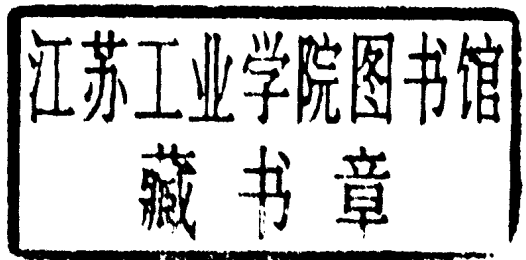


Melver and Stevenson

# Teaching with Shakespeare

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Shakespeare





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Critics in the Classroom

Edited by  
Bruce McIver and Ruth Stevenson



DELAWARE

Newark: University of Delaware Press  
London and Toronto: Associated University Presses

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[0-87413-491-9/94 \$10.00 + 8¢ pp. pc.]

Associated University Presses  
440 Forsgate Drive  
Cranbury, NJ 08512

Associated University Presses  
25 Sicilian Avenue  
London WC1A 2QH, England

Associated University Presses  
P.O. Box 338, Port Credit  
Mississauga, Ontario  
Canada L5G 4L8

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements  
of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Teaching with Shakespeare : critics in the classroom / edited by Bruce  
McIver and Ruth Stevenson.

p. cm.

Lectures delivered throughout the academic year 1990-1991 at Union  
College, under the sponsorship of the English Dept.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-87413-491-9 (alk. paper)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616—Study and teaching.
2. Literature—History and criticism—Theory, etc. I. McIver,  
Bruce, 1943- . II. Stevenson, Ruth, 1939- . III. Union College  
(Schenectady, N.Y.). English Dept.

PR2987.T38 1994

82.3'3—dc20

92-59966

CIP

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**For Isabel McIver,  
Bill Hendricks,  
and Harry Marten**



# Contents

List of Figures	9
Acknowledgments	11
Introduction	
BRUCE McIVER and RUTH STEVENSON	13
Poems Posing Questions	23
Reading for Difference: <i>The Sonnets</i>	37
Sonnets 33, 60, <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> 1.5.93–106, Sonnets 94, 105, 116, 129	57
HELEN VENDLER	
Cutting the Bard Down to Size	60
Making a Start on <i>King Lear</i>	78
<i>King Lear</i> 1.1.33–283	94
R. A. FOAKES	
Disestablishing Shakespeare	98
Teaching Textual Variation: <i>Hamlet</i> and <i>King Lear</i>	115
Textual versions of “To be or not to be”	116
Parallel texts of <i>King Lear</i> 3.3	117
LEAH MARCUS	
Dramatic Structure and Effect in <i>Julius Caesar</i>	142
Teaching <i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i>	152
<i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i> 1.1.1–251	163
JOHN WILDERS	



Interpreting Through Wordplay: <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	166
Teaching and Wordplay: The “Wall” of <i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i>	205
<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> 4.1.1–85	215
<i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i> 5.1.28–370	217
PATRICIA PARKER	
“A Political Thriller”: The Life and Times of Henry V	222
Pages of the 1600 Quarto	236
Passages and Figures from “ <i>Henry V</i> ”: A Screen Adaptation by Kenneth Branagh	250
<i>Henry V</i> , 5.6.1–38; 5.7.1–50	252
Palinode	254
ANNABEL PATTERSON	
Notes on Contributors	260
A Short List of Recent Works on Teaching Shakespeare	262
Index	265

## List of Figures

1. Parker Pen's Use of the Image of Shakespeare / 64
2. IBM's Use of Shakespeare's Name / 64
3. "To be or not to be" from *The Riverside Shakespeare* / 116
4. "To be or not to be," "Bad Quarto" version, from *The Riverside Shakespeare* / 117
5. Parallel Texts of *King Lear* from the Viator edition (1892) / 125
6. *Henry V*, 1600 Quarto / 236
7. "English Camp. Boys' Slaughter" / 243
8. "Concluding Scene of the Battle of Agincourt" / 244



## Acknowledgments

The editors thank not only the English Department of Union College, whose Thomas Lamont Fund provided major support for the Shakespeare Lecture Series presented here, but especially the individual critics—R. A. Foakes, Leah Marcus, Patricia Parker, Annabel Patterson, Helen Vendler, and John Wilders—whose presentations themselves and cooperation throughout the entire project made this book possible.

