press; Marzano et al. 1988). Thus, proponents of schema theory have indicated that we must help our students move toward the strange by taking them through the familiar; that we must help students find value in new facts by enabling them to form connections between those new facts and others; and that we must sometimes introduce to them ways of manipulating language that they are neither prepared to perceive nor inclined to accept. I will make clear the importance of these points as I describe the general strategies I have followed in the practice section of this booklet.

As schema theory has been providing information about learning in general, many teachers at several levels have been providing one major recommendation about the teaching of Shakespeare's language in particular. Performances, rehearsal activities, readings, and assorted dramatic exercises, these teachers tell us, can help students associate themselves with the speakers of Shakespeare's lines and, thus, help students associate Shakespeare's language with their own (see especially Carter 1983; Swander 1984; Frey 1984; Gilbert 1984; O'Brien 1984).

Difficulties Caused by Shakespeare's Language

Whereas those concerned with pedagogical methods have left us useful advice in recent years, observers concerned with the specific difficulties caused by Shakespeare's language have left us only one strong recommendation: to give some special attention to the

most troublesome kinds of words, familiar words (such as "still," "abuse," "gentle," and "discover") used with unexpected meanings. For example, F. P. Wilson (1941, 172–74) devotes a considerable part of a very famous essay to such words, and Alfred Harbage (1963, 14–17), several pages of an even more famous book. Stuart Omans recommends that students be asked to develop lists of troublesome words—including familiar words that have changed in meaning—so that they will not have to continually "rediscover the wheel—underwater . . ." (1973, 14). In addition, George Price provides a list of deceptive words as well as the following warning: "Editors occasionally gloss these words in their notes to the plays; but precisely because the words recur so often, they cannot be noted regularly" (1962, 13).

Less common are observers who tell us to give special attention to the difficulties caused by strange arrangements of words. Among the few who mention such arrangements are R. C. Bennett, George Kernodle, and Laura Hapke. Bennett (1968/69, 57) reports on the problems such strange arrangements cause for foreign students. Kernodle—noting that subordinate elements in Shakespeare's sentences often separate related parts—advises: "It is good practice to read separately the subject, verb, and object, to make sure the basic structure of the sentence is understood before adding the subordinate elements" (1949, 40). And Hapke (1984), whose observations are similar to Kernodle's, also writes on the value of working with students to identify the subjects and verbs of difficult Shakespearean sentences.

Even more rare are comments on the problems caused for readers by Shakespeare's omissions of syllables, parts of syllables, and words. Ordinarily, writers mention such omissions only in passing, if at all. Kernodle, for instance, merely says that "Shakespeare is often very compact and elliptical ..." (1949, 39), and Harbage merely provides a few illustrations to support his assertion that one finds in Shakespeare "ellipsis of every possible kind" (1963, 20).

In sum, although for many years scholars have been providing valuable information on the characteristics of Shakespeare's language (see particularly Abbott 1870; Franz 1924; Hulme 1962 and 1972; Barber 1976; Brook 1976; Hussey 1982; and Blake 1983), observers have

shown little concern for the main difficulties presented by that language to student readers. Only in 1986, 1987, and 1988, in fact, in seminars and workshops provided by the Shakespeare Association of America, NCTE, and the Folger Shakespeare Library, have signs appeared of a significant general interest in such difficulties.

Additional Research

Activities

During the past four years, I have taught Shakespeare to graduate students in English, to undergraduates from various majors, and to twenty high school sophomores in two workshops supported by the National Council of Teachers of English. In working with these students, I have made special efforts to identify their principal weaknesses and needs as readers.

In 1985 and 1986, I gave lengthy diagnostic quizzes to thirty undergraduates and to all twenty of the high school students. I also met with each of the high school students and with twenty-eight undergraduates in diagnostic paraphrase sessions. In each of these sessions, I gave the student a cutting of about fifty lines from one of Shakespeare's plays, and, after a short introduction, asked the student to mark every word, phrase, clause, or sentence with which he or she wanted help. Then, as I provided questions and bits of information, the student worked to produce a word-for-word paraphrase of the entire selection. Through these quizzes and paraphrase sessions, I was trying to answer two main questions. First, what characteristics of Shakespeare's language most confuse students? Second, are students, in general, able to identify most of the elements that trouble them when reading Shakespeare?

