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Offensive Shakespeare in Performance

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Apparently, we live in 'the age of offence'.¹ A general feeling across the political and social spectrum is that 'the taking of offence is ubiquitous in modern life'.² As one memorable statement has it, '[i]t's like we're all talking on eggshells in case we cause someone offence'.³ Some commentators identify positive aspects of 'the culture of offence taking'. They point to its origins in oppressed minorities' long struggle for equality, and note that it provides us with 'an increasingly rich vocabulary to identify, distinguish and denounce sources of injustice'.⁴ Many others, however, are alarmed by what they see as negative consequences of the phenomenon. Among these consequences, they include the alleged rise of the 'Generation Snowflake' – young people who lack resilience, cannot face being challenged, and combine 'apparent hyper-sensitivity' with 'an almost belligerent sense of entitlement that their feelings should take precedence'.⁵ Such snowflakes, the case goes, have moved 'from the domain of ideas to that of emotions', replacing reasonable disagreement and logical argument with the subjective statement 'I am offended', which 'closes down conversation and debate'.⁶ This leads to an erosion of 'Enlightenment values', a rising 'climate of censoriousness', and a 'devaluation of the freedom of speech'.⁷ Democracy itself 'suffers when sensitivity gains the upper hand. Important questions are being put to one side in the interests of "respect" and "appropriateness." Sometimes, whole issues are declared off limits'.⁸ To its critics, then, the key danger which 'the age of offence' poses is the shift from reason to emotion, from the objective to the personal. This shift stifles rational

¹ Jeff Jarvis, 'The Age of Offence', *Guardian*, 12 February 2007

<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/feb/12/arecampaignsandconversation>> [accessed 4 September 2020].

² Richard King, 'The Age of Outrage: From Russell Brand's Sachsgate to Plebgate, Taking Offence has Become Ubiquitous in Modern Life', *Observer*, 30 March 2014 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/opinion/the-age-of-outrage-9224704.html>> [accessed 7 September 2020].

³ Joyce Fegan, 'Trying not to Stay Silent in the Age of Offence', *Irish Examiner*, 21 July 2018

<<https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-30856716.html>> [accessed 8 September 2020].

⁴ Ira Wells, 'The Age of Offence: The Politics of Outrage, and the Crisis of Free Speech on Campus', *Literary Review of Canada*, April 2017 <<https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2017/04/the-age-of-offence/>> [accessed 8 September 2020].

⁵ Claire Fox, *'I Find That Offensive!'* (London: Biteback, 2016), pp. 57, xvi.

⁶ Frank Furedi, *What's Happened to the University? A Sociological Exploration of Its Infantilisation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 15, 4.

⁷ Fox, pp. ix, 12; Furedi, p. 14. See also Brendan O'Neill, *A Duty to Offend: Selected Essays by Brendan O'Neill* (Ballarat: Connor Court Publishing, 2015); Mick Hume, *Trigger Warning: Is the Fear of Being Offensive Killing Free Speech*, concise and abridged edn (London: Collins, 2015); Richard King, *On Offence: The Politics of Indignation* (Melbourne and London: Scribe, 2013).

⁸ King, 'The Age of Outrage'.

debate and empowers demagogues adept at manipulating people's feelings. To its defenders, taking offence is an important bulwark against hate speech and discrimination, and an instrument of advancing social justice.

In this paper, I do not attempt to resolve the question of whether offence taking is a good or a bad thing. I do not take sides in the debate between the advocates of social mechanisms designed to limit offence (safe spaces, no platforming, and trigger warnings) on the one hand and the champions of untrammelled free speech on the other. Instead, I propose to look at the phenomenon of offence and some of its manifestations through a specific lens – that of Shakespeare and performance. As I will demonstrate, performance is a form uniquely suited to bringing to light and debating crucial social and political problems. Through concrete characters acting out specific situations, performance embodies issues that could otherwise be seen as abstract in ways that arouse audiences' emotions – including those of offence. Consequently, drama practitioners and theorists have produced much literature that – directly or indirectly – addresses the offence-related problems with which we are grappling now. Taking into account what previous ages thought about offence and how they debated it through performative arts might help us look at our current debates from a slightly different, broader perspective. My case study is Shakespeare not because I consider him the best playwright ever or the fount of wisdom from which we can draw the answers to all our questions, but because of his position as the author known, taught, staged, filmed, and quoted across the globe, and invested with unique cultural authority and significance.⁹

My discussion will proceed in three stages. First, I will examine how the issue of offence is represented in some of Shakespeare's plays. Then I will consider a couple of recent cases when a Shakespearean performance caused offence. Finally, I will reflect on what makes performance (theatrical performance in particular) a useful tool for reflecting on the issues of free speech, democracy, reason and emotion, which feature so prominently in the debates surrounding offence. Some of the questions I hope to raise – if not necessarily fully answer – are:

What is offence/offensive?