Because Patricia Parker has published the lecture and workshop she presented at Union elsewhere, she has prepared for this volume an alternative lecture and workshop. Annabel Patterson has read all of the workshops and written the “Palinode” that concludes the book. We thank them both.

The editors also thank the following institutions: the Harvard Theatre Collection for providing, with permission, the photograph of Sarah Bernhardt appearing on the book cover; the Houghton Mifflin Company for permission to quote extensively throughout the lectures and workshops (as well as to use textual reproductions) from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Boston, 1974; International Business Machines Corporation for permission to use their advertisement in *American Way Magazine* (15 December 1992); Parker Pen for permission to use their advertisement in *The New Yorker* (25 November 1991); A. P. Watt Ltd. for permission to reprint text and photographs from “*Henry V*”: *A Screen Adaptation* by Kenneth Branagh, London: Chatto & Windus, 1989; and Yale University Press for permission to quote from *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth, New Haven and London, 1977.



## Introduction

BRUCE McIVER and RUTH STEVENSON

The English Department of Union College invited the six Shakespearean critics whose presentations compose this book to visit the campus individually throughout the academic year 1990–91 as participants in the Lamont Shakespeare Series. We asked them to explain to our students the bases and nature of their critical procedures and to put these procedures into practice by teaching Shakespearean texts of their own choice in follow-up workshops. We did not request our guests to represent particular schools of criticism, but all of them addressed basic issues vigorously debated by such schools. While the presentations were diverse, they held in common a concern for directly correlating criticism with teaching. In particular they took care to encourage the students to establish receptive relationships with Shakespeare's work through developing some awareness of its multiple and intricate demands and some knowledge of influential reactions of past and present critics to those demands.

Helen Vendler began her lecture by describing her own experience as a student. She explained the distinct critical procedures and ways of thinking about literature, especially poetry, that she had learned at home, at college, and in graduate school, and that she had assimilated into her own manner of responding to poems. She led the students to think about their responses and to work at establishing closeness between themselves and Shakespeare's poems in order to discover not only their logical precision but especially their undercurrent of emotion that increasingly urges the student to respond. Professor Vendler never used the language of critical strategy, of interpretative assertion or aggression; rather, she encouraged students to discover how poems themselves dictate the appropriate critical procedures and how to become close to them through reimagining their compositional processes, as she did:

I found my way into poems by imagining that it was my own hand that had written them, that had chosen this form, and this word rather than that

word. It was a habit with me to write out in longhand any poem I was going to think about for some time; and it became a habit to learn the poem by heart, too. Then it was “my” poem, and I could feel its inner exfoliation from a kernel of imaginative and formal intention.

Following the process of exfoliation requires, she explained, discovering the important though not always obvious questions that each poem poses, questions generated within and by the complex interactions of its multiple elements. She demonstrated how to identify some of the key questions posed by Shakespeare’s poems as she introduced the students to five sonnets that present quite different problems. For example, in Sonnet 33 (“Full many a glorious morning”), she drew attention to the inconspicuous but insistent inversion of traditional sonnet structure which leads us to ask “why the octave of this sonnet is so luxuriously expressive and the human ‘application’ in the quatrain so bare” and to see and to feel exactly why this sonnet was written “the wrong-way round.” On the other hand, in Sonnet 60 (“Like as the waves”) she pointed out the sequence of life models developed quatrain by quatrain that makes us wonder why they occur in just the way they do and that thus encourages us slowly through a process of expectation, surprise, and gradual adjustment, to discover how unarrangeable, how inexorable those quatrains are. In identifying questions that become progressively precise and provocative, Professor Vendler demonstrated how familiarity with poetic conventions and techniques enables readers to develop gradual awareness and enjoyment of the demanding aesthetic systems of Shakespeare’s poems. But reference to poetic technique itself was only a point of departure in her teaching. Even as she introduced the students to specific, technical ways of learning to respond to specific poems, she led her audience to increasingly intellectual and emotional immediacy with these strange and complex poems that lie “just at the brink of our horizon of perception.”

In her workshop she arranged at the front of the class a panel of five student experts (on Latin, Shapes, Psychology, Gender, and plain Kibitzing) and by asking them questions began to trace an intricate series of more and more exact discoveries about Sonnet 129’s quick, complex movement to different states of perception about “the expense of spirit.” Through her direction of the students to particular questions posed by this poem, through her precise attention to numerous student responses, and through the evocative power of her own lyric phrasing, she developed a reading that not only answered those questions detail by detail but also awakened the students to

notions of aesthetic value and to glimpses of the gathering, empathetic power of a receptive imagination.

