

'twere well it were done well...': taking dialogic and philosophical risks with Shakespeare.

A few years back, I was helping a friend's son with his Higher English course. I asked him what literature he was studying, and, as it's my favourite play, was delighted when he said *Macbeth*.

My enthusiasm waned somewhat when he told me how the class was approaching it. It's all about one fatal flaw, he said, because Macbeth is too ambitious, and we only need to really know the scene when Lady Macbeth persuades him to kill Duncan because that's where the theme of ambition is most clearly shown.

'Okay,' I said. 'And how do you feel about that?'

He seemed perplexed but relieved that someone had asked his opinion. 'I don't buy it,' he said. 'If it was all about ambition, then it would finish at the end of Act 2, when he's crowned King. That's what he wants.'

'But what about the 'to be safely thus' thing though?' I asked.

'But that's not ambition. That's insecurity. Macbeth says he'll never be as good a king as Duncan, so it's not ambition that makes him kill his rivals. It's fear. He's afraid he can't command their loyalty.'

It was an interesting – and distinctly plausible – personal response. When I asked him what his teacher thought, he said he hadn't discussed it with him, but had just submitted an essay in which he'd tried out the idea. 'Let me know how it goes,' I said.

I wasn't hopeful about the reaction he'd get. The way he'd been taught seemed to reflect what we all know has become pretty standard practice in some classrooms. Teachers plan what will be studied and what will not, decide the acceptable interpretations that will satisfy examiners, and set firm parameters outside of which exploration cannot venture. The justification is always the same ('we don't have time to do anything else!') but I'm always reminded of Rosenblatt's famous exhortation that "Accepting an account of someone else's reading or experience [of a text] is analogous to seeking nourishment through having someone else eat your dinner and recite the menu."

Shakespeare has always been problematic, of course. On the one hand, I can't imagine teaching English to anyone without Shakespeare, and, despite my natural antipathy to curriculum specifications and the whole notion of canonical literature, am quite happy to accept that the National Curriculum got something right when it embraced Shakespeare as "the *de facto* embodiment of English cultural heritage" (Coles). I may have a crush on old Will, but that's because he deserves it. And yet there will always be a debate about his 'relevance', about 'the language', about the historical context, that encourages teachers to make judgments about his 'suitability' for the 21st century urban youth of our classrooms, and the danger is that in trying to make the text 'accessible', we run the risk of making reductive and patronising decisions.

Certainly, there are ways into Shakespeare that can help, and these often depend on moving away from the written text to explore performance using film. At its most basic – and unsatisfactory - level, a DVD is slapped into the player simply to illustrate the reading of the print text; at its best,

multimodal approaches develop an appreciation of the play as performance, not as *a* text, and not as *a* performance. Using the print text to support the analysis of several versions of the same scene can help generate a multiplicity of different interpretations about character and theme; just ask the students what's going on in Macbeth's head during the 'If it were done...' soliloquy as performed by Fassbender, McKellen, Stewart and Branagh, and then try telling them there's only one motivation lurking there...

Drama too offers enormous opportunities to engage students in the text, and that's where brilliant schemes run by bodies like the RSC come into their own; a friend of mine has just worked with her Drama class on a performance of Act 2 scene 7 for a Shakespeare Schools Festival project, and the student who directed a remarkable performance is now being head hunted by drama colleges across the UK. Not bad for a lass from Fife.

But in a world ruled by high stakes examinations, our curricula north and south of the border haven't caught up with these possibilities, and the critical response to the print text still rules. This is where we have to make fundamental choices. Do we adopt the view that it is our role as teacher to fill our students with what we deem to be 'acceptable' critical responses organised into PEE chains to be regurgitated in an exam? Or do we trust ourselves and our students and create the conditions under which genuine personal response can flourish?

To have any hope of building students' capacity to respond truthfully to Shakespeare (or any text) we have to have the courage to adopt a truly dialogic classroom, because, as Johnston and Maurer put it, 'teaching Shakespeare's plays creates a place in the curriculum where students and teachers can take risks together... can undertake... an examination of texts that provocatively resist attempts to impose a coherent interpretation on them.'

