

Teaching Literature

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ograph by Denise Applewhite

and there is an important index of self-selection among students who elect Chaucer courses – can do both most of the ‘Canterbury Tales’ and all of ‘Troilus’ in a semester. Obviously two semesters would be better in principle. Howard is right about not worrying too much about orthography, but in practical fact there is no ‘modern’ edition of Chaucer that limits itself to mere spelling. And the difference between reading Chaucer in Middle English and reading him in modern translation is the difference between taking a bath and taking a bath with one’s socks on.”

Fleming also believes that having students read Chaucer aloud is important: “It allows students to ‘own’ the poetry. Learning passable Middle English pronunciation is also a finite task that almost every student can do, and with its achievement comes a feeling of power. But above all Chaucer is a poet of sounds par excellence – you really do need to speak and hear him. Students can see for themselves the ‘modernity’ in Chaucer. They need help in understanding its alterity. And the real excitement for teacher and student alike is the exploration of the dialogue between the two.”³⁹

Overall, the models for teaching poetry – performance, imitation, generic focus, comparison, connection, engagement, evaluation – are traditionally the most hands-on in the literary repertoire. For these reasons, thinking about poetry is a good place to start thinking about teaching literature in general.

Chapter 5 Teaching Drama

It's a dirty job teaching Shakespeare. But somebody's got to do it.

Edward Focher, *Shakespeare Quarterly 41* (Summer 1990): 173

In a way, my relationship with Shakespeare has been the most lasting and stable one I've ever had with a man.

Gayle Greene, “Looking at History,” *Changing Subjects*, 9

Teaching drama is also a paradigm for active learning and the reflective teaching of literature, because teaching is itself a dramatic art and it takes place in a dramatic setting. As Kenneth Eble points out, “it is commonly forgotten that the classroom offers the rudiments of a stage. In auditoriums, used as classrooms, everything is there, including curtains and lights. There is little to be lost and much to be gained in using the classroom, when appropriate, as theater.”⁴¹ The professor is also an actor, with teaching assistants as the supporting cast, and students as the audience. The classroom space with its entrances and exits, the teaching hour with its rhythms of exposition and climax, relate to the theater and illuminate the theatrical experience.

For a teacher of dramatic literature, the theatrical metaphor is reflected in the structure of the learning experience; and we waste much of our potential if we do not take advantage of these parallels. But many teachers ignore them. Richard Bausch, for instance, writes: “When I teach sophomore literature, before I give any other assignments, I ask my students to do an annotated bibliography about *Hamlet*. They must find ten critical essays about the play, read them, and then summarize for me, merely to show that they have indeed read the essays. This is less to teach them about *Hamlet* than to expose them to the ways and means of critical speech about that great

play, and, by extension, about any other work of literature.⁸² Bausch's intention is to shake students out of their complacency about finding any single key to the play. But such an assignment risks alienating and intimidating students as well.

Intellectually as well as pedagogically, exploring the connections and contradictions of page and stage is part of the most up-to-date thinking in the field. According to J. L. Syvan of Northwestern, author of the influential book *The Dramatic Experience* (1965), "for an influential number of instructors who are devoted to teaching drama, the great advance since about mid-century has been recognition of it as a performing art."⁸³ This approach has been most highly developed and theorized with regard to Shakespeare. It was initiated in the 1960s, by Homer (Murph) Swander, who organized a radical and influential MLA session on teaching through acting workshops, and developed through the work of such scholars as Bernard Beckermann, who taught an NEH summer institute at Folger Library in 1982 on teaching drama through performance, Lois Potter of the University of Delaware, who directed a yearlong institute at the Folger Library in 1992-3 called "Shakespeare and the Languages of Performance," Alan and Cynthia Dessen at the University of North Carolina, who lead a group called ACTER, and Miriam Gilbert of the University of Iowa, who has directed several NEH Summer Seminars on performance for high school and college teachers. An essential tool for this approach is John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare*, a book based on a series of televised workshops with actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company, accompanied by videotapes. The *Shakespeare Quarterly*, under the editorship of Ralph Alan Cohen, devoted three special issues, in 1974, 1984, and 1990, exclusively to teaching, and they show that performance studies came to dominate the field of pedagogy in the 1980s and had become institutionalized by the 1990s. Nevertheless, I suspect that many teachers of literature outside of the Shakespearean field are unfamiliar with it, and with its implications for the teaching of drama in general, as well as for other literary genres.

