Sustaining Tradition with Inspiration from Modernity: Countering Elitism in Teaching Shakespearean Drama

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Abstract
The tradition of teaching English Literature in most universities round the world has evolved in such a way that a degree programme in English is not considered complete without a component of Shakespearean drama. Yet the poetics and the noetics of the Shakespeare plays written in a 16th Century dialect have become bitter delicacies for most students, as the comprehension and personalization of Shakespeare texts remain an unresolved challenge. The traditional mechanism of teaching Shakespeare texts involves reading the lines with a glossary, comparing the meanings with influential critical interpretations, reflecting on the implications either diachronically or synchronically, and writing unguided essays on topics related to classroom discussions. Most students fail in these activities as they find it difficult to internalize the meanings conveyed by word and action in relation to the historical settings depicted in the plays. Hardly a stage production of a Shakespeare play takes place in their environments to give them an idea about the actual form of it and therefore they are destined to remain totally segregated from Shakespeare. Unfortunately, this turns Shakespeare scholarship into an elitist pastime, and invites undue controversies from students who feel fenced off from the process. In attempting to develop solutions to the problems of teaching Shakespearean drama faced in this way, so much inspiration can be drawn from the numerous cinematic productions of Shakespeare plays. They present not only approximate models for pronouncing the lines but also lively simulations of the persons and situations concerned. Cultural commodities developed in a spirit of modernity prove effective only if they preserve the essence of tradition. There are numerous films on Shakespeare, very articulate in this sense. Therefore, using a series of exemplars developed on Shakespeare's *Othello*, this article demonstrates how inspiration can be drawn from modernity in countering elitism in teaching Shakespeare.
Key words: Shakespeare scholarship, tradition, challenges, rural underprivileged students, elitism in learning literature, modernity, acculturation model, pedagogical value of films/audios, literature classroom management, sophistication

Place and Position of Shakespeare in English Studies

With his thirty-seven plays and five works of poetry, Shakespeare occupies an unprecedented position in English scholarship round the world. Addressing different complexity levels in the knowledge of Shakespeare's language, literature and artistry, his plays are introduced to GCE (O' Level), GCE (A' Level), undergraduate, and postgraduate curricula in most places in the world. A university degree programme in English without a component in Shakespeare is considered *Hamlet without the Prince* to mean an event from which the principal performer or the star attraction is missing. Those who hold an in-depth view about

the universal appeal of canonical literature tend to assess the quality of a degree programme in English on the basis of the exposure to Shakespeare it ensures for the students. Today Shakespeare does not remain confined to only English departments but has hit the other language departments as well through the medium of translation. For example, in Sri Lanka, even Sinhala curricula have been enriched by Sinhala translations of Shakespeare plays. The recognition of Shakespeare as an indispensable component of language and cultural studies ignites our interest in the reasons for his appeal to intellectual communities everywhere and the phenomenal impact it has had so far on the creative thinking of generations of artists and intellectuals all over the world.

Why Teach Shakespeare?
In an exploration of arguments in favour of teaching Shakespeare, Forrester (1995) states that Shakespeare plays demonstrate their educational relevance by addressing timeless questions relating to the human condition, and by being the basis upon which modern works rest. All his great tragedies, comedies, and histories remain fresh in the world of culture inspiring new creations representing the problems and questions the later generations are faced with. This is clear in the inspiration George Bernard Shaw has drawn from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* in the creation of his *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Shaw (1925) confesses to have written the part of Caesar in the play for Shakespeare actor Johnston Forbes-Robertson, who played it opposite his wife Gertrude Elliott. It is surmised from the available records that Shaw was inspired not only by the themes of the plays concerned but also by the actors who played in them. Shakespeare has thus inspired hundreds of creations in the performing arts. Wikipedia records that more than 410 feature-length film and TV versions of Shakespeare's plays have been produced, some being faithful to the original story and text while others using only the plots rather than the dialogues, making Shakespeare the most filmed author ever in any language. Annually, productions of Shakespeare plays are carried out in their hundreds by professional artists, amateurs, and university and school students, and there are numerous songs on Shakespeare themes to cheer up thousands of music fans. Notwithstanding his popularity in societies by and large, under various circumstances, Shakespeare has gathered anathema from many students and teachers round the world, allowing an obnoxious elitism to dominate English scholarship in many academic institutions.

Elitism Harming Shakespeare Scholarship
Concerning her American experience, Kylene Beers (2009) reveals the practice of segregating the poor by intellectual rigour, under a prejudice that the poor are unable to cope with educational materials that their opposite use:

> Too many school boards, superintendents, principals, and even teachers choose instructional materials and strategies for *those* kids that in all likelihood would not be offered to the gifted kids or the kids whose parents know how to demand and can afford better technology, libraries, textbooks, teachers, supplies, tutors, playgrounds, gyms, and …

well, anything that can be bought with the money these parents will willingly, can easily, supply. No one would ever suggest that a scripted program be used to teach these kids; that's the curriculum for *those* kids, because those kids need *that* help, *that* kind of education (Beers, 2009).

