A New Reality: Appreciating Reality TV Through Shakespeare

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Intensive reading, discussion, and (in some sections) viewing of plays from the comedy, tragedy, romance, and history genres.

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“A New Reality: Appreciating Reality TV Through Shakespeare”

It is the genre of television we love to hate, and admittedly hate to love. Whether you have accepted America’s fascination with the genre as inevitable, or whether you remain in denial, clinging on to the hope that your fellow citizens have “classier taste”, reality television has still managed to captivate millions of viewers worldwide multiple nights a week (sometimes even multiple times a day). With the most recent season finale of popular dating show The Bachelor (2002) raking in 10.8 million views in a single night (a 14 percent jump from last season’s viewer count), and popular singing competition, American Idol (2002) pulling in a whopping 21.6 million during it’s 2012 season finale, you can’t deny that a good portion of America has become captivated with reality TV.

Critics, bloggers, journalists, and writers alike have pored over this obsession the American people have developed with this often-absurd genre. Andy Dehnart, creator and editor of the popular reality TV blog Reality Blurred, describes the genre as “a subset of nonfiction TV”, or “television that involves real people” (Dehnart). Dehnart goes on to clarify that “nonfiction TV is not reality TV”, but rather reality TV is the “dramatic, soap-opera like” brother of nonfiction TV (Dehnart). In their article Reality Bites, Edwin Stepp and Bill Welch note the conflict between the genre being seen as “exploitative and salacious” versus “exciting and fun” (Stepp). Most critics, like Stepp and Welch, tend to side with the “salacious” argument, focusing on the negative social implications the genre might instill in it’s viewers, such as the ethics of
“frankenbiting” (an edited reality show snippet that splices together several disparate strands of an interview, or even multiple interviews, into a single clip), gender role disputes, elitism, and stereotypes (just to name a few) (Stepp). Kaitlin Chapman, contributor to the website A Critical Guide to Reality TV, sums up the overall critical opinion when she states that “it [reality TV] doesn’t provide any intellectualism for our viewers today and doesn’t provide any stimulus for our culture either” (Chapman).

The argument of what contributes “intellectualism” and “stimulus” to our culture can and will go on for years, but in the midst of the argument against the genre, critics seem to have forgotten a huge element of discussion: the appreciation of reality TV through the process in which it’s created, or in other words, it’s artificiality. We all know that reality TV is highly contrived (anyone that says otherwise is only fooling themselves), but what we don’t know, or rather, what we seem to forget, is how much work actually goes into creating a reality TV show. From the casting that takes place before filming to the editing that goes on afterwards, it takes more than just a handful of people to produce a well shot reality show with an interest grabbing story line. An average reality show will use any where from two to sometimes over twenty cameramen, date producers, challenge producers, normal producers, story editors, sound bite editors, and of course the “competitors” (and that’s only a handful of those involved in production). I argue that the amount of effort and devotion that is apparent in the creation of a single show merits enough cause to think over the worthlessness with which we seem to have branded the genre. At the very least, I argue that there is a level of appreciation we as a society are missing when we merely cast aside reality TV as worthless or as Dr. Beverly Thompson of Siena College in Albany, New York says “cheap entertainment for the masses” (Thompson). While reality television may be cheaper than producing a movie or a fictitious television show,
deeming it “cheap entertainment” creates a negative connotation towards the genre that often comes with the word cheap: that it’s inferior to all other forms of entertainment (Thompson).

Therefore, the problem isn’t wholly in reality TV itself, but rather in the lens with which we as viewers and ‘critics’ are choosing to view the genre. If we change the way we are analyzing reality television by placing it up against a form of entertainment that we do deem worthy of our attention, we might see there is more in common then we as a society originally assumed. I believe that if we view reality TV as a derivative of Shakespearean theater, paying attention to its use of editing and controlled settings, casting methods, characterization, plot formation, and its representation of the touchy subjects—all things that contribute to artificiality, and all things that can be found within the realms of Shakespearian Theater—we can shed reality TV in a new light; one of appreciation rather than scorn and shame. Now, in no way am I claiming that reality is as great as the works of the man who has influences the world for hundreds of years, but I am merely using Shakespeare’s work as a medium through which we can come to better appreciate and understand the world of reality television. By doing so, I hope to establish that reality TV’s artificiality isn’t what hurts reality TV, but rather what helps us appreciate it more.

