

What Teaching Shakespeare Taught Me

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Abstract

Of all English writers, Shakespeare has given me the most joy, and in this paper I discuss what I learnt over 45 years of teaching Shakespeare's plays to BA Pass/Programme, English Honours and MA students at Miranda House, Delhi University, and in the Global Humanities and English Departments at the University of Montana. Shakespeare has lately been bashed as a white imperialist, and often I had to begin by first underlining his relevance today. Interestingly, teaching American students was not much different from teaching Indian students as most suffered from the same limitations in reading and writing. Teaching strategies such as having students read aloud or the impromptu translations done in class sometimes give one insights that might not arise from reading silently to oneself.

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I have taught Shakespeare's plays to English Honours and BA (Pass) students at Miranda House, to MA students at Delhi University, and to both undergraduates and graduate students at the University of Montana, USA. The methods I employed varied over the years, depending on whether the students were beginners or advanced, whether the class was on Shakespeare or a more general class, and on the type of technology available to me.

In all classes, I encouraged students to buy annotated texts that explained the meanings of words, especially when the meanings have changed over time. But I discouraged them from buying versions of the play that translate the entire text into modern English. For me, Shakespeare's greatness lies almost entirely in his marvellous language. He did not

invent the plots of most plays. His characters are certainly unforgettable but so are those of many other writers. It is Shakespeare's language that is irreplaceable, and students respond to it even when they do not fully understand it. "But look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,/Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill" (*Hamlet*, 1.1.165–166)¹. Rarely does a student fail to feel the beauty and wonder of these lines. And often the language is almost unbearably lucid: "Thou'lt come no more/Never, never, never, never" (*King Lear*, 5.3.372).

In the 1980s, the syllabi at the University of Delhi were much less crammed than they are today. This was good because literary language needs explicating, and we had the time to explain and make the words clear to students, which teachers today do not. We also had time to read scenes aloud and discuss how certain lines could be interpreted by actors or readers. University of Montana syllabi were more crowded but still less so than Delhi University syllabi today. The experience of teaching was not as different as one might expect, because although English is the native language of American students and the only language most of them know, the majority suffered from the same deficiencies in reading and writing as most BA (Pass) students at Miranda House.

In classes dedicated to Shakespeare, I would spend time introducing his life and his other plays to my students. I would also provide a brief history of England, especially the Renaissance and Reformation, and talk about other writers of the time and about the old religious drama that influenced Shakespeare and the new commercial theatre in which he worked. When teaching just one Shakespeare play as part of a larger course, for example, an 'Introduction to Western Humanities', I focused less on this history and more on universal themes that appeared throughout the course, for example, attitudes to life, death, love, friendship, family, religion, and modernity. In these courses, I had less time to devote to a particular play, so the students had to use other aids to understand the language.

In all courses, I emphasised that the Globe theatre was open to the sky and plays were enacted in the daytime, therefore, the power of language was significant as it had to create effects, say, in the storm scenes in *King Lear* or the murder scenes in *Macbeth*, which the modern stage and screen create through technology. Once it became fashionable (as apparently it now has, even at Stratford-on-Avon and at institutions like the Folger Library) to bash Shakespeare as a product of imperialism and a dead

white man whose works it is pointless to study, I always began with a lecture on the hundreds of words, idioms, and phrases Shakespeare contributed to the language, and his immeasurable presence in modern culture.

Once technology became available to me, I used power-points, primarily to show images of the theatre, of churches (e.g. the church where Shakespeare was baptised and the Southwark Cathedral which he would have frequented), and of paintings and sculptures. The absence of art from my own education was a major gap, which I filled later on my own, so I was grateful to be able to take my students on virtual tours of English and Italian art.

I also made a point of showing at least one film, usually not during class but at other times. I also showed film clips in class to demonstrate how the same scene or speech has been interpreted by different directors and actors, or how a director uses music to shape audience response, for example, the way John Sichel's 1973 film, *The Merchant of Venice*, with Laurence Olivier as Shylock, closes with Jessica standing silent and alone, holding her father's enforced will that Portia has given to Lorenzo, while the melancholy Mourner's Kaddish swells in the background, reminding us of Shylock's destruction, which is the tragic element concealed by the happy ending.