I'll confess, I have a particular affinity for *Macbeth* because, in taking risks with my students over the years, I have developed my own, idiosyncratic reading that I am convinced is just as valid and supportable by textual evidence as any other: I would marry Lady Macbeth. Misguided though she is, she lives and breathes for her husband alone, sacrificing herself for his benefit and appropriating his guilt to leave him unencumbered, while he cruelly manipulates, uses and discards her in pursuit of a goal he has been planning long before the opening curtain. You see, I read the play as twin arcs of character revelation, the parallel journeys of 'fair is foul and foul is fair' in a play so steeped in things not being what they seem that it is obtuse not to interpret the main characters in the same way.

And this somewhat perverse reaction to the play isn't a rehash of my undergrad essays, nor come from reading critical analysis by Oxbridge scholars (though I'm sure it's not original), but from starting with dropping little pebbles of devil's advocacy into the pond of classroom discussion, asking 'yes, but...' questions, and allowing students to throw whatever comes to hand at me in response (once, it was a copy of the Arden edition). We really did learn together.

Take Act 2 scene 7, the scene we all trudged through lectures on, telling us that a woman who would crush her child's skull is the blackest heart imaginable. Set the students up in groups with contradictory propositions, task them to find the textual evidence within and outwith the scene to back up and defend their given proposition, and watch the sparks fly:

<p>Proposition 1:</p> <p>Macbeth, in his soliloquy, has an attack of conscience. Duncan is so good while he feels so wicked to be motivated by nothing but ambition that he will be damned for the murder, and he relents. However, when he conveys his decision to his evil wife, she knows exactly what his weaknesses are, and, using fearsome language and horrifying images, attacks his strength of character and masculinity, bullying him into going forward with the plan.</p>	<p>Proposition 2:</p> <p>Macbeth, in his soliloquy, worries that he will be held accountable for Duncan’s murder if he is caught, and regrets that the only motive he has for killing is that he wants to be king. He does not actually say he won’t kill Duncan, but when his wife enters, he seems to back out of the scheme, knowing she will attempt to persuade him again. He manipulates her, so that in the event of him being caught, he can shift the blame to her and claim ‘she made me do it.’</p>
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For me, it’s absolutely imperative that we allow this breathing space for ideas like this to butt heads with each other. To restrict response to a particular interpretation that we have predetermined is, as Leggat puts it, ‘tempting and dangerous’ because there is no growth ‘beyond the idea you came in with.’ Instead, he argues, we must ask ‘questions that have no answers’.

In doing this, it is helpful to think about approaches being developed in the Philosophy with Children movement (Cassidy) such as Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI), using its four principles as a mantra for explorative discussion:

1. It is possible to question everything
2. We are all capable of reasoning independently and with others
3. We are human and therefore prone to error
4. Communication requires creating meaning.

In addition, the rules of the enquiry – that the teacher as facilitator never rephrases participants’ responses, that participants don’t have to believe what they say as long as it develops the discussion, that participants do not seek consensus or conclusion – all help to generate the kind of genuine discussion we would have in the theatre bar after a particularly thought-provoking performance. I do wonder how much of our investigation of literature with students embraces these principles, but it strikes me as a short cut to failure if we deny students’ rights as active participants in the responsive process. Moreover, we deny ourselves the right to grow.

So we have to take dialogic and philosophical risks with Shakespeare, and be prepared to challenge and be challenged ourselves. My friend’s son and I discussed and developed his interpretation of Macbeth’s paranoia; I agreed with him in many respects, disagreed with others and came away with a new perspective on the play. We discussed my passion for baby-smashing regicidal maniacs; he agreed with me in many respects, disagreed with others and went away with a new perspective on the play. We also discussed his teacher’s one fatal flaw theory, and wholeheartedly agreed that the notion that a mind as sophisticated as Shakespeare’s would conceive of a character so cartoonishly one-dimensional was pretty much preposterous.

As for his essay: he brought it to me after it had been corrected. His argument was only just beginning to germinate, but the seeds of an independent response could clearly be seen; it just

needed nurture. Instead, his teacher had awarded him 7 out of 25 and had written at the end, in bold red pen, the single comment, 'Were you not listening to me in class?'

Awful, yes. But I reckon we should all be alert to the fact that it's possible that even just the tiniest bit of that kind of attitude is always in danger of creeping in to the way we teach texts if we take the safe option and tell our students what to think.

References

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