Poems and Poetry: Writing Useful For Teaching Shakespeare

PETER E. MURPHY

SHAKESPEARE DID NOT DIE IN 1616. He died in a ninth-grade classroom in the early Sixties when a good-natured pedagogue insisted that we "learn to appreciate" the beauty of the Bard's verse, he read to us and we listened. He explained to us, and we scanned our lines and thought "Deadly!"

It took almost a decade for me to exhume the body of Shakespeare's work, to look at it with my own eyes, and to love it for the drama it is. In the meantime, of course, I have also looked at other poetry, and what I like best in modern verse is the same wit, quality, and life that attracts me to Shakespeare. My teaching of Shakespeare has improved, and I have enjoyed it more since I abandoned the artifice of time periods and began teaching modern poems and poetry-writing while simultaneously teaching Shakespeare's plays.

I

My students begin reading short stories early in the year, then progress to novels, learning that there is more to reading and analyzing literature than discussing the plot. About mid-year I try to break their preconceived ideas about poetry by introducing it as a "dirty" word, a word which, unfortunately, offends them and their peers more than the words which describe their daily bodily functions and their lusty hormonal drives.

While reading and responding to many poems, they learn the poetic terms that relate to the devices and concepts they are discussing. They read Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and after listening to a professional recording of it by Richard Burton, they begin reading Shakespeare.

Romeo and Juliet is one of the most widely-taught plays in high school, and it is usually popular with students. Among the major themes in the play is that of fate and fortune, representing all that is confusing to a hapless lot of mortals. But what I usually find from class discussions is that my students have little feeling for what's going on in *Romeo and Juliet*. Here Maugham helps. His

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prose poem "Death Speaks" from the play *Sheppey* (reprinted in John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra*) is concrete enough to illustrate the futility of trying to escape one's destiny.

> There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came up to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.[1]

The universe is huge but sparse, and Romeo calls to this futile emptiness frequently in the traffic of the tragedy. He shares his "Mind-misgiving" dream with the revelers (I.iv.106–13); he calls himself "Fortune's fool" (III.i.136) after slaying Tybalt; and when he learns of Juliet's alleged death, he curses, "Is it even so? Then I defy you stars" (V.i.24). Many of Stephen Crane's poems also speak to this same emptiness, but none so directly as the following:

> A man said to the universe:
> "Sir, I exist!"
> "However," replied the universe,
> "The fact has not created in me
> A sense of obligation."[2]

In the poem "Purgatory" Maxine Kumin suggests an answer to the question which, when we view or read the play, we forget to ask. "What would happen if the stars uncrossed in Act V and Romeo and Juliet escaped to Mantua?"

> And suppose the darlings get to Mantua,
> suppose they cheat the crypt, what next? Begin
> with him, unshaven. Though not, I grant you, a
> displeasing cockerel, there's egg yolk on his chin.
> His seedy robe's aflap, he's got the rheum.
> Poor dear, the cooking lard has smoked her eye.
> Another Montague is in the womb
> although the first babe's bottom's not yet dry.
> She scrolls a weekly letter to her Nurse
> who dares to send a smock through Balthasar,
> and once a month, his father posts a purse.
> News from Verona? Always news of war.
> Such sour years it takes to right this wrong!
> The fifth act runs unconscionably long.[3]

[1] *Sheppy,* from *The Collected Poems of W. Somerset Maugham,* Vol. III (Melbourne, London, Toronto: William Heineman Ltd., 1931), p. 298.

[2] *The Poems of Stephen Crane, A Critical Edition,* Joseph Katz, ed. (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1971), p. 102.

[3] *The Privilege,* Maxine Kumin (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 67.

There are other poems which have been written in response to Shakespeare's plays. William Carlos Williams' "Lear" and Frost's "Out, Out" come quickly to mind. I have been able to find modern poems useful for teaching for almost any of the Shakespearean plays I have attempted. There is also an unlimited canon of poetry from other periods to use in teaching Shakespeare. One can sneak across the time barrier in both directions by using the erotic poems of Ovid alongside "It's Raining in Love" by Richard Brautigan and "To His Coy Mistress" by Marvell.

But of course we should not neglect to teach the poetry from the plays as well. We should share with our students, particularly the youngest ones, the heightened state of language that Shakespeare used to convey the same emotions that many of our students have felt desperate to express for themselves.

