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A few Hints yo approach Shakespeare's Works

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide some orientation to students of English teaching programs in connection with the reading of the plays and sonnets of the playwright who is considered the master of English literature, William Shakespeare. By providing some basic information and encouraging further study prior to approaching any of his plays, this analysis intends to state that Shakespeare's plays are not as difficult as they seem to be and, of course, are not something reserved for scholars and literature teachers.

Keywords: Shakespeare – english literature
000000000 – methodology of literature

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es entregar alguna orientación a los alumnos que siguen carreras vinculadas a la Enseñanza del Inglés en relación con las obras de quien es considerado el maestro de la literatura inglesa, William Shakespeare. A través de la entrega de información básica y de la estimulación para investigar otras fuentes antes de aproximarse a alguna de sus obras, este análisis pretende establecer que las obras de Shakespeare no son tan difíciles como muchas veces se les quiere hacer parecer y que, desde luego, no están de ninguna manera reservadas sólo para la lectura o estudio de los eruditos y profesores de literatura.

Palabras clave: Shakespeare – literatura inglesa
0000000000000 – didáctica de la literature

Introduction

It is generally believed by both scholars and students that reading Shakespeare is a difficult task. This is specially so if the reader approaches the playwright with the fear of finding difficult lexicological components and is disinclined to read "Old" English. Whatever the case, and according to my personal experience in the teaching of English Literature at secondary and university levels, many Chilean students of English as a foreign language and, specifically, students of the different English Teaching programs at different universities, seem to be reluctant to read complete versions of Shakespeare's works. They usually resort to either Spanish translations or, in many cases, modern movies, which usually modify the real sense and meaning of the English originals.

It is true that Shakespeare may be difficult for those who decide to read his plays or sonnets for the first time, but there are a few ideas that can help make it easier and are discussed in this short monograph.

1. The first thing to consider is that plays were originally meant to be played and seen and not read.

This aspect, although quite obvious, is important to be pointed out because much of the process of understanding a play has to do with the attitude of the spectator (or reader in this case). As we can not have Shakespeare's plays very frequently represented in our reduced theater scene –much less in the English language– we can hardly be exposed to the situation of really seeing the play. It is for this reason that we have to make an additional effort to understand the different scenes in the plays. In fact, the reader is in a very similar situation to that of the actual audiences of Shakespeare's plays in fifteenth century England when, for example, in the Prologue to Henry V, they were requested by an actor to "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts... Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them, printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth". By this simple request he forced the audience to use their minds in understanding the different parts of his plays.

In our case today we should go a little further than the Elizabethan spectators and not only imagine that we see the objects they could not present on stage but also try to create the complete play in our imagination.

There are many cases that we can take from Shakespeare's plays that could be useful to exemplify the idea of the previous paragraph. When King Duncan, for instance, arrives at Macbeth's castle and remarks:

"This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses",

we should immediately bring the castle to our minds as a warm and comfortable place to visit.

Similarly, when Macbeth angrily orders his servant, who has come to report that the English soldiers are coming in large numbers and getting closer to the castle, and says:

"The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!
Where gott'st thou that goose look?"

it seems very obvious to the reader that Macbeth is desperately angry, aggressive and enraged, while the servant sounds as if he were scared to death with the fact that the enemy army is approaching the fortress.

At the same time, Shakespeare never hides elements from the reader. He may, of course, puzzle or fool his characters, but the readers are always aware of the actions that are necessary to understand the play.

Very easily, we can observe that the reader knows exactly what Macbeth's intentions are when the assassins are waiting for Banquo before they kill him because we have "witnessed" the dialogue between the king and the killers. Similarly, in Romeo and Juliet we are always aware of the facts that will lead the action to its tragic end.

It seems, then, very convenient for a better understanding of Shakespeare's plays to read them rapidly once for the story and a second time for plot structure, characterization, and any other element that the reader would like to consider. It needs to be considered that the play should be read as a drama and not as a novel or an essay. This means that special attention needs to be given to stage directions and to the fact that words are intended to be heard rather than read.

