

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Bedford Shakespeare: The Bard in Hypertext

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, January 28th, 2015

Most editions of Shakespeare's plays are exactly what you'd expect: text, footnotes, some introductory remarks. They cram words into your ears, but don't give much sense of them, or the context of the plays, or how the plays make context for our lives today.

A new edition, *The Bedford Shakespeare*, is different. It presents the 25 most-studied plays as part of an experiential banquet, which also includes essays, contexts, explanations, quotes from actors and lots of illustrations; one of the authors calls it "a hypertext reading experience." I imagine students will find their appetites expanded with this encounter. I recently talked with the authors, Russ McDonald, Professor of English Literature at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and Lena Cowen Orlin, Professor of English at Georgetown University and Executive Director of the Shakespeare Association of America. (Full disclosure: Bedford/St. Martin's is also my publisher.)

ADAM: Hi, Russ and Lena! First off, I have to congratulate you. The book is quite an undertaking, and I learned a lot from it.

RUSS: Thank you. The Bedford people did such a splendid job on the physical book that I have to say that, when I open it, it feels friendly and inviting to me.

LENA: Thanks! I have to confess that I learned a lot from it, too. You know, most scholarly research publications are narrow and focused, but the world of Shakespeare is a big one. Here, we had the chance to think in terms of poetry, history, imagination, performance, human relationships, argument, emotion—it was fun! And it was fun to know that, no matter how many ideas we tried to open up, for teachers and students these are just springboards to more.

ADAM: There are a lot of Shakespeare editions out there. Why do another one?

RUSS: This is, of course, an essential question. The kinds of books we use change over time. It used to be, in the 1950s and '60s, that almost everyone in American colleges used the G. B. Harrison edition. As students, Lena and I were among the first to use the Complete Pelican Shakespeare, and this was followed by the Riverside Shakespeare and David Bevington's revision of Hardin Craig's old edition.

All these editions, and we should also include Greenblatt's *Norton Shakespeare*, are fundamentally similar: a comprehensive Introduction to the period, then introductions to each of the plays, with textual apparatus and such. But they all look fundamentally the same: indeed they look as if they might have been edited in the eighteenth century, with a large body of text on the page and then

notes at the bottom of the page.

The Bedford Shakespeare is intended frankly as a pedagogical edition, a volume that contains many of the classroom strategies, topics, and illustrations that we have found helpful in our years of teaching. And these materials are integrated into the presentation of the play text. So that, for example, accompanying Macbeth's great soliloquy in Act One, scene seven is a five-hundred word analysis of the loaded word "success" as it functions in that speech and indeed throughout the play. Readers do not have to stop and absorb that discussion, but they may do so, or they may come back to it. We have also (as you've noticed) dismantled the formidable General Introduction and chopped it into twenty-five "Contexts" designed to enrich the reader's understanding of early modern European culture. Finally, the extensive emphasis on performance—production photos (and not just the RSC) and quotations from actors distinguishes this volume from most Shakespeare texts. We hope that some of the visual materials will stimulate readers' imaginations about possibilities for staging and for interpretation.

LENA: When we first talked about the Bedford project, Russ pointed out that the way in which Shakespeare's plays are presented on the printed page hasn't really changed since the first "modern" edition in 1709. Until he said that, I probably took it for granted that every Shakespeare play needs a long, scholarly introduction and then two columns of small, dense type on each page. Our genius editors at Bedford had a different vision. This is more like a hypertext reading experience, with pop-up information and illustrations, all keyed to individual Shakespearean lines. Often, I bring together several short quotations to show that Shakespeare has been understood in different ways by different critics and actors and that there's room for new ideas from students, too. Next, we split that long, scholarly introduction into two parts. Before the play there's a very brief preview that gives some important start-up information and, we hope, identifies some of the most intriguing aspects of the play. The students don't encounter our own interpretation until after they've read the play and developed some interpretations of their own. We also provide simple plot summaries for two reasons. First, students can read a scene and then check back to make sure that they've got the gist. Second, we want them to understand that Shakespeare is about much more than plot; plot's just the beginning. Finally, we add some information about the afterlives of the plays to show Shakespeare's long influence in world culture. For me, assembling the supporting material for each play was like doing a jigsaw puzzle of meanings and ideas. I hope that every student will find at least one piece of the puzzle that captures their interest and inspires them to think in more sophisticated ways about Shakespeare.

ADAM: I was thrilled to see *Titus Andronicus* included, because it is often omitted from works that don't include all the plays. How did you decide which plays to include?

RUSS: Since we were basing the contents on the plays that mostly get taught, the core of the book was pretty easy to determine, but there were fuzzy cases at the margin. Actually, *Titus* has come into fashion in university courses in the past two decades, partly owing to Julie Taymor's film. After twenty-five we had to give up: Lena especially wanted *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, I wanted *Pericles*, and we both wanted *3 Henry VI*, but physical requirements prevailed.

LENA: I am with you on *Titus Andronicus*. I think if Russ and I had had to decide which plays to include we would not still be friends. But Bedford conducted extensive research to find out which plays are taught most often, and that research guided the decisions. Plays go in and out of fashion; a good film version can move a less popular play onto the syllabus, for example. I think that's what happened with *Titus Andronicus*. The reason I was so happy to include *Titus* is because one of my

most memorable theater experiences ever was a production directed by Deborah Warner for the Royal Shakespeare Company. You remember that the character Lavinia is raped, has her tongue cut out, and has her hands cut off. After the scene of her brutalization, she is briefly offstage before she comes on again to be discovered by her uncle. I happened at this production to be seated on the aisle as the actress walked to the rear of the theater to wait for her re-entry. As she went back on, though, she tripped over someone who had fainted in that aisle. Later I found out that at every single performance, someone fainted or rushed from the room, nauseated. I was very concerned in the Bedford edition that our supporting materials should honor that moment. Go back in history and you'll find it over and over again. The first major modern production was in 1923 at the Old Vic in London. They advertised that they kept an ambulance at the ready and stocked extra supplies of alcohol for patrons who needed to steady their nerves at the intermission. This is a very powerful play, and students today are more capable than their parents were of appreciating the significance of its grotesquery and violence and despair.

ADAM: In your Previews, there's a recurring theme of strangeness vs familiarity, which is a version of "compare and contrast." It recurs in different forms, as in your introduction to *Henry V*, where you discuss that we can read the play as "both/and." How does Shakespeare do that? Do you think the familiarity is especially relevant to the modern reader, because we know Shakespeare even before we have officially read or seen the works? And was Shakespeare "strange" even in his own time?

RUSS: I would say that "familiarity" is something of a trap: I'd like students to read *Hamlet* as if they'd never heard of it before, although I admit the difficulty of this. The "both/and" phenomenon is actually an important critical principle, one of the characteristics that makes Shakespeare Shakespeare. In a famous article in 1976 or so Norman Rabkin wrote about "Rabbits, Ducks, and Henry V," arguing that the play invites you to see Henry both as a hero and as a thug, but that you can't see both views at the same time. This multifarious way of looking is one of the qualities that make the plays endlessly readable and watchable.

LENA: *Henry V* is a great example of what you're talking about. This play has a long history of being staged like a great patriotic war movie. In fact, there are two important movie versions, and while Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* is more aware of the human cost of war than Laurence Olivier's was, still Branagh can't help playing Henry as much of a hero as Olivier did. It's irresistible: there's a lot of action, and a lot of stirring inspirational rhetoric, and Henry wins the war and wins the girl. When you read the play, it's easier to see that it's much more complicated than that. Shakespeare's audiences would already have known a play by another guy, a playwright whose name we don't know, who wrote *The Famous Victories of Henry V*. So everyone probably expected Shakespeare to give them the familiar story of the most heroic and valiant king in English history. But Shakespeare had already written so many plays at this point that he wasn't about to do something easy and uncomplicated, something that had already been done before. He did make this play strange, by showing the calculation, even cruelty, that goes along with a king's kind of power and ambition. Today we're ready to recognize the "both/and." With the Bedford edition, we hope that students will learn that the first way they understand a play isn't the only way and shouldn't be the last way. Every play is always strange, in the sense that there's always more to discover in it.

ADAM: Your contextual material pulls no punches, as in the discussion of race and anti-Semitism.

