Book Review

Simply Shakespeare
Toby Widdicombe, 2002
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Whether they are in my College Composition, Introduction to Literature or Shakespeare class, students are usually a little apprehensive about reading Shakespeare. ‘What’s with the “thee”, “thou”, and “doth”? ’ Or, ‘Why is that guy standing out there all alone talking to himself? Hamlet really is mad!’ Or, ‘Over 50 characters in Richard III? How am I supposed to keep track? And their names keep changing!’ And ‘Why does Iago talk to Othello in poetry, but to Roderigo in prose? ’ or ‘Can’t Enobarbus just say Cleopatra sat in a barge with a bunch of eunuchs—and what’s “burnished”? What’s up with that?’ They have trouble with word order, vocabulary and with finding the literal in the midst of all that figurative language and description.

Toby Widdicombe’s book, Simply Shakespeare, helps students read and understand Shakespeare by responding to issues like these. He is not concerned here with Shakespeare’s contemporaries or predecessors, the history and development of the drama or critical analysis of individual plays. He does provide students with a reading process and with the literary tools needed for interacting with a Shakespeare play in terms of its meaning, structure and language.

This book is an excellent supplementary text for students in a Shakespeare course and useful to instructors teaching a Shakespeare play in a literature class. The style is accessible to students: clear, straightforward and engaging. Each chapter is organised so that students can find information quickly by providing an overview of the topics covered, bullet lists followed by elaboration, summary or ‘advice’ sections, sometimes a ‘test case’ that illustrates previous information, questions for writing and discussion and a ‘further reading’ list on the particular chapter topic.

The book is divided into three sections: the ‘Introduction’ provides the student with a reading process (pp. 1–18); Part 1, ‘Language’, has four separate chapters that focus on Shakespeare’s dramatic language, imagery, rhetoric and humour (pp. 19–112); and Part 2, ‘Staging’, provides three separate chapters on Shakespeare’s genres, stagecraft and performance on stage and screen (pp. 113–213). Also included are some convenient aids to students: a list of 30 of the most troublesome words in Shakespeare, a chronology of his life and times and a family tree for the Wars of the Roses. An appendix lists Shakespearean resources—books, journals and websites.

The ‘Introduction’ serves as a valuable lesson on how to study a Shakespearean or any literary text, even for first year college students. The author suggests they engage in multiple readings, annotating, posing questions, summarising, etc. He then illustrates each part of the process by applying it to a particular Shakespeare text: Hamlet I, i. Throughout Widdicombe uses the method of demonstrating a process and providing well thought out examples, thus clarifying or proving ideas. The writing and discussion assignments at the end of each chapter reinforce the development of the student reading process. Each question asks students to apply the information previously given in the chapter—such as why and how Shakespeare uses ‘you’ or ‘thou’—to a Shakespearean text of the students’ choosing or to a text the author suggests. Students will retain information from the chapter better by applying it.

At three separate points in his book, Widdicombe gives what he calls ‘test cases’. In the beginning of the chapter on dramatic language (Chapter 1), he discusses Hamlet’s ‘To be, or not to be’ speech, noting the problematic aspects for the student (i.e. vocabulary, sentence structure, figurative language, argument) and explaining all as he goes along. He takes us on a journey through this speech which serves as a helpful guide to what to notice in Shakespeare. The discussion in such ‘test cases’ is very specific and detailed, illustrating to students just how much can be gleaned from a single speech.

This chapter on dramatic language then tackles what many students find difficult about Shakespeare’s dramatic language: ‘you’ vs. ‘thou’, ‘hath’ and ‘doth’, syntax or word order, alternat-
ing verse and prose. My students are often put off by these aspects of Shakespeare, assuming that he is simply being ostentatious. But if the students can be convinced that there is a reason for sometimes using ‘thou’ and at other times using ‘you’, for example, then they will accept the usage and learn to look for its meaning or purpose. And Widdicombe does a fine job through such explanation and examination of guiding and convincing students.

