



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2016 Volume I: Shakespeare and the Scenes of Instruction

Introduction

All drama depends, for our understanding of the situation on stage, on one character explaining things to another, a “scene of instruction” to which we, the audience, are as it were auditors in the classroom. And almost all drama involves one or more scenes of recognition in which a character explains the awareness to which he or she has come—or surprises another with an awareness that comes as we watch or read, as an unexpected revelation. Shakespeare seems to have been particularly interested in exploring the dynamics of these scenes of instruction, both the scenes of “knowledge” instruction that often get a plot going and the scenes of “wisdom” instruction that bring a journey to its end. Shakespeare variously experiments with where these scenes of instruction are placed, how many “classes” we can attend without a recess, the difference between self-revelation and revelation to others, the comic and tragic consequences of instruction that is intentionally or unintentionally wrong, and the breathtaking ways in which teacher and student change places or in which the most important lesson turns out to be learning to challenge the authority of the figure previously assumed to be the teacher.

This seminar was conceived as a way of getting teachers and students more deeply involved with the art and wisdom of Shakespeare, so concentrated in these scenes—and as a way of exploring how attention to scenes of instruction within literature might affect our understanding of and excitement about the scenes of instruction in which teachers and students are actually engaged. Consider briefly three opening scenes of instruction in Shakespeare’s major tragedies:

The first lines of *King Lear* are Kent’s question, “I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.” We are being caught up quickly with the history of the king’s private emotions and public displays of preference, and we are being led quickly into Gloucester’s disastrous public display of sexual and parental preferences. But we are also being led immediately into a real “seminar topic,” a social and ethical question that far transcends the local matters of knowledge on which we need to get caught up and that holds us till the very last lines of the play: “The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.” What should be the relationship between what we feel and what we say? To what extent does mature social behavior depend on repressing “what we feel” and publicly saying only “what we ought to say”? Do Edgar’s last lines (perhaps, as Q1 gives it, Albany’s last lines, so that the king’s more affecting Albany would have this last reaffirmation!) suggest that speaking what we feel is what we should have learned to do in the course of this play? Or is “speak what we feel” a rare opportunity, something Cordelia got wrong but which we have, in the end, earned—at least for this overwhelmingly special moment as the curtain is about to descend? When I myself was a high school student, passing the Regents exam in economics depended on spouting the “free trade” orthodoxy that everyone benefits if Italy, which can make shoes more cheaply than England, can export shoes to England without tariff while England can sell its tea without tariff to Italy. I

remember questioning whether such free trade policies would not mean a race to the bottom, manufacturing going to the country where labor laws are weakest and workers could be exploited for the most hours at the lowest wages. What about fair trade, abolishing tariffs only when fair labor laws are shared between the partner states? My wise English teacher, to whom I complained, misquoted King Lear to make his practical point: “The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak not what we feel but what we ought to say.” If you wish to do well on the standardized exam, you must spout what you “ought,” not what you think! I imagine that every high school student encounters some version of this sad wisdom, both in the classroom and in social life.

The opening lines of *Hamlet* ostensibly suggest a “scene of instruction” in which one castle guard exchanges identity information with another. But it is hard to read *Hamlet* without realizing, whether proleptically or retrospectively, that “Who’s there?” is a most pressing identity question throughout this play, and the circumstances and extent of “stand and unfold yourself” are a matter to brood about in scene after scene. If we jump ahead to Hamlet’s last words, “The rest is silence,” we may here again wonder if those words apply only to Hamlet at the moment of death or if the question when silence is more appropriate than standing and unfolding oneself is a question in scene after scene—as it is in all of our lives, perhaps especially hauntingly in the lives of adolescent students. *Hamlet* makes us question again and again whether “stand and unfold yourself” is something we need to learn to do only in soliloquy—or whether the forms of self-deception in Shakespeare’s soliloquies (and our students’ diaries or electronic postings) make it impossible to distinguish rhetoric from self-revelation to the self.

The opening lines of *Othello* introduce us to the nightmare world of bad pedagogy—Iago as “teacher” out to mislead Roderigo—and then Othello. Roderigo’s opening words, “Never tell me?” mean, in modern English, “You don’t say!” But because that expression is so common, and so commonly taken as a dead metaphor for “That’s incredible!”, we are alerted both to what Iago *does* say and how much saying and misleading he does right up to his last words: “What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word.” There is a bitter truth to the fact that he is so incapable of speaking true that the best he can do is never more to speak word. But Roderigo’s complaint—not just that Desdemona is married but that Iago, of all people, should be the one to convey this news, alerts us to the sad but necessary fact that it matters not just what we hear but what we hear from whom. At a time when budget cuts and moves to avoid conflict with parents have led to the disastrous abolition of sex education in many schools, it may be worth thinking of Iago’s information about Desdemona as a synecdoche for sex education generally and the consequences of not just “getting it wrong” but “getting it” from the wrong person. Attention to this aspect of scenes of instruction cannot be far from the mind of a teacher or student, and indeed a student of any age.