Furthermore, in 1985 I composed a set of course notes on Shakespeare's language. In these notes I included information and illustrations of the expected kind, but I also included descriptions of writing assignments that I thought students could use to become more comfortable with the language of Shakespeare's plays. I used these notes in my graduate and undergraduate classes and also in the two high school workshops.

Since 1984 I have also worked with acting groups at every level, and I have frequently asked students to imitate Shakespeare's practices in their own compositions. In addition, I have sometimes given quizzes on the course notes, and I have occasionally asked students to analyze grammatically sentences from Shakespeare's plays. I have also asked advanced students to write elaborate essays on the speaking styles presented by various Shakespearean characters.

The Most Troublesome Practices of Shakespeare's Speakers

First, my investigations strongly support the most common assertion made by earlier observers. When students encounter familiar words used with unexpected meanings, they are indeed likely to misread and misunderstand the speakers' meanings. In fact, when I asked students to look for elements with which they needed assistance in Shakespearean passages, they very rarely mentioned such words at all; they looked chiefly for strange words instead—words such as "countenance," "prithee," "pranked," and "swain" thinking that most of their difficulties as readers were caused by these unfamiliar words. Also, most students had great difficulty surrendering the familiar meanings of familiar words, even when those meanings were absurdly inappropriate for the contexts in which Shakespeare's characters were using the words.

Second, my investigations show that strange arrangements of words in the speeches of Shakespeare's characters are much more likely to produce severe impediments for students than observers have supposed. Only very rarely do students recognize that the unusual arrangements of words in Shakespearean sentences may be impeding them as readers. Further, most students are not prepared to solve the problems that such arrangements cause even after they become aware that these arrangements exist. Many students simply do not have the training to identify the major elements of a clause and to put those elements into a more commonplace, understandable order. Others, although well schooled in grammatical analysis, have never learned to use their analytical skills as readers.

Third, my investigations show that Shakespeare's omissions also cause difficulties that are much more severe than observers have commonly supposed. Omissions of syllables and parts of syllables frequently distract and slow students. In addition, clauses with

missing words often confuse or baffle them. Although, as speakers of English, all students have learned to add words mentally to the speeches of others in order to understand them, most students do not know consciously that they have that skill; they do not perceive that they must use it as readers; and they do not easily use it, even under pressure, with the works of Shakespeare.

In short, my investigations show that unexpected arrangements of words, familiar words used with unexpected meanings, and omissions of syllables, parts of syllables, and words cause particularly significant difficulties for readers of Shakespeare. Therefore, in the practice section of this booklet, I have tried to provide materials that will enable students to study such omissions, words, and arrangements in order to become comfortable with them, and even to enjoy them.

Teachers should not think, however, that students' reactions to omissions, unexpected arrangements, and deceptive words are the only ones that demand careful attention. Indeed, other reactions, which I have not mentioned in the practice section, also require concern, and I can best introduce these by stating some assumptions that I have developed during the past four years:

1. Most students will understand incompletely the common and very significant pronouns, "thou," "thee," "thy," "thine," and "thyself."
2. Most students will be slow to notice the emphases produced when Shakespeare's characters repeat words, the roots or stems of words, sounds, rhythms, or constructions; consequently, most students will often fail to give proper weight to certain words and will fail to interpret sentences accurately.
3. Most students will have difficulty perceiving the associations that occur when speakers use metaphor and personification and will therefore have difficulty using such associations to build up ideas about the speakers' chief concerns.
4. Most students will have difficulty understanding wordplay, especially when the wordplay is bawdy and expresses a speaker's resistance to intimate, tender relationships.
5. Most students will refuse to assign unexpected meanings to familiar affixes, even when such meanings are clearly intended by the playwright's speakers.

6. Most students will often be confused by pronouns that have no specific antecedents and by pronouns that have no antecedents nearby.
7. Most students will become distracted or perplexed when Shakespearean characters use infinitives where we would not; when they introduce objects or reflexive pronouns where we would not; or when they employ auxiliary verbs different from the ones that we would choose.

The evidence that I have collected also indicates that these assumptions might well be legitimate conclusions. Certainly, they have served me well in my work with both high school students and undergraduates.