I taught the works of many authors at the University of Delhi, and a wide variety of subjects in the Liberal Studies (later renamed Global Humanities) Programme at the University of Montana. I also taught as a post-doctoral Fellow at Cornell and a visiting professor at the University of Chicago. But Shakespeare is the author with regard to whom I developed the largest number of ideas in the process of teaching. In class, I noticed many things—lines, phrases, words, movements, silences, absences, that were not as evident when reading by myself. This may be because small things that can be overlooked when reading a play are more likely to be noticed when one is going through the play slowly, and explaining it scene by scene, sometimes line by line, or having students read scenes aloud in class. All my work on Shakespeare is fuelled and illuminated by the closeness I feel to both the outer and the inner world of his characters, a closeness I do not feel to modern Western society. This insight is to me much more important than examining how Shakespeare is translated or adapted in Indian languages.

While teaching Shakespeare, I came to the important realisation that

many of the conditions in Shakespeare's England, not only for women but for everyone, were similar to conditions in India, but very different from conditions in the West today. For example, in America, many people leave home at 18. In India, young, unmarried people usually live with their parents unless they have to relocate to another city for work. American students find it hard to understand why young lovers in Shakespeare want to convince their parents to approve of their choices. Indian students have no trouble understanding this.

Likewise, most Indians understand the preference for sons, the anxiety to get daughters married depicted in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the helplessness of old parents thrown out by their children in *King Lear*, in a visceral way that modern Americans with their frequent divorces, remarriages, living together without marriage, and old age homes, cannot. Most Indians also understand Cordelia's love for her father without having to invent an incestuous motive for it as some American critics do; they understand a close friendship like that of Hamlet and Horatio in much the way they understand the friendship between Krishna and Arjuna, and they understand the bond between a kind employer and a loyal servant as depicted in Hindi films or in Shakespeare. This last is something most modern American students cannot fathom, let alone appreciate. They are likely either to see Kent's loyalty as a lack of self-esteem or to be completely befuddled by it.

When I taught *Othello* to BA (Pass) students, I translated the whole play on the spot into Hindi, over a period of a few weeks. This process focused my attention on the dynamic of wife-abuse and wife-murder. At the time, while teaching at Miranda House, I was volunteering the rest of my time at *Manushi*, where I constantly encountered victims of wife-abuse who came for help, so these issues were very much on my mind. I had noticed that women whose birth families supported them survived while those whose birth families condoned the husbands' violence were more likely to die. The students of BA (Pass) were mostly from lower middle class backgrounds and were familiar with the way victimised wives often fail to get support from their birth families. Therefore, they were not at all surprised at the way Desdemona is isolated in Venice, and the way no one, not even her own cousin, Lodovico, comes to her aid when Othello insults and slaps her in public.

These were the same students, who, when I asked them to write essays on dowry, wrote that since their brothers would inherit all their parents'

property, dowry was the only wealth they would get. Thus, a girl like Desdemona who married a man of whom her father disapproved, had nothing to fall back on—neither family nor property. This is the primary reason Desdemona has to put up with Othello's mistreatment even though she knows it might end in her death. It is also the primary reason why Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, has to endure her husband's mistreatment.

My first published academic essay arose from teaching *As You Like It* in the early 1980s at Miranda House. It was while teaching that I noticed that Celia is present in every scene where Rosalind interacts with Orlando, except the brief interaction towards the end of the play, in 5.2. This is highly unusual because all of Shakespeare's other young lovers meet alone. Because she hardly speaks, one may overlook her presence while reading by oneself. But in class, when I asked students to read scenes aloud, the student playing Celia usually had almost no lines to read. Celia is present but silent. This set me wondering why she was there at all. What would the actor playing Celia do in these scenes? What emotions would she or he project?

While I was teaching the play, Celia's unrequited love for Rosalind rose to the surface as the driving force of the plot. It is Celia who decides that the two women should run away to the forest and buy a house together there, and it is Celia who finally realises that Rosalind does not love her, and therefore decides to marry Oliver, thus precipitating Rosalind's marriage and the end of the forest idyll. It is Celia who reveals to us that Orlando has kissed Ganymede, that is, he kisses someone he thinks is a young man. Celia says to Rosalind, "marry, his kisses are Judas's own children" (3.4.7–8).² When Rosalind defends him, saying that the kisses were chaste, Celia mocks this defence with hyperbole, "He hath bought a pair of cast lips of Diana. A nun of winter's sisterhood kisses not more religiously; the very ice of chastity is in them but for his verity in love—I do think him as concave as a covered goblet or a worm-eaten nut" (3.4.14–16, 22–3).

