



Volume 29 (2014)

Teaching Shakespeare's Sources and Contexts

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According to Hans Robert Jauss, the study of the reception of a text should begin with “the objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance.”¹ Those expectations are constructed “from a pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetic and practical language.”² The reconstruction of such expectations is possible and even crucial, because, as Jauss argues:

[a] literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcement, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the “middle and end,” which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text.³

The memories that a new text's first audience has of other texts—what Jauss calls the “horizon of expectations” for the new text⁴—and the way in which the new text confirms or plays upon that horizon of expectations are therefore critical to the text's meaning and impact for its initial audience. As a result, if we wish our students to acquire a historically-informed understanding of Shakespeare's plays, an understanding that approximates in some form the experience of Shakespeare's first audience or Shakespeare's own intention as author, we should reconstruct in our classroom, as far as possible, the horizon of expectations within which Shakespeare wrote and Shakespeare's audience watched his plays.⁵

In light of the richness of Shakespeare's influences and given the temporal limitations of the college semester, a course that teaches Shakespeare in the context of the horizon of expectations of his age requires a very selective syllabus of readings. A survey of Shakespeare's complete plays, along with their sources and analogues, is simply not possible. For this reason, I make the choice to teach Shakespeare by *not* teaching Shakespeare. I begin the semester with the assumption that students will have (or be able to get) basic familiarity with five Shakespeare plays—*Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*. These five plays become our Shakespearean touchstones—in class discussions, in papers, on exams. Towards the end of the semester, I add one additional Shakespeare play—a less familiar play such as *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*, or *Pericles*—which I assign to the students to read or require them to watch outside of class. With this minimal but functional Shakespeare canon, we are able to begin the semester.

¹ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, intro. Paul de Man (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1982), 22.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ I am not the first to suggest teaching an author through his sources. Others have suggested teaching individual texts in this way. See, for example, Christine M. Rose, “Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale: Teaching through the Sources,” *College Literature* 28 (2001): 155-177.

The selection of other materials—from among the sources, analogues, and intertext of Shakespeare’s plays—is perhaps the most difficult task in the planning of the course.⁶ Not least among the difficulties is the lack of suitable editions in print to use as textbooks and the lack of a single anthology that comes close to having all the specific texts that fit the needs of the course. The intertext of Shakespeare’s plays is far too rich and varied. Shakespeare and Elizabethan playgoers drew upon an education that was predominantly classical (emphasizing Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, Livy, and Horace, among other Roman authors), and Shakespeare’s stage was also significantly influenced by the works of revered medieval authors (such as Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate), by eclectic collections of popular *novelle* (such as William Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure*), by native folk traditions of drama (such as the cycle and morality plays), by contemporary literary fashions (such as Petrarchanism and Euphuism), and by the ruthless competition among the theaters of the period (and, consequently, a never-ending cycle of innovation and borrowing from each other). The richness of Shakespeare’s sources and analogues therefore causes some difficulty when looking for textbooks, although the Internet makes more and more texts available online every day, often for free (e.g., the TEAMS web site).

Just as the richness of Shakespeare’s sources and analogues can cause difficulty when looking for textbooks, the breadth and variety of those sources and analogues can cause bewilderment when one begins the process of selecting and organizing readings for the course. For this reason, I divide the semester into three parts that help to manage and focus the many and various materials that I include. I begin the semester by focusing on Shakespeare’s antecedents and the ways in which those antecedents define general concepts, genres, and theatrical practices for Shakespeare and his audience. If we want to understand how Shakespeare and his audience conceived of comedy, for example, we can hardly do better than to begin with Plautus, whose comedies were admired by the Elizabethans as standards and models of the genre. As we read the *Menaechmi* and *Pseudolus*, I ask my students to consider what, besides humor or a happy ending, defines comedy in the plays—what the characteristics of comedy are, from the simple (e.g., word play) to the complex and far-reaching (e.g., social conservatism that temporarily allows comedy to turn the social world upside down only to restore order and restraint in the end). I use Seneca in much the same way to tease out the characteristics of the genre of tragedy and then build on these Roman models by also examining early Tudor examples of each genre (*Ralph Roister Doister* for comedy and *Gorboduc* for tragedy).