Allowing this insensitive practice to go on would expand the polarity between the rich and the poor within the school setting leading to greater effects of disharmony in society when these students grow up underprivileged. Regarding the same issue, Carol Jago (2009) makes a strong case for introducing Shakespeare and other difficult texts to the students irrespective of their social class:

> But to me it seems wrong that schools should reserve challenging literature for honors students or that only private school students should continue to study these works. Aside from the elitism that such curricular decisions betray, caring teachers defend the use of alternative, simplified reading selections for nonhonors students in the belief that their students don't have the vocabulary, background knowledge, or reading stamina to follow complex syntax. Besides, they argue, today's kids won't read anything that is old. I argue that the only way students will ever acquire academic vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading stamina is by reading complex works. Unless you grow up on a farm or take up horseback riding, it's unlikely that you will know that a farrier is an expert in equine hoof care. That is, unless you read books. … I worry that in our determination to provide students with literature they can relate to, we end up teaching works that students actually don't need much help with at the expense of teaching classics that they most certainly do need assistance negotiating. … Classroom texts should pose intellectual challenges to young readers and make students stronger readers, stronger people, for having studied them (Jago, 2009).

What Jago observes as elitism is something universally experienced. In Sri Lanka I have experienced teacher educators, master teachers, and university teachers maintaining similar opinions about poverty-stricken students regarding English scholarship. They consider such students' economic difficulties a mental and physical handicap that hinders their performance in intellectual pursuit. Mike LoMonico (2009) observes that as a result of ELA (English Language Arts) teachers not teaching Shakespeare at all, thousands of students are graduating from high schools across the US nation having never experienced a Shakespeare play. As reasons for this situation he claims:

1. There is a lack of preparation in pre-service Methods courses in graduate and undergraduate programs. The reality is that there are only a handful of university courses in Teaching Shakespeare and Shakespeare rarely comes up even in a basic English methods class.
2. The emphasis on testing (which doesn't include specific texts) scares teachers, so they avoid Shakespeare if they can.
3. Many school administrators actually discourage teachers from approaching Shakespeare except in AP (Advanced Placement) classes for reason #2.
4. Many ELA teachers had a bad experience with Shakespeare when they were high school students. Most of them either have bad memories or no memories of learning Shakespeare in school. The very few who had a teacher who used performance and had

them "doing" Shakespeare, report that they had a good experience. (Adapted from LoMonico, 2009)

LoMonico's (2009) views directly apply to Sri Lanka because of the shortcomings experienced there in the curricula, methodology, expertise, teaching personnel, resources, and the student attitudes. This prevents the majority from the study of Shakespeare and limits the Shakespeare classes to tiny groups whose membership does not exceed four or five students. However, a different view about student response to Shakespeare appears from observations made in places where there is a genuine commitment to the acculturation of younger generations through exposure to Shakespeare.

Shakespeare in the Language Classroom
While studying the efficacy of an acculturation model influenced by Shakespeare, our attention is drawn by a group of teachers and scholars from the US reporting on Shakespeare's influence in inspiring creativity in youthful learners. Smith (2010) reports the success achieved by Meredith Szewchuk's teenage student Terry at Toronto's York Mills Collegiate Institute in his production of a music video depicting Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Szewchuk expresses contentment with her effort to get her teenage students to re-imagine the Bard using the younger generation's language and media (Smith, 2010). Peggy O'Brien, the former director of education at the Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington, DC recommends raps, podcasts, and short films as "perfect vehicles" for teaching *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (Smith, 2010). Joshua Cabat, who teaches English and film studies at Roslyn High School, in Roslyn Heights, New York, appreciates his students' adventures in filming Shakespeare scenes as short videos and posting them on YouTube, stressing, "It's still them wrestling with the text. But they're using different tools" (Smith, 2010). Christy Desmet, a professor of English at the University of Georgia, has surveyed that "some of these YouTube English-project videos have received as many as 20,000 hits, in part because teachers at other high schools use them to engage their students" (Smith, 2010). John Golden, a language arts curriculum and instruction specialist in Portland, Oregon, has his students analyze the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy from *Hamlet* by looking at how actors performed the famous monologue in seven movies (Smith, 2010). Commenting on the success achieved in his theatrical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in an experiment in interactive language learning conducted at the H. M. Patel Institute of English Training and Research in Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat, India, Elliott Swift (1996) claims, "In addition to encouraging the learners to use English creatively in a theme/task-based approach, the project was to have a consciousness-raising effect on the participants as well as on the audience." All these veteran teachers have observed how Shakespeare has been instrumental in awakening the creativity of the groups of students they have worked with.