Practice

As I have indicated, the practice section itself contains three sections. The first of these three sections treats unexpected arrangements of words; the second deals with omissions of syllables, parts of syllables, and words; and the third concerns familiar words that appear either sometimes or always with unexpected meanings in Shakespeare's plays.

Sections 1 and 2 are quite similar. Each section presents a series of worksheets for students and an introduction to those worksheets for teachers. In preparing these worksheets, I have kept in mind two of the points elaborated in schema theory: first, that we must sometimes develop new knowledge about the conventions of organized discourse in order to understand unfamiliar texts, and second, that we always accommodate new knowledge by relating it to old or existing knowledge. Thus, to help the students develop new knowledge about conventions, I have described the syntactical schemes that underlie some of Shakespeare's unexpected arrangements of words as well as some of his troublesome omissions. Further, to help the students relate the new knowledge to existing knowledge, I have shown how these syntactical schemes differ from or resemble schemes that the students themselves use in modern English. I have also shown the students how to

transform Shakespeare's unfamiliar schemes into familiar ones by rearranging words or by adding words. In addition, I have asked the students to follow my examples and make similar transformations themselves. I have also urged the students to produce unusual schemes while writing original pieces in familiar, modern English.

Section 3 differs strikingly from sections 1 and 2. It does not present worksheets. It presents, chiefly, a collection of familiar words and some information about the unexpected meanings those words can carry. In developing this section, however, as in developing sections 1 and 2, I have kept in mind some major points included in schema theory. Thus, I have organized the words into groups, and I have shown each of the words at work in at least one sentence, or a piece of a sentence, from one of Shakespeare's plays (for information on the benefits students receive from seeing words in groups and in syntactical contexts, see Carr and Wixson 1985/86; Stahl 1985/86; and Nagy 1988, in press).

In my introduction to section 3, I have presented some assignments that teachers can use in conjunction with the vocabulary materials. The assignments ask students to create new groupings for some of the words and to use words with their unfamiliar meanings in original compositions. As writers on vocabulary instruction emphasize, such assignments can help students both understand and remember new information about words (Carr and Wixson 1985/86; Stahl 1985/86).

In preparing sections 1, 2, and 3 of this booklet, I have used passages from many different plays. My favorite sources have been *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, but I have also included several passages from each of the following works: *Richard III*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Since all are plays that teachers frequently assign and acting companies often perform, most students will probably find some acquaintance with them useful. My texts for the plays come from the Pelican collection: *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Harbage 1969).

Because long-accepted principles for the editing of Shakespeare's plays are now being challenged by numerous scholars, generally respected editions of the plays are hard to find. However, the Pelican texts, which are easily obtainable in paperback editions, have won greater acceptance in recent decades than most competing versions, and they are often used in the schools. Readers should understand that the numbers assigned to lines in other texts (particularly in scenes that include prose) and also the line readings in other texts will differ sometimes from those presented by the Pelican text.

The Context for Studying Shakespeare's Language

High school and college students alike are eager to find their places in society—to know where, exactly, they fit in—and they want to interact dramatically with one another, to express and clarify their own motives, to learn about the motives of others, and to analyze the major problems that commonly arise in human relationships. Through a number of activities, students can make the study of Shakespeare's language a means, a prologue, or an accompaniment to their pursuit of immediate social goals.

First, students can communicate with one another by sharing the original compositions that they produce in their study of Shakespeare's language. Second, after discussing the language of Shakespearean scenes in small groups, students can discuss the motives of the characters who appear in those scenes, and they can compare those characters with real people who are important to their everyday lives. Third, as students study Shakespeare's language in the relatively restrained ways urged by this booklet, they can also participate in the more physical and more emotional explorations of language made possible by rehearsal exercises and theatrical games. Finally, after working with materials from this booklet, students can use their knowledge of Shakespeare's language in performances of scenes from Shakespeare's plays. Through such performances, they can express themselves and relate to one another intensely in the safe, pretending space of the stage.

In short, through various activities that are suitable for the classroom, students can draw Shakespeare's language out of the past and give to it the flesh, fabric, rhythms, and breath of present reality. They can place this language within the contexts of their own lives and use it to make discoveries about themselves.