

Performance Cruxes and Consequences: Teaching Shakespeare with Text and Performance

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“Shakespeare is a plural noun,” I tell my students on the first day of class, and while I illustrate this claim by clicking through the unsettlingly different images of the Bard – the “Cobbe,” “Chandos,” and “Droeshout” portraits – it is the claim that I spend the rest of the semester trying to support, first by destabilizing the authority of the five-and-a-half pound *Norton Shakespeare* that they lug around campus, and ultimately linking that destabilization to the liberating indeterminacy of Shakespeare in performance.

A touchstone of my pedagogy is the idea of the “crux,” a term that has been used since the eighteenth century to mean an interpretive crossroads, fork, or juncture. First, I introduce the concept of textual cruxes in Shakespearean editorial scholarship such as whether Othello refers to himself as the base “Indian” (the quarto reading) or the base “Judean” (the Folio reading) in his final speech. After killing Desdemona and before his suicide, Othello tells his audience to speak of him as one “Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand, / Like the base Indian/Judean, threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe... (5.2.355-7). Majorie Garber points out that the Indian/Judean variant, rather than suggesting authorial revision, may have been merely a function of the peculiar conventions of early modern print, yet the difference, “however accidental, is salutary, for it has produced competing readings of great power”(615).¹ If Othello

invokes an image of the “base Indian,” the context is colonialism, and Othello sees himself as the “savage” man who does not know the value of the jewel he finds. If Othello is the “base Judean,” he likens himself to Judas Iscariot and the “pearl of great” price (Matthew 13: 44-52), Othello throws away becomes the Kingdom of Heaven (Garber 615). Scholars line up on one side or the other of this debate, largely choosing one reading or the other depending upon whether they find a post-colonial or religious reading of the speech, or indeed the entire play, more compelling, a choice that is, at least in part, based on what they see as the primary element of Othello’s identity as a Moor, either his racial otherness or his status as a Muslim by birth who later converted to Christianity. As Garber suggests this crux is beneficial because it ultimately serves as a catalyst for profoundly different but competing interpretations. This textual crux from *Othello* further illustrates to students how central the representation of race is, in both the texts of the play as well as the critic’s response.

In addition to considering the ways that early modern textual variants generate profoundly different meanings, we examine how contemporary editorial interventions and emendations further complicate the notion of a definitive Shakespearean text. From *Much Ado About Nothing* we look at the line from the final scene of the play, “Peace, I will stop your mouth,” (5.4.96) which is attributed to Leonato in both the 1600 Quarto and the First Folio, yet commonly reassigned to Benedict by modern editors who also add the accompanying stage direction, “[*kissing her*].” Students are surprised to learn that it is contemporary editors who have decided to conclude the play with Beatrice being silenced by her husband-to-be rather than her uncle’s exasperation with the squabbling couple.² The budding sense of reciprocity between the

pair is undermined if Benedict's words and gesture serve to curb Beatrice's unruly speech and enforce the patriarchal ideal of female silence. In a similar vein, we look at Act one, scene two of *The Tempest* where Caliban taunts Prospero with the implications if he had he been successful in his attempt to rape Miranda. After he boasts that he would have "peopled else /This isle with Calibans" (1.2. 352-3), the Folio attributes the blistering response to his lines to Miranda, yet editors from Dryden and Davenant through the early twentieth-century reassigned them to Prospero, thinking the harsh retort out of character for the presumably mild-mannered Miranda (V. Vaughan and A. Vaughan 135-6). In addition, we look at a number of stage directions also added by contemporary editors whose choices shape how readers imagine stage action.³ Emphasizing the contingent and mediated aspects of early modern textual production as well as the creative element in textual editing unsettles the hierarchical notion of an authoritative Shakespearean text from which all performances are derived and to which all performances should be more or less "faithful."

Beyond dispelling the myth of an original, definitive Shakespeare, our examinations of textual variations and editorial emendations lay a foundation for conceiving of text as analogous to performance, an idea articulated brilliantly by W.B. Worthen: "We might understand books...to materialize a certain kind of *performance* of the work. If books are like performances, it is not because they are individual interpretations of the metaphysical work of art; it is because they materialize the work as a unique event in time and space. Each *Hamlet* on the stage uses Shakespeare's words, and much else, to fashion a new and distinctive performance; each *Hamlet* on your shelf uses Shakespeare's words, and much else, to fashion a new and distinctive

performance” (10). As Lucas Erne points out, Worthen’s premise “shifts the emphasis from the loss of meaning to the production of meaning” and recognizes the extent to which “the text is always constructed in accord with a set of cultural values and textual assumptions, and its making and remaking are not evidence of its contamination but are, in fact, the very conditions of its being” (Erne 8-9). This theoretical framing encourages a “reciprocal sense of the relationship between writing and performance” (Worthen 12), both radically contingent and open to interpretive possibilities.