Teaching Shakespeare in Sri Lanka
Although numerous feature films, serial films, audios, picture albums, and other types of textual and graphic materials have emerged to assist our creative perception of Shakespeare plays in detail, they have never reached the literature classrooms in high schools and universities in Sri Lanka. There is no record of trying what Meredith Szewchuk, Peggy O'Brien, Joshua Cabat, Christy Desmet, and John Golden have reported to Smith (2010) in terms of their students' achievements in creating music videos, producing short films, commenting on performances, and analyzing videos in a literature classroom. In all classes I have experienced what goes on is a kind of lecturing. The teachers, showing off their erudition, either go on nattering about Shakespeare to their respective groups of dumbfounded students or dictate notes for them to make verbatim copies for memorization. As homework they recommend the students to read the lines with the assistance of a glossary, to compare the meanings with etymologies provided by various Shakespeare scholars, to study the annotations on diachronic or synchronic applications of the ideas, and to write unguided essays on topics related to the lecture notes given in the classroom. When it comes to evaluation the sole mechanism appears to be an essay written under a given topic developed from the text and the recommended reading. The entire process does not move an inch ahead of the printed text, while not allowing any alternative mechanism to take place. The obstacle created by the teaching methodology and the testing and evaluation mechanism does not allow any experimental approach to set in. There is no room for presentations, projects, group exercises, or innovative tests and evaluation strategies as mentioned above. Therefore the students end up in such a process being tired of Shakespeare.

Teaching Shakespeare's *Othello* to Rural Students from Sri Lanka
While helping a group of non-English speaking rural students from Sri Lanka in their GCE (A' Level) studies in English, I was faced with the challenge of introducing the original text of Shakespeare's *Othello*. As they did not speak English in their daily life, I had the challenge of getting these students, in terms of preparing them for their advanced level examination in English: to read the dialogues produced in an archaic form of language with correct pronunciation and intonation; grasp the literal and figurative meanings of the words; connect the words with the actions; internalize the plot along with a coherent progress in the comprehension of action and dialogue; follow the episodic development of the themes; and write comprehensive essays on a series of topics. When I looked around I found, according to Judy Monthie-Doyum and Gülay Öztürk (2006) from Turkey, that I was not the only teacher struggling with challenges posed by unsophisticated students and sophisticated objectives.

My struggle to get these extremely unsophisticated students to perform these wonders was made easy by a BBC 3 audio production of the play from London's Donmar Warehouse, featuring an award-winning performance by Chiwetel Ejiofor in the title role as the jealous Moor Othello, alongside Ewan McGregor as

the scheming Iago (BBC, 2008). I got my students to follow this powerful audio production scene by scene in their reading of the play. By eliciting their views of the tonal variations realized in the dialogues, I could get the students actively involved in the listening to the play with comprehension. On enjoying each episode of the play, I got them to read the interpretations provided by Cliffnotes and by Kenneth Muir (1974) in the T.J.B. Spencer edition of *Othello*. They succeeded in grasping the nuances produced in the expressions and interpreting the dialogues in their own language with the help of the glossary and notes. We finished the work with the audios in 24 contact hours spread over eight weekends at the rate of three hours a session. In between they answered quizzes and wrote short compositions on topics developed from the weekly discussions. At the culmination of reading the play with audio help and interpretation we moved onto watching films on *Othello* to have a more visual understanding of the play.

We started with a black and white 91-minute film of the three-hour Shakespeare play directed and produced by Orson Welles. (1952). As the film was shot on locations in Morocco, Venice, Tuscany and Rome and at the Scalera Studios in Rome, the students could easily grasp the setting that Shakespeare seems to have had in his imagination. The students were made to compare the experience they had of the reduced version of the play in film with that they had had with the complete version in the audio. Thereby they got to distinguish the main sentences from the support sentences in the dramatic discourse. They wrote short reviews of the film, emphasizing the editing it had undergone and the reinforcements it had received from the visual effects.

From the black and white movie we moved on to a technicolour one by Stuart Burge (1965). The 165 minute film retained most of Shakespeare's original play and did not change the order of scenes. The only major omission was the Fool's scene, although other minor lines were cut here and there. So they could see the entire play being acted in the film. The students enthusiastically commented on the role of Othello played by Lawrence Olivier in the mood of a tragic hero and compared it with that by Orson Welles. They enjoyed the authenticity of the original preserved in this great Lawrence Olivier film and analysed the two Othellos, going by a checklist.

