Shakespeare in the Restoration Theatre: “Staging” Assignments

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Twenty students sit in my classroom, looking at me somewhat suspiciously. A few are there because they saw “Shakespeare” in the title, but they are non-plussed by this “Restoration” idea. Another small group is there because they have to “read some old stuff,” but they aren’t necessarily happy about it. Some are aspiring musicians, and this looked like the least painful way to fill a distribution requirement. Finally, there are the ones who are there for the writing requirement, and this class fit their schedule.

How long is this semester, again?

SOMETIMES early in my teaching career I was planning on teaching a 200-level course on Restoration theatre. My chair asked if I could “throw in some Shakespeare” to increase enrollment, and this course, eventually entitled “Shakespeare in the Restoration,” was born. Our 200-level courses focus on genre and writing, so the general goals of this course are to introduce students to dramatic literature and to writing in the field of literary criticism. Instructors have considerable freedom about how we meet those goals, and I have opted to achieve them through a discussion-based class format supplemented by film and in-class performances, with short, varied writing assignments. The course meets distribution and departmental requirements — the Humanities: Literature (HL) general education requirement and the “literature before 1800” requirement for English majors and minors — and it also cross-lists with Women’s and Gender Studies courses. The resultant range of students enrolled in the class is considerable: third and fourth year students, English majors and minors, Theatre Arts majors, Women’s Studies majors or minors, and a handful of other students without any background in either literature or theatre, but who need the distribution credits.
The challenges are therefore many and (perhaps) obvious. Students may have passing knowledge of Shakespeare (and come to class feeling as if the playwright is someone they should read), but the Restoration is new to almost all and it carries no pre-existing clout. Even those familiar with Shakespeare struggle to work with two different historical periods and the unfamiliar language of each. Most students are relatively unversed in theatrical conventions so are faced with learning not just one, but two different sets of conventions. Many students lack confidence in their writing skills and arrive at a “writing intensive” class with various degrees of anxiety, resistance, and resentment, especially students who are only there for the general education credits.

My goals, therefore, are to find a way to lure the students as a group to the material, to help them realize how much knowledge they bring to the class on which they can build, and to challenge them to expand their comfort zones. More specifically, I aim to:

1. familiarize students with theatrical conventions like the repertory cast and with changes in theatre practice between 1500 and 1660, including the introduction of actresses and female playwrights;
2. engage students in considerations of how texts are shaped by distinct contexts, including the political tensions in Restoration England or the presence of a monarch in the audience, and how literary convention and national identity are constructed in texts;
3. challenge students to think about the practice of adaptation, both in the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries;
4. introduce students to the interpretation of characters as practice and as an analytic tool;
5. illuminate theatrical literature as a genre distinguished by performance;
6. empower students to make texts their own through analysis, adaptation, and performance;
7. help students to articulate their arguments in clear and effective oral and written prose;
8. introduce students to reference resources common to the field, particularly The London Stage.¹

In the course, we read three to four pairs of plays. These are either Shakespearean plays and revisions / adaptations of these plays, such as King Lear and Tate’s History of King Lear, or The Tempest and Dryden’s The Enchanted Island, or a Shakespearean play and a Restoration play more loosely connected to it, such as Twelfth Night and Behn’s The Rover or Othello and Otway’s Venice Preserved. Around this material I have constructed a sequence of writing assignments that embody some of the theories familiar to those in Composition / Rhetoric. The first foundational idea that informs
these assignments is that students benefit from process-oriented writing instruction and assignments that build on specifically identified analytic and rhetorical skills in sequence rather than being expected to master the whole disciplinary array at once. The second is the recognition that when students grapple with cognitive leaps, their writing skills sometimes temporarily decline. In light of these premises, I have developed a sequence of assignments that seek to move students from the familiar to the unfamiliar, building confidence and competence as they go, so that tackling the unfamiliar is less daunting, and they come to each new writing task prepared to take it on. I have provided the essay prompts as hyperlinks to this article in the hope that they may help illustrate my practice and prove useful starting points for others. Many improvements can doubtless be made.

