



## Introduction

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

This was the third National Initiative seminar I have had the pleasure of leading on topics related to Shakespeare. Our focus was “character,” and it was in part my hope to show that Shakespeare transforms the role of character as Aristotle had prescribed it, with the continued approval of Renaissance criticism and practice until Shakespeare. For Aristotle, character is subordinate to plot; it exists solely to provide motivations for the events in a plot, and in order not to seem anomalous it must be plausible and consistent within a given role. All teachers need to recognize that this is still the way we are taught to understand dramatic characterization: a “tragic hero,” for example, is a noble person who has a “tragic flaw” (pride, ambition, jealousy, devotion to private rather than public loyalties, etc.) that brings about some reversal of fortune in the plot. Who doesn’t recognize that formula, and who has managed to get through school without hearing it? Well, it works, more or less, for drama from the Greeks right on through to Shakespeare’s great contemporary Ben Jonson.

I hoped to show in our seminar, though, that Shakespeare has a different conception of character. Sure, character provides motivations, but there’s a great deal more in his characters, as there is in our own, that makes them “human”—“round,” as E. M. Forster put it in an influential discussion of the novel, a modern form of literature that would have puzzled Aristotle but not Shakespeare. Characters in Shakespeare may be the puppets of destiny, as they often complain that they are, but they stand before us as beings whose thoughts, like our own, very often wander away from their predicaments. Or, to see this matter in another way, if even their thoughts that seem to wander most freely are still obscurely connected with their predicaments at all times, we need the help of modern thinkers about the determinants of consciousness—Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, cognitive scientists, some theologians—to understand why this is so. We can’t just identify a tragic flaw or comic obsession, then tie a ribbon around it, and call it the truth about a character.

Although our discussions ranged over these matters in the seminar, however, our curriculum units reflected the sober fact that teaching is a practical affair, and there’s only so much you can do. To begin then with the units of two teachers of second and fourth graders, respectively: Joyce Jacobson uses Shakespearean insults, chosen from passages in three plays, to illustrate her school’s newly mandated guidelines to discourage bullying. She leaves open the question whether certain characters (say Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*) just are bullies; that isn’t her point, and can’t be. Her point is to show her students what bullying *is*. Irene Jones teaches fourth grade children of the Diné Nation who have no “first” language (they have had no opportunity to master either Navajo or English), and a large part of her mission is therefore to improve their verbal skills. She has an interest too, though, in the relation of character to plot, and she gets her students to see the motivational nature of this relation by comparing a traditional oral narrative with which the children are familiar to moments of choice in graphic novels of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The aim of many teachers is to get their students to see themselves, or aspects of themselves, in Shakespeare's characters. Christina Cancelli in her military academy takes up the complexities of stereotyping—a crucial issue for today's students that goes right to the heart of question, what is character?—in *The Merchant of Venice*, leading to in-depth discussion not just of Shylock but of Portia and Antonio, and beyond that to what might be called religious as well as cultural ideology: Shakespeare's dispassionate and even-handed study of the clash between Old and New Testament values and their mutual misunderstandings. Chenise Gregory wants all of her African American students to discover the Hamlet in themselves. For Chenise, whose enthusiasm for *Hamlet* as a guide through personal perplexities drives her teaching, the goal is to make students see the relevance of Shakespeare by recognizing in themselves his characters' motives, family circumstances, and social outlook. Sarah Weidmann, having noted a high incidence of family tragedy among her students, teaches *Hamlet* almost therapeutically as a story of "family and loss." Her most continuous study of character in this regard concerns Gertrude, whose responses to family and loss Sarah considers for the most part admirable, defending Gertrude against performances suggesting her degradation. And Michelle Hilbeck, teaching sixth grade, wants students to see themselves in choices made by characters in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*. It is her challenge to make Shakespeare palatable to the young, and to this end she works chiefly—like Irene Jones—with graphic novels of these plots that perforce make character primarily motivational, posing for students the question: what is it in our own characters that dictates our choices?

For many teachers the relevance of Shakespeare is ethical. And why not? *Ethe* is Greek for "character." Quinn Jacobs feels that her high school students struggle to distinguish—in themselves and others—between "phony" and "authentic" presentations of self, and to that end she has written a unit on masks and pretenses in *The Taming of the Shrew*, primarily but not exclusively focused on the enigmatic final speech of the apparently "tamed" Kate. Jennifer Vermillion's ethical focus is the seductive yet also sometimes elevating power of persuasive rhetoric, and she helps students analyze dialogues and speeches in *Julius Caesar* by using the ancient rhetorical divisions *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*. The center of her attention is the contrast between the funeral speeches of Brutus and Marc Antony.

The focus of Teresa Madden Harrold is at once ethical, as she is interested in what constitutes a villain, and intellectual, as she makes students consider what constitutes a historical fact: what is "literature" and what, if anything, is "information"? The first part of her unit studies the character of Shakespeare's Richard III, while the second part considers the effort to reconstruct the historical Richard in Josephine Tey's novel, *The Daughters of Time*, in disagreement with the Tudor-sponsored biography by St. Thomas More on which Shakespeare's Richard is largely based. Studying *Julius Caesar*, Jen Giarrusso too pursues an objective that is at once ethical and intellectual. She begins with the dispute late in the play between Brutus and Cassius about friendship: is it blind loyalty or is it subject to a dispassionate weighing of qualities? She goes to show how this question, and the ethical choices it gives rise to (*et tu, Brute?*), permeate the entire fabric of the play, offering students a coherent close reading with an ethical basis.

The remaining two units focus on themes within which character is central. Comparing and contrasting the theme of love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Justin Brady ranges through these companion plays not only to reflect on the elusive line of division between love and lust but also to contrast love as a genuine feeling with love as a literary affectation, a pretext for sonneting. One can detect all three of these feelings struggling with each other in the character of Romeo, for example. Tara Ann Carter's study of four characters in *Julius Caesar* (developing the *theme* of character) in a way illustrates the dispassionate analysis of qualities discussed by Jen Giarrusso. That there is more than one way to view each character displaces the duty of choice from the characters themselves onto the reader's or spectator's

reactions to them.

I am certain that each of these units will not only stand up to the test of the classroom but also inspire intellectual conversion experiences in many students, and that is surely what teaching is for.

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