From the two radical film productions of *Othello* we moved on to the three hours and 24 minutes long BBC film on the play by Jonathan Miller (1981), which was true to Shakespeare's script. In this faithful and authentic production, the students watched how the original script in its entirety being enacted. They compared the Anthony Hopkins Othello with the Orson Welles and Lawrence Olivier ones. Also they analysed the role of Iago played in the three films by Bob Hoskins, Micheál MacLiammóir and Frank Finlay respectively. Further they remarked at the differences noticeable in the personality and demeanour of Desdemona in the three films as engendered by Maggie Smith, Suzanne Cloutier and Rosemary Leach respectively, and did the same with the other characters as well.

Finally, we watched a very modern film version of *Othello* by Oliver Parker

(1995), starring Laurence Fishburne as Othello, Irène Jacob as Desdemona, Kenneth Branagh as Iago, Nathaniel Parker as Cassio, Michael Maloney as Roderigo, Anna Patrick as Emilia, Nicholas Farrell as Montano, Indra Ové as Bianca, and Michael Sheen as Lodovico. Its duration was 123 minutes. Kenneth Branagh and Laurence Fishburne placed a new spin on the traditional end of Act 3 scene 3. It cut many parts of the play's scenes to shorten the film while adding a few to provide a more cinematic and box office-oriented production. Having studied three different film versions of the play what they experienced with Parker (1995) turned Shakespeare for them into a powerful medium of entertainment. Parker's cinematic treatment of Othello's jealous imagination in his dreams of Desdamona's supposed affair with Cassio could enlighten them on the basis of Othello's bond with Iago, inspiring their imagination in a critical direction.

In the course of watching the respective films and discussing their aesthetic and linguistic niceties the students started demonstrating a sort of maturity that could ensure an ability to handle the challenges posed by critical questions posed in the Cliffnotes guide to Shakespeare's *Othello*. By the time they finished three months with the text, reading its original, listening to the audio version, studying Kenneth Muir's commentaries and the Cliffnotes guides to vocabulary and episodes, watching the film versions of different approaches to the plot, and discussing their make from different angles, they had left behind their fear of the text and achieved a high level of self expression on the text, its themes, and the film versions of it.

In a real sense what they did was that they developed a coherent graphic understanding of the play connecting the dialogues and actions of the characters and wrote short accounts of how the characters evolved on the stage and how their individual behaviours contributed to the development of the themes. Their classroom exercises on the speech-acts of the characters provided them grist for their elaborate take-home exercises on the major issues of the play that involved critical analyses of the characters, their behaviours, and their contributions to various aesthetic and epistemological wholes. Equipped by a consummate perception of the play, they demonstrated a great self-confidence in handling critical questions on the text and produced decent classroom essays.

Lessons Learnt from Student Response
As a result of constant support presented in a variety of ways, the students make progress through what Lev Vygotsky (1978) introduces as "zone of proximal development toward independence", where he explains, "the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it" (72). With experiments inspired by Vygotsky, Jago (2009) establishes that "many who never expected to be able to read challenging literature find that with a little help from their teacher and classmates, the book isn't as daunting as they first thought." They develop maturity in interacting with the text presented in auditory and visual media in addition to the printed form. When it comes to achieving sophistication in the skills of dramatic/oral reading, comprehension, interaction, appreciation, explanation, simulation, discussion, analysis, criticism, argumentation, and

writing essays with Shakespeare plays, what is important is disciplined interaction with the texts, rather than family background, economic status, prior exposure to culture and the performing arts. Students gradually undergo an attitudinal, cognitive, epistemological, and linguistic transformation in each interaction with a text, when they are actively engaged in watching film versions of it along with frequent emphasis on keeping vigil on the nuances the author intends producing through his narrative, dramatic, linguistic, vocal, gestural, kinetic, facial, costuming, paraphernal and situational devices. Thereby the students expand their horizons over the intentions of the playwright and develop the skills to cope with it efficiently.

Conclusion

Absence of tradition in an academic programme will handicap its form on the basis that it functions in superficial lines without quality and character. In that sense a degree programme in English without Shakespeare will neither maintain its quality and character nor endow the readers with the versatility and expertise required in responding to any form of classical literature. That holds the entire degree program questionable as it leaves the reader helpless in many respects. Therefore, inclusion of Shakespeare plays helps to add not only elegance but also profundity to the programme. It is understood that even very successful works of modern literature owe greatly to works of traditional literature in acquiring their classical value and beauty. When it comes to utilizing the expertise a degree programme ensures, attention is drawn to the creativity it can achieve in the reader as well. Authors who possess an in-depth knowledge of classical literature outshine the others in the quality maintenance of their work. In order to promote the use of traditional literature where Shakespeare figures prominent, technology can be exploited in a spirit of modernity in achieving sophistication, versatility, and pleasure in the classroom sessions. Of course, in classroom management inspired by such academic objectives, the teacher has to give up his pedestal in the front and remain a backstage manager. But if it leads to a clear enhancement of the productivity index in the use of classroom hours, why don't we try it?

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