
TEXTS AND CONTEXTS – A READER- ORIENTED APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract: The paper investigates the grounds on which the reception of a Shakespearean play can be based. The play we envisage is Much Ado about Nothing as in terms of reception it is a rewarding area of investigation and growing in popularity. The three types of readership under scrutiny are of an expert, initiated and innocent nature. What we report here is the outcome of an expert interpretation of some fragments from the comedy and their two recent films adaptations which served the purpose of generating hypotheses for the initiated and innocent readerships to follow.

Keywords: reader-orientedness, types of readership, Shakespeare.

Motto: And there's no better time to get to know Shakespeare than during the feast of Shakespeare and Shakespearean events that will take place between 2014 and 2016.

Shakespeare and his work are undoubtedly the most frequently used and abused subjects of investigation ranging from academic to forensic studies, to take two extremes. In an equally frequent way, Shakespeare is performed whether as himself or when it comes to his work, either in more formal circumstances, such as various types of theaters, or informally as, for instance, in street art happenings. Whenever someone claims that Shakespeare and his work have finally been exhausted as a subject of scholastic and artistic endeavours, out of nowhere and all of a sudden, a fresh approach or facet pops up. So what can someone, academic or performance specialist, say about Shakespeare in the three proclaimed Years of the Bard, that hasn't been said before? Shakespeare was born just about 450 years ago (in April, 1564 to be exact and he died about 400 years ago (in April 1616). To mark Shakespeare's birth and death, the Royal Shakespeare Company is spearheading a three-year Jubilee, between 2014 and 2016, which will involve theatre performances, events and live streaming cinema around the world. The internet abounds in announcements of various events proposed by various institutions for celebrating our Will. For example, the motto we chose for our paper comes from such a site (<http://gouk.about.com/od/forshakespearefans/fl/Happy-Birthday-Will-Shakespeares-450th-Birthday-Celebrations-in-2014.htm>)

The larger academic study we propose (part of which is what we present in this paper) draws on the receiving end of Shakespeare's work, more precisely on reader-oriented theories. We are broadly interested in how Shakespeare's work is viewed and interpreted and for this reason we are conducting an exploratory case study which focuses on the comedy *Much Ado about Nothing* and two of its best known film adaptations. The interpretations we instantiate in the study are done by three different kinds of readers, what we labelled as: expert, initiated and innocent. An expert reading is provided, in our view, by the academic-critical approach to Shakespeare's comedy, both in the traditional line of expertise and in the context of contemporary, culturally-oriented studies. For the other two types of readers, we conduct an experiment among representatives of two levels of studies: a MA student who has been exposed to formal English literature courses in literature in general and a course on

Shakespeare, for the initiated reader, while an innocent reader is a junior student, a fresh person in English language and literature BA study programme. Due to the fact that the outcome of this entire endeavour cannot be reported in one sitting, in this paper we will focus on the issues pertaining to the framing of our study and we will report on the expert readership. The subsequent phases and outcomes of the study focusing on the initiated and innocent readings will be reported on other occasions and the entire study will constitute the substance of a larger research report.

Framing the analysis

One of the most obvious questions that comes to mind when approaching a literary text is the following: is it the text itself that prompts the interpretation or it is the reader's strategies that imposes his or her own interpretation on the text? Reader oriented theories all start from the assumption that the receiver is active and not passive in the act of perception and meaning making therefore – the literary text has no real existence until it is read/viewed. Several concepts of reader-oriented origins were considered as relevant for our study: phenomenology, horizon of expectations and literary competence and conventions. We will briefly discuss them as follows.

Phenomenology is considered a philosophically grounded trend prefigured by Heidegger with both ontological and epistemological values which basically stresses the perceiver's role in meaning making, the individual human mind being the center and origin of meaning:

Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>)

Phenomenology has been practiced in various guises for centuries, but it was framed as such in the early 20th century in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, for example. In other words, phenomenology studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity, “a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals” in Creswell's words (2013: 82). The structure of these forms of experience typically involves what Husserl called “intentionality”, that is, the directedness of experience toward things in the world, the property of consciousness that it is a consciousness of or about something. According to classical Husserlian phenomenology, our experience is directed toward things only through particular concepts, thoughts, ideas, images, etc. These make up the meaning or content of a given experience, and are distinct from the things they present or mean.

