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A Rhetorical Approach to Teaching Shakespeare in Secondary Schools

The great bard, William Shakespeare, who penned over 35 plays and more than 150 sonnets, has as one critic notes, over the centuries become “an institutionalized rite of civility. The person who does not love Shakespeare has made, the rite implies, an incomplete adjustment... to culture as a whole” (Greenblatt 1). His genius is indisputable and for this reason, he is still taught in English classrooms at all academic levels. However, generally when the works of Shakespeare are taught in a school setting, they are taught with an emphasis on his poetic and thematic qualities. While these are both undoubtedly magnificent avenues to explore in Shakespeare’s works, if these are the only things that students and teachers feel the need to learn from the great playwright, then they are missing out on another, equally compelling opportunity for interaction with the mastermind: a rhetorical approach.

During Shakespeare’s upbringing, the mainstream topic for grammar school instruction was rhetoric, and both he and his audience would have been aware of the rhetorical choices Shakespeare made in writing his plays. Rhetoric was a crucial skill for divulging meaning and understanding in Shakespeare’s day, so much that he and “his contemporaries, convinced that rhetoric provided the most natural and powerful means by which feelings could be conveyed to readers and listeners, were trained in an analytical language that helped at once to promote and to account for this effectiveness” (Greenblatt 64). Such a rich subject should not be ignored in the classroom, especially when reading the works of Shakespeare, who clearly intended for his

audience to experience his plays in light of their conscious knowledge of rhetoric. Thus, I argue that Shakespeare should be taught, not solely from thematic, poetic, or other commonly used angles, but rather that it should be taught from a rhetorical standpoint in addition to these other proved methods of instruction.

As any person who has studied rhetoric will attest, there are hundreds of different rhetorical figures available for use by an author in his or her compositions. Shakespeare himself “knew and made use of about two hundred” (Greenblatt 64). With so many figures available for study, it is as easy to get stuck in a rut of teaching rhetorical tropes as it is to get stuck in the rut of teaching literary devices. However, rhetoric is more than just a collection of terms used to name stylistic figures implemented by an author, rhetoric is “the study of effective study of speaking and writing. And the art of persuasion” (Silva Rhetoricae). Thus, there are many aspects of rhetoric, beyond rhetorical figures, that are found in Shakespeare’s work and are valuable to teach to secondary school students. While there are many options for teaching these other principles of rhetoric as well, for the purposes and scope of this paper, I will focus on the teaching of Shakespeare to secondary students from a rhetorical perspective with an emphasis on the first three canons of rhetoric: Invention, Arrangement and Style.

Invention:

The first step in any process of communication is to nail down a topic. Once a person has decided what to say, the next step is to decide how to say it and to consider what options you have available to help you express whatever that topic is. This process of deciding what your topic will be and how to discuss it is known as invention, or the discovery of arguments. In the classroom we create situations every day that demand our students express some idea to some audience: we necessitate invention. To codify this process, Aristotle, considered one of the most

influential rhetoricians of all time, devised what he called ‘the topics,’ which were essentially go-to ways of arguing a specific claim successfully. These included “definition, comparison, relationship, circumstances, [and] proofs” (Lamb 108). It is incredibly useful for students to realize that when they are arguing a specific claim that there are ways of doing this that have been proven and can help them in their own argument constructions. Explicitly teaching students about the Topics is extremely helpful to students because they are then able to choose from a toolkit of techniques they have mastered, which is far less intimidating to students than simply hoping that their argument is convincing enough to pass.

Throughout Shakespeare’s works there are instances when each of these basic topics, these techniques, is utilized successfully to create a claim. While I will not pretend to have identified every instance, I have pulled a couple of examples from one scene that will illustrate this point and that can be useful in the classroom.

Scene 5.2 in the play *Henry V*, is quite possibly one of the greatest love scenes ever written. Many teachers teach this portion of the text by solely examining the figurative language and verbal prowess of King Henry, which allowed him to woo Princess Catherine, a woman who did not even speak Henry’s language. While this is a valid means of instruction for this passage of the play, Shakespeare is offering so much more to our students. If a rhetorical eye is used, this scene quickly becomes not only a model of poetic artistry, but also one of the most successful arguments ever made. In this scene we can show our students that King Harry is not a gushing, love-struck suitor, but that he is a clever, accomplished rhetorician; we can illustrate that more than wooing Catherine, he is essentially arguing that it would be wise to marry him through the use of the topics—by masterful invention.

