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EN 150

3 October 2014

More Than Just Words: Concerning Shakespeare

Jester Touchstone in William Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It* declares, "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool" (5.1.2217-2219). Sitting at a local coffee shop, taking delicate sips of my overpriced beverage, I sense that the people all around me thirst for knowledge. Some are more explicit about it than others, but as my hearing floats in and out of tune to the conversations around me, most of the people, in one way or another, seek to understand something. That quest for wisdom is not new; people as far back as (and before) Shakespeare have been asking questions about their humanity, with Shakespeare having been especially well-known for his ability to answer those questions. It is for this reason, among many others, that studying the Bard's work still has extraordinary value in schools and in reading for leisure. His writing provides not only wisdom, but also entertainment and depth of understanding of the English language.

One such form of wisdom Shakespeare often expresses in his writing is the axiom. An axiom is a statement that offers a piece of proverbial advice that can be connected to daily life. For example, Polonius from *Hamlet* offers several axioms to his son Laertes, two of which are as follows: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be," and "This above all— to thine own self be true" (1.3.561, 564). Sensible guidance like this can be given to readers by a parent or other authority figure, but there is, according to Mrs. Susan Biondo-Hench, "no possible way to truly experience a piece of text until it is ripped apart with [one's] own eye and manipulated on the page by the

reader itself.” A long time English teacher, Shakespeare Troupe director, and scholar with the Folger Shakespeare Library, Biondo-Hench, finds that she can talk about a passage in literature as much as she would like, but students typically do not fully grasp it until they have read it and had the chance to connect to it in their own ways. (Biondo-Hench). Another Shakespearean scholar, Gerald M. Pinciss of Hunter College and the Graduate Center in the University of New York, argues that the axioms in Shakespeare’s work “add to our sense that [he] has absorbed... our common knowledge” and the words unfolding on the page “will fundamentally reflect how we respond to our shared experiences” (118).

Similarly, reading Shakespeare has its value in simply adding to appreciation for the beauty of the English language and expanding one’s own ability to write. Sixty-seven percent of his writing is done in prose, ranging from love sonnets to proclamations of war said to an assembled army. *Shakespeare and the Young Writer* by Fred Sedgwick explores how analyzing the Bard’s verse impacts, well, the young writer. After reading the seven ages of man passage from *As You Like It* to the children, he encouraged them to write their own versions and was not disappointed. Sarah Jane, a nine-year-old, wrote images as vivid as a schoolgirl “walking like a tortoise” and being “vicious as a fox.” Sedgwick contests that, by having the children study Shakespeare’s language closely enough to emulate it, the words will grow and further learning as both a writer and a critical reader. (75-76).

As an actress myself and devoted member of my high school’s Shakespeare Troupe and class, I have always considered acting Shakespeare’s work to be my specialty. When I am asked about what types of plays I prefer, I always say that without a doubt, his work is my favorite; at this point, a typical response is a grimace of dismay and a statement not unlike, “I can never

understand Shakespeare! How come he never just says what he means?” It can be argued that he does indeed say what he means, just in a way that requires more thought.

While I cannot deny that modern English is more easily accessible, the act of wrestling with a piece of text deepens one’s understanding of not only Elizabethan English, but also modern English today. Shakespeare was a descriptivist. By definition, this means that he used his own established norms of language to write in such a way that the grammatical and structural norms of the time were bent to his own will (“descriptive grammar”). It is important for students to understand where the English language has come from and how it has been formed, which is impossible to do without reading and analyzing the text of someone who shaped it so heavily. It may be difficult at first to understand, but the more Shakespeare is read, the more easily it is understood. As high school English teacher Sue Thorson points out, “difficult” is not synonymous with “impossible” (575).

Her context, however, is different. Thorson and her teaching assistant decided to study *Macbeth* with their group of students with learning disabilities. These pupils ranged in age from fifteen to twenty years old and had been in special education classes for between of three and seven years. They had been put through an academic wringer, having been put down so many times that they felt “difficult” meant “impossible.” At first, the students were not thrilled at the idea of studying Shakespeare because of his reputation of being a “scholastic ogre,” but they eventually fell in love with the witches’ spooky premonitions and Lady Macbeth’s sensual monologues of power. Constantly pushing each other to dig deeper and to learn, the students completely turned their academic careers around. A specific example is found in Gert, a “quiet, awkward girl” who had a severe case of intellectual disability, and yet her writing came in full sentences and paragraphs with proper grammar and insightful thoughts. She is not alone; the

entire group of students had read ahead to the end of the play and all of them had “increased self-confidence and newly established work habits,” which gave them “the thrill of success” and improved grades. Studying Shakespeare gave students not only a confidence boost, but also broadened their horizons in reading and writing just by being exposed to the language and profound nature of his writing (Thorson).

Thorson’s success story surely is not the only one. Students everywhere can benefit greatly from studying the Bard’s work because of its beauty, insight into life’s mysteries, and depth of character. Teachers also learn more about their students by breaking down complex texts into manageable sections for study. Finally, the vivid images and dramatic format allow students to take a piece of text from paper to stage in their minds, which helps promote understanding and even creativity, as it is the highest level of thinking to transform text to action in the mind. Shakespeare wrote for the uneducated masses of rural Elizabethan England, and if they could understand, enjoy, and benefit from it, anyone can.

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