

The difficulties and solutions of teaching shakespeare in Chinese colleges

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Abstract: For Chinese college students, Shakespeare's works read difficult for at least the following three reasons. Firstly, Shakespeare commands a much larger vocabulary than Chinese college students could ever have mastered, let alone those desolate words and those words whose meaning has altered. Secondly, Shakespeare's early modern English follows a grammar that differs from that of contemporary English. Thirdly, Shakespeare's works contain Greek-Roman and Biblical allusions that are not familiar to Chinese students. Solutions to address these difficulties include acquainting students with professional dictionaries and annotated versions, with the differences between modern English grammar and Shakespeare's grammar, and with the canonized works that Shakespeare alluded to, like *The Holy Scripture*, the Greek myths, as well as European history and culture.

Keywords: Shakespeare teaching; College education; Vocabulary and grammar; Allusions

1. Introduction

After the canonization of Shakespeare around the end of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Shakespeare was first adopted into the British education curriculum around the mid-19th century and has ever since become a very important part of the curriculum of literary education for all ages in English-speaking countries. Shakespeare's works were first introduced into China in the early 20th century, and not only made important teaching materials in those church schools established by missionaries from America and Europe, but also were an essential part of college education before the foundation of New China, and deeply influenced several generations of scholars.^[1] After the reform and open up in 1970s, Shakespeare's works were reintroduced into the classroom, in the Chinese translation form for high school students and in the original English version for English majors in college. Shakespeare's English in general differs from contemporary English in many aspects of details, which can be very big obstacles for non-native readers, even though they have come to the stage of college education as English majors. During the hundred years of Shakespeare teaching in China, especially for today's college teachers, many difficulties await them when they do try to teach Shakespeare to the English major students.

2. Difficulties and Solutions of Teaching Shakespeare in Chinese Colleges

2.1. Vocabulary

The late Chinese Shakespearean scholar Gusun Lu said in one of his articles of Shakespearean studies, "Shakespeare has used 43566 words in all his works."^[2] Such a large vocabulary is definitely beyond the reach of the majority of today's Chinese college students, for according to the requirement of TEM 8, English major students need only a mastery of about 12000 words, some of them only nodding acquaintances in the second semester of their senior year. The Shakespeare course in our college is meant for English majors in their second year when the best of the students can possibly master around 8000 words. This means there is a very big gap between their vocabulary and Shakespeare's, where lies the first and biggest obstacle for these students to read Shakespeare. Even in some English departments of the top universities in China, the senior students can be expected to have a mastery of 15000 words.

Besides this, there is another problem with Shakespeare's vocabulary. Shakespeare lived and wrote in an age about four hundred years away, which means some words that were popular and familiar to his contemporaries may not necessarily remain so today. Native speakers even frustrated when they try to confront with Shakespeare's huge and unfamiliar vocabularies, Latin phrases, bewildering sentence structures and layers of allusions. It is estimated that Shakespeare has coined around 2000 words, some of which have ceased to be used by today's writers. There are those words that are not used today, like

ye, thou, thee, and aye, wherefore, whither. If the students didn't read Shakespeare, they might never come across these words all their life. If they want to read Shakespeare, they would have to adopt these words into their vocabulary pond. In order to better deal with these words, a good annotated version of Shakespeare's works would be indispensable. For Chinese students, I would usually recommend the Royal Shakespeare version published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, which among the easily accessible annotated versions contains relatively speaking rather detailed annotations for unfamiliar words and allusions. As for the more authoritative and detailed versions, such as Arden Shakespeare, only about ten facsimile versions of Shakespeare's plays have been published by Renmin University Press. This version can be too professional for most of the English major students.

There are also those words that read familiar to today's readers but do not make any sense if they try to understand them in the meaning they have learned. Shakespeare's English is about four hundred years away from us, usually known as the early modern English, which forms a transition from Medieval English of Chaucer's time to Modern English that is familiar to us. These words are known as our false friends, examples, 'want' means 'lack', 'still' means 'always'. Take a more extreme example, 'let' in Hamlet's mouth when was stopped by his friends when he intended to go with the ghost, 'Still am I call'd. Unhand me, gentlemen. /By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!'^[3] In here let means 'hinder, stop', only impossible for today's readers to imagine. In order to better deal with these 'false friends', we need be equipped with not only advanced annotated versions of Shakespeare's works, like Arden Shakespeare, Noble & Barnes Shakespeare, etc., but we need advanced and professional Shakespearean dictionaries, and the students need to be encouraged to form the habit of consulting dictionaries whenever coming across any words beyond their comprehension during the reading of Shakespeare. The late professor Liubing Shan from Henan University had spent more than ten years and compiled a bilingual *Shakespeare Dictionary for Chinese Students* which can be very useful for Chinese students for their reading of Shakespeare.