Harry begins with a comparison strategy saying, “An angel is like you, Kate, and you are like an/ angel” (5.2.108-109). By using this comparison he is attempting to win Catherine over by lauding her with compliments and comparing her to beautiful things. This first attempt, however, is unsuccessful because Kate does not understand what the comparison means.

Harry then attempts the topic of circumstances, listing a number of ways he could, in the future, prove his love, if given the correct circumstance. He says:

“if you would put me to verses, or to dance/ for your sake, Kate, why you undid me... or if I could win a lady at leap-frog, or by vaulting into my saddle/ with my armour on my back, under the correction of bragging/ be it spoken, I should quickly leap into a wife. Or if I might/ buffet for my love, or bound my horse for her favours, I could/ lay on like a butcher” (5.2.131-139).

On and on he continues, stating situation after situation in which he could prove to her his love, but because of their present circumstance, living in different countries and never having met, none of these are possible and hence, Kate will simply have to trust that Harry will provide as he says he will. Harry makes headway with this argument, but Kate provides an important concern, that marrying him would make her a traitor to her own country, and once more Harry is forced to redirect his tactics selecting yet another topic, another means of expression, to use in his argument.

His next choice is a definitional approach in which he redefines himself as not an enemy to France, but rather a “friend of/ France” (5.2.165-166). After this definitional distinction is made, Kate is far more open to the rest of Harry’s words. His wooing continues and he eventually convinces the beautiful Catherine to be his bride, all in perfect rhetorical form. Using this scene to help our students understand what a topic is and how each topic selected by Harry

either strengthened or failed to strengthen his argument and why this was. Students will begin to see how incredibly easy, and certainly valid, a rhetorical approach is in approaching Shakespeare's genius.

The next step in the process of teaching Shakespeare rhetorically would be to have students practice using the topics themselves. A great way to scaffold this process, until they are comfortable with the topics as a whole, is to have them imitate Shakespeare's techniques using a different subject matter. One teacher states that using this method, presenting a model text and then having students imitate that, "can help the student learn how it feels to write in other than his normal idiom; the exercise may help free him from inflexible, perhaps tedious, habits of expression" (Larson 1064). Thus, using a rhetorical approach to Shakespeare may the doors of understanding to many students who feel lost after approaching the bard from the traditional angles. Rhetoric gives students another strategy to use in making sense of Shakespeare and then translating their learning from the text into their individual circumstances.

Arrangement of Arguments:

Once a student has decided what they are arguing and how to develop that argument he or she must then decide how to order these arguments. This part of the process is known as arrangement. Classically, speeches were arranged rather rigidly in the following order: introduction, statement of facts, division, proof, refutation, conclusion (Silva Rhetoricae). However, as the study of rhetoric has evolved to include more than simply oration, so too has the rigidity surrounding the proper arrangement of a text. Arrangement is now useful when creating an argument not only in speech, but also in texts meant to be read or even viewed. Thus, according to one source, "proper arrangement of material into a cohesive structure...will [typically] include the introduction, a brief overview, proofs, refutations and conclusion" (Lamb

108-109). An effective persuasive piece may include all of the aforementioned components, or a portion of them, and these could appear in several different orders depending upon how the author decides he or she wants the piece to flow. Shakespeare was very aware of the rhetorical canon of arrangement, for example, he chose to arrange all of his plays in the traditional 5-act sequence. However, making students aware of this fact alone does not do much for enriching their experience with the bard. Instead, a better application would be to look specifically at how Shakespeare's arrangement in a particular work creates an effect on his audience. An example a teacher might use to show how Shakespeare uses arrangement is through comparing two of his sonnets, for instance, numbers 78 and 130.

For obvious reasons, sonnets are usually taught with a focus on their figurative language and poetic devices, but again, a rhetorical approach can increase the density of knowledge students glean from Shakespeare. The sonnet is a highly structured genre and there are certain expectations associated with the form, including adherence to strict rhyme and meter as well as the topic itself, which usually centers on a lover expressing his adoration for the object of his love. Looking beyond the poetic properties employed by Shakespeare, we see in a comparison between these two sonnets, that Shakespeare was a master of arrangement as well as poetry.