As well as acknowledging the ontological value of phenomenology, theorists and practitioners of research also claim its epistemological value, especially when it comes to the qualitative research paradigm. For example, Creswell (2013) conceptualizes phenomenology as one of the five methodological approaches within qualitative inquiry claiming that: “A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived

experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.” (Creswell 2013:76). Classical phenomenologists practiced various distinguishable approaches, as for example that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty who proposed the pure description of lived experience just as we find it in our own (past) experience. Another equally popular approach proposes the interpretation of a type of experience by relating it to relevant features of context. In this line of thought, Heidegger and his followers spoke of hermeneutics, the art of interpretation in context, especially the social and linguistic contexts.

When it comes to the study of literature, phenomenology refers to “a type of criticism which tries to enter into the world of a writer’s works and to arrive at an understanding of the underlying nature or essence of the writings as they appear to the critic’s consciousness” (Raman, 1989: 118). Our own endeavour has such a dimension since it draws on phenomenology, more precisely on hermeneutics in the study of Shakespeare’s work. Thus, broadly speaking, we view Shakespeare as both a literary and a social phenomenon and we try to explore and understand how he is experienced by different receivers. Furthermore, our study is situated between the two extremes of a continuum in the study of literature. We conceptualize this continuum as having at one end Russian formalism which completely ignores the context in which the text was produced and at the other end social theories which ignore the text. Consequently, we start from the assumption that without ignoring the text itself its interpretation is highly dependent on the historical contexts in which it was produced and in which it is read. Additionally crucial to the study is the belief that the interpretation of a text is also dependent on the reader and his/her knowledge and skills. We call these two aspects the contextual factor and the reader factor.

The contextual factor starts from the concept of “horizons of expectations” whose proponent was Jauss (1982). In Jauss’ view it would be wrong to say that a work is universal, that its meaning is fixed forever and open to all readers in any period. The criteria readers use to judge literary texts vary in time and place. In this line of thought, interpretations instantiate (or not) a reader’s ability to move between past and present. In other words, an interpretation of the text depends on the questions prompted by the reader’s own culture and/or their knowledge of the past (i.e. the period in which the text was produced).

The reader factor in this study mainly refers to what Culler (1975) first labelled as literary competence and which he later on (1997) claimed them to be conventions of reading. Thus, in his view, literary competence actually takes the form of internalised literary conventions. He argues:

A poetics describing literary competence would focus on the conventions that make possible literary structure and meaning: what are the codes or systems of convention that enable readers to identify literary genres, recognize plots, create ‘characters’ out of the scattered details provided in the text, identify themes in literary works and pursue the kind of symbolic interpretation that allows us to gauge the significance of poems and stories? (Culler, 1997:62)

However, in our view, literary competence should clearly be delimited from reading conventions as they put forth very different constructs. Thus we take the view that literary competence comes in various degrees and shades and refers to the reader’s exposure to knowledge of various literary theories as well as practice in the actual analysis of various

texts. Reading conventions, on the other hand, we view as being culturally rooted and putting forth the values, beliefs, and practices emerging from a particular culture. In the same line of thought, Torell (2010:371) argues that stereotypes and clichés as reading conventions can be mistakenly taken as internalized literary conventions. He illustrates his point as follows:

As a starting point, let us use a somewhat rude and obsolete example, the excessive use of Marxist–Leninist stereotypes in Soviet school readings a long time ago (...). According to these stereotypes, all texts were about tensions in society, class struggle, capitalist or feudal exploitation, and almost nothing else. Quite obviously, these ‘internalized literary conventions’ could not be regarded as proofs of literary competence.

This distinction is particularly important for our study in which, we seek to explore the way in which a reader’s having/lacking certain literary competences in conjunction with (lack of) awareness of stereotypes as well as contextually rooted “horizons of expectations” experience a sample of Shakespeare’s work. As already mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, this will materialize in a case study of qualitative nature which focuses on three types of readership: expert, initiated and innocent, starting from Shakespeare’s comedy *Much Ado about Nothing*. The expert reading which represents the first phase of our study is presented in the next section of our paper, while the remaining two readerships representing the second, experiment-based phase of our study, is still in progress and will be dealt with in a future paper.