How do we deal with offence?

What offends us in Shakespeare?

⁹ For an outline of Shakespeare's unique position, see, among others, Graham Holderness, *Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001); Sofía Muñoz-Valdivieso, "All the World's a Stage": William Shakespeare's Cultural Capital 400 Years after his Death', *Changing English*, 24.1 (2017), 67-80; Kate Rumbold, 'Brand Shakespeare?', *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 64: *Shakespeare as Cultural Catalyst*, ed. by Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 25-37.

Can an exploration of offence in and through Shakespeare and performance offer us some insight into the current socio-political debates?

Offence in Shakespeare's plays

In Shakespeare, the words 'offence', 'offend', and their derivatives occur 303 times, which demonstrates a sustained interest in the issue of offence.¹⁰ A closer look at how these words are used indicates that pinning down their meanings is anything but straightforward, as they often move between and sometimes simultaneously point to several distinct areas of human experience, among them religion, law, morality, customary codes of behaviour, as well as individual feelings and impressions. To illustrate this, here are a few of the most relevant definitions of the word 'offence' from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Offence

1. A breach of law, rules, duty, propriety, or etiquette; a transgression, sin, wrong, misdemeanour, or misdeed; a fault.
2. *Law*. An illegal act or omission; a punishable crime.
3. The action or fact of offending, wounding the feelings of, or displeasing another (usually viewed as it affects the person offended); an instance of this.
4. Offended or wounded feeling; displeasure, annoyance, or resentment caused (voluntarily or involuntarily) to a person. Frequently in **to give (also cause, etc.) offence to**: to offend, displease; **to take offence**: to be offended, to feel resentment, to take umbrage [...].

These definitions demonstrate how slippery the issue of offence is. The first two indicate that, depending on the source of authority which one defies, offence can be of very different magnitude and its consequences can considerably vary. It is one matter if one breaches etiquette – one may be frowned upon in polite society – and quite another if one sins against God – the punishment can be as serious as eternal damnation. Similarly, if someone breaks the rules of a football game, they may be red carded and suspended for a few matches, but if someone violates the official law of the land they are liable to be fined, imprisoned, or even executed. Meanwhile, definitions 3 and 4

¹⁰ To offer some comparison, derivatives of 'forgive' occur 90 times; 'hate' 290 times; 'respect' 144 times; 'debate' 31 times. See '*Concordance of Shakespeare's Complete Works*', <https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/> [accessed on 9 September 2020].

question what the chief source of offence is: number 3 implies that offence is the responsibility of the offender (it is the action of offending that counts), while number 4 indicates that it resides in the subjective feeling of the offended person (offence happens if somebody feels offended, even if this wasn't intended by the offender).

We encounter similar problems when looking at the definitions of the word 'offensive':

Offensive

1. Of or relating to offence or attack; attacking, aggressive; adapted or used for purposes of attack; characterized by attacking. Opposed to [defensive adj.](#)
2. Causing painful or unpleasant sensations; used esp. in reference to taste or smell or sight, or to the moral sensibilities: disgusting, nauseous, repulsive.
3. Giving, or liable to give, offence; displeasing; annoying; insulting.

As an adjective, the word could be reasonably expected to describe observable qualities of an object, person, or action. This seems to fit with definition 1 – something is objectively used or adapted as an instrument of attack. With definitions 2 and 3, though, the unpleasant sensations 'caused' by the offensive thing seem to reside not so much (or at least not exclusively) in the thing itself but rather in the recipient of offence. As a result, the same object or action can be offensive to one person and perfectly innocent or even pleasing to another. To what extent, then is offensiveness in the eye of the beholder?