2.2. Grammar

English in Shakespeare's time has not formed its own independent system of grammar, but adopted many rules from Latin and French like an apprentice. The systematic rules of grammar we are learning today only came into being about the 19th century. So in order to better understand Shakespeare's grammar, we need to be acquainted with modern English grammar, and then when we read Shakespeare, we can clearly tell the differences; or otherwise, we would lose ourselves and make even more grammar mistakes by following blindly Shakespeare's writing in our own writing.

In order to solve this problem, the appendix in Prof. Liu Bingshan's *A Shakespeare Dictionary for Chinese Students* would be recommended to Chinese Students.^[4] In this appendix, Prof. Liu introduced some features of Shakespeare's language, which can well serve as a guide for beginners of Shakespeare's works. A Wechat official account was registered in order to publish some articles to introduce some rudiments about reading Shakespeare, including articles upon Shakespeare's comments, the differences between Shakespeare's language and today's English, etc. Lifu Ning's *A Brief History of English* can also be very useful for students who are interested in some basic knowledge of the transitional development of the English language from Chaucer's time to Shakespeare's.

Another difficulty students would confront in reading Shakespeare is that Shakespeare's works are poetry, which makes his language even more difficult to read. Poetry has a system of strict rules to be followed, including rhyming and scanning. In order for his lines to rhyme and scan, he adopts iambic pentameter for most of his lines, and sometimes he even adopts heroic couplet, especially in his early plays. His sonnets requires even more strict rhyme pattern. In order to meet the poetical requirements, he uses inversion, enjambment and many other devices that would all contribute to making his works more difficult for today's readers. In order to better appreciate the beauty of Shakespeare's works, the students would have to be equipped with some basic knowledge about English poetry. Some basic rules about the poetic devices would be introduced to them time and again.

2.3. Literary and Cultural Allusions

Because of the liberal education Shakespeare had received, his wide reading of Classical works in ancient Greece and Rome, his catholic background, Shakespeare alluded to many works that are not familiar to Chinese students, just like the Chinese classical novel *The Dream of Red Mansions* which is an embodiment of all the classical Chinese culture combined. Anyone who intends to understand the novel would have to be fully acquainted with all the important Chinese classical works before Cao

Xueqin's time, including the thoughts of the great thinkers in the Spring and Autumn period, the poetry of Chu and Han Dynasties, the short stories in the Wei, Jin and Tang Dynasties, the Poetry in the Tang, Song Dynasties, and the plays in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, as well as the novels in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Only by getting themselves familiar with these classical works before Cao Xueqin's time can today's readers truly appreciate the beauty of the great novel and the real intention of the author when he alludes to something. This applies to almost all the classical and important literary works, which is especially so for Shakespeare's.

The first big obstacle is Christianity. Shakespeare was brought up in very religious circumstances. He received his baptism three days after birth. He went to church every Sunday. He read *The Holy Bible* all his life. So biblical stories, figures and allusions pervade his works and lie in the background of all his thinking. For the students brought up in Christian countries, biblical allusions may be taken for granted by them and would not present any difficulty. But for Chinese students, although they have heard of The Holy Bible, or at the most a few of the most popular stories in the Bible, such as the fall of man, Noah's Ark, the crucifixion of Jesus, etc. Their shallow impression and knowledge of these stories are far from enough for their dealing with Shakespeare's biblical allusions in his works. In order for the students to understand his thinking mode and all these scriptural allusions, biblical courses have been arranged during their second and third years so the students have a general knowledge about Christianity.