A Sample of an Expert Reading of *Much Ado about Nothing*

Much Ado about Nothing is one of Shakespeare’s very few plays written almost exclusively in prose. It features a fashionable, Italianate plot, about the tribulations of suspicious, jealous lovers, and a more original English subplot, about the war of the sexes. *Much Ado* is also one of the most remarkably stable comedies in terms of its critical reception, less vulnerable to newer academic approaches to Shakespeare, such as (mainly, though not exclusively) postcolonialism and gender studies. It is, at the same time, a light, romantic comedy, and a text containing the germs of a problem play. It is appreciated for its elegance and aristocratic taste, its evidence of court life, being thus more typical of the English Renaissance spirit than other instances of Elizabethan drama.

Still, the play has a substantial potential for embeddedness, given the interplay of meanings, announced from the very beginning by the pun in the title, between *nothing*, a trifle, and *noting*, as the word was pronounced in the 16th century (Marion Wynne Davies 2001), in a play where observation and misobservation are the engines that drive the story. The habit of *noting* makes the discrepancy between appearance and essence one of the main themes of the play, materialized in the bed-trick. This is a rather common motif in numerous comedies and problem plays, with variations, the main „trick” being the fact that a male lover thinks himself in bed with the wrong woman or (less frequently) viceversa. In *Much Ado*, the motif is complicated further by macabre elements, such as an alleged death and a tomb. This has led critics to a newly coined term, a tomb-trick, which in Wendy Doniger’s opinion, is only a quasi-trick (2000:21). If a complete trick is available in the tragi-comedies, where the eager male heroes cannot escape the amorous traps laid by the

women who love them but are not loved in return, *Much Ado* offers only a half of several tricks: the bed-trick is incomplete because neither Claudio nor Hero go to bed with anyone and the tomb-trick places Claudio in front of an empty grave and then in front of a falsely resurrected bride. Thus, the trick in this play is not only a technical element in the development of the plot, but a *mise en abyme*, by means of which Shakespeare explores the discomfort of jealousy, the tension between monogamy and promiscuousness, the fragile borderline between sex and gender, between power and identity. The bed-trick hints at the gap between physical closeness and mental alienation, between reality and imaginary projection. George Volceanov (2003:19) regards the bed-trick as a ritual of deception which becomes, in Shakespeare's plays, an archetypal situation. To understand this motif, one must read and watch the play with the eyes of the 17th century spectator, in a cultural and material world which was very different from ours. Once the nights have grown less dark, due to artificial lightning, once the intimacy of couples has increased, making the sexual act less ritualized and conventional, the bed-trick has started losing its likelihood, the modern reader and watcher growing more skeptical. Apart from this pragmatic aspect, the ethic connotations have also made traditional critics impatient (Muir 1965:47), as with something which, seen once, presents no potential for a repeat. Although no one ends in bed with other fellows than the intended ones, most of the characters are victimizers or victims in this game of deception and doubling. Hero makes Beatrice believe Benedick is in love with her, Don John makes Claudio believe Hero is unfaithful to him, Don Pedro woos Hero for Claudio, Leonato gives Claudio a bride he believes to be Hero's cousin, after he mourns Hero over an empty grave. This partial enumeration successfully proves that, instead of one complete trick, the play offers a multitude of quasi-tricks which, in quantitative terms, come to dominate the entire story. Still, the most relevant scenes which are conventionally labelled as "tricks" are scene 1 in Act II (the quasi-bed-trick, in which Claudio sees a woman he believes to be Hero in the arms of another man) and scene 4 in Act V (the quasi-tomb-trick, in which Claudio believes Hero has been miraculously brought back to life).