But I do not only focus on genre in the early weeks of the semester. I also assign a number of stories from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and several medieval cycle plays. As the students and I read the cycle plays, we discuss how, performed for generations, these plays shaped audience expectations for drama as a form and an experience—by the way that they mix humor and serious topics, elicit sympathy from the audience, develop full-blown characters from scanty Biblical material, and comment on contemporary social and economic issues (e.g., domestic violence in the Wakefield *Noah* or rising rents in *The Second Shepherds’ Play*). In contrast, Ovid provides not insight into dramatic form and experience but rather into conceptualizations and conventions of love, an emotion so frequently central to drama in Shakespeare’s day—whether comedy or tragedy. Ovid’s

⁶ Not least among the difficulties in choosing such texts is the lack of suitable editions or translations in print to use as textbooks. No single anthology is likely to have the specific variety of texts that fit the needs of the course. For many Middle English texts, the TEAMS website (at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/tmsmenu.htm>) is a welcome source of reliable, generally accessible texts, and the Internet promises increasing access to other useful texts within the public domain.

influence on Elizabethan sensibilities and thinking was considerable, and Ovid's portrayal of love—violent, irresistible, sometimes perverse, almost always doomed, but poignant for those who helplessly watch its unfolding—intimately shapes the way that Shakespeare and his audience perceive and conceive of love.

Having used Shakespeare's antecedents to establish basic benchmarks for the dramatic genres and experience, as well as for conceptualizations of love, we move into the second part of the course, in which we focus on reconstructing more specifically and concretely the conventions and expectations of the Elizabethan stage. In this portion of the course, we read a selection of comedies and tragedies written and performed during the period of Shakespeare's own activity as a playwright—i.e., from the 1580s until 1613. We read plays that are relatively typical and unadventurous (e.g., *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* or *The Shoemaker's Holiday*), plays that were iconic and widely influential in their own day (e.g., *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine the Great*), and plays that are so innovative as to compare favorably with cutting-edge drama of the twentieth century and beyond (e.g., *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*).

In this portion of the course, students are usually struck by how very conventional, in many respects, Shakespeare is. When a play such as *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* completely shatters the fourth wall by having apparent members of the audience (who are really actors) rise up out of their seats, take over the stage, and rewrite the play being performed, the metadramatic moments of Shakespeare's plays (the plays within plays or references to actors and the stage within a play's dialogue) seem tame by comparison. While Shakespeare's problem plays and romances blur the lines between comedy and tragedy, a play such as *Arden of Faversham* completely destabilizes generic categories by using the stock characters of comedy (including a shrewish wife and a braggart soldier), stock scenes from comedy (including a love test), and elements of humor typical of comedy (including farce and mistaken identity) to dramatize a tragedy. By considering Shakespeare's plays in relation to the theatrical and generic originality of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and *Arden of Faversham*, students come to realize that Shakespeare's reputation as a literary genius is not necessarily the product of stylistic or generic innovation. Shakespeare's strengths lie elsewhere.