Shakespeare's prominence undoubtedly derives from the extraordinary aesthetic power of his poems and plays, but authorities have used the artistic reputation of "the Bard" to develop non-aesthetic programs. In fact, as R. A. Foakes points out, students might well be on guard for special interests which covertly influence standard interpretations of Shakespeare's work. In "Cutting the Bard Down to Size," Professor Foakes took into particular account the way previous audiences of Shakespeare's work may definitely but indirectly have influenced the responses of today's students. He traced a history of the gradual but crucial shift from the Elizabethan-Jacobean theatergoers who actually attended Shakespeare's plays during his lifetime to twentieth-century highbrow spectators, especially educators, who, unlike the "nut-cracking Elizabethans," have used Shakespeare's work for the implicitly political purpose of encouraging belief in the plays' "unity," "truth," and "stable, finite meaning." Foakes did not try to expose the various motivations that might direct this purpose, but he did explain one kind of influence pertinent to his American student audience. He pointed out that in the United States, during the major periods of mass immigration, teaching Shakespeare as a bard-idol who created profound, determinate, absolute meanings in all of his work was politically useful in assimilating—and, Foakes implied, indirectly subjugating—diverse groups of immigrants while discouraging differences. In opposition, poststructuralist approaches have arisen from a "crisis in confidence" in authority and have challenged "traditionalist" views through five major poststructuralist lines of attack which Foakes described in some detail: deconstruction, American new historicism (and British cultural materialism), feminism, performance criticism, and new textualism. While he warned about the extremes to which poststructural practice can lead and offered two vivid examples of such extremism by professional critics, in his own analysis of *Hamlet* he skillfully exposed the limitations of determinate, unified, and ultimately, if indirectly, political interpretations of the play. In the spirit of poststructuralism, he directly encouraged the students to question traditional authority and to trust their discoveries of plural meanings.

In his workshop, "Making a Start on *King Lear*," Professor Foakes set the stage for such questioning and discovery by introducing basic questions about history, genre, and language ("the imaginative resonances of the text"), by establishing parameters for critical freedom in interpretation, and by tracing something of the critical history of *Lear*. He then involved



the class in a process where questioning, discovery, and confidence emerged. He recruited student volunteers to become actors representing characters in the first scene of *Lear*, while he himself took the role of the king. The students and Professor Foakes did not read the text but improvised it out of their own experience of the play, and gradually there developed a flurry of dramatic accusations and vivid debates while Foakes/*Lear* provoked and guided the students to a clearer understanding of the powerful forces involved in that scene and in the play as a whole.

If students in Professor Foakes's class welcomed the heated debate of his role-playing workshop as a highly stimulating, though still a normal extension of classroom discussion, students in Leah Marcus's lecture and workshop found Shakespeare's texts not only open to debate and multiple interpretation but also subject to "disestablishing." Professor Marcus explained in detail recent critical practices which programmatically challenge schools of criticism which have privileged traditional institutions at the expense of diverse and unstable elements in the plays, and she introduced the students to current debates about the "established" materiality of the printed texts themselves. Perhaps the most striking aspect of disestablishing emerged as she traced the radical redefinition of Shakespeare himself, "not as a man but as a cultural construct remade in different ways by different human agents with competing critical and social agendas." However, having led the students to theoretical poststructuralist ideas about Shakespeare himself, Shakespearean textuality, and Shakespearean interpretation, she led them back to practical kinds of criticism by explaining how the approaches of three of the most conspicuous objects of recent theoretical attack—A. C. Bradley, E. M. W. Tillyard, and New Criticism—enable students to deal closely and intelligently with specific texts in ways that recent critical practice may not.

In her workshop, Marcus returned to the question of "establishing" Shakespearean text and offered different versions of lines from *Hamlet* and *Lear* for the students to interpret from as many angles as possible. As she conversed with the students about their readings of these lines, she demonstrated to them the problems of interpretation created when we deal with plays which exist in radically different textual versions and which may be presented to readers in radically different formats. In particular, the students gained unexpected insights when they tackled the problem of explaining "To be or not to be," whose 1603 "Bad" Quarto version seems extremely strange in comparison to the "polished, lovely, accepted [later] version" of *The Riverside Shakespeare*. At the close of the workshop, Marcus's students came to an intriguing discovery that the Shakespeare of Hamlet's