In his section on imagery (Chapter 2), Widdicombe provides definitions for many of the various forms of figurative language and gives and analyses examples (from Macbeth) for each. This chapter develops students’ critical vocabulary and reinforces it through the examples and the writing assignments at the end. By learning about Shakespeare’s imagery and applying it to Shakespearean texts themselves, students will be more conscious of that aspect of Shakespeare’s writing and will come to appreciate how it enhances meaning, rather than see it as a distraction. In an ‘advice’ section at the end of this chapter, Widdicombe provides helpful reading strategies such as, ‘Don’t rush to analyze what the language means figuratively. Always begin with the literal’, and then move on to what the imagery or figures mean (p. 64).

The second ‘test case’ at the end of this chapter is the famous speech by Enobarbus, ‘The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne …’ (II, ii, 200), describing the first meeting between Antony and Cleopatra. Widdicombe labels the figurative language throughout, exemplifying for students all the previous definitions and illustrating how wonderfully dense Shakespeare’s language is. He never mentions, however, that Shakespeare used as his source for this speech North’s translation of Plutarch’s Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans. This would have been a wonderful opportunity to illustrate Shakespeare’s genius for language and his ability to transform a text, perhaps by putting Plutarch’s comparatively bare-bones description along side Shakespeare’s vivid lines.

The organisation of Chapter 3, ‘Shakespeare’s Rhetoric’, is similar to Chapter 2. Definitions (of 17 rhetorical devices) are given with examples from Shakespeare’s plays. Distinctive features of Shakespeare’s rhetoric are discussed, followed by the third and final ‘test case’ using Portia’s ‘The quality of Mercy is not strained …’ (Merchant of Venice IV, i, 182) speech in which all the rhetorical devices are labelled. For me the most interesting part of the chapter is Widdicombe’s discussion of idiolect: ‘[Shakespeare’s] major characters use language in a particular, individual way … each of them has an idiolect that is as unique as a fingerprint’ (p. 83). I have to say I don’t always remember to point out and illustrate this feature of Shakespeare to my students. It is true that Hamlet could never say, as Othello says, ‘My parts, my title and my perfect soul/Shall manifest me rightly’ (I, ii, 31–32), nor could Othello break into the ‘To be, or not to be’ speech as he is about to stab himself in Act V.

This is why Simply Shakespeare is a good supplementary text for teachers: it often reminds us of things about Shakespeare that we do know or have discovered for ourselves, but that we may have internalised and forgotten to transfer to our students. In Simply Shakespeare Widdicombe teases out the individual tools, devices or practices of Shakespeare, explains and analyses them and shows how they contribute to the whole.

Chapter 4, ‘Shakespeare’s Humor’, completes Part I. Here Widdicombe carefully guides the student through Shakespeare’s various levels and types of humour, pointing out that his plays had to appeal to a wide ranging audience. He examines and provides examples of Shakespeare’s slapstick, crude and vulgar humour, ethnic humour, linguistic humour (especially the malapropism) and cosmic humour.

Part II, ‘Staging’, considers Shakespeare’s genres (Chapter 5), stagecraft (Chapter 6), and finally examines stage and screen performances (Chapter 7). In the chapter on genre, Widdicombe does provide minimal classical background, but the concern here is more with the characteristics of genre as we find them in Shakespeare. His objective here is clearly to show what Shakespeare actually did, rather than to superimpose someone else’s rules. Genre characteristics and definitions are given loosely rather than rigidly; there is plenty of room for exceptions or overlap, many of which are noted and explained. For example, is Troilus and Cressida a tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy or a problem play?

The characteristics given for each genre are sometimes traditional and sometimes innovative. One of the interesting characteristics has to do with the female roles: ‘In comparison to the tragedies, [comedies] emphasize female experience’ (p. 120), and ‘[tragedies] dramatize the abuse of women, and portray that abuse as reprehensible, evil, or pathological’ (p. 136). This is a valid perspective that I have never presented to my students, but I shall now.

