



Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

The Fellows in my 2008 seminar, "Race and Gender in Shakespeare," took a particular interest in Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*, especially in the way that Shakespeare according to Bloom makes consciousness in certain characters (Hamlet, Falstaff, Rosalind, Cleopatra, Edmund) register the capacity to change. On hearing for example that Goneril and Regan have gone to their deaths competing for his favors, the dying Edmund reflects, "Yet Edmund was beloved," and orders — too late — a reprieve from death for Cordelia. Bloom argues that this sort of discovery through introspection is something crucial and new in the history of human self-understanding. The Fellows' interest in this claim prompted the topic of the 2009 seminar. With this emphasis in mind, this summer's Fellows studied *Hamlet*, *Henry IV Part I*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *King Lear*. It proved a worthwhile guiding thread, as whatever other kinds of focus their classroom situations required, their presentation of Shakespeare necessarily passed through considerations of character (you can't get around character because Shakespeare does not follow Aristotle's subordination of character to plot), and all their curriculum units very naturally focused on this issue.

Three Fellows teaching at the high school level directly address aspects of characterization. Amanda Stefanski's unit is premised on the fact that theatre, unlike narrative fiction, is obliged to use the devices of "indirect characterization," especially the revelation of character through speech: what do certain speeches in *Macbeth* tell us about the characters who utter them, and what — as a cautionary note — do our own speeches reveal about ourselves? Aleco Julius draws on the sociology of Erving Goffman to consider character, also in *Macbeth*, as a matter of "performance" at three levels: the characters' self-presentation to self and others; the actor's interpretive presentation of the character; and the actualization of the performance in the minds of readers or audience members. Janelle Price, preparing her students to compose brief sequels to *King Lear*, emphasizes what one might call "inference from character": How can we imagine Cordelia (in the "happy ending" of Nahum Tate, or if we imagine Lear to have correctly seen her breath on the mirror), Albany, Edgar, Kent, France, the Fool, or any other survivor to behave if we put them in a new setting, given what we know about them already?

Two Fellows work with students for whom learning English as a second language is the ultimate goal: Spanish-speaking middle school students and Chinese-speaking fifth and sixth graders, respectively. Both of these teachers necessarily "scaffold" their approach to Shakespeare, starting with graphic versions, continuing through parts of the No Fear editions, and arriving finally at certain speeches or passages in the original. Barbara Prillaman is eager to return to Shakespeare, having been gratified to see how well her students, with whom she works for two years, took to such seemingly remote material. She has distinguished nine aspects of characterization that she wishes her students to recognize and discuss, especially in relation to *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*. Lisa Ernst asks her students to imagine what *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

would be like with text messaging (suppose Juliet had texted Romeo, "Fak'n death"?), and develops an across-the-curriculum unit in which the organizing idea is "communication."

Three Fellows consider character in relation to historical and social issues. Terri Blackman is actually teaching social studies to middle school students, and wishes to focus on "leadership" in the Roman plays *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, comparing the main characters in those plays with the personages described in her students' history textbooks. Through this strategy she identifies aspects of leadership that are suitable or risky for various forms of government, including the social dynamic affecting the students themselves. Jane Hall wants her high school-level unit to appeal to students from broken or dysfunctional families, so she will focus on mistakes made by single parents and on sibling hostility in *King Lear* — an approach that will effectively organize all the pivotal events and characterizations in the play. Barbara Dowdall finally honors the namesake of her high school, Asa Philip Randolph, an amateur actor as well as social activist, by teaching a unit encouraging research projects on the history of acting Shakespeare by African Americans. Her unit combines this historical work with reflections on race and racial attitudes in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

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