Teaching Shakespeare through Performance, part of the "Options for Teaching" series of the MLA, is an excellent introduction to this field. All the contributors to this volume emphasize the ways that classroom space is theatrical space, and the manifold ways that students learn by performing Shakespeare. James N. Loehlin explains that "teachers of Shakespeare have a unique opportunity to involve their students directly in the material being studied. Math students can reconstruct the proofs of their predecessors, art history students can copy a Vermeer - but students of Shakespearean drama can actually create the thing they study. By becoming themselves involved in the complex interaction of text, actors, and audience that constitutes a

play in performance, students can gain unique insights into Shakespearean drama and the Elizabethan theatrical culture that produced it."⁸⁴ As the editor, Milla Cozart Riggio, explains, "performance initially may seem to imply only one approach to teaching drama. But this book is based on the premise that performance pedagogy - more than simply an approach or an option - provides a holistic frame with a broad range of options and implications."⁸⁵ Riggio defines performance teaching to include full student theatrical productions, reading scenes in classroom workshops, using films and videos, attending live productions, studying the stage history of the plays, and above all, involving teachers and students together in dramatic interpretations of character, structure, and action.

David Bevington and Gavin Witt, at the University of Chicago, collaborate in teaching a course that uses their expertise as scholar and dramaturg. They ask "Why use acting or dramatic-reading workshops in literature-oriented classes in Shakespeare? The proposition may strike some teachers as a contradiction in terms. Acting workshops belong in a theater department, some might argue; literature professors teach literature. Our graduate English departments generally do not teach acting or offer instruction on how to teach an acting class; for literature teachers to attempt such a thing smacks of amateurism and of poaching on others' terrain in the war-torn landscape of the academy. Most teachers of literature have little or no experience even as semiprofessional actors; will they not look foolish in front of their students if they undertake to be knowledgeable about the practical aspects of theater production?" Why spend time in class acting when you could be analyzing and criticizing and mastering all the theoretical approaches? They argue that the great virtue of an acting approach is that it is "interactive. It gets students involved, gets them speaking, talking, and on their feet when scenes are blocked out . . . workshop teaching is an effective way to bring drama to life in the classroom."

Bevington and Witt used acting workshops as a voluntary supplement to the course as a whole, but they also incorporated aspects of it into the lectures themselves. Understanding the importance of beginnings, on the first day of class, for example, they began not with announcements, but by having Witt deliver Hamlet's Act II soliloquy, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I," and then asking students to respond on the basis of watching and hearing the performance. "Through the use of this soliloquy as an opening gambit, we undertook to put the class on notice that, for the following weeks, 'the play [was] the thing.'" The results were exciting; "our experience was that when students are asked to read aloud portions of the play and whenever possible to undertake rough stagings of a scene, the process opens up features undreamed of in silent, solitary perusal of the page."⁸⁶

you yourself have does not matter." She offers reassurance and advice to the timid and untheatrical: "If you are a lively, outgoing person, it is easier to inspire confidence. But if you are not, there is a solution: plan everything very carefully, thinking at each stage about the worst case scenario and how you will deal with it. Then, once you start, try to enjoy everything. The experience of acting is so intense for all participants that it will make you and your mistakes less visible than usual." Finally, Potter has students come to her office for a "minirehearsal" of their assigned scene, really as a way to get students to come to see her informally, and to get to know them as individuals.¹⁰

Ralph Alan Cohen outlines his approach to the first scene of *King Lear*, which examines where characters enter, in what order, and when Kent begins to speak his lines. This focus, Cohen explains, means the students need to be familiar with the physical arrangement of the Elizabethan stage, and also to consider Elizabethan hierarchy. Cohen also discusses the importance of visible audience in Shakespeare and ways of helping students understand it. "The Elizabethan stage worked like a classroom in which the audience simultaneously experienced the subject and learned lessons about it. For that reason, teachers who stage their classrooms as Elizabethan theaters will not only find a place from which to view Shakespeare's language more clearly, they will also re-create a venue that teaches as it moves its audience."¹¹