If these issues are baffling enough when we look at dictionary definitions, they acquire particular intensity and urgency when they are embodied in human characters and debated on stage in emotionally charged situations. Time and again, Shakespeare presents us with dramatic situations in which different aspects or definitions of offence are pitted against each other, questioning where offence resides, whose responsibility it is, and whether its consequences are proportionate to its magnitude. For example, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the messenger who brings the unwelcome news that Antony is married to Octavia pleads with Cleopatra: 'Take no offence, that I would not offend you' (2.5.100). We could hardly imagine a clearer case of the 'offender' being less guilty of offending than here – as the messenger rightly says, 'I that do bear the news made not the match' (2.5.82). Nevertheless, since Cleopatra does take offence, he does offend her, and suffers the consequences: she 'strikes him down' (s.d. 2.5.74-74), 'hauls him up and down' (s.d. 2.5.76-77), and draws a knife on him (s.d. 2.5.89-90). She exclaims: 'Hence, horrible villain, or I'll spurn thine

eyes / Like balls before me! I'll unhair thy head!' (2.5.77-78), and threatens him with being 'whipped with wire and stewed in brine, / Smarting in ling'ring pickle' (2.5.79-80). And to her lady-in-waiting's reasonable objection, 'The man is innocent', Cleopatra replies: 'Some innocents scape not the thunderbolt' (2.5.93-94).

Cleopatra's hyperbolic reactions and extravagant threats, combined with the fact that in the end the messenger escapes relatively unscathed, make this scene somewhat comic in the middle of the unfolding tragedy. Nevertheless, we catch a glimpse of what can happen when somebody who holds unassailable power decides both what offence is and how it should be punished. We have a darker hint of such a situation in *Henry IV Part II*, where the Archbishop of York uses the analogy of what we would now call domestic abuse to speak about the King's relationship with his subjects:

[...] this land, like an offensive wife
 That hath enraged him on to offer strokes,
 As he is striking, holds his infant up
 And hangs resolved correction in the arm
 That was upreared to execution. (2 *Henry IV*, 4.1.213-17)

What is most chilling in this comparison is that the responsibility for the unspecified offence and the brutal punishment is placed squarely on the wife. To come back to the *OED* definitions, we do not know how the wife has offended the husband: by breaching 'law, rules, duty, propriety, or etiquette', or by being 'annoying' or 'insulting'; we do not know whether her offence was a 'transgression', a 'sin' or a minor 'misdemeanour'. The fact that the husband is 'enraged' seems to be sufficient justification for making the wife 'offensive', which in turn warrants the 'correction' of a beating.

While these brief examples question what offence is, who is responsible for it, and how we should (and should not) react to it, *Hamlet* presents us with a more sustained and probing interrogation of these issues. In this play, obsessed with crime, sin, guilt, (im)propriety, hurt feelings, and introspection, offence takes centre stage from the very first scene. When Horatio attempts to question Old Hamlet's ghost and the apparition refuses to respond, Marcellus comments: 'It is offended' (1.1.58-59). At this point, we may think that it is simply the mortal's impertinence in addressing it that offends the ghost. However, as the play unfolds, we are drawn into the mystery of whether an offence (i.e. a crime) has been committed, and into an exploration of a range of behaviours that offend particular characters' norms and sensibilities. At various points, different meanings of the words 'offend' and 'offence' are brought into productive tension. This happens when

Hamlet, soon after speaking to the Ghost, apologises to Horatio for his ‘wild and whirling words’: ‘I’m sorry they offend you, heartily’ (1.5.146-47). Horatio reassures him: ‘There’s no offence, my lord’, to which Hamlet retorts: ‘Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio, / And much offence too’ (1.5.149-51). The two friends are clearly speaking of different types of offence here: Horatio is referring to offence only as a reaction towards impoliteness or crossing the rules of a civil conversation, while Hamlet halfway through the dialogue alludes to the other, darker meanings of the word: ‘crime’ and ‘sin’.

If the meaning of offence in *Hamlet* proves slippery and ambiguous, so does the determination of who exactly the offender and the offended party are, as we can see in the following exchange between Hamlet and his mother:

GERTRUDE Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

HAMLET Mother, you have my father much offended. (3.4.10-11)

As in the previous example, the mother and the son do not define ‘offence’ in the same way. The former is talking about rudeness and upsetting somebody, while the latter is referring to a much more serious issue: betrayal and complicity in murder. Moreover, they do not mean the same person by the perpetrator of the offence and by its victim, or even by ‘father’. Gertrude is accusing Hamlet of offending Claudius, her current husband and thus Hamlet’s stepfather. Meanwhile, Hamlet is making her the offender and his natural father, Old Hamlet, the victim of the offence. In effect, talking about offence brings into light a crisis of familial relationships and even personal identities, as Gertrude asks: ‘Have you forgot me?’, and Hamlet answers: ‘You are the queen, your husband’s brother’s wife, / But – would you were not so – you are my mother’ (3.4.16-19). When it is debatable who your father is and you yourself wish to reject your mother, your own position in the world becomes uncertain indeed.