This portion of the course also draws attention to how Elizabethan expectations for drama—as well as our own—could have developed differently. One of my favorite playwrights to teach from the 1580s is John Lyly, because Lyly was a bit of an artistic dead-end. Unlike most drama, Lyly's plays are less explorations of intense human emotion at moments of extreme stress than they are tranquil meditations on a philosophical theme or topic. Lyly's play *Endymion*, for example, examines the tension between male-male friendship and romantic love—a tension that was the topic of a treatise by Cicero and had become a commonplace in Elizabethan England, important in several Shakespeare plays (including *Merchant of Venice*). The title character of Lyly's play is magically entrapped by a woman whose love Endymion does not return, and Endymion's male friend Eumenides, having discovered a magic well that will enable him to find the answer to one and only one question, is torn between his sworn duty to find the key to Endymion's freedom (i.e., male friendship) and his desire to find a way to win the love of a woman who scorns him (i.e., romantic love). His choice is the climax and focus of the play, but it is portrayed more as an intellectual exercise than as a moment of psychological *Angst*. Lyly's plays, then, with their focus on philosophical topics and their intellectual, almost allegorical style of presentation, represent a might-have-been of literary history—a road not taken in the development of drama. As such, they help us to understand how more conventional plays, such as Shakespeare's, function and why Shakespeare's more conventional plays please us, while Lyly's, in the final analysis, do not.

After exploring the artistic dead-ends, the cutting-edge innovations, and the more conventional classics of the Elizabethan stage, the final portion of our course focuses specifically on Shakespeare and the ways in which Shakespeare molds his source material into his plays. We examine the tale of “Romeo and Iulietta” from *The Palace of Pleasure*, the tale of the pound of flesh from *Il Pecorone* of Giovanni Fiorentino, and the life of Brutus from Plutarch’s *Lives*—each compared to the Shakespeare play for which it is a source or analogue (*Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Julius Caesar*, respectively). At this point in the semester, I also assign a less familiar Shakespeare play (e.g., *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*, or *Pericles*), along with its most important source (Plutarch’s life of Coriolanus, Plutarch’s life of Mark Antony, selections from Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, or Gower’s tale of Apollonius of Tyre from the *Confessio Amantis*, respectively).

In this portion of the course, students soon realize that expectations about dramatic genres and forms in Shakespeare’s day profoundly influence how and why Shakespeare shapes his sources into plays in the way that he does. One of the conclusions that students draw about tragedy early in the semester, for example, is that a tragic plot is predicated on the premise that the world is fundamentally flawed and unjust. From Seneca’s *Atrius* to Daniel Webster’s *Duchess of Malji*, tragedies assume a world in which human monstrosity, social and political corruption, and the desertion of the gods (or God) are at the root of the characters’ difficulties. As a result, when Shakespeare adapts William Painter’s tale of “Romeo and Iulietta” to the stage, he adds the death of Romeo’s friend Mercutio at the hands of Tybalt in order to give a stronger motivation to Romeo for fighting and killing his wife’s cousin. But that stronger motivation also stresses that, in the world in which the young lovers find themselves, an inherent good (friendship) leads almost inevitably to something bad (Romeo’s return to violence). Despite Romeo’s every attempt to maintain peace, the corrupt, violent world in which he lives forces his hand and destroys his happiness. In this way, Shakespeare adopts Painter’s plot to the generic and dramatic expectations of tragedy in his day. Ending my course in this way allows the students to apply what they have learned about the Elizabethan horizon of expectations to reconstruct Shakespeare’s motives and creative decisions.

In a course such as I have been describing, the students learn a great deal by the end of the semester—most especially to appreciate classical and medieval influences on Shakespeare and become experts on the conventions that guide Shakespeare’s writing and stagecraft, having reconstructed those influences and conventions from their own reading. More importantly, they come away from the course with a strong sense of why literary history is an important and useful course of study – a course of study that can demystify Shakespeare’s “old English” and disclose the literary norms and innovations of a past age. Shakespeare’s plays cease to be boring, timeless, hermetically-sealed museum pieces and instead come alive as singular responses to contemporary Elizabethan discourses and concerns. As students become experts in Elizabethan comedy and tragedy, in Ovid and Plutarch, in *Endymion* and *Arden of Faversham*, their confidence in reading and understanding Shakespeare vastly increases. Most importantly, their reading, as Jauss predicts, “avoids the threatening pitfalls of psychology” and develops beyond “an arbitrary series of merely subjective impressions” to become sophisticated, historically-informed acts of interpretation.⁷

⁷Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 22-23.