I have taken Romeo's speech comparing Juliet to a "Jewel in an Ethiop's ear" and had my students read it for the love poem it is. The Sonnets, so rarely taught in high school, are a particularly rich resource for teaching the plays. Sonnet 130, for example, is a saucy foil to the more succulent poetry of *Romeo and Juliet.*

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
(ll. 1–4)

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
(I.v.44–47)[4]

II

If it is true that the best response to a poem is a poem, then perhaps it isn't such a bad idea to have one's students write poems in response to Shakespeare. Not only does it allow them to obtain a greater understanding of the writing process; it forces them to reconsider the play in more depth. Here are several suggestions which will work not only for Shakespeare but for any literature.

A traditional exercise is to have students write sonnets about some theme or another using formal iambic pentameter and an abab rhyme scheme. This may be useful, but I have seen students who loved poetry-writing in my classes learn to hate it in later classes where this exercise was inflicted on them. Why not loosen up one's definition of a sonnet in order to allow the students to use their creative power to compose thoughts, not to count syllables and stresses. Here are three fourteen-word sonnets I composed the other night while waiting for sleep to come.

A.	B.	C.
Too	Before	Macbeth
late	the	Macbeth
our	ancient	your
love	tide	heart

[4] All references are to *The Riverside Shakespeare,* ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

turns	has	empties
to	covered	its
soap—	our	blood—
Bubbles	soil	the
out	We'd	soil
of	best	drinks
the	perhaps	so
Earth	finish	deep
then	our	so
pops	toil	good

Yes, these are free verse poems that will teach students nothing at all about the difficulty of composing "real poems." But the composing may attract them to the power that words can have, and thereby allow them to be more playful and imaginative in their own thinking and writing.

Quotations are another way of getting students to write their own poems. I try to choose interesting ones that are not only important to the play but are intriguing on their own. *Macbeth* suggests these:

> The earth hath bubbles, as the water has
> . . .
> (I.iii.79)

> . . . unsex me here,
> And fill me . . .
> (I.v.41–42)

> By the pricking of my thumbs,
> Something wicked this way comes.
> (IV.i.45–46)

> For strangers to my nature: I am yet
> Unknown to woman
> (IV.iii.125–26)

The following poem is a response to Le Beau's line "Hereafter, in a better world than this" in *As You Like It*, I.ii.284:

ALL'S WELL

At light's grey moment
at the starkness of approach-
ing storm—our wind is sucked
from our bodies—
we clothe ourselves
in windows, hereafter,
in a better world
than this
when light's last flesh
warms our too early failure
to exist
and frisks our rippling skin
and with our life does mesh.

III

Parody is another way to bring forth poetry-writing from today's rock 'n' roll students. In Paul Zimmer's *Zimmer Poems* each composition uses the poet's name either in the title or in the text. He includes several parodies, such as "Death of the Hired Zimmer," "Leaves of Zimmer," and "Zumer is Icumen In." A brief but often amusing exercise is to have students write parodies using lines from the plays. Thus

> Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! beware Macduff;
> Beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough.
> (IV.i.71–72)

can give rise to

> Sister, Sister, Sister, beware of Murphy;
> Beware his loins of fire—tell him, Enough!

Shakespeare frequently parodies himself. In *As You Like It* Touchstone mocks Orlando's tree-breaking, pitiful love poems with some couplets of his own.

> For a taste:
> If a hart do lack a hind,
> Let him seek out Rosalind.
> If the cat will after kind,
> So be sure will Rosalind.
> Wint'red garments must be lin'd,
> So must slender Rosalind.
> They that reap must sheaf and bind,
> Then to cart with Rosalind.
> Sweetest nut hath sourest rind,
> Such a nut is Rosalind.
> He that sweetest rose will find,
> Must find love's prick and Rosalind.
> (III.ii.100–112)

Shakespeare's parody can itself be parodied.

> For a drunk:
> If a tongue do feel the thirst,
> Let him go and seek out Murph.
> If his lips do too much slurpy,
> So, be sure, will Murphy.
> Policemen will close up mirth,
> And feed the drunk tank with Murph.
> They that drink must lose their purse,
> For drinking long and hard with Murph.
> Sweetest beer make sourest pith,
> Such a drunk is Mither Mith.
> He whose brains do slosh like turkey,
> Hath drunk deep with Peter Murphy.

I am sure that after reading these embarrassing samples of mine, you will feel confident to write your own and share them with your students. They too can then write magic.

There is, of course, no one way to teach literature. But using the ideas about poetry and poetry-writing suggested here may help to introduce an element of playfulness and involvement that might not ordinarily occur in a class on Shakespeare. We all know that Shakespeare is a Serious Author. But studying him—and teaching him—can also be, and indeed should be, fun.