For each genre, Widdicombe provides a bulleted list of characteristics and then elaborates on each characteristic, providing many examples for each, and he carefully points out the exceptions. Tragedy, comedy, history and romance are naturally given the most attention while the ‘problem play’ is given short shrift because the
problem play designation is, well, problematic. I actually wanted to see more discussion here and in the discussion of the characteristics of the Roman play.

As a teacher I would definitely use these lists of characteristics for each genre since they would be so helpful for the students and they would spark intelligent and focused discussion and analysis of the plays. The excellent writing assignments at the end of the chapter would yield the same result: ‘Select any one characteristic of Shakespearean tragedy and examine the way in which it manifests itself in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, or *Macbeth*’ (p. 148).

In Chapter 6, ‘Shakespeare’s Stagecraft’, Widdicombe enhances students’ appreciation of what Shakespeare brilliantly accomplishes on the actual stage. We are made aware of Shakespeare’s meticulous handling of seemingly mundane stage business, such as helping the audience to know and remember who is who on the stage (introductions) or providing all the necessary background information efficiently (exposition). The discussion of how Shakespeare keeps our attention through pacing or ‘varying the tempo’ (p. 178) is interesting and informative: Widdicombe analyses examples of alternating long with short scenes, action with quiet, reflective scenes, comic scenes and scenes of high drama (Porter scene in *Macbeth*), as well as single scenes that have within them both the comic and the profoundly philosophical (Gravediggers scene in *Hamlet*). As we read or see a Shakespeare play, we know we are attentive, but here Widdicombe shows us how Shakespeare makes this so.

He sums up this chapter by providing a bulleted list of the eleven major devices of Shakespeare’s stagecraft. The rest of this chapter is devoted to another important aspect of Shakespeare’s writing, metadrama: ‘the ways in which the plays comment upon the nature of drama itself’ (p. 178). While books have been written on this topic, Widdicombe, in five pages, presents enough information to keep students alert to this Shakespearean practice whether it involves the ‘play within a play’ device, individual speeches or characters who take on the role of the playwright, like Prospero.

I would like to note an excellent aspect of Widdicombe’s writing and discussion questions at the end of each chapter. One question, usually the last, always requires or allows students to be creative: ‘Imagine you are a director of …’ or ‘Imagine you are playing the role of the Porter …’ or ‘Imagine you are the editor of Shakespeare’s plays …’. Such questions allow students to use the specific knowledge they have gained in a chapter in an imaginative way.

The last chapter focuses on Shakespeare in performance on stage and screen. A whole new dimension is added to students’ understanding of Shakespeare’s works: the plays now become open and alive to interpretation through directing, acting, staging, cinematography, editing and so on. First Widdicombe provides bulleted lists of the distinctions and then the continuities among stage, cinema and television as media for Shakespearean performances. He then presents and analyses a critic’s review of a stage performance of *Antony and Cleopatra*. He then gives the same critic’s review of a stage performance of *King Lear*, but this time poses questions to students about character and staging, requiring them to use their knowledge of *King Lear* to present an informed opinion on the critic’s review. The rest of the chapter compares five film versions of *Hamlet*, Act I, scene iii. By focusing on this one famous scene which includes the ‘To be, or not to be’ soliloquy, Widdicombe has students gain a detailed sense of all aspects of a film performance.

Teachers like myself who have read, studied, viewed and taught Shakespeare for many years can sometimes overlook all that can be difficult and that needs to be explained to students about Shakespeare, and students do not always remind us by asking questions. *Simply Shakespeare* reminds us of those difficulties, examines and explains them and gives us (and therefore the students) a process for tackling those difficulties. This text gives information and insights into Shakespeare’s stagecraft, for example, that might take most students years to develop on their own. It also encourages students to use their imagination in their encounters with Shakespeare. *Simply Shakespeare* will help to bring forth informed, perceptive, imaginative and more confident students of Shakespeare, and it will enhance Shakespearean instructors’ teaching repertoire with a greater variety of perspectives and approaches to their subject.

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