Reading 4.1 aloud in class, I was struck by Celia's line, "I cannot say the words" (4.1.111) when Rosalind asks her to act the priest's role and officiate at a virtual wedding between Rosalind and Orlando. I then researched the troth-plight wedding in Elizabethan England and found that an exchange of vows in the presence of a witness was considered a binding contract. No wonder that it is only after this that Celia

suddenly decides to marry Orlando, although, again, very unusually in Shakespeare, we never see her alone with him or any wooing or courtship or declaration of love between them.

Co-directing a student production of *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1992 at Miranda House and Hindu College, was an experience that cemented this perspective. Directing a student production is closely related to teaching but even more intense. I had avoided this play earlier, assuming that it was misogynist. Directing it with boys taking female roles and girls taking male roles, and with Sly remaining on stage throughout, led me to understand the play as one of the most brilliant examinations of how male-female relationships work in a society where men own their wives' property and the law gives husbands power over wives. Even though marital, legal and property relations are very different now both in India and in the West, many women do not have access to the law, and wife-beating as well as wife-murder continue to occur in both places, especially but not only among the poor.

The negotiations between the girl's father and prospective sons-in-law around marriage in *The Taming of the Shrew* are familiar to Indian audiences. All of Bianca's suitors (except the unsuitable Gremio) discuss the dowry question with Baptista. Informing Vincentio of his son's marriage to Bianca, Petruchio assures him that the girl "is of good esteem,/Her dowry wealthy" (4.6.65–6). The suitors' offers of large marriage settlements are balanced by their expectations of dowry and inheritance. Similarly, in India today, a larger dowry would be given to a groom who either earns a high income or belongs to a wealthy family, since this ensures that the wife will be well-off if she is widowed.

Likewise, Petruchio's behaviour on his wedding day, calculated to humiliate Kate and her family, is not unfamiliar to Indians. Weddings usually take place at the bride's home, and it is not unknown for the groom and his kin to humiliate her family by behaving inappropriately—getting drunk, insulting her relatives, and criticising the wedding arrangements. Newspapers report occasional cases of a bride protesting such behaviour by rejecting the groom at the altar. More commonly, the bride and her family silently endure mistreatment (as Kate's family does), fearing disgrace if the wedding is called off.

This pattern of endurance continues after marriage, women's families encouraging them to put up with mistreatment. The fear of having a divorced daughter return to the natal home often leads parents to

pander to unreasonable sons-in-law. Katherine's lament that she is "starved for meat, giddy for lack of sleep" (4.3.9) is one that I often heard from married women in India, when I worked at *Manushi*, and that I continue to hear over the years from women domestic workers. Such women yearn for visits to their parental homes, where they obtain respite from suffering, and they would do much to be permitted these visits. It is perfectly understandable that Katherine says the sun is the moon rather than let Petruchio cancel the visit to her father's house. Petruchio's flinging away of food and breaking dishes is also reminiscent of a standard type of bullying by husbands, attested in real life and in Indian literature and cinema.

It is important, though, to remember that such behaviour is not normative for men in India. That many men get away with it demonstrates their power; however, most people disapprove of it, and religious authorities condemn it. When I studied Elizabethan marriage manuals, I realised that this was true of Elizabethan England too. It is for this reason that my BA (Pass) students who attended our performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* understood it perfectly even though their English was imperfect and they had not read the play. On stage, Shakespeare's language is no barrier. Students even laughed at all the right places, which was quite a revelation because when reading plays in class, they had the most difficulty with his jokes. Verbal humour is hard to understand on the page but not at all hard on the stage, where it is accompanied by action. Our near-tragic interpretation of the last scene and of Kate's closing monologue also came across well, to pin-drop silence.

Our cross-dressing the sexes defamiliarised gender roles and highlighted the way men's power and women's lack of power is socially imposed rather than always natural. While men do have greater physical strength of one kind, women (such as Queen Elizabeth or Cleopatra or, to a lesser degree, a wealthy widow like Hortensio's wife in *The Taming of the Shrew*) can wield economic and social power. Shakespeare's characters were all played by male actors so his audience would have seen a male Petruchio oppressing a male Katherine.