Though our approach could have taken us to any of Shakespeare’s plays, and though the actual syllabus of plays we discussed in seminar was determined by the choice of the seminar participants, there are a number of plays that could not be omitted from this enterprise both for themselves and for the theoretical questions about scenes of instruction that they raise so urgently. The first of these is *Hamlet*, frequently taught in the high schools, and centering around two very problematic scenes of instruction. Hamlet tells us that the play is the thing wherein he’ll catch the conscience of the king, though he seems far more preoccupied with catching the conscience of the queen. Is Hamlet like a teacher who has had to fill out a lesson plan but has (or discovers? or hides from himself?) the real lesson plan (discovering his mother’s involvement in the murder or discovering to her the way in which marrying her husband’s brother is, emotionally, tantamount to murder)? And does catching the conscience of the king mean learning for sure whether Claudius has murdered Hamlet senior (informational knowledge, with Hamlet and Horatio as the students) or striking the conscience of the king, getting the king to realize and expose his own guilt (the king as “student” with far more than information

as the goal of the “lesson plan”)? These are questions that have to come up in discussions of the play, but they are also questions of wide resonance, affecting how we trust or do not trust characters and narrative voices in literature, how we trust or suspect the voices of those we meet and think we know.

The second great scene of instruction in *Hamlet* occurs in Gertrude’s closet, where despite Gertrude’s and Polonius’ sense of the young man needing to be taught something about decorum and respect, Hamlet sets out to upset the scene of instruction and teach his mother something about her own soul. His “lesson plan” is most peculiar, though, and the idea that she might come to a superior moral position from examining the portraits of the two men in her life leads to profound and profoundly disturbing questions about how it is we do change and grow in matters of real humanity.

The other Shakespeare play most frequently taught in the schools and calling for careful consideration of the problematics of scenes of instruction is *Macbeth* —to which, at the Fellows’ request, we also devoted two sessions. *Macbeth* presents some nightmare version of “teachers” in the witches and in Lady Macbeth. But it also contains, at its core, a scene of instruction between Malcolm and Macduff in which Malcolm ostensibly misrepresents himself in order to test the purity of Macduff’s motives for asking Malcolm to lead the campaign against Macbeth. Though Macduff is so desperate for “anyone but Macbeth,” to evoke a current political slogan, Macduff finally learns to lay aside deference to a figure teaching him such hideous things about himself and dismiss the authority of his “teacher”: Is Malcolm, as he has represented himself, fit to govern? “Fit to govern! / No, not to live.” This is one of several great moments in Shakespeare where the object of the scene of instruction is to have the student reach the point of being willing to dismiss the “teacher” utterly. And surely, among the most important questions students must learn to ponder is the question when to be deferential and when to revolt against the authority of teacher, parent, or boss.

One Shakespeare play not frequently taught in the schools but essential to our study of scenes of instruction is *The Merchant of Venice* : In Venice, Portia’s attempt to persuade Shylock to mercy may be regarded as a nightmare version of instruction if we think of the difference between teaching a lesson and teaching a student. To the best of my knowledge, there is only one version of this play on film, Trevor Nunn’s, in which Shylock seems genuinely moved by Portia’s words and almost yields; in most film and stage versions (we sampled four of this scene in seminar), he is deaf to all pleas; the nightmare classroom may get darker if we think of Antonio’s “mercy” as anything but—the horrific insistence on Shylock’s forced conversion. In contrast, the elegant Belmont scene of instruction by which Bassanio is brought to understand what it takes to become “marriage-ready”—not a forced conversion but a true moral conversion from profiteer to one willing to “give and hazard all he has”—raises delicate but profound questions about the difference between a test and a piece of instruction, a hint and a persuasion, a directive and an inner reformation. In an era when many teachers worry if the increased percentage of their time in testing has abetted or interfered with instruction, the question whether Bassanio is helped unfairly (Portia or the musicians cheating on Bassanio’s test) or led subtly (in a model of great teaching or self-instruction) extends beyond Shakespeare to the Shakespeare classroom and classrooms generally.