Shakespearean Sonnet 78 is a typical sonnet in form and topic, arguing that the speaker's lover is not only his muse, but also the muse of every other love poet. The sonnet begins by introducing a brief overview of his claim: that this woman is his "muse/ and...every alien pen hath got my use" (1-3). Then, Shakespeare supports his claim by offering proofs of how he knows she is the ultimate muse, saying things like, "thine eyes, that taught the dumb on high to sing" (5). Finally, the speaker makes his conclusion and gives the reason for why his argument is important in the first place requesting of his love: "yet be most proud of that which I

compile...thou art all my art" (9-13). He is writing this piece not only to flatter, but also to articulate his desire for her to love him above all others. After looking at the components of arrangement in this piece, discuss with students the effectiveness of this arrangement. Example questions include: What would have happened if he had started with his conclusion, begging her to love him above all others? Would he have seemed needy, more direct? What if he had not included proofs and instead used refutations? Questions like these can help students realize that authors make intentional choices and that these choices create specific effects.

After discussing this first sonnet, have students look at Sonnet 130. This sonnet, while it still follows the structure of meter, rhyme and line number, twists the norm for subject matter and follows a different order in its arrangement. Its argument is that, while his lover is not perfect, he prefers her to any other woman. This sonnet begins, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (1). Not only is this an insult, but it is not much of an overview of what will follow; it is a proof. This speaker then presents more proofs: "coral is far more red than her lips," "her breasts are dun," "black wires grown on her head" and on and on he continues (2-4). After presenting his audience with proofs of his lady's unattractiveness, he finally tells us to what end; he concludes, "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare/ As any she belied with false compare" (13-14). His love, though dismally realistic, is more authentic than a man who would be less blunt. After picking apart this sonnet it is clear that, as far as arrangement is concerned, all it contains are a series of proofs and a conclusion.

After students have identified the parts of this arrangement, the next step is first to discuss this sonnet and the effectiveness of its arrangement. Example discussion questions include: Why does this speaker berate and insult his lover? What effect does this have? Would the effect have been the same if the conclusion had come first? What if he had given a brief

overview of his argument first? Then, when students have discussed these elements, have them compare this sonnet to the Sonnet 78. Emphasize that while each is written in the same genre and same rigid form, that Shakespeare was able to manipulate the arrangement to produce two different, highly effective arguments. This shows students the freedom rhetoricians have, even in the most rigid of genres.

Teachers wishing to illustrate Shakespeare's mastery of arrangement are by no means required to do so using only sonnets. However, it is worth noting that using highly structured forms, like sonnets, makes it easier for students to compare and contrast the techniques used in each; it allows them to zero in on the component parts of the arrangement, without the confusion resultant of stylistic differences between two different genres or differences caused by stylistic liberties available in a less rigid form. After students grasp the concept of arrangement in one of Shakespeare's genres, a teacher can then broaden the scope to include different, more complex genres, fostering discussions of arrangement within these genres and also discussions of arrangement in two different genres focused on the same topic.

Considerations of Style:

The third canon of rhetoric is known as style. Rhetorical style is typically the most closely aligned method for analyzing Shakespeare approached by teachers in their more traditional modes of teaching his works. As one teacher states, style takes in to consideration:

“sentence length and variety, diction, euphony, coherence, paragraphing figures of speech. Figures of speech encompass such techniques as the use of analogy, simile, metaphor, parallelism, antithesis, ellipsis, alliteration, assonance, climax, personification, hyperbole, litotes, irony, paradox, oxymoron, and erotema...such techniques help convey complex ideas clearly” (Lamb 109).

Shakespeare uses many of these stylistic elements throughout his works and teachers are wonderfully adept at pointing out how Shakespeare's work exemplifies the highest quality of English style. However, looking at style through the lens of rhetoric is slightly different than looking at style in the traditional literary way. It is important that students see that Shakespeare's use of style was not simply to create beautiful language, but that his style also strengthened the persuasiveness of the arguments he made in his works.

One such example of how Shakespeare employs style to create a persuasive argument comes from his play, *Julius Caesar*. In Act 3 Scene 2 both Brutus and Antony give speeches at the funeral of Caesar aimed at persuading the Roman crowd to agree with their respective claims regarding Caesar's murder. To assist students in grasping the importance of style in a persuasive argument, have them analyze each speech stylistically and then compare the two. I have analyzed these speeches for stylistic components and pulled a few examples from each.