RUSS: Thank you. We tried to divide up the tricky topics so that neither of us was excessively

burdened with writing about sensitive problems. In dealing with such matters as race and misogyny, it's vital to maintain a sense of balance: we don't want to read the plays only through the lens of our twenty-first century interests; on the other hand, Shakespeare makes these problems central to some of the greatest plays, and we deform the works if we give insufficient attention to such concerns. For us, the difficulty is to introduce such questions while taking into account both a modern and an early modern point of view. To take a single example, in a play like *The Comedy of Errors*, the beating of the servants by their masters can be unsettling, and yet the farcical nature of the comedy provides a kind of insulation for the audience. And still the violence can be troubling.

LENA: I often teach a course called "Shakespeare's Problem Plays." This is a term from the turn of the twentieth century that was primarily about genre. Can you really call *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* comedies? And yet they're not quite tragedies, either; labeling them is a problem. In my class, I expand the idea to include subjects that are problematic. Is *The Merchant of Venice* about anti-Semitism or is it anti-Semitic? Is *Othello* about racism or is it racist? Is *Much Ado About Nothing* about sexism or is it sexist? I always take my students to at least one local theater production, so I change the syllabus every semester to include whatever's being staged. Believe me, every play is a "problem" in the sense that it is grappling with political and emotional issues that we're still living with. This is one reason we still read Shakespeare: he was concerned with issues that have remained problems for 400 years. But I like to approach Shakespeare this way not because he's a writer "for all time," but instead to show how alive and engaged his plays were in their own moment and how they're now vehicles for us to engage with the problems of our moment. Shakespeare is good for thinking with.

ADAM: For each of you, what was your first introduction to Shakespeare?

RUSS: I had two introductions, one disastrous, one miraculous. My tenth-grade encounter with *Julius Caesar* and *As You Like It* was not a success—the latter I was required to read on my own, and, well, I did not like it. Then in my last year of high school I had a splendid advanced studies teacher who taught us *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. My eyes were opened. I should also add that when I graduated from college I went to England and saw everything at Stratford-upon-Avon, including Judi Dench in the famous John Barton production of *Twelfth Night*, and I thought the plays were the most beautiful things I had ever seen.

LENA: Gosh, that's hard to remember. I'll tell you my first formative memory. I grew up in the American Midwest, in a town that hadn't yet developed culturally. But in high school, my English teacher took us on a field trip to see a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. One of the reasons I was so excited about the Bedford project was that it gives us an opportunity to suggest how many different ways students can encounter Shakespeare. Every time I read a play, I find something I hadn't noticed before. Every time I go to the theater, I hear at least one line in an entirely new way. Every time I teach Shakespeare, a student understands something about a character that I hadn't picked up on.

ADAM: How might parents introduce children to Shakespeare today?

RUSS: There are countless tools for doing so: children's theatre, simplified stories, cartoons (like the student who, in a class on *Hamlet*, pipes up with "This is just like The Lion King!"), etc. I always think that seeing a production is key, but you shouldn't force things too early.

LENA: There are so many more avenues to Shakespeare these days. It used to be that all people

had were the prose versions known as “Lambs’ Tales,” published by Charles and Mary Lamb in 1807. In the mid-twentieth century we had Classic Comics versions. But now there are illustrated prose versions and simplified verse versions and amazing graphic versions. You can find nearly any Shakespeare scene on YouTube, and some of these are animated. Many professional theater companies have small groups of actors who will travel to local schools to do Shakespeare workshops and performances. They’re working to develop the theater audiences of the future, and they’re great at engaging students in lively and imaginative ways. Parents who aren’t actors can still try reading Shakespeare aloud.



The Bedford Shakespeare

ADAM: Tell me about the cover. That’s the Ninth Doctor from *Dr. Who* pointing to an orthodontic problem, right?

RUSS: Yes, I have had some funny comments about the particular canine tooth to which he is pointing. Bedford did consider an *Othello* shot and apparently took a vote among potential users. But clearly the cover does its job by instantaneously identifying the product: the image of Hamlet and the skull of Yorick has been something like a Shakespeare brand since the eighteenth century.

LENA: Hmm. Now that you point it out, that is one mean incisor. And good eye about the actor, Christopher Eccleston! Our wonderful Bedford editor Rachel Goldberg found the cover illustrations. It seems to me like the perfect choice because it’s an image that’s understood worldwide. A man with a skull: we all know that’s Hamlet; we all know that’s Shakespeare.

Buy The Bedford Shakespeare here.

Top image: Shakespeare’s first folio; courtesy Wikimedia.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, January 28th, 2015 at 6:00 pm and is filed under [Theatre, Fiction](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.