I begin the class with the works of Shakespeare to take advantage of students’ nominal familiarity with and respect for the “Bard” and the first three writing assignments focus on individual characters, largely to help keep interpretive focus narrow. Students flounder less when given clear frameworks within which to work, so the tight focus helps offset the cognitive leap the course content demands. The tone of the initial “Casting Call” paper is slightly tongue in cheek. In this paper, rather than requiring students to write “like an English major” immediately, I begin by luring them into thinking like one. So I dispense with anything that could be wrestled into the “five-paragraph-theme” format and help students to recognize that they already interpret characters and their portrayal. I want them to recognize that the analytic practice I ask for in the course is not especially foreign. Students are asked to imagine themselves writing to the director of a new movie production of the Shakespearean play we are reading to make a strong case for casting of a character of their choice. In Southern California, where I teach, the culture of film permeates the general atmosphere, so this assignment capitalizes on a double familiarity with Shakespeare (even if only through film) and the film industry. The prompt directs them very specifically to articulate their understanding of the character’s significance in the play, and to support all of their arguments with concrete examples from the text. In some iterations of the class students workshop the paper with a partner to make the imagined interlocutor more authentic and to help them determine what strategies they need to employ to persuade the reader. Since discussing and arguing about actors is a common topic of conversation for my students, they quickly feel some sense of mastery of the material at hand. Writing this paper compels them to deliberate on the physical aspects of any character right away — the relative height of actors, for example — which prepares them for the staging assignments to come. They feel especially empowered when advocating for young actors with whom I don’t happen to be familiar, as they assume the role of “expert.”

The second writing assignment focuses on the Restoration play in the initial pairing. As we move into the Restoration, students are required to read about acting styles of the time period before considering particular actors. Alan Downer's “Nature
to Advantage Dressed: Eighteenth-Century Acting” has been a very useful source. With this contextual information, students are better prepared to write the second paper. A micro-research project, it touches on many of the same concerns addressed in the first paper but from the other direction. Using The London Stage, students research who played a particular part in Restoration performances of the play in question, and consider what that might mean for how we read a character in that play. This assignment results in a paper that looks much more like a typical work of literary criticism but builds on the confidence and sense of comfort students have gained in preparing the preceding casting call paper. Having just thought about how casting supports textual interpretation, they are primed to reflect on how working within the repertory system might affect the casting / writing of Restoration drama. Further, while they are conducting genuine research, they do so in a fairly controlled environment since they can only use one source, and it is guaranteed to contain relevant information. My hope is that by having students remain focused on the same kind of interpretive work to write a report that advances a speculative argument, they comfortably develop their analytic and argumentative skills. The assignment leads the students through pre-writing questions regarding their own assumptions about a character and then coaches them on what to look for in the other roles an actor might have played. They are then asked to comment on what additional insight they have gained about the play.

When working on the second assignment, students sometimes find themselves initially daunted by a print reference source that is only partially available online, but once they become familiar with the resource, they again take up the role of “expert.” They are researching plays on which I do not write, so every time students complete this assignment, I learn something new. This gives even reluctant students a sense of investment in their work. Students present their findings conversationally in class as well as in written form. During in-class presentations, moments of revelation are commonplace as the implications of findings come to light. Students routinely jump into the conversation with “wait till you hear what I found!”

The third assigned paper is coupled with a memorized performance and constitutes the midterm for the course. The paper helps students to prepare for the recital of the monologue (deciphering motive, clarifying language use, etc.) and demands a more academically rigorous analysis of a character than they have conducted so far. In composing the previous two papers, students have contemplated the nature and portrayal of characters, so the lines of inquiry should be fairly familiar. As with the previous two papers, the third assignment includes a prompt that provides students with a fair amount of guidance in terms of the paper’s shape. Here, my hope is that their ambitions for the performance will energize their interpretive arguments. Students articulate their interpretations of the character in the paper, and I evaluate that argument rather than the performance itself. Before they write this paper, a colleague of mine from the Theatre Department attends my class to work with them.
on theatre exercises — breathing, body, and staging — and talks to them about language choices and performance, building the connection between the two arenas of interpretation. In preparing the paper, they are walked through a similar preparation process. Having spent the first two papers deliberating on actors inhabiting certain roles, it is now their turn to undertake the role of actor. The work they carry out with my theatre colleague provides them with some practical skills that they continue to develop. After each performance, classmates complete “review cards” for the actors, which contain constructive comments about the performance. The audience is instructed to think about interpretive choices (i.e., why the character has been played in a certain way) and the class spends time debriefing about the theatrical experience. Usually the majority of students find that the depth of knowledge that they have developed about their chosen character significantly affects their grasp of the play itself; they feel a real sense of ownership of the material. Because performing is a daunting experience for everyone, there is considerable bonding as a result. Some semesters I present a monologue as well, since students are always more willing to take risks they see us take first.

In the second half of the semester, the class reflects on each play as a whole and confronts the idea of adaptation more directly, both in theory and practice. The students now have some practice in analyzing characters, so we have a solid foundation on which to build. To ease the analytic jump from the part to the whole, we move back to a familiar genre: the film review. Students are also given a more familiar subject to analyze, since I ask them to watch modern film productions of Shakespeare. Once again, I seek to balance the known and unknown. For the fourth paper, students are asked to watch a modern adaptation of a Shakespeare play from the syllabus and to write a review of it. I make very explicit that the litmus test they should be using is how well the film adaptation meshes with their own understanding of the play (which they must spell out and support with quotations from the play). They are encouraged to think about historical factors that contribute to adaptation decisions (the transition of Othello’s military might to the basketball court in O, for example) and to pay careful attention to cuts and additions to the original text. Because of their focus on individual characters, they have a good toe-hold on how to assess changes at that level; changes in setting, etc. then follow fairly easily. At this point in the semester, students are sometimes surprised by the strength of their own reactions to the films they watch; they have become invested. Watching the film version of Jane Smiley’s 1,000 Acres, for example, produces anger at a “Lear” they find so unlikable, even as they are moved by the transition from a kingdom to a farm.

The fifth paper builds on the completed film review and takes the question of adaptation further by asking students to respond to the changes between King Lear and Tate’s happy-ending re-write. Drawing on Michael Dobson’s Making of the Modern Poet, I encourage students to think through what political, social, or historical motives might account for Tate’s changes to Shakespeare’s play, challenging them to
theorize those changes. This paper is harder for them than those that precede it, but by this point in the semester they usually embrace the challenge, having worked their way up to it through the previous papers, class discussion, and performance. They are embarking on a more complex argument than before, working now entirely between the two historical periods under examination. In addition to their own past achievements on character analyses from multiple angles, they have also been reading eighteenth-century critical views of Shakespeare and presenting this material to their classmates. These reports help to provide a stronger context for speculating about adaptation practice. Groups of students sign up to read John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Nicholas Rowe, Samuel Johnson, and Charlotte Ramsay Lennox on Shakespeare, and the groups make presentations to the class so that all of the students come away with a working knowledge of five critics after having read only one.⁵ This sense of “what ‘Shakespeare’ means” gives them an additional foothold as they compose the fifth paper.

For the final assignment in the course, the performance component comes back into play, helping students synthesize the material and put their ideas about adaptation into practice. I divide the class into two groups named for the dominant theatrical companies of the Restoration: The King’s Men and The Duke’s Men. The ‘companies’ are then charged with creating, casting, and staging their own scene. We agree as a class on which pair of plays to examine — usually choosing comedy. I have experimented with asking one group to select a Shakespearean play with the other opting for a Restoration play, but the aim of the project is marginally more successful when they draw from the same source (usually the Restoration piece, since the midterm required them to work on Shakespeare). They are to pick the scene they believe is most representative of / significant to their play, with the freedom to cut and paste material from other scenes to create a hybrid. I encourage them to watch performances by The Reduced Shakespeare Company for possible inspiration. They have complete artistic control over setting, language, casting, etc.

The paper they hand in at this performance is a culmination of those that have preceded it, making an argument for their performance in the context of the adaptation in which they are participating. For the paper, each student focuses on the character he or she performs. If any students have taken on the role of director instead of actor (as is sometimes the case in high enrollment semesters), they address the adaptation more broadly. The innovative productions staged in this class (which include scenery, music, costumes and, in some cases, choreography) are a welcome surprise to us all. One production of The Rover was set during college Spring Break and updated to include same-sex couples. The students argued that Spring Break was the best modern analogue for Carnival, and that because the provocative language about sexual double standards in Behn’s text is now dated, the exploration of gender identity and sexual orientation was a plausible way to re-capture that element of the play’s energy. The staging was very compelling.
Through this series of assignments, I seek to accomplish multiple pedagogical goals, as outlined above; the real achievement is frequently a bit more abstract. Throughout the semester I stress that the assignments move back and forth between known and unknown material and analytic practices, in an effort to help students self-consciously expand their intellectual repertoire. This transparency is a crucial pedagogical component to help students recognize they come to the classroom with a range of competencies that they can apply even to unfamiliar, unlikely material. Such an approach can build their confidence and willingness to take risks on page and on stage, which in turn makes the daunting task of approaching historical literature easier, and — with luck — fun. The student evaluations testify consistently to students’ enjoyment of the class, frequently to their own surprise.

The range of assignments also works to challenge all of the students, whether they are English majors proficient in Shakespeare who leave the class with a deeper understanding of literary history and performance, or whether they are Theatre majors who come to the class comfortable with performance and leave the class more proficient at thinking about historical context and literary analysis. Again, in student evaluations, the students who self-identified as English majors express surprise that they now see Shakespeare in a different light, and non-majors describe him as “no longer scary.”

Significantly, the eighteenth-century context helps students to decalcify Shakespeare; instead of being seen as the only playwright in the British tradition, he becomes one of many. Unexpectedly, the assignments have also proven successful in unifying the class members. Rather than dividing into the typical cliques — a persistent problem on our small campus — the students have been able to work together well. Student evaluations praise the small group work for discussion, presentations, and the final scene, which is not common in my experience. My hypothesis is that because the assignments stress the range of skills they all have coming in, each student feels competent and has something to offer the others, even if he or she is not an English or Theatre major.

And finally, the assignments work to expose continuity between the past and the present. What has made this class so enjoyable for me is watching students develop their “own” Shakespeare, which they feel empowered to do partly through the assignments but largely through encountering the eighteenth-century contests over Shakespeare’s legacy. I was pleasantly surprised to find in their evaluations that the majority of students enjoyed hearing the voices of eighteenth-century Shakespeare critics in student presentations; eavesdropping on the critical conversation that canonizes Shakespeare in a sense authorizes their own multiple responses to him. The eighteenth century offers an unusually rich ground for this kind of comparative course because of the self-awareness of writers, critics, and readers during the period. The sense of actively creating a tradition of “British” literature that permeates eighteenth-century criticism of Shakespeare brings to the fore questions about canon and genre,
which in turn invite students to engage in those debates not just as historical artifacts but as ongoing discussions. Bringing that debate forward to consider modern adaptations opens up contemporary questions about what “Shakespeare” means to readers and viewers at different historical moments. Clearly, we have inherited many of the aesthetic dictates and hierarchies of the eighteenth century, but where did they originate? In debates about genre, political and aesthetic decorum, evolving acting styles, and the advent of women actors and writers, very little about literature could be taken for granted in the eighteenth century, and students begin to realize ways in which this might still be true. It is my hope that they leave the class with more confidence in their ability to develop new skills, and more curiosity about how texts are shaped by the context in which they are written and read.

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NOTES

1 Most readers of Digital Defoe: Studies in Defoe & His Contemporaries are doubtless familiar with this text; if not, the subtitle explains it all: The London Stage 1660–1800; a calendar of plays, entertainments & afterpieces, together with casts, box-receipts and contemporary comment. Compiled from the playbills, newspapers and theatrical diaries of the period.

2 The by-now standard “writing to learn” pedagogy in composition owes much to the seminal work of Janet Emig (see The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders). Crosswhite has documented the temporary deficits in students' writing when they are struggling with new content or concepts, especially 272–74. Thanks to my colleague, Claudia Ingram, for her help in locating precise sources for these concepts.

3 This assignment was inspired by a talk I heard Rob Hume give at the Huntington Library series “Redefining British Theatre History.” It is available in published form as “Theatre History 1660–1800: Aims, Materials, Methodology,” in Cordner and Holland 9–44.

4 Fittingly, it was a student who brought this partial online edition to my attention. See Robert Hume’s personal web page: http://www.personal.psu.edu/hb1/London%20Stage%202001/.

WORKS CITED