One of the first things to note is that Brutus' speech is written in prose, whereas Antony's is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is commonly associated with high class or virtuous characters in Shakespeare's plays, and thus the decision to have Antony speak in this form, gives his speech a greater sense of authority and virtue. It also shows that Antony has taken more thought as to what he says, because it takes more effort to speak in a specific meter than to simply speak prosaically. Thus, Antony is already using style to his own persuasive purposes, by suggesting he is a more virtuous and noble source of knowledge than his opponent.

Next one might note that Brutus uses the imperative or command form of speech repeatedly in his oration, saying things like, "hear me," "be silent," "believe me," and "awake your senses" (3.2.13-16). Commands are used as a way to gain submission from another party, whereas in Antony's speech, he does not use the imperative and instead uses synecdoche as he

asks his “Friends” to “lend me your ears” (3.2.70). By referring to their ears in place of the person themselves, he suggests that he is humble and is submitting himself to the audience rather than the other way around. He does not want to impose his will on others and instead asks for only the smallest part of them that can offer of themselves and still allow him to relay his message: their ears. Thus, again Antony uses his stylistic elements to his advantage in gaining the approval of his crowd to create an appearance of humility rather than dominance.

A few last qualities to note in the two speeches are that in Brutus’ speech, he uses several instances of parallelism. For example he relays his reasoning for killing Caesar using parallel structure: “As Caesar loved me, I weep for him. As he was fortunate, I rejoice at it. As he was valiant, I honour him. But as he was/ ambitious, I slew him” (3.2.23-25). By using the same structure of ‘as he was’ followed by some adjective, and then ‘I’ followed by some action Brutus committed, Brutus attempts to present his crime as a simple cause and effect argument. He suggests that Caesar’s murder was inevitable, considering the pattern set in motion by Brutus’ previous encounters with the Emperor; Caesar had become ambitious and so Brutus in response had to kill him. In this way he is trying to lighten the gravity of the crime he committed in hopes of persuading his audience to believe that his act was not as bad as it seems. This approach seems effective in persuading his audience, until Antony responds.

Antony uses a different approach: the careful repetition of a few key words. Over and over he states that “Brutus is an honourable man” (3.2.79). He also repeats several times the idea that “Brutus/ Hath told you Caesar was ambitious” (3.2.74-75). In doing this Antony is carefully trying to first establish Brutus as a man of honor and, thus, somebody in a position to be listened to, and second, that Brutus held an obvious opinion regarding the kind of man Caesar was: in this case a negative one. Antony recounts many times that Brutus negatively referred to Caesar

ambition by reviewing some of the ‘ambitious’ feats of Caesar, which actually turned out to be great victories of Rome. When the citizens of Rome realize that Caesar’s ambition was, in reality, a positive thing for their republic, they are then enraged at Brutus, because he was supposed to have been ‘honorable.’ Thus Antony successfully slanders Brutus, without saying one ill-word towards him, a very persuasive technique.

After students have discussed these and other stylistic pieces of the speeches, they will be prepared to discuss why Antony was ultimately more successful than Brutus. Once students have done this, have them consider questions such as the following: Are there stylistic techniques Brutus could have employed that would have caused the audience to agree more with him? What if Antony had used different techniques? How would these have hindered or improved his argument? Doing this will allow students to practice analyzing the stylistic choices of Shakespeare as tools of persuasion rather than tropes used to make his writing sound prettier and more poetic. Studying Shakespeare’s work in this manner then prepares students to be more aware of the persuasive effects of their own stylistic choices in writing.

Conclusion:

Shakespeare was, and still is, one of the greatest masters of the English in the history of the language. Teachers rightly continue teaching his works as exemplary models of what literature ought to encompass and what an author ought to inspire within his audience. However, teaching Shakespeare merely from a poetic or literary standpoint negates a huge portion of what Shakespeare considered when composing his plays and sonnets: rhetoric. A rhetorical approach to teaching his works is another way that teachers can successfully emphasize Shakespeare’s genius and come closer to helping students unmask the true intent the Bard sought when he composed his art so many centuries ago.

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