In this play about *noting*, watching and eavesdropping are obsessive, each character understanding, as it happens in the romantic comedies, "what they will". In Act I, the noblemen of Aragon „note" Hero's distinguished figure, which persuades them of her honesty. However, the same figure carries signs of betrayal and debauchery in Act IV. The blood in her cheeks is, for Claudio, a mark of lust, while for the good friar, it is a note of maidenly innocence. At the wedding, Claudio doesn't note the real woman behind the veil, though he swears to note well all her virtues. This almost deliberate confusion is backed by the attitude most characters declare to have towards slander. Ironically, the first one showing eagerness to practice "honest slanders" (III, 1) is the very victim of slander, Hero herself, who makes up things about her cousin Beatrice in order to force destiny and see her married. Of course, the oxymoron has a tinge of irony. Hero's lie may be innocent, but it is a lie all the same. Hero and Don Pedro invent a love story between Beatrice and Benedick in order to bring them together, a false and shaky scaffolding which could collapse at the slightest perturbation. When the two pseudo-lovers realize they are the victims of "honest slanders", it is too late – they are already genuinely infatuated with each

other. The slander against Hero is dishonest but only apparently different from the “honest” ones, as the mechanisms are the same. Claudio is shown a woman wearing his fiancé’s dress and needs no further evidence of Hero’s infidelity. Leonato, the girl’s father, needs even less, since he accuses his daughter of treason having only Claudio’s and Don Pedro’s words. This impatience would seem a gross exaggeration if one forgot, like in the case of the bed-trick, the background to which the play explicitly alludes several times. One of the most frequent “jokes” of this comedy is about cuckolding: when he introduces his daughter to Aragon and his men, Leonato joins this witty exchange:

DON PEDRO

You embrace your charge too willingly. I think this is your daughter.

LEONATO

Her mother hath many times told me so.

BENEDICK

Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

LEONATO

Signior Benedick, no; for then were you a child. (I, 1)

Leonato hides behind words, avoiding the sophisticated irony of the Aragon court, but exposes his daughter, whose vulnerability grows later. The fact that Leonato’s line is not random is proved by Benedick, who repeats the joke about the cuckolded husband, symmetrically, in the last act, when he addresses Don Pedro: “Prince, thou art sad; get thee a wife, get thee a wife: there is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn.” (V, 4)

The script being already known by the male characters, they don’t hesitate to repudiate Hero at the slightest innuendo. Her dishonesty being presented as *vraisemblable* by her father, it takes very little thinking for her fiancé to accept Don John’s fabricated evidence as true. Both Claudio and Leonato react violently: the lover expected “chaste Dian” and found a “witch”, while Leonato wanted his only child to “have his head on her shoulders for all Messina” and, in exchange, thinks she is a false mirror of his good name. S. P. Cerasano (in Barker and Kamps 1995:31) correctly points out that, in Shakespeare’s age, guarding one’s reputation was harder than avoiding slander. The evidence lies in the countless slander trials recorded in the early modern age. If, in earlier centuries, slander was controlled by the laws of the Church, in the 16th century, the line between lay and religious authorities grows dimmer and the trials held by civil courts seem to be all the more hostile when the complaint is issued by a woman. The trials were problematic anyway, since the woman could make an appeal only with the approval of a male protector and the object of the trial – the woman’s reputation – was volatile. Still, the great number of such court appeals shows both how vulnerable women were to slander and how eager they were to protect one of their few assets, their good name. In many Shakespearean tragi-comedies, a woman’s reputation is the synonym of physical survival. In *Measure for Measure*, a stained reputation is enough to send anyone to the scaffold and Isabella, a promised nun, would rather see her brother dead than her good name put to shame. In *The Winter’s Tale* and *Cymbeline*, a wife stays alive after a husband’s wrath only by means of

travesti and concealment. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Hero faints and is believed dead, which, if guilty, in the men's eyes, would only serve her right. It takes the rehabilitation by means of yet another trick for the men to rejoice the sight of her being alive and well.

It is not by accident that the slander is uttered and annulled in the church, under the surveillance of the good friar (a constant figure, who is also the final solution in *Measure for Measure*). He orchestrates the tomb-trick and makes the truth finally evident to the men who build and destroy Hero's life. The monk turns out to be the only person who sees clearly, although everyone is watching carefully. More realistic than Beatrice (who, convinced of Hero's virtue, asks Benedick to kill Claudio and avenge her cousin's shame), he suggests the only possible solution for a woman with a bad reputation: "die to live" (IV, 1). Since her compromised life cannot continue, only the resurrection, which implies purification, is acceptable. According to tradition, this would have implied the discretion and penitence of a convent. Since this is a Shakespearean comedy, the good friar, with the father's approval, offers another way out. The strategy works well literally, as Don Pedro and Claudio receive the "new" Hero not as a rehabilitated person, but as someone who has risen from the dead.