Finally, *Hamlet* sheds much light on the issue at the very heart of this paper: the relation between offence and performance. Most of us would agree that the Prince of Denmark has some legitimate and serious reasons to feel offended. After all, his father was murdered, his mother married the murderer, and the murderer took the crown which Hamlet should have inherited. Under these circumstances, it may come as a surprise that when Hamlet explicitly declares that something deeply offends him, it is not any of these wrongdoings that he is talking about. Instead, he is lambasting bad stage acting: ‘Oh, it offends me to the soul to see a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable

of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise [...]’ (3.2.6-8). Now, perhaps Hamlet is something of an aesthete, a university man, an intellectual unwillingly thrown into the world of court intrigue and politics. However, nobody would accuse his ruthless uncle/stepfather of being an impractical, artsy type. And yet Claudius too is seriously concerned about offence in a theatrical performance, asking Hamlet about the play that is being performed in front of them: ‘Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in’t?’ (3.2.202). In the light of what we have already seen regarding the definition of offence, Hamlet’s answer – ‘No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest: no offence i’t’h’world’ (3.2.203) – is both truthful and disingenuous. There *is* no actual offence, in the sense of ‘crime’, in the play, as the murder of Gonzago is only enacted and nobody really dies. Yet, of course, there *is* an offence in the sense of ‘wounding the feelings’ and ‘causing displeasure’ to Claudius. But then, is this offence really *in* the play’s argument, or rather in what Claudius makes of it? Indeed, watching the play shakes Claudius so much that he acknowledges – if only to himself in a soliloquy – his own crime: ‘O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven: / It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, / A brother’s murder’ (3.3.39-41). As it turns out, the offence – crime and sin – is not in the play, but in Claudius, and the play makes that offence come to light by causing offence – discomfort – to him. This is of course exactly what Hamlet hoped for when he declared: ‘The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King’ (2.2.536-37).

In demonstrating how a play stirs Claudius’s emotions in order to expose his crime, *Hamlet* follows Sir Philip Sidney’s description of the key function of tragedy. According to Sidney, tragedy ‘openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; [...] maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours’, and ‘with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded’.¹¹ In other words, tragedy provokes the audience’s emotional response in order to expose the faults which society (and particularly those who hold power within it) would rather keep hidden. Tragedy, and theatre in general, force us to notice what we usually ignore, overlook, marginalise, or take for granted. The experience of being confronted with such issues can be deeply uncomfortable, but ideally it can improve society: the hope is that, if kings fear to be exposed as tyrants, they will avoid behaving tyrannically. However, as Claudius’s case proves, it is equally possible that the offended members of the audience will lash out at the ostensible cause of the offence (the play or those responsible for it) instead of critically reflecting on their own faults and mending their ways. The next section of this paper examines a couple of recent cases when a

¹¹ Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry* [1595], ed. by Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966; repr. 1973), p. 45.

Shakespearean performance caused offence, focusing in particular on the reactions of those who took offence at them.

Recent Offensive Shakespeares

Offensive Shakespeare in the UK

On 23 April 2016, the Royal Shakespeare Company held a star-studded gala in Stratford-upon-Avon to mark the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death. Among many other tributes, the programme, broadcast live on the BBC, featured a rendition of a speech from the collaboratively written early modern play *Sir Thomas More*. The speech, often attributed to Shakespeare, defends 'the wretched strangers' – foreigners settling in England – from the hostile native populace violently seeking to remove them.¹² Its performance caused a swift backlash from the conservative press, politicians, and members of the public. The Tory MP Peter Bone complained about the programme's 'bias', accusing its producers of 'us[ing] Shakespeare to push pro-immigration agenda'.¹³ Some of the online comments posted in response to the *Daily Mail*'s coverage of the incident called the BBC 'a mouthpiece for the extreme left', 'bunch of commies', and a 'Marxist cabal' disseminating 'left wing anti British propoganda' [sic]. A number of posts quoted John of Gaunt's 'sceptred isle' speech from *Richard II* (2.1.31-68) as the patriotic corrective to the controversial lines from *Sir Thomas More*, one commentator introducing the rival quotation with the sarcastic: 'William Shakespeare eh? This is William Shakespeare'. Meanwhile, others defended the show as illustrating that Shakespeare 'has so much to say to the modern world' and criticised the opposing side for its own political bias and perceived narrow-mindedness.¹⁴