Additionally, it must be considered that Shakespeare's plots are not complicated or difficult to follow. This simplicity consists basically in the fact that they usually follow a simple formula, except in the historical plays. As one would expect, drama should be based on human conflict. In the case of tragedy, it is a conflict where fatal consequences are usually involved, whereas in comedy, there is a happy ending.

The reader is usually presented with an unstable condition which has existed for some time (for example, the war against the rebellious Macdonwald and the Thane of Cawdor in Macbeth, and the insincere relationship between Lear and two of his daughters, Goneril and Regan, in King Lear), and which continues until it reaches its climax. In tragedy the plot usually shows the "tragic flaw" which does not stop until it has destroyed the victim or victims. In comedy, the conflict is in most cases something unimportant that usually concludes with a happy union or reunion.

2. A second important element to consider when reading Shakespeare's plays is the Elizabethan scene and the importance given to this form of art during the long reign of Elizabeth I.

The Elizabethan theater for which Shakespeare wrote had very little in common with the theater of today. Many historians describe

Shakespeare's playhouse more like a stadium or arena than a theater, according to our present standards. The reader then should be familiarized with the structure of playhouses such as The Theater, The Curtain and the famous Globe. They all had a circular or polygonal wooden structure of galleries surrounding an open court into the middle of which projected a covered platform. The audience, usually rowdy and noisy, stood rather than sat around this platform, although the most influential ones usually found a seat in the galleries. There was no front curtain in the stage and acts had to be announced by the actors. The famous inner stage was usually appropriate for cells, caves or shops, while the upper stage was necessary for scenes requiring elevation, the famous balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet being the most famous.

The complete description of the Elizabethan theater would require long explanations, which are usually found in textbooks and essays written by Shakespeare's scholars, and it would be highly necessary and convenient that the reader may have an approximate idea of the physical structure and conditions in which Shakespeare presented his plays.

When the reader has obtained some information about the physical structure of the Elizabethan theater, he or she will be aware of the different possibilities offered by such structure and will certainly understand the relationship established on the stage by the characters. The most classic example of this idea is represented by the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet, where the reader has to exercise his imagination and have a clear vision of the situation to understand the dialogues, especially the lines by Juliet when she talks simultaneously to Romeo and the Nurse, who was calling her when she was talking to her beloved in the orchard of the Capulates:

Nurse calls within:

I hear some noise within; dear love, adieu! Anon,
good nurse! Sweet Montague, be true.
Stay but a little, I will come again.

Then, the more the reader can know about the Elizabethan theater structure the more he or she can visualize the scenes. In other words, it would be very difficult for the readers to understand Shakespeare's use of the stage if they had the modern standards of a theater as their only reference. They need to pay attention to the limited physical elements incorporated to the theater of that period.

3. The development of drama as a literary form boomed during Elizabeth I's reign.

Being a poet herself, Elizabeth I encouraged all forms of literary development and enjoyed attending the theater plays or summoning the acting companies to perform privately.

However, the common citizen had to attend the local theaters, which were located outside the city of London, across the river Thames. As it could be expected, all kinds of people went to see the plays and rowdy and noisy audiences were usually attracted to this kind of performances. Bear-baiting was not unusual on the occasion and activities of doubtful reputation were commonly carried out in the areas nearby. It is interesting to note that attending a play was probably one of the few occasions in which pageantry and gentlemen mingled in a common activity.

The spectators usually stood in the galleries or in the yard, facing the stage. Their proximity with the actors made their approval or refusal very clear. Shouting or hissing or even throwing objects to the actors was not uncommon. In this context it seems that the complexity of the plays could not be taken too far by the playwright. And this is reflected in most plays, which in general, followed a very simple pattern.

4. It is necessary to mention as a fourth aspect that Shakespeare wrote according to the needs and experiences of the time he lived in.