Our seminar also studied *Much Ado about Nothing* , *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* , *1 Henry IV* , *Romeo and Juliet* , *As You Like It* , and *Measure for Measure* . At the request of the Fellows, we concluded with a session on Shakespeare sonnets that allowed us to approach some of the more dialogic of these great poems as scenes of instruction between one speaker and an implied auditor—and to think anew about lyric poetry generally as solitary singing or conversational or “classroom” communication. We concluded with meditation on the great classroom exercises of having students respond to a poem with a poem they write or—following the brilliant model of Helen Vendler—inventing the poem to which the poem being studied could be imagined to be a

response.

Members of this seminar have one and all made “scenes of instruction” their own and done work far beyond the particulars of their own teaching situation—in grade level and subject matter. Christine Elmore’s unit on the casket choice in *The Merchant of Venice* is a model of how to do more interesting work with literature, work that goes beyond reading comprehension to comprehension of some fundamental aspects of our social being. There are a few, a very few great children’s books (like Julia Donaldson’s *The Spiffiest Giant in Town*) that simultaneously introduce both good fun and the morality of self-sacrifice. Her unit on *The Merchant of Venice* should likewise win the hearts and minds of teachers and students in a range of grades from first grade up. Briana Bellinger-Dawson, though herself a drama teacher rather than a reading teacher in the primary grades, does exemplary work in her unit of showing how attention to transgressive moments of speech can capture the literary imagination of young people while simultaneously engaging them in more thoughtful consideration of their own transgressive and potentially hurtful speech. Her unit might interest anyone presenting Shakespeare to students of any grade. But far more important, it raises questions about how to engage the relationship between what happens on the page and what happens in students’ own lives when words hurt and when the unintended (or maliciously intended) speech acts require careful undoing. Mary-Doris Devlin, a teacher of visual arts, has written a unit that should be of special interest to anyone working in the visual arts who is interested in ways of supporting literature teachers. But more important, she helps us to think about representation generally—about when to show and when not to show what someone is thinking. The question that comes up relentlessly in the primary grades about illustrations vs. opportunities for children to illustrate is the same question that Rupert Goold faced in deciding what to put on screen when Malcolm is describing his (feigned) unbridled lust to Macduff or when Kenneth Branagh decided to have Hamlet, contemplating the skull of Yorick, evoke on screen the visualization of the little boy delighting at the attentions of court-jester Yorick. These questions of representation form, in Mary-Doris Devlin’s unit, a scene of instruction even for teachers whose medium is exclusively words.

The remaining four units might be thought of as more conventional uses of the classroom for literary study, but the particular interpretations of scenes of instruction in each of them are so special and so powerful that I think they should be of interest to teachers not even thinking about Shakespeare. Aron Meyer’s unit on identity raises profound questions about the difference between playing roles, which adolescents and adults can change as we change our clothes, and changing ourselves, our identities, in fundamental ways. It is hard to imagine a question that could be more probing for anyone, but especially high school students. Marialuisa Sapienza’s unit on gender identity in *Macbeth* simultaneously raises two crucial questions that create busy traffic on the bridge between what students read and who they are: What is the strength of social constructions of gender (and, by extension, social pressures of conformity generally)? And how do we distinguish a view taken by a character in a work of literature from the view of the author? Is the relation of character to author (say, Lady Macbeth’s idea of masculinity to Shakespeare’s ideas of masculinity) like the deceptive relationship of the roles we play to the identities we claim?

Robert Schwartz and Barbara Sasso offer curriculum units that depend on close and careful attention to one pedagogical “handle” that proves to be anything but a gimmick. Robert Schwartz’s exploration of Shakespeare in terms of “tweetable” units allows for exciting opportunities to unpack memorable Shakespeare lines. More important, it raises fundamental questions for the study of Shakespeare, and fundamental questions for growing into maturity generally, about what is a private, what is a limited, and what is appropriately a broadly public communication. I doubt that anyone reading this unit will ever think about Shakespeare’s soliloquies or students’ Facebook posts in quite the same way again. Barbara Sasso’s attention to the few stage directions that Shakespeare quartos and the folio have given us, and the many more stage

directions that editors have invented and that students could supply, turns into an extraordinarily engaging opportunity to let students “direct” their interpretations of literature—and their lives.

I want to thank all of my Fellows for their exciting work in the classroom and in their curriculum units. It has been a real privilege to be the student of each and every one of them, and I hope many reading their units will share my sense of excitement and delight.

Leslie Brisman

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>