After laying this critical foundation that establishes both the contested and unstable nature of the text and its status as a kind of performance, I introduce what I call “performance cruxes.” While the term “crux” employed by textual editors refers to textual variants, inconsistencies, or “corruptions,” of the text(s), “performance cruxes” are interpretive crossroads in Shakespeare’s scripts that invite or even necessitate making a choice about staging to fully constitute dramatic meaning. By “dramatic meaning” I mean the rich yet necessarily indeterminate synthesis of what might be inferred from the words on the page and what might actually be happening on stage at a particular moment, especially where the relationship between the scripted dialogue and its performative counterpart is both unclear and consequential.

In some sense every single moment of a drama’s unfolding on stage might be considered as an interpretive crossroads, but to narrow the field I introduce three distinctly different opportunities that invite students to consider the extent to which performance is integral to understanding a play. In every one of these categories, students are paradoxically asked to look very carefully at the text in order to discover what is essentially *not* there. First, I ask them to

consider conspicuous silences, places where there the script does not include verbal expression from characters whose presence is called for on stage and who would be impacted by the scripted action or speech of other characters.⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly many of these silences belong to female characters. Examples include moments like Adriana's silence and apparent exclusion from the happy family reunion at the conclusion of *The Comedy of Errors* or Isabella's silence at the end of *Measure for Measure* when the Duke cuts off her plans to enter the convent and proposes marriage instead. What dramatic possibilities are there for Hippolyta, the captive Queen of the Amazons, who remains silent on stage while Duke Theseus, her husband-to-be, enacts a nearly parodic version of patriarchal tyranny in the first scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Each one of these instances, among countless others, makes plain the extent to which the words on the page provide only a fraction of the information necessary to understanding any dramatic moment.

The second performance crux category involves questions of tone or delivery. The indeterminate tone of Katherine's concluding monologue from *The Taming of the Shrew*, where she surprisingly delivers an argument in favor of wifely obedience and subordination, is perhaps the clearest and most famous example of this kind of crux. Similarly, in Act 4 of *The Merchant of Venice*, when the Duke mandates Shylock's conversion to Christianity, Shylock's simple three-word response in the text, "I am content" (4.1.389) would seem instantly to dispel his prior bitterness and hostility. Yet, as with Kate's speech, how the actor articulates the words of the script conveys tone, and will fundamentally shape how an audience understands what, on the page, are sudden and unexplained transformations in defining beliefs and attitudes.

The third type of performance crux I introduce is the “ambiguous stage referent.” In this instance I ask students to identify places in the script where a clear question arises regarding the relationship between the language of the script and the action the audience sees on stage. Act one, scene two of *The Winter’s Tale* where Leontes becomes suddenly and violently jealous at the interactions between Hermione and Polixenes is among the most compelling and consequential examples of this kind of performance crux. While Leontes says he sees them “padding palms and pinching fingers” and “making practiced smiles” (1.2.115-16), every production of the play must decide what the actors do (or do not do) on stage that will either confirm, call into question, or blatantly contradict Leontes’ description in the minds of the audience. Given that Leontes is the only character in the play that seems to construe Hermione’s and Polixenes’ actions as illicit, this decision is especially consequential: it is directors and actors who determine what an audience sees and whether they understand or condemn Leontes’ jealous perspective.

The staging of King Lear’s enigmatic final lines from the Folio provides another example of this kind of ambiguity. While apparently oscillating between a hope that Cordelia is alive and a firm acknowledgment that she is dead he says, “Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips. / Look there, look there” (*Tragedy of King Lear* 5.3.284-287). In his introduction to the Arden edition of the play, R.A. Foakes points out that “what [Lear] sees, or thinks he sees, has been much debated; to some it appears a cruel final delusion if he supposes Cordelia to be alive, while others see a blessed liberation for him in a moment of imagined reunion” (75). The pronouns “this” and “there” in Lear’s speech create multiple ambiguities that require decisions about what

stage referents will correspond to them, and then there are broader issues concerning how the actor playing Lear will interpret or react to what he sees and how that is consistent or inconsistent with what the rest of the actors or audience observe. Foakes highlights a number of theatrical productions that have variously interpreted Lear's final lines as a "cry of pain" (Donald Sinden, 1976), a joyful hope at his 'perception of apotheosis in Cordelia' (John Gielgud, 1940; Granville-Barker's notes, Bratton 213 qtd. in Foakes 78) or omitted all together, as by Paul Scofield (1962), who sat upright, silent, and died without moving (Rosenberg 320 qtd. in Foakes 78). Each one of these dramatic scenarios creates a profoundly different ending for Lear's life and the play.

Pre-Performance Exercises

While referencing past performances is helpful for illustrating the indeterminate nature of drama, when possible, it is ideal to incorporate a trip to a live production so that students can see these choices unfold before them. But this activity benefits from further structured preparation. Before we see a particular theatrical production, I divide the class into five groups, each one assigned to each of the five acts of the play, and ask each group member to re-read the script on their own with a focus on locating performance cruxes and framing them in critical terms. In an informal written assignment they complete at home, I ask them to 1) identify the lines that correspond to their "crux," 2) describe the dramatic context of that crux in detail, 3) articulate the kind of ambiguity or indeterminacy that characterizes that moment (silence, tone, or stage referent), and 4) draft two substantial questions generated by the ambiguity that bear on our

understanding of characterization, context, or conflict, or some other aspect of the play. In class the following day, students meet in small groups by act, sharing the cruxes they each came up with and collectively choosing one that they feel is most consequential and open to multiple interpretations.

Once the class has collaboratively decided upon these five cruxes (one for each act), they work individually at home on a four-part assignment that asks them: A) to examine how they think the text *may* imply a staging choice for that crux, based on evidence either from elsewhere in the play or relevant early modern historical contexts B) to imagine generally how *contemporary* performance potentially could shed light on, problematize, or explicitly challenge those textual or cultural assumptions, and C) to specifically realize the crux by describing in detail the dramatic action including the stage space, the relationship to and potential interaction with the audience, blocking/positioning of the actors, inflection of the lines and other actor's responses to them, props, costumes, lighting, music, time period/setting, etc. and D) to articulate in a sentence or two what idea, connection, or question they want their imagined staging to generate in the minds of their audience and what their primary rationale and objective would be in doing so.

Once students have completed this assignment, they meet again in their small groups during class, sharing their work and the specific staging each of them envisioned. Finally, these groups informally present the work they did on the five cruxes back to the larger class who invariably provides additional insights and interpretive possibilities on how performance could create the meaning of an important moment on stage.

This assignment is designed to encourage students to think of themselves as artistic collaborators with Shakespeare and with one another, collaborators who come to understand that any reading or performance of any Shakespeare play is essentially a reconstitution of it; rather than seeing a performance as being “in” the text and succumbing to what Jane Margaret Kidney calls “anti-theatrical bias supported by the dominant ideology of print” (117), I hope that their imaginative engagement with performance helps to empower them as interpreters who see themselves as co-creators of the meaning of Shakespeare(s).

Before and at the Performance

Providing students with these structured assignments and exercises prepares them to see the live production we attend together because they begin to see performance as a series of active, creative choices made by the director, actors, and artistic team whom they now understand as the play’s co-authors and co-creators. Their analysis of the performance itself involves a related but very different interpretive process than they had just been engaged in with the performance crux assignment. Rather than examining the text as an invitation for their own creative work, they now attend to the various ways that the performance imagines and creates the meaning and implications of the text (again meanings and implications that are not “in” the text to be found but created in a collaborative relationship with it).

Beyond looking at costume or set renderings on the theater’s website, I urge students to avoid reading reviews or interviews with the director, not wanting them to be influenced by other critics or their analytic perspective overdetermined by the “intent” of the director. Naturally, they

are very invested in seeing how the specific performance cruxes they identified and imaginatively staged are enacted in the production, but I warn them that the fact that they have identified a crux doesn't necessitate that the director or artistic team will attend to it in any particularly interesting or purposeful way. I ask them to broaden their interpretive lens.

From the moment they take their seats, they take notes on aspects of the production they see and hear, without any preexisting notion of what those details will mean. They jot down their observations of the set design, costumes, lighting, music, props, and of course stage action -- and they all notice very different things from one another. I suggest that if a metaphoric reading or inference occurs to them when they see something to write that down, too. I encourage them to make connections between the production details and the language of the text, to forge a two-way relationship between textual and visual/aural fields of reference. A striated lighting design in a scene from *Othello* might remind a student of Iago's metaphors of entrapment or Leontes' spitting out a mouthful of wine at a climactic moment from Hermione's trial scene could recall his earlier soliloquy about having "drunk, and seen the spider" (2.1.47). Ideally, the performance is illuminated by the text and the text is illuminated by the performance to such an extent that they become mutually constitutive. I ask them to be on the lookout for rearrangements or cuts of scenes from the script in addition to nonverbal scenes or tableaux that do a considerable amount of decisive interpretive work. I encourage them to see their job not as figuring out the director's intent any more than they could discover Shakespeare's, but to co-create the meaning of the performance through their own interpretations of it.