Performance teaching also works well with gender theory, Stephen Orgel explains: "In the classroom at Stanford University, where I teach a range of English majors and nonmajors, I have found discussions of performance practice the most helpful way of introducing undergraduates to the rarefied world of postmodern gender theory." In *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, even *The Merchant of Venice*, reminding students that boys were playing the women's parts illuminates gender issues. In a class of about a hundred undergraduates, meeting for two 90-minute lectures and one discussion section a week, Orgel studies six plays in a nine-week semester. He spends a lot of time lecturing on stage history, and devotes about a third of each lecture to film clips, including clips from several versions of *Twelfth Night* to "analyze how the actress playing Viola conveys that, disguised as Cesario, she is a boy."¹²

Jill L. Levenson at Trinity College, University of Toronto, finds tracking the stage history of a single play an effective teaching method. For *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, her students examine productions from David Garrick's at Drury Lane in 1748, to Baz Luhrmann's film. In short, performance teaching offers flexibility and depth. Edward L. Rocklin defends its intellectual and academic rigor: "Readers may wonder whether I do not

How should others begin to carry out such a drastically different method? Michael Shapiro, who attended the Beckermann seminar in 1982, recalls that he and the other participants "learned how to prepare students to do scene work in the classroom by doing it ourselves, as well as how to make pedagogic use of such work, and how to integrate performance-oriented teaching into drama courses."¹⁷ Ideally, such seminars should be part of the graduate literature teacher-training program. Shapiro also describes improvisational techniques that teachers could adapt for their own classrooms.

The range of examples of performance teaching and its transformational effects is impressive. Michael O'Neill, at Oklahoma State University, for example, says that "Performance techniques desanctify Shakespeare in more practical ways than do, for instance, politically correct readings. Most analyses, however iconoclastic, encourage submission to the dominant critical-authorial voice and to the pressure of the thesis. Self-generated performance lets the students define their own Shakespeare in terms of the culture they live in."¹⁸

Most important from my point of view is that performance teaching provides a model of active engagement for the student of literature that we can use as a base for thinking about teaching other genres and topics. I have seen it done brilliantly in the classroom for all kinds of dramatic literature. At Gettysburg College, students presented a scene from *Medea* in the style of *The Godfather*, an apt parallel to Jason's high-handedness, enriched and expanded by the teacher's use of different translations of the play, and glosses on the Greek original.

In my own classes, I use video clips for *Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll House*, and *Miss Julie*. I've also invited professional actors to the class to discuss the videos with us. But Lois Potter (Delaware) worries that using videos and films may "confirm the group in its habits of passivity, especially if one turns out the lights during the show . . . unless trained to read films in their own right, the students are still in the position of passive consumers, evaluating and adjudicating among other people's interpretations, rather than evolving their own." She recommends playing a video of scene but avoiding the "pittfall of passive viewings," by showing it "after the class has itself experimented with ways of playing that scene."¹⁹

Potter points out that if "lecturing itself establishes teacher and students in the roles of performer and audience, lecturing about performance can be a double reinforcement of these roles." Nonetheless, she has been inspired by performance to risk more of it herself: "The more you watch other performers work in the classroom, the more you begin to see how to make students, and yourself, comfortable with the idea of acting. How much ability

have an idealized view of our students, perceiving them not only as developing readers and apprentice writers but even as artists – if not quite potential Shakespeares. My reply is that to make a performance model work, you have only to believe that asking students to act as if they are artists will make them exercise their creativity . . . What we should be aiming for is a model of an English course in which the creative and the interpretive functions are fully integrated.¹³

At Princeton, Oliver Arnold, Larry Danson and Michael Cadden – faculty from different critical backgrounds who teach dramatic literature – agree on the importance of stressing performance, but with varying degrees of personal involvement. Oliver Arnold is a New Historian who trained with Stephen Greenblatt at Berkeley. In the classroom, however, he also asks whether a text is “a record of performance, and how to make plays first created as writing into performance. Even at Princeton, there is a huge divide in students’ experience. Many students have seen lots of live theater and others have seen none. It certainly helps if students have some experience of theater so that they can understand its power.”