The interplay between deception and verisimilitude is one of the play's great assets, but also one of the major problems in the process of reception and adaptation. Reading and interpreting the play conventionally is very different from a pragmatic, skeptical approach. This is not such a far cry from the Romantic desideratum formulated by S.T. Coleridge as „the suspension of disbelief". It does take such a conventional suspension to assimilate the intricacies of the *Much Ado* plot. Good examples of how such a conventional reading – an expert reading, in the terms we used in the theoretical part of this paper – operates are the two film adaptations of Shakespeare's comedy, Kenneth Branagh's 1993 and Joss Whedon's 2013 works. The 1993 version, featuring Branagh as director and male star in Benedick's role, received surprisingly little critical acclaim despite the cast, the quality of the film features and the interventions in the original storyline, most observers regretting the absence of naturalness and spontaneity (Canby 1993). The film's success in reading the bed-trick and the tomb-trick "expertly" (and then conveying them to the public in the spirit of verisimilitude) lies in the choice for an atemporal (possibly Italianate) décor, with an impressive number of extras, including soldiers in brightly coloured uniforms and Messinan citizens in white, under the heat and light of a continuous summer sun, giving the impression that the characters' only goal is the single-minded pursuit of pleasure. All the actors are surprisingly young and healthy, with the plain Hero interpreted by the beautiful Kate Beckinsale, the evil Don John by the handsome and exotic Keanu Reeves, or the royal Don Pedro by Denzel Washington. The whiteness of the costumes, the universal gaiety, the dancing and singing and frolicking give the impression of a game, perhaps an extension of the costume party evoked in the second act of the play, which contributes to the "suspension of disbelief" effect.

In 2013, when Hollywood offered a new version of *Much Ado*, Joss Whedon was a novice of Shakespearean adaptations. However, although Branagh was a consecrated Shakespearean actor and director (*Hamlet* and *Henry V* being only the most obvious examples), his *Much Ado* was less acclaimed than Whedon's, who was trained in fantasy

thrillers like *The Avengers*. Moreover, while Branagh's film had cost a fortune, Whedon's version was a low-budget movie, shot exclusively in the director's own house, with virtually unknown actors. Still, the 2013 film was a genuine critical success. The elements that contributed to this are those which also secure "the suspension of disbelief". Shot in black and white in a Hispanic Californian villa, with the Aragon court and Don John looking more like Prohibition gangsters, the film is presented as a farce, in the spirit of the screwball comedy (Shoard 2012), a genre which was very popular in the glamour age of the 1930s and 1940s movieland. The characters return from "abroad", give casual parties and keep "hanging out". In a story about watching and hearing, the house where the plot unfolds has thin walls and poor acoustics, where no secret can be kept for long – a technical detail which completes the message of the original Shakespearean text. The conventions of the screwball comedy, with male and female heroines exchanging witty repartee, also contribute to a general farcical atmosphere, which makes the tricks deployed by the plot acceptable and convincing.

Follow-up

The expert interpretation which represents the first phase of our study presented above has also served the purpose of generating our main hypothesis for the second phase. It can be framed as follows: the less expertise the reader has, the more difficult it is for them to suspend disbelief and to accept the conventions of the dramatic text. With little or no background about the tricks so massively employed by the Shakespearean comedy, we assume the readers will attach little credibility and even less *vraisemblance* to the two scenes which are the epitome of illusion and deception, as these concepts were employed in the classical theatre. Our secondary assumption, which will be validated (or invalidated) during this semester, when we apply the experiment and discuss its outcomes of reading and watching *Much Ado about Nothing* with one senior and one junior student at Research Methods tutorials, is that the two film adaptations will facilitate the reception of the play's tricks and the conventional acceptance of illusion and deception as the major engines of the plot.

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