Occurring, as it did, shortly before the referendum on the UK's continuing membership of the European Union, in which the issue of immigration played a crucial role, the performance clearly touched a raw nerve. It exposed the 'ulcers' festering within the British society: xenophobia, racism, and classism pitted against the discourses of multiculturalism and inclusivity; and deep-rooted

¹² *Sir Thomas More*, ed. by John Jowett, Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London, A. & C. Black, 2001), Addition 2, l. 81. The programme was broadcast as *Shakespeare Live! From the RSC*, dir. by Gregory Doran, BBC, 23 April 2016. For a discussion of the play in relation to refugee and migration debates, see Stephen O'Neill, 'Shakespeare's Hand, or "the strangers' case": Remediating *Sir Thomas More* in the Context of the Refugee Crisis', *Borrowers and Lenders*, XIII.1 (April 2020) <<https://search.proquest.com/docview/2413967461?accountid=12860>> [accessed 18 August 2020].

¹³ Fraser Moore, 'Outrage as BBC bosses "use Shakespeare to push pro-immigration agenda"', *Daily Express*, 25 April 2016 <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/664069/bbc-shakespeare-pro-immigration-agenda>> [accessed 18 August 2020], n. pag.

¹⁴ Online comments on 'Fury as the Bard is dragged into refugee row: BBC accused of using Shakespeare celebration to push "Left-wing, pro-immigration agenda"', *Mail Online*, 24 April 2016 <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3555755/Fury-Bard-dragged-refugee-row-BBC-accused-using-Shakespeare-celebrations-push-Left-wing-pro-immigration-agenda.html#comments>> [accessed 24 August 2020], n. pag.

divisions between the perceived 'cosmopolitan elite' and 'ordinary people'. Both sides of the debate claimed to know and understand the 'real' Shakespeare: respectively, the universal poet of all humanity and the patriotic, national bard. Those who were offended by the inclusion of the 'immigration speech' made much of the fact that it was 'obscure' and 'never performed during the playwright's lifetime', with Bone saying 'You'd have thought they could at least have found something which was published under Shakespeare's name for a start', and one online commentator writing: 'A speech celebrating Shakespeare on the BBC was not by Shakespeare and had nothing to do with him or the immigrant crisis but they thought that it should be connected'.¹⁵ While there was much sound and fury in the *Mail* comments section, with plenty of abuse hurled at the BBC and repeated calls to abolish the TV licence, overall the episode itself did not escalate much further. As far as I know, the show's creators and performers were not directly threatened and the funding was not withdrawn from the BBC or the RSC as a result. An offensive Shakespeare incident in the US the following year, however, had more serious consequences.

Offensive Shakespeare in the US

My final case study concerns the Public Theater's 2017 performance of *Julius Caesar* in the outdoors Delacorte Theatre in New York's Central Park.¹⁶ This modern-dress production drew explicit parallels between the play's titular character and the recently elected President Trump. The look, speech, and mannerisms of the actors who played Caesar and his wife Calpurnia clearly alluded to those of Donald and Melania Trump, and men wearing red baseball caps saying 'MAKE ROME GREAT AGAIN' appeared on stage. The dialogue kept to Shakespeare's script with one exception: the insertion of the words 'on Fifth Avenue' into Casca's scornful description of the Roman women who pity and forgive Caesar. To echo Trump's boast that he wouldn't lose any votes even should he 'stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody', the speech was changed to 'if Caesar had stabbed their mothers [on Fifth Avenue] they would have done no less'.¹⁷ It is fair to say that the Trump-like Caesar was portrayed in an unflattering light, which could easily offend the President's supporters. However, the outrage that erupted when reports of the play began to circulate seemed to be motivated chiefly by the assassination scene. Some commentators took the Caesar/Trump identification literally, with a headline in *Mediaite* declaring: 'Senators Stab Trump to Death in Central Park Performance of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar', and *Fox & Friends* stating:

¹⁵ 'Fury as the Bard is dragged into refugee row'.

¹⁶ Throughout this section, I draw on James Shapiro's extended discussion of the production and its aftermath in *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), pp. 8-22 and 227-47.

¹⁷ Quoted in Shapiro, p. 15.

‘this is a play put on in Central Park in New York City that very obviously depicts the assassination of a US president’.¹⁸

What followed was a storm of protests. Some of them occurred in the flesh, with several attempts to disrupt live performances, but most of the offence played out on social media. The offended reