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Shakespeare for the Developmental Reader

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Our urban student audience today is such that the number of “behind” readers is rapidly approaching the majority. These students are often mainstreamed into regular English classes, drastically altering class composition. Many times curriculum is eliminated or altered to suit the projected needs of these classes. Indeed the instructor’s entire approach and pace must be revised. There are many pros and cons concerning this type of supplementation. One consistent problem for those taking either side of this argument is the teaching of Shakespeare. There is a nagging obligation about teaching and learning Shakespeare. We cannot easily drop him from our plan books, nor can we abridge his writings and hope to come close to conveying the same experience. His artistic worth is immeasurable, yet he poses many problems in a classroom for developmental readers. We at least owe our students the minimal experience of exposure to his writings, but can we settle just for this?

In this situation we teachers face the same dilemma and have the same fear as our students: fear of failure. But if we examine this problem closely, we can recognize its fraudulence.

My curriculum unit is designed to help make the classroom instructor more aware of the readability of a Shakespearean text for developmental readers. Developmental readers are defined as those students who are at or near expected grade level for their age (approx. 0-3 years behind by standardized measurement). In urban high schools we are talking about a group of students, probably from a substandard dialectal background, who average seventh or eighth grade reading ability.

Imagine that you are a member of drama class and the instructor for the class announces one day, “For tomorrow please read Oedipus Rex in the original Greek.” How would you feel? Most of us, to say the very least, would become anxious about this near-impossible task. Not only would we have to translate the language, but we would have to comprehend the text as well. This hypothetical situation just described is much like the reaction a “developmental reader” has when he is assigned a Shakespearean play to read.

To such a student audience a Shakespearean text resembles a foreign language. Suddenly they are faced with new vocabulary or familiar vocabulary spelled in a different way, new syntax and word order, and the added burden of verse. What is often misread as lack of interest in Shakespeare is usually a defensive reaction based on a form of linguistic insecurity.

This fear instead can be transformed into a strong motivating force. For most developmental readers, the school reading experience has usually meant watered-down elementary texts of questionable interest. They

are aware that the ability level of these texts is set low. This can be discouraging, even counter-productive to growth in reading. Thus, while we should not hide the fact that there may be problems in reading Shakespeare, we should also point out that these problems can be worked out as a group. The importance of Shakespeare to literature, history, and our students' lives should be emphasized. We can turn the initial fear into a challenge and present Shakespeare in the most positive terms in order to raise reading interest and motivation. The end result of finishing the play will be a needed boost to the student's self-esteem. Lack of self-esteem is a strong contributing factor in secondary reading disability. We have here an opportunity to change that.

The Problem of Shakespeare's Language :

To overcome this insecurity, the teacher must focus on the student's largest intimidation with Shakespeare—his language. We can do nothing with a Shakespearean text until we understand the language. Most importantly, we cannot even comprehend the story. Without a literal comprehension of a story, we can hardly expect a deeper interpretation to occur. Our first step then is to make our students aware of the language form they will be dealing with—Early Modern English.

Early Modern English is no more sophisticated than Modern English. The problem with our understanding of it is that it is different, but not different enough to be treated as a foreign language. Its major differences are a direct product of the age when it was used. English at this time was in one of its greatest periods of transformation, and therefore had enormous structural inconsistencies (nouns could be used as adjectives, etc.). Grammar on the whole was usually sacrificed for clarity and brevity.

The rediscovery of the Roman and Greek cultures caused English to be heavily influenced by them. In order to describe their new ideas that were inspired by the ancients, the Elizabethans borrowed many words and word parts from them, especially from Latin. Shakespeare himself is credited with coining over 2000 words. The Latin influence also affected English grammar. English which is primarily a Germanic language, was forced into the tight structure of Latin, thus straining the development of Early Modern English. This was due to the seemingly logical structure of Latin in comparison to English. This, however, only contributed to the already mongrel structure of English, making it less logical and more impure. Considering the heavy French influence from the Norman Conquest, which changed the Germanic Anglo-Saxon (Old English) to Middle English, the new Latin emphasis found in Early Modern English only allowed for greater license by its users.

Changes, of course, were found beyond the written word; diction and therefore spelling were also in their greatest known state of flux. In less than 500 years the hard German consonants and continental vowels of Old English (Approx. 449-1100 A.D.) were replaced by the softer consonant blends and long vowels of Middle English (Approx. 1100-1450 A.D.). Then in less than 300 years the phenomenon of the Great Vowel Shift (Approx. 1400 A.D.) occurred, changing the pronunciation of almost every vowel in English and increasing the number of diphthongs. This changed the entire color of English. We also know that the Elizabethans spoke more rapidly than we do now. The closest modern equivalent we have to Shakespeare's pronunciation is Irish or Australian dialect. A more detailed account of the development of the English language may be found in Abbott, Cook, and Finnie (noted in my bibliography).

To compound the problem, we are dealing with a writer who was a champion linguistic athlete. During his time the writer of great skill exercised the most freedom in language usage. It has never been argued that Shakespeare was a man without skill. Presented with this loose framework of the rules or grammar of Early Modern English, how then are we to teach it?

In this unique situation we must present Shakespeare's language as an idiom. We must examine how the structure is perceived in order to obtain meaning. To do this requires that we look carefully at how words and phrases are constructed. By hearing, saying, and seeing, we can see how the language functions by itself. The first impression gained from this process is a general feeling for the language which we can imitate. This is the same imitative process we use to learn any language, and this same process can be employed in the teaching of Shakespeare. For an example let's examine Lady Macbeth's speech (1,v,15-30):

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without 20
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou 'ldst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, "Thus thou must do, if thou have it";
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem 30
To have thee crowned withal.

First pull out single words for general analysis. Verbs are an excellent choice as they tend to be the most confusing words.

Example: Shalt be, Art, wouldst, doth

Question: What do these look like? Do you recognize them? Can you tell me what they mean?

Now make up your own sentence using them.

Example: the apostrophe with o (o')

Question: What does it mean? How would you say it? Compare that to Thou 'ldst in line 22.

Example: Read "Thus thou must do, if thou have it" Question: Ask individual students questions on how to obtain something and reply with this line

Teacher, "How can you get a driver's license?" Student, "Read the book and pass the test."

Teacher, "Thus thou must do, if thou have it." Teacher, "How can you win a letter in sports?"

Student, "Score a lot of points."

Teacher, "Thus thou must do, if thou have it."

Continue questioning on the same line, then ask, "What does this phrase mean?" "Are there any words missing?" "How did you figure out what it meant?"

Example: Judging from what you know about speech and how this phrase sounds, tell me what you think it means. Then read, Hie thee hither.

Example: In line 28, is Lady Macbeth really going to pour something in Macbeth's ear? What kind of spirits is she talking about. What does she mean by this line?

We of course cannot question every passage in minute detail, but these types of questions are important especially in the beginning of the reading. This line of questioning gives a feeling for the language, establishing rules and patterns of language behavior that the students can imitate. At the same time these questions allow for closer examination of the language in the context of the situation in the passage. It is through these context clues that students will infer meaning. Thus the language is considered in an ontological approach. It is important that this approach, and not translation, receive primary attention.

Translation is only one part of the process we can use to learn Early Modern English. The construction of Shakespeare's verse calls on the reader to look at it in terms of formal units of meaning. Translation can only give rough approximations in meaning. In this sense, translation alone is misleading. There are few direct parallel meanings between any two languages or two forms of the same language. The seduction of translating Shakespeare is the fact that it is a form of English. We cannot be victimized by that. Superficially, it is like our language, but its deep structure has a unique character. This notion is obvious when it is realized how much of Early Modern English's character and meaning is sacrificed in translation.

As we move farther away from Early Modern English, the Englishspeaking culture may have to treat Shakespeare in much the same way we treat Anglo-Saxon. Today we do not have to do this. We can still read

and speak Shakespeare's texts, but to understand them fully we must become more comfortable with their idiom.

This unit is a guide to the first reading of a Shakespearean play. This will limit the depth of study. It will be necessary for students to read more Shakespeare in order to become more familiar with his style. With the language barrier reduced, they may have greater interest in doing so.

Before I teach a Shakespearean play, I teach a poetry unit in order to familiarize my students with poetic devices. It is necessary for students to be familiar with basic poetic devices of sound and imagery. They should understand such terms as alliteration, rhyme, onomatopoeia, metaphor, simile, and personification. We should not shy away from the technical aspects of poetry. They are a large part of Shakespeare's genius that the developmental reader can appreciate. They present the pieces to fascinating word puzzles that the class can solve.

A review of parts of speech and simple grammar will also be needed. It would be helpful if students understood how dialect functions in language. Knowing how their own dialect functions will help introduce the notion of linguistic change and variation. The overall end result I expect to achieve beyond the reading of the play itself in this unit is the raising of students' overall awareness of how language functions.

This unit is designed to be used with any Shakespearean play. I will use *Macbeth* for my specific examples. The ideas presented here can be adapted for grades 9-12 for students of eighth grade reading level or above.

Sequence of Activities :

After I teach my poetry unit I follow with Shakespeare while the language of poetry is still fresh in my students' minds. Upon handing out the texts I prepare myself for the inevitable question, "Why do we have to read this?" I quickly seize this opportunity to present my case. I first take a quick measure of "the Bard's" popularity to see what I'm up against.

1. How many of you have ever read a play or poem by Shakespeare?
2. Who can tell me something about him?
3. When did you first hear about Shakespeare?

I then write a list of some fairly famous quotations mixed with a few personal favorites and then ask how many of these the class recognizes. I then show a portrait of Shakespeare and solicit reactions. What I hope for in these initial classes is that the students note as many differences as they can. I want them to realize that they are dealing with something which is new and outside their normal experience. I do not want to present expectations of immediate success. Many of my students believe that they should read Shakespeare as easily as anything else. Pointing out the difference in this reading experience will reduce the initial frustration which could otherwise sabotage the rest of the unit.

With time remaining I have them open to *Macbeth* and thumb through it. I gather their first impressions and then ask, "How many of you think you'll have trouble with this?" "Why?" Automatically the issue of the language will be raised. I explain at this time that the language is a genuine concern, that I am aware of it,

and that we will work on it together. I then go into my own personal experience with Shakespeare and tell them of my problems as a beginner. I am careful, however, to color my anecdotes in order to share with them my joy in reading Shakespeare. I present Shakespeare as a friend. My experience has shown that this engenders a contagious enthusiasm for the task ahead.

The teaching of a Shakespearean play allows for many supplementary exercises. The history surrounding Shakespeare's theater and his plays provides excellent activities to help further the student's understanding of the play. A Shakespearean play should not be taught in a vacuum to the beginning Shakespearean reader. In order to place Shakespeare in some historical perspective it is beneficial to give an overview of theater history from the Greeks to the Renaissance. Most students will be surprised and amused to find that Shakespeare's actors were all male or that his audiences were as loud and rowdy a group as they could be. Presenting the historical side of "the Bard" removes the gilt from him, making him and his writings seem much more human. The loss of pretension will help the students relax more and enjoy the plays.

On the second class day I bring in an Elizabethan potpourri consisting of,

1. Prints of Renaissance people and scenes
2. Recorders
3. A madrigal record

We then talk about Elizabethan England in general. It is important to name dates and give general background details on life in the 1500s. From this we make a general comparison of life styles. I also explain the Tudor line. The object of these classes is for students to get a general feeling for the time with which they are dealing.

The third and sometimes fourth class is spent on history of the language. I open this class by reading the Lord's prayer in Old English (see appendix one). I then solicit response. In these classes it is important to use a discovery approach because you want the students to realize the differences in the language. At this point I ask,

1. What does this sound like?
2. What do you notice is different about this language?

Students should hear Old English's similarity to German or Dutch. I then distribute a ditto containing three versions of the Lord's Prayer in Old English, Middle English, and Early Modern English. I continue the questions along the same line:

1. What does the language look like?
2. Does it sound like it looks?

3. What are these letters? (reference to , , and)

eth thorn

(figure available in print form)

I then go into an overview of the history of our language noting the following:

1. The fall of Latin and Verner's Law
2. The development of Anglo-Saxon and the settling of England
3. The Norman Conquest
4. The rise of Middle English—Chaucer
5. Early Modern English and the Great Vowel Shift

During this talk it is helpful to have a map of Europe to illustrate the story. We then discuss changes in language, including changes and differences in their own dialects, and consider how dialect contributes to linguistic evolution overall. During these classes I have the students do a choral reading with me using their copies of the Lord's Prayer.

This leads into the next class where I move into Early Modern English and Shakespeare. After a quick review of the previous class I hand out 2 Shakespearean sonnets (29 and 116), using them as the focus for the lesson. Here we talk about Shakespeare the man. I give what little biographical evidence we have of him. I also write his tombstone inscription on the board. The discussion about language is general at this time. I use this period to assess where my students are. At this time students should recognize the similarity between Shakespeare's language and The King James Bible, which was written at that time. To emphasize this similarity the Bible could be brought in to be used as a point of comparison in language structure.

Finally, I move into the text. Before any reading is done I have the class survey the text and point out the following:

1. The arrangement of the *Dramatis Personae*
2. How the play is divided
3. How to read Act and Scene numbers
4. How to read line numbers
5. How to read footnotes
6. The difference between Exit, *Exeunt* , *Exeunt omnes* , etc.

7. The meaning of Italics & Abbreviations
8. Terms like Flourish, Alarum, etc.

These small technicalities can interfere with the reading. At this point a spot check to see whether they can work with the text is advisable. For example, "On what page is III, ii, 96?"

I then hand out a glossary of my own (Appendix 2) which explains some common words usually excluded from the footnotes. I review this list and discuss the following items for clarification.

1. The difference between formal and informal address (thou vs. you)
2. The use of contractions, compounds, abbreviations, and apostrophes
3. Dramatic terms like Monologue and Soliloquy

We then begin by reading aloud the first scene. Students may have to be reminded not to stop reading at the end of the line, but at the end of the sentence. I again ask for problems and end with a homework assignment. This unit cannot be rushed; therefore, homework assignments, especially in the beginning, should not be too large. (See Appendix 3 for a suggested reading schedule for Macbeth.) I would not recommend more than 3 scenes or 8 pages at a time. The students will be better able and more willing to complete shorter assignments, and closer reading can be encouraged. I always encourage my students to read Shakespeare aloud to themselves. This makes the language come alive (as it was written to be spoken) and makes it more easily understood. Re-reading must also be encouraged. A certain standard of discipline must be maintained to cover this unit successfully. To help this I give regular quizzes. If students are held responsible for their work, they will respond more readily. The quizzes should not be used as punishment, but as motivation. They are valuable in assessing who's doing what and the overall general progress of the class. The quizzes should focus on literal questions to check that the story is being understood. Interpretive questions are better saved for discussion or examination.

The general routine for in-class reading is as follows:

1. Read the previous night's homework aloud in class as an acting exercise. You might suggest that certain students prepare a specific role for the next day.
2. General discussion of important or problem lines.

Once again I follow the discovery approach when interpreting lines, allowing students to argue points rather than spoon-feeding them. Also the emphasis here is on comprehension of the story first. This is especially true for the first two acts, where exposition can be very confusing. Shakespeare tends to lead you into the action rather than to start the action in the beginning of his plays. It may be necessary for the instructor to fill in the gap of what was going on before the first scene begins. It is also important that the instructor makes sure that important expository lines are clearly explained.

If a play is going to be viewed in performance from either film or live acting, it should be read first. There are two reasons for this. First, if the students know the play they will enjoy the performance more. Shakespeare can be extremely difficult to follow on stage if you don't know what you're seeing. Secondly, we must remember that the emphasis in this unit is on reading. Without going into a long discussion on the media's effect on our country's literacy level, suffice it to say we owe our students' imaginations the beauty of Shakespeare's verse. Let them first imagine what Macbeth looks like, or how Romeo climbed up to Capulet's orchard. To give them a pre-conceived vision of a play will only help kill their imaginations a little bit more.

I usually play a recording of each act when we complete that particular act. By this time the students will have read the play on their own, and read it aloud in class; now finally they hear a professional performance. This allows sufficient repetition for a sound comprehension of the play.

Once the reading of the play has been organized there are a number of enrichment exercises that may be assigned.

A valuable exercise supporting comprehension and language skills is memorization. At some point during the unit, students should be required to memorize one or two passages of at least ten lines each. For a student to memorize a passage successfully he must pay close attention to the structure and meaning of language. Students experience a great sense of reward from this type of exercise, which is valuable in maintaining motivation in reading. The "Reflection on Life" in Macbeth (V, v, 19-29) is an ideal passage for this exercise. It is very impressive if the teacher can recite the passage to the class first. A choral reading should then follow. My next step is a discussion on the problems of memorization. I'm careful to point out that poetic sound devices provide an easy method for memorization. It is also important that students understand what the passage is saying for proper oral interpretation. I usually give my students the option of reciting the passage for the class or me alone.

Activities

Translation exercises:

Translation exercises should be built upon slowly. I work with single words and parts of speech and then slowly enlarge my scope. The most difficult part of speech for students to deal with is the verb, especially the third person plural -es, -eth, -s, -en inflections. It is worthwhile to take some lines from the play and pull out the verb for analysis. Examples should not be too complex (i.e. subjunctives, etc.). What we are aiming for here is recognition of the verb's structure.

Take several lines with similar verb structures in them. Ask students if they see differences or similarities in the verb itself. Then ask if they notice any particular similarities in the rest of the lines, such as pronouns.

From this, primitive sentence patterns will be recognized. Sentence word order in Shakespeare's writing also makes reading him difficult. Structural rearrangements most often occur for emphasis or considerations of poetic meter. E.G. Lady Macbeth, 1, V, 61: "O, never shall sun that morrow

see:” When lines like these occur, especially in the beginning of the play, they should be rearranged on the board for analysis and clarification. It is also important to explain to students that questions will often start with a verb (e.g. “Say you so?”).

Assign a scene and have each student comb the scene for sentences constructed in a manner 1 they are not used to. Follow up in class with comparison and analysis of these lines on the board. You may wish to have students translate or rearrange the sentences as well.

As with any foreign language, translation is handled best when done in a cross-translation manner. Translate language A into language B and vice versa. The same holds true for translating Early Modern English. When translating, it is best to first do examples as a class then give the assignment individually.

1 Take a passage from a Shakespearean play of considerable size (at least 30 lines) and have the class translate into Modern English. Example—Macbeth IV i 47-111

2 Translate a short piece of Modern dramatic writing into Early Modern English.

In this last exercise you will have students mimicking the style of Early Modern English. This is exactly what they should be doing. By imitating the style they are demonstrating cognizance of the structural language differences which may impair their reading.

After translating it is helpful for students to compare each other’s interpretations for better insight into the problems of translation.

Understanding Poetic Language

It is not enough to merely understand Early Modern English. It is essential to understand the language of his poetry as well. The following exercises deal with how Shakespeare extends certain images poetically. These images are important to the comprehension of theme. Therefore the student should be able to trace them through the play. A valuable preliminary exercise is to first have the students Chart the action of each scene and apply the following:

1 List the animals Shakespeare mentions in Macbeth. What is he telling us by using these images?

2 Chart the weather in Macbeth. How is the weather related to the action in the play?

3 How do the lines “Fair is foul and foul is fair” demonstrate a pattern which is seen throughout the play?

4 Sleep is an important theme in Macbeth. Trace the theme of sleeping or sleeplessness in the play.

Explain its significance.

The Shakespeare Radio Hour

Assign parts to be read aloud by certain students for a particular scene. Then have those students go to the back of the room and perform their roles. By performing behind the students’ backs they are forced to listen to the language without visual distraction. At a later date you may have some students mime out the parts while the lines are being read from the back of the room. This is a valuable addition to the exercise because it demonstrates how gesture complements the meaning of verbal language.

Sexual imagery is rampant in many of Shakespeare’s plays. Students delight in these lines as much as anyone. In the sense that they present a more human side to Shakespeare’s writing they should not be

ignored. In *Macbeth*, see 1, VI, 20; IV, II, 25; 1, VII, 59; 111, I, 59-60; and III, V, 142-145 for lines which contain some entertaining yet sophisticated puns.

Appendix I—Finnie, W., Bruce. *The Stages of English*. New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972.

(figure available in print form)

Appendix 2

Glossary of Early Modern English

anon = at once	thine = yours (possessive)	
art = are		thou = you (informal)
ay = yes		thy = your
cousin = any relative	till = until	
doth = does	'tis = it is	
ere = before	whence = what, where, or when	
hark = listen	wherefore = why	
hath = yes	whither = where (from where)	
hither = near or to a place	withal = within	
i' = in		wrought = made
nay = no		
o' = of		
o,er = over		
pray = please		
prithee = please		
quoth = said		
shalt = shall		
sooth = truth		
th' = the		
thee = you		

Words You Need To Remember

Appendix 3

Suggested Reading Schedule for Macbeth

Day Act

1	I
2	II
3	I
4	II
5	II
6	III
7	III
8	IV
9	IV
10	V
11	V

Bibliography

Editions of Macbeth

Shakespeare William. *Macbeth* ed. Sylvan Barnet. New York: New American Library (Signet), 1963.

A good student edition with excellent footnotes.

It also contains critical essays and sources.

Shakespeare, William, *Five Plays of Shakespeare* , ed. H. C. Schweikert, New York: Harcourt Brace, and World, 1926.

An excellent book for the classroom. It contains *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar* , *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. It also has an excellent introduction to Shakespeare and Theater.

Shakespeare, William, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* , ed. Eugene Waith, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1954.

A scholarly edition heavy on footnotes. Much care has been taken to preserve the original text. It also contains sources of the plays.

Language

Abbott, Edwin. *A Shakespearean Grammar* . New Edition, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1877.

A compendium of Shakespeare's grammar; old but still useful, especially the introduction.

Berry, Ralph. *The Shakespearean Metaphor : Studies in Language and Form* . London, Macmillan Co., 1978.

A useful book with a good introduction. The book is divided into detailed essays giving poetic analyses of

particular Shakespearean works.

Cook, Albert. *Introduction to the English Language : Structure and History* . New York: Ronald Press, 1969.

This book uses a linguistic approach to Shakespeare's language. It is full of useful historical and structural information about language.

Evans, Benjamin. *The Language of Shakespeare's Plays* , London: Methuen, 1952.

A useful introduction and first two chapters on poetic language will be found here.

Finnie, W. Bruce. *The Stages of English* . New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972.

An excellent source on the history of the English language. Contains a record, translations, phonetic transcriptions, and many useful charts and maps.

Davis, James E. *Teaching Shakespeare* , Ohio Univ. Focus Vol. II #3, 1976 ERIC ED-128-817.

A resource article focusing on the management of a Shakespearean Unit in the classroom.

Miscellaneous

The following books are excellent background material to life in Shakespeare's day and Shakespeare's theater.

Harbage, Alfred, *Shakespeare's Audience* . New York: Columbia University Press, 1941.

Nagler, A.M. *Shakespeare's Stage* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958.

Tillyard, E.M.W. *The Elizabethan World Picture* . New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944.

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