Arnold himself believes that “as scholars, we have an affinity for a certain form. I felt powerfully that although I loved novels I wasn’t good at writing about them, and I felt an affinity for thinking and writing about drama, that is partly connected to the challenges of teaching a form. At this stage, I think literary pleasure can be taught and conveyed. Like my teachers, I try to emphasize the fun of even rigorous analytic thinking about literature – it’s always pleasurable.” Arnold asks himself “what students need to know about the context that would make the play richer, more intelligible. How are larger bites of the play intersected?”¹⁴

Shakespearean scholar Larry Danson is most concerned as a scholar with the language of the play, but he points out that “the difference between teaching a novel and teaching a play is that students have to be active in supplying the thing the novel supplies for them. The novel will tell them ‘he said angrily.’ But so much of the drama has to be supplied. You have to help them think of a play not just as a book but as a script for a possible performance.”¹⁵

Michael Cadden, who teaches drama in the English Department and chairs the Program in Theater and Dance, was trained at the Yale School of Drama. He is the most concerned with performance: “Plays are not meant to be read. If you see them in the theater, many decisions will have been made through the rehearsal process, but no matter how good a reader a student is, it is extremely hard to imagine the performative possibilities of the text. So my role as a teacher is to bring out what’s on the page, and help

them to set up and provide that performative supplement for themselves. They have to be active, the designer, the director, all the collaborators who make up the theatrical event. But potentially it’s more exciting than teaching a novel or poem. For students, studying drama can be like discovering a whole new world.”¹⁶

Arnold never tries to act himself, although he believes that “it’s important to have students act things out. Students need the reminder of what a peculiar endeavor acting is – theater is an art form that depends on human beings as its representatives.” He can “perform spontaneously – but then in the event it doesn’t feel like performance, but like rediscovery.” Often, he team-teaches Shakespeare with another instructor – “we have mutual levels of anxiety.” Depending on his partner, he feels more or less cast in an audience role. With a “kinetic and energetic” colleague, I can “feel quite staid. With Michael Cadden, one guy is the stage guy and one the page guy.”

Danson is a celebrated performer. “I’m not an actor, but I’m a ham, my students tell me, and I think a certain degree of modeling, both in lecture and in small groups, is helpful. I perform to the extent that I am asked every year whether I am a frustrated actor. I have got a pat answer to that now. I say, ‘No, I’m not a frustrated actor, I’m a frustrated teacher.’ I don’t formally act things out. I have too great respect for those who do it professionally – but I do try always to incorporate passages, readings from the text, and when I do it, try to do it *en amour*.”

He also insists that students read Shakespeare out loud. “I just point to a student and say, ‘Would you mind reading Hermione’s passage? Would you mind reading Theseus’s speech?’ It does tend to be the case that women read women’s roles, but I’ve done cross-gendered things. The main problem with a group of inexperienced students who are not coming from their own experience as people involved on stage is to get them over the embarrassment of moving from themselves reading to themselves acting.”

Cadden performs himself, reading with gusto, and participating in stagings of *Twelfth Night*. He is the most conscious of the three of the performative elements and obligations of teaching. “You are in a role,” he explains, “as are the students. You can’t ignore the responsibility of the role. You are expected to have knowledge, authority, and passion, and you need to fulfill those expectations. They are expected to come in with a love of learning. Alas, we are usually better at our roles than they are at theirs. But the audience is never neutral, and the classroom is a theater of mixed means.” He prefers using trained actors, audio or video tapes, and theater trips to having students read. “Film clips give students freedom to see the range of representation in a scene. It’s even better with actors doing the same scene

different ways, as we can at the Bread Loaf Summer School where there is a resident acting ensemble. The tension then is not between actor and role, but between role and role.”

Cadden also tries to exploit the possibilities of post-modern teaching, in which students are made aware of being in a dramatic space themselves. In a course on modern drama which began with Ibsen and ended with Caryl Churchill, he used the teaching staff of the course, and the teachers’ different ethnic origins and sexual orientations, to illustrate the theatrical shift from fixed to fluid identities over a century.