Post-Show

After we've seen the performance, we have a class discussion where students share their observations and insights. I structure the discussion by having students write down specific aspects of the production in a variety of categories, such as props, costumes, or lighting. For example, I might ask students to write down one example where a prop was prominently featured in the production, describing its usage in a particular instance in as much detail as possible from memory. I call on a student to share what they wrote down and then ask the rest of the class to generate a variety of inferences from that piece of "evidence." This helps students to see that a variety of interpretive inferences might plausibly be made from the same piece of staging and put in different relationships to the script of the play. Students then draft thesis-driven papers on the production that go through peer review. Some make arguments about a single production element that they trace throughout the production such as costuming, set, or lighting design; others will do sustained analyses of a single scene. In every case their arguments need to forge a connection between the performance and the text, to read the visual field of the production as a rich and dynamic companion of the text that, when combined with their own interpretations, creates the meaning of the play.

Teaching live theatrical performance helps students understand Shakespeare as a topic that is quite different from the excavation of a dead author, his works, or the culture in which he lived. Instead, they see Shakespeare as a "plural noun," created through a dynamic and ongoing process in which they play a leading role, not as actors but as close readers of the script and the performance as two discrete but interrelated texts. The performance-oriented criticism I hope to

encourage among my students is akin to one Margaret Jane Kidnie envisions as “training readers in a *process* of creative and imaginative thought, a process that includes close textual analysis but also, for example...considerations of stage business, casting, theatre space, acting style, costuming, music cues, and the shaping of a script through cuts and rearrangements” (113). The complex logistics and financial cost involved in these theater trips can be daunting, but there is nothing that matches live performance in terms of its lasting impact on students. While I often use film clips in class to give students practice at reading and interpreting the visual field in relationship to the text, film is no substitute for attending a play together as a class. Admittedly film has what might be considered the pedagogical advantage of permanence and repeatability, but it is precisely the ephemeral nature of live performance that makes the interpretive work that students do more challenging, dynamic, and individual. In cinema the lens of a camera can direct, influence, and create common perception in a much more controlling and determinate manner than is possible in live performance where audience members have more freedom to direct their attention in unexpected ways, to make connections or drawn conclusions based on their own individual perceptions, perceptions that will inevitably vary based on any number of factors from where they sit in the theater to what elements happen to catch their eyes.⁵

At the time of this writing colleges and universities as well as theaters all over the country have had to close and move online due to COVID-19. Within this moment of cultural upheaval, I find myself appreciating more than ever the distinctive nature of the experience that live theater offers. There is something profoundly human and communal about being in a theater with fellow audience members and seeing a play performed not for a camera, but for audiences –

for you, for us. It is not a virtual experience. It is an imminent and intimate one that unfolds uniquely in real time and three-dimensional space that is shared. Teaching Shakespeare in performance hones students' skills at critical reading, viewing, and thinking while teaching them that Shakespeare is indeed collaboratively made, a plural noun, because the plays that we see together see are not created by Shakespeare but by theater artists and audiences – and student's individual and collective imaginations.

Notes

¹ Garber points out that the Indian/Judean crux is “produced by the fact that the capital letters for modern *I* and *J* were the same, and that the letter *n* could look like the letter *u* (the piece of type - *u* or *n* -- could also be inserted upside down within the frame)” (615).

² Interestingly, the first and second editions of *The Norton Shakespeare*, following the Oxford Edition, attribute the line to Benedict, but the freshly edited new text of the third edition of the *Norton* (2016) restored it Leonato with the added stage direction, “[*He gives her hand to BENEDICT*]” (1461).

³ Lucas Erne in *Shakespeare’s Modern Collaborators* (2008) analyzes the implications of these editorial interventions ultimately arguing for their value for contemporary readers and critics. He proposes that “the editorial intervention with which Shakespeare is mediated to us is basically beneficial” (3).

⁴ Philip C. McGuire’s *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare’s Open Silences* (U of California Press, 1985) is the first book-length study of this common element in Shakespearean drama.

⁵ See Jessica Winston’s essay in this volume for another discussion of audience autonomy in theatre and film.

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