We know that he was born a few years after Elizabeth came to the English throne, which means that he somehow represented the new order established by the monarch. It is in this world that the famous "Chain of Being" acquired importance. Every single element of life had its position in this chain, which, when broken, produced a disorder that could only be regained when things came back to normal. An easy description of the Elizabethan Chain of Being found in the Internet by an unknown author reads as follows:

"Very briefly, they felt that the universe made a lot more sense than we are inclined to think, and that it was all arranged on the common principle of hierarchy. That is, just as some animals were clearly superior to others, and some metals were clearly more valuable than others, and society seemed to work best when people were stratified in distinct classes, so everything else (physics, astronomy, morality, art, etc.) probably also sorted itself out according to this universal principle of hierarchy". 1

It is for this reason that Macbeth would obviously have a fatal conclusion. The order had been broken with the assassination of the King, which constituted an unnatural action. This is reinforced by the conversation between the Old Man and Ross outside Macbeth's castle:

Ross: Ha, good Father

Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threatens his bloody stage: by th' clock `tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp.
Is `t night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,
When living light should kiss it?

Old Man: `Tis unnatural,

Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,
A falcon, towering in her pride of place,
Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at, and kill'd.

Ross: And Duncan's horses (a thing most strange and certain)

Beauteous and swift, the minions in their race,
Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending `gainst obedience as they would make
War against mankind.

This unnatural disorder represents the breaking of the Chain of Being by Macbeth's deed. All the world is suffering the consequences of this action and there will be no peace until the situation is remedied.

For the playwrights of the period it was easy to use the Chain of Being as a reference, and any person who intends to read Shakespeare has to have a notion at least about the existence of this framework on which many authors rely for their literary production.

5. A fifth question to consider is related with the idea that during the Elizabethan period there was a tendency to admire complicated and intricate patterns.

This could be clearly observed in the architecture, painting, and musical development as well as in clothes. The best example is represented by Queen Elizabeth I, who is reportedly seen as a woman who would take as long as three hours in getting dressed. Literature was not indifferent to this, but in Shakespeare's case, the complexity is more in the lexicological aspect rather than in the content or structure of his plays or sonnets. The analysis of Shakespeare's influence in the development of

the English language has been the subject of many studies of both historians and linguists. This monograph will not cover that issue, as it is something reserved for specialists in those areas.

It is, then, important to mention that it is probably the lexical aspect which will become the most complicated for the new reader of Shakespeare. There is, however, significant help in most editions of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets given by means of side or foot notes with the "translation" of difficult expressions, words or collocations into modern English, so that the reader can easily understand the real meaning of the words that may be considered as "difficult".

6. Many of the ideas explained above in connection with theatre are also applicable to Shakespeare's sonnets.

Basically, an appropriate reading of Shakespeare's sonnets calls for the understanding of the purpose of his writings. It is generally accepted that Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets which are commonly divided into two groups: the larger set (Sonnets 1 through 126) is addressed by the poet to a beloved young man; the remaining pieces (Sonnets 127 through 154) comprise a smaller grouping addressed to another persona, a Dark Lady, who is considered one of the great mysteries in Shakespeare's life. The admiration he feels for the young man is clearly expressed in the famous sonnet XVIII, which might be misinterpreted as a love poem addressed to a girl. In this sonnet Shakespeare is amazed at the intellectual, physical and personal characteristics of the young man and encourages him to marry and perpetuate his characteristics. For some readers, it might be shocking to find a poem like this which stresses the admiration between the writer and a male character. However, one must consider the personal relationships existing in those days, where vocabulary could be delicate without the meaning it might have today.

Conclusion

It should be understood from the previous lines that reading Shakespeare is not complicated when the reader knows the facts that surround his inspiration. Both the social and personal situation of William Shakespeare will definitely determine his writings. It is necessary to approach Shakespeare's writings with some understanding of his life, his surroundings and his relationship with society, especially the Elizabethan scene. It will be very difficult for a student of English, even a native speaker, to read any of Shakespeare's works without paying attention to the details indicated in the paragraphs above.

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