In our Princeton seminar, teaching assistants were regularly impressed with how well performance techniques worked with all kinds of plays: “I selected the Corvino/Celia scenes from *Volpone*,” wrote one, “and focused on performance and close reading of those segments. We had a few hams, who helped to wake up the others. Some of them became genuinely intrigued about the play and promises flowed that all would continue to read with interest and attention (hmm – they’re beginning to tell me what I want to hear – now I know I’m turning into my mother).” When I taught Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, all the preceptors tried switching gender roles as a way to show students how stylized the dialogue is. “We read the first scene between Algy and Cecily,” a preceptor reported. “Then I said, ‘Okay, now switch sexes.’ I thought it would be good to stick with the same people. They were a total riot! We got talking about how conversation is sex in Wilde.” In teaching *A Doll House*, we had students reading the final few pages aloud and then asked whether “Nora can consent to a marriage contract if she isn’t ‘fully grown.’” We read the last scenes of *Hedda* and *Judith*, and compared suicides – “My group,” said another TA, “felt that Hedda had more fun in her dying.”

The performative approach, which emphasizes the dialog in a play, does not, of course, preclude or exclude other ways of teaching at the same time. Many teachers of drama actually prefer to emphasize the reading of plays, which gives value to every detail of the text. Ann Thompson, of King’s College London, is among those who have critiqued the consensus that “the ‘right way’ to teach Shakespeare was through performance and classroom workshops,” and noted the “almost total absence of literary theory and cultural politics.”¹⁷ Graham Aitken, who teaches at Chester College in England, argues that “a particular reader will always have an advantage over any theatre in the world no matter what the resources of that theatre,” because reading offers more imaginative freedom. Aitken emphasizes the importance of analyzing the side-text or secondary text of the play, especially stage directions, titles, and character names. He also stresses the problems of helping student readers appreciate the non-verbal elements in a play, such as the knocking at

the gate in *Macbeth*.¹⁸ In my own teaching of Chekhov, for example, I have asked students to imagine stagings for the sound of the breaking lyre-string in *The Cherry Orchard*, as well as to explain its dramatic impact and emotional or thematic significance.

Teaching by performance has its own clichés. Everyone will recognize the hammy Shakespearean who ends every semester (“in hope of applause,” Robert Watson says cynically) by intoning Prospero’s speech: “Our revels now have ended.”¹⁹ Yet the self-reflexive elements of turning the play into a comment on the course can also be witty and provocative. When we read *Waiting for Godot*, a student in my Modern Drama class at Princeton wrote as his weekly required posting on the class electronic bulletin board, “They do not post.”

Of course, the drama classroom is not the only academic space that reflects the subject matter. Nor is teaching and the art of performance limited to the subject of drama. As I’ve mentioned in chapter 2, Jyl Lynn Felman of Brandeis has written an electrifying book about pedagogy and performing, which recommends techniques of acting and improvisation to all classroom teachers.²⁰ Michael Conlon (Binghamton) cites psychologist Howard Gardner on the role of “performances in understanding,” the use of performance to transform, reconfigure, interpret, and apply principles or data. In his own course on “Literature and Performance in Eighteenth-Century England,” Conlon has students give presentations of group research projects, which have included “reconstructions of performances that took place” at weddings, masquerades, and funerals, “recreations of eighteenth-century games including a performance of the card game Ombre according to the directions in Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*; a presentation on the spectacle of executions; and an eighteenth-century puppet show.”²¹

In a survey course at Princeton, a TA wrote, “five women did a skit acting out Book I of *Paradise Lost*. This was quite a surprise and raised the energy of our lagging discussion very well. It was a very funny mix of Milton’s lines and college-student speak: ‘Beezlebub, I didn’t recognize you. We are so totally fallen.’ The skit did a nice job of covering what I wanted to talk about in class, and I hope the other students got more than just entertainment value from it.” In her course on “Women at the Margins,” Isobel Armstrong always ends by having students in groups dramatically present sections of the novels or poems to the class, and considers this exercise the most powerful moment of the course. In short, of all teaching techniques, performance can be the most active and student-centered, and can lead to engaged intellectual discovery of the text.