The second important source of allusions for Shakespeare comes from the classical works of ancient Greece and Rome. Shakespeare lived in an age known by later generations as Renaissance. Renaissance is a French word which in English means rebirth of Greek and Roman culture. The thousand years of Middle ages have been monopolized by Roman Catholic church. In order to better take the believers under the control of the church, the Roman Catholic church destroyed the Roman and Greek classical works that were seen as heathenish and secular. So the great tradition of Greek culture was broke and was rediscovered by the Europeans around Shakespeare's time. Therefore, Shakespeare had the opportunity to acquaint himself not only with the Hebrew tradition, but also with the Greek tradition.

The Hebrew and the Greek civilizations constitute the foundation of the Western civilization. So for the western students, the classical works in the two civilizations are something familiar, while for Chinese students, both of the two civilizations are strange.

In order to solve this problem, a course on Greek myths has been opened for the English majors so that they get access to some of the most popular mythological stories. After they have taken the course, they would be able to recognize some of the related allusions when reading Shakespeare. Even if those allusions were unintelligible, it would be much easier to explain to them the related allusions during the reading of Shakespeare. Let's take an example from *The Merchant of Venice*. When introducing Portia to Antonio, Bassanio alludes to the story of Jason and Medea and compares Portia to the Golden fleece and her suitors to those Argonauts.

her sunny locks

Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,

Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,

And many Jasons come in quest of her.^[5]

If the students have read the story of the Golden Fleece, he would recognize the analogy here immediately.

2.4. Language Skills

In Elizabethan England, the English language was trying to establish itself as a national language. The theater-goers went to the theater to hear rather than to see the plays, and this encouraged the playwrights to experiment with the new language. Due to the immaturity of the English language, the playwrights had large room to explore and play with language. They felt free to coin new words, to borrow words from other languages, to adapt and even change the meanings of old words into new. In order to create more dramatic effects, the poets and playwrights like Shakespeare experimented with as diverse language skills as they could, including alliteration that was popular in the old English period, hyperbole, rhyme and scansion, irony, puns, oxymoron, imagery, personification, repetition, etc.

Alliteration, a very important language skill to create special sound effect and maybe to help the bards to memorize the lines in orally transmitted epics like *Beowulf*, is the repetition of consonants at the beginning of words in a line. Hyperbole means extravagant claims, Macbeth's hyperbole when he has

killed King Duncan and says all great Neptune's ocean is not enough to wash the blood clean from his hand. Imagery includes the use of metaphor, simile, and personification, like when Romeo first sees Juliet and in his soliloquy describes her beauty by comparing her to a snowy dove among crows. Oxymoron was fashionable in Shakespeare's time to describe the bitter sweetness of love. When Juliet bids farewell to Romeo, she says something like parting is such sweet sorrow.

These delicate and intricate devices that Shakespeare uses a lot in his works need detailed introduction for ESL students so they can get the real meaning and appreciate the true beauty of Shakespeare's language.

3. Conclusion

Now that Shakespeare seems so difficult for Chinese students, one would ask why we would take so many pains to read him and whether it worth the while. Actually, if we compare Elizabethan England with today's China, we shall find many similarities between them, such as they are both transitioning from feudal societies to more industrialized ones. Hu Shi in the early 20th century even adopted the term of Renaissance to name the New Culture Movement. Another obvious similarity is that they were both trying to break away from the restraints of the old language tradition and to establish a new tradition of native language.

Living in the late period of European Renaissance, Shakespeare was a transitional giant who has not only inherited the rich tradition of classical Greek and Roman culture, the religious culture of Judaism, Catholicism and Protestantism, but also the fruits of European Renaissance. Cao Yu, in the preface to his Chinese translation of *Romeo and Juliet*, has the following comments, "Shakespeare's plays are like a boundless ocean of language. If one can read his original English, he will find enlightening wisdom among each of his lines."^[6]

A further study of Shakespeare's works would require much more than such introductory courses as those above-mentioned, Greek and Roman Mythology, Interpretation of the Holy Bible, Appreciation of Shakespeare's works, etc. Reasonable students would understand that these courses mean only to lead them into the door of understanding Shakespeare, to acquaint them with some basic methods and tools so they have a general idea that if they want to study Shakespeare, there are many good annotated versions for them to read, and good dictionaries for them to resort to. With the help of these courses, if the students' interest could be aroused to read and study Shakespeare, the teacher's efforts would have been well required.

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