In our production of *Taming*, the male actor who played Kate almost always, even in rehearsals, found himself close to tears or even shedding tears during the last speech. The experience of being bullied and tormented, even though just in a play, was perhaps more agonising for him as a male, and its culmination in the humiliation of Kate's last

speech, had the effect of gradually pushing him over an emotional edge.³ The woman playing Petruchio, on the other hand, remained as cocky as his closing lines suggest: "Twas I won the wager, though you hit the white,/ And being a winner, God give you good night!" (5.2.186–7).

Like Isabella's famous silence at the end of *Measure for Measure*, Bianca's and the Widow's silence at the end of Kate's speech speaks volumes. What is not said may be as significant as what is said. Bianca and the Widow could have been given a line each to concur with Kate's analysis, but Shakespeare does not do this, thus leaving staging decisions to the director and actors.⁴ In the earlier anonymous play *The Taming of a Shrew* (1594), the Bianca character has the second-last line. Her husband says to her, "I say thou art a shrew" to which she replies, "That's better than a sheep" (5.1.159–60).⁵

In the Global Humanities programme at the University of Montana, I taught *The Tempest* in a general humanities class. I presented various readings of the play, including the view that it is a representation of colonialism. I also pointed out all the problems with this theory, for example, Caliban is alone on the island so he does not represent an indigenous community, and he is not an indigenous individual either, because his mother, Sycorax, was a blue-eyed woman who was not native to the island. Sailors brought her there from the mainland and left her there as a punishment. Algeria, where she came from, was never colonised by the Italians and all the characters in the play are Italians. Algeria was colonised by the French in the nineteenth century, more than 200 years after Shakespeare's death. I taught the play as a meditation on the magical aspects of life and on many other themes, such as youth and age.

I regularly taught a class for advanced undergraduates on the *Bhagavad Gita*. I designed this class myself and it became my most popular class. While teaching this class and simultaneously teaching *Hamlet* in another class, I realised how much there is in common between these two very different texts. In both, a prince has to battle against members of his family, hurting people he loves in order to uphold justice. He has to undertake action that will lead to the death of those he loves and possibly his own death too. In this enterprise, he has only one faithful friend supporting him. *Hamlet* is perhaps Shakespeare's most philosophical play, and like the *Bhagavad Gita*, it grapples with issues of life, death, the afterlife, conflicting duties, the nature of action, and the question of right and wrong.

Having the opportunity to teach these two texts in a Global Humanities programme, allowed me to design a Comparative Literature class on *Hamlet* and the Bhagavad Gita. This was an interesting experiment but somewhat difficult for students because both are dense, complex texts and these students were completely unfamiliar with Hindu philosophy.

After the publication of my most recent book, *Shakespeare's Re-Visions of History: Social Collusion, Violence, and Resistance* (2025), I have applied to teach Shakespeare to older students in a Continuing Education class. If that course goes ahead, it should be an interesting experience for me.

Notes

1. All quotations from Shakespearean in this paper are from *The Norton Shakespeare: Complete Works* (3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, New York: W.W. Norton, 2016). However, the Folio's spelling of names, such as Petruchio have been used instead of Norton's spelling, such as Petruccio.
2. The idea that Ganymede and Orlando had kissed cost Furness, the editor of the first Variorum Edition of the play, some anxiety: 'it is unlikely, indeed scarcely thinkable, that Orlando should have kissed Ganymede, and yet Celia's allusion seems to imply that she spoke either from experience or as a witness', Furness, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, p. 193. Shapiro, in *Gender in Play*, ignores this reference to kissing when he inaccurately states that the play avoids intimacy between Ganymede and Orlando, and does not "refer to offstage intimacy" between them (p. 13).
3. While I agree with Juliet Dusinberre, 'The Taming of the Shrew: Women, Acting and Power', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Vol. 26, 1993, pp. 67–84, that a boy playing Kate on Shakespeare's stage would denaturalise and foreground gendered role-playing, I do not agree with her conclusion that the speech represents a seizing of power.
4. In our 1992 production, we had Bianca and the Widow come to the front of the stage and stand on either side of Kate as she delivered the last speech.
5. *A Pleasant Conceited History Called The Taming of a Shrew*, printed at London by Peter Short, 1594.

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