As defined by the New Oxford American Dictionary, reality television is a television program in which real people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative. The genre consists of many different sub categories such as dating shows, documentary style shows, and game shows, the first reality show being the well-known hidden camera show that debuted in 1948: Candid Camera. Since Candid Camera, the reality TV genre has blossomed into what Stepp calls a “major media gold mine”, including subgenres of dating type shows, game/competitions shows, and documentary style reality shows (Stepp). Reality TV
producer, Richard Hall, breaks down the production of a show into four phases: casting, pre-production, production, and post-production. He explains that while sometimes shows will air during the production process, usually the shows will be delivered to stations but remain held until the final stages of production are completed.

Casting, much like in any theatrical production, plays a large role in the reality TV process. Reality TV Producer Mark Cronin explains casting as “looking for personalities that will in some way conflict with each other” (Cronin). By finding that “odd couple”, Cronin states that you will create “interesting turmoil, conflict, and resolution”. A producer may “know what emotions . . . what conflicts [they’re] going for” as Hall says, but it’s up to the cast to give them that emotion and conflict during production. As in live theater casting, reality TV shows will put ads in newspapers, on television, websites, and sometimes even Craigslist in their search for a cast; although, reality TV producers seek out “unknown” men and women rather than guild actors to give them the “raw” emotion that is reality television (also, untrained actors are much cheaper than guild actors) (Chapman). Casting is the basis upon which reality TV writers are able to both create and tell their story. Reality TV even includes the casting of a host in many of its shows, who watches over the contestants, narrates the story, and draws the viewers’ attentions towards the drama. This tactic is also used throughout Shakespeare’s plays, taking the form of a Chorus, like in Henry V. Hosts of the show, like the contestants, are required to have “strong personalities”, and posses the ability to create and maintain a level of excitement throughout the show; however, the most efficient way to get these reactions, as producers have discovered, is not just through casting strong characters and hosts, but by also placing those characters into stereotypes known as stock characters.
Stock characters are the product of an early Italian theater genre known as *commedia dell’Arte*, otherwise known as the mother of modern day improvisation. In the early 16th century, theater groups would travel Italy and perform on the spot improvisation in front of various audiences. Each member of the group would play a specific character each time they performed, so actors became well versed in their characters. The characters include the *Harlequin* (the witty fool), *Il Dottore* (the pompous fraud), the *Inamorato* and *Inamorata* (the lovers), and *Columbina* (*Inamorata*’s servant who was the witty beloved of the *Harlequin*). There were also the adventurous, miserly, villainous, and cowardly characters amongst the stock characters. Today we know the stock characters as ‘stereotypes’, an important feature in reality TV. *Newsweek* declared the top nine stock characters to fall under the following: The desperate bachelorette (a play on the lovers), the despicable dude (*Il Captiano* - swaggering and cowardly), the slut, the good girl, and the bitch (a play on *La Ruffiana*, thwarter of the lovers) to name a few (Ponzer). It’s the stereotypes and characterizations like these that have labeled contestants like Tierra LiCausi (season 17 of *The Bachelor*), who quickly became the most disliked contestant of the season, as villains. In fact, LiCausi seems to mirror Shakespeare’s strong willed Katharina from his comedy *Taming of the Shrew*, whose sister sums up Kate’s personality when she exclaims to Kate “content you in my discontent” (I, i, 83). LiCausi seemed to do nothing but find “content” in the other contestant’s “discontent” as she touted her ability to have “any man she wanted” while running off to see the Bachelor when she wasn’t supposed to, causing great tension between her and her fellow bachelorettes throughout the season.

Katharina isn’t Shakespeare’s only character who seems to fit a stereotype, with well-known characters such as Petrucio (*Taming of the Shrew*) playing the pompous gold digger, Iago (*Othello*) playing the cowardly villain, Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*) playing the overtly pious
servant, or “good boy”, and the Fool, or funny guy, seen in many of Shakespeare’s plays from his tragedy *King Lear* to his comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where the role is played by the mischievous fairy Puck. Both in reality TV and Shakespeare, the use of these well known stereotypes provides as Wendy Wyatt says “commentary on who comprises our communities and how they behave” (Wyatt, 29).

One example of this is seen in *The Taming of the Shrew*. When a Lord discovers the drunkard Sly passed out in the streets of the town, he turns to his servants, suggesting a joke on Sly saying,

If he were conveyed to bed,

Wrapped in sweet clothes,

Rings put upon his fingers,

A most delicious banquet by his bed,

And brave attendant near him when he wakes,

Would not the beggar then forget himself?

(Introduction, i, 31-36)

This would merit entertainment during Shakespeare’s time because he plays with the characters of the drunkard and the wealthy Lord. A man who went to bed a drunkard would not awake a Lord in any time period, and thus Shakespeare plays with placing these familiar characters in different roles and situations to provide conflict and humor. Sly’s inability to fit in the character of a Lord is evident mulitple times throughout the play when he asks for “a pot of small ale” instead of wine, and when at the end of Act I, scene I, a servant notes that Sly begins to fall asleep, saying “My Lord, you nod. You do not mind the play” (Introduction, ii, 1, I, i, 204).
Today, in reality television, we see the same entertainment and pleasure in playing with the rules of our own class system by placing stereotypes in odd circumstances. In *The Simple Life* (2003-2007), a reality show about Paris Hilton, heir to the Hilton hotel fortune, and Nicole Richie leave their money behind in attempts to work various internships along the east coast. In her analysis of the show, Heather Hendershot notes that the girls fail at their attempts to complete their jobs by “ignor[ing] their chores, assembl[ing] slutty outfits . . . [and] mak[ing] half-assed attempts to work blue-collar jobs” (Hendershot 12). In the same way sly is unable to leave behind his character as a drunkard, Paris and Nicole are (seemingly) unable to leave behind their characters as wealthy party girls. While placing stereotypes in unlikely situations provides humor, it’s the pitting of these stock characters against one another, such as the slut vs. the good girl, or the pious vs. the atheist, that truly gives the producers what they’re after: drama.

Once the cast has been agreed upon and the chance of conflict discovered, that conflict and drama is created in the final three stages. Hall describes pre-production as “two or three weeks to get people up to speed” (Hall). It’s here that the contestants are informed of shooting locations and game rule (depending on the type of show being filmed). This is the time in which producers are able to create the controlled environment decided whether to use hidden surveillance cameras, follow their contestant around, or use a mixture of the two. Some reality TV shows will film in front of a live audience, like in *Fear Factor* (2001), or *American Idol*. Once the logistics are taken care of, the crew can begin filming. This is where challenge producers and dating producers are often brought in, and where the manipulation process begins (Arnovitz, 1). Challenge producers are essential in games shows like *Survivor* (1997), *Hell’s Kitchen* (2012), and *The Amazing Race* (2001). What a challenge producer, or what former
reality TV writer Kevin Arnovitz calls a “taction”, does is create a game that can work within a large reality show framework, in which the contestants will compete for a reward. This award ranges from immunity like in Survivor, or sometimes even a cash prize, like in America’s Next Top Model (2003). Either way, the challenge producer will create, test and then explain the game to the contestants before they actually compete on camera. These games often create situations in which editors and producers call and OTF, or “On the Fly” (Arnovitz, 1). An OTF is an impromptu interview of a contestant with hopes to catch said contestant’s emotions in the moment. Cameramen will often use handheld camera during these scenes, allowing them to move freely about the competition. OTFs are different from reflective sit down interview, which tend to occur later in the filming sequence. Both OTFs and sit-down interviews, however, contain a questioning session in which the producer will try and probe the contestant to receive the information they are seeking. On a show like The Bachelor, these specialists are known as dating producers. Their job, as Arnovitz describes, “include[s] coaxing confessions from participants, cultivating jealousies, and ensuring that the participants become sufficiently wasted so that they will make all the miscues essential to a dating show” (Arnovitz 1). The “essentials” include confessing hookups or feelings, revealing past sexual experiences, and basically talking about anything even remotely dramatic (Arnovitz, 1). On a show like The Bachelor, the girls might exit gracefully after being voted off, but once face to face with the camera, they will suddenly begin cursing the ground the man they once loved walks on. This is because the exit conversation between the contestant and producer might look something like this:

Producer: You must be so upset you two didn’t work out.

Contestant A: I guess the connection just wasn’t there.

Producer: But the other day he was telling me how much he loved you.
Contestant A: What!? I bet it was that Contestant B who convinced him to vote me off by sleeping with him! She’s such a whore!

While it may seem to Contestant A that another woman got in the way of her love, the reality might be that Contestant B never slept with the Bachelor and that the Bachelor never told the Producer he loved anyone. Thus the producers are able to coax out the reaction they desire in order to move the plot along.

Further editing takes place after the cameras are off during the post-production stage. Depending on the show, filming can require two to twenty or more cameramen to gather the amount of film needed. Field crews along with mounted surveillance cameras (depending on the show) will collect anywhere from hundreds to over thousands of hours of footage. Sometimes that footage will have successful OTFs or sit-down interviews, but more often than not, the producers will be left wanting more drama. Specialized segment producers, also known as story editors, will sit down and filter through all of the tapes collected over the production stage looking for what they call “money shots”. These are shots of the contestants “visibly failing in the face of adversity” (Arnovitz 1). In the case of Contestant A, a money shot would be her declaring Contestant B a “whore”, or shedding a few tears as she hugs her bachelor goodbye. In the case of a show like Survivor or Cupcake Wars (2010), it would be tripping during an obstacle course, or putting too much flour in your batter. When the story editors run out of, or fail to find money shots, they begin to manipulate the remaining footage using a tactic known as “frankenbiting”. Frankenbiting is the cutting and combining of film segments to create a desired emotion or reaction (Arnovitz 1). One of the most used examples of frankenbiting is when, during the filming of a date, the audience sees the couple sitting down to dinner. During dinner, one of the participants will be telling a story while the camera angles switch to show their
partner sitting opposite them. The partner’s face will show signs of boredom, leading viewers to believe that the date is going bad; in reality that shot of the partner was taken while their date was using the bathroom. Producers will use frankenbiting in a situation like this when the date wasn’t spectacular, but wasn’t exactly horrid. It’s the fastest way to get the point across that there was no connection between the two.

Another way in which editors utilize frankenbiting is in the creation of characters, or rather in the emphasizing of character traits already present in cast members. As mentioned earlier, producers are often seeking “strong personalities”, or as Hall describes it, “strong characters” (Hall). More often than not, a character will have the qualities necessary to fulfill their role as a stereotype or stock character, but the producers will find the need to “amp up” their traits through their editing, which is done by taking sound bites and playing them out of context. For example, in the new reality show Ready for Love (2013), bachelor Tim Lopez is forced to send one of two girls home. In order to make Tim seem more upset about a decision he most likely had already made, the producers had Tim run his hands over his face multiple time, covering his mouth. While covered, the editors would insert sound bites of Tim saying “I’m sick to my stomach”, and “This is so hard” to make it seem like he was saying those things at that moment (Longoria). The reasoning behind doing so lie not only within a desire to build suspense before the reveal, but to also gain sympathy from the audience by painting a portrait of Tim as a forlorn bachelor hoping not to “make the wrong choice” (Longoria). In other instances, such as Tierra’s, the editors would often cut to sections of Tierra cackling manically whenever she took the upper hand in an argument, or gain attention from the Bachelor. The editing, along with the fact that Tierra was very good at “injuring” herself repeatedly throughout the season, painted the
picture that she was conniving and fraudulent when she may have just been probed and
instigated by producers.

The manipulation of characters (or cast members) and scenes to produce a desired
outcome is frequently seen in Shakespeare’s works. In his play The Tempest, Shakespeare’s
character Prospero plays the role of producer to the plot line. We are first introduced to him as
such in the beginning of Act I, Scene ii, when his daughter Miranda says “If by your art, my
dearest father, you have/ Put the wild waters in this roar, ally them”, acknowledging her father as
the creator of the storm (1-2). Upon further questioning, Prospero admits that “I have done
nothing but in care of thee”, revealing to the readers that his manipulation of the storm, as well as
his manipulation of the people that become shipwrecked later, has purpose (I, ii, 19). Much like a
producer of a reality TV show, Prospero creates false relationships and coaxes jealousies among
the castaways, with the help of his servant Ariel, to achieve a desired outcome. In the same way,
Petrucio, of Taming of the Shrew, manipulates his wife Katherina to “tame” her and later use her
to win a bet. Petrucio does so by as one of his servant’s notes, “kill[ing] her in her own humor”,
or giving her, as we call it, a taste of her own medicine (IV, i, 116). Petrucio further reveals his
intent when he states (in relation to causing a scene)

Ay, and amid this hurly I intend
That all is done in reverend care of her.
And, in conclusion, she shall watch all night,
And if she chance to nod, I’ll rail and brawl.
And with the clamor keep her still awake.
This is a way to kill a wife with kindness.
And thus I’ll curb her mad and headstrong humor.
Petruccio continues to manipulate his wife’s feelings by creating situations in which she is forced to comply with his wild demands in order to obtain something she desires; in the case above, it is sleep. Petruccio’s manner of shaping his wife is similar to the way in which producers probe and shape their contestants. They create situations in which they must complete and comply with the rules to get something they desire (immunity, cash, love), while shaping their characteristics through editing and probing for the responses they desire.

The disconnect that comes with reality TV I assert, happens in the lack of the suspension of disbelief, or the pretense that what you are viewing is, at least in part, unreal. As I have demonstrated above, the effort behind creating reality shows is immense, and even admirable, but the audience is quick to find fault with the lack of “authenticity” reality TV seems to strive for. Hosts or reality shows are constantly reminding viewers that what they see is “real”, without any mention of the fact that a large percentage of the show is, in fact, contrived. The inability to acknowledge the reality of reality television mixed with the fact that most of our society realizes the shows are partly contrived creates a sense of superficiality that causes critics to view reality TV as “trash TV”. In Shakespeare’s works, we are able to entertain the thought of two young teenagers falling in love at first sight because we know Shakespeare is not trying to portray reality. In shows like The Bachelor we miss that suspension of disbelief because we are constantly reminded that what we are watching is “real”. The fact is that while something as fantastic as falling in love in a short amount of time can be reality, the chances of it actually working out in the end are so low, that the viewers cannot accept love at first sight as their reality. The conflicting feelings of wanting to accept what they are watching as reality and knowing that it most likely is not creates discord within viewers that can often lead to a distaste
of reality television. Society doesn’t give the producers, writers and editors of reality enough credit because society is too busy focusing on the fact that they can’t get past the superficiality that comes with ignoring reality TV’s artificiality. If we look at the instance in which Hamlet uses the suspension of disbelief to his advantage in the tragedy, *Hamlet*, we can see how through the use of the suspension of disbelief as well as a highly contrived situation, Hamlet is able to still get a point across without directly stating what the point is.

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to
You, trippingly on the toung. But if you mouth it,
As many of your players do, I had as life the town
Crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air gently, for in
Much with your hand thus, but use all gently, for in
The very torrent, tempest, and (as I may say)
Whirlwind of passion, you must aquire and beget a
Temperance that may give it smoothness.
(III, ii, 1-15)

Shakespeare reveals the artificiality of Hamlet’s play in his instructions to speak just as he taught them, and gesture just as he wants them to because Hamlet wants the play to mirror reality so his uncle will understand the reason behind the play. If reality TV were to acknowledge their artificiality a little more, like Shakespeare does in this instance, and allow room for a suspension of disbelief in their viewers, society might be more likely to pay more attention to reality TV as, I dare say, an art, rather than “cheap entertainment”. There is so much more to reality TV than we let ourselves believe. Days and weeks are spent pouring over tapes to create the perfect story line that will capture audiences and give them the entertainment they
crave; but, audiences are distracted by the disconnect with calling something so contrived and artificial a “reality”, that they aren’t able to fully appreciate reality TV for what it really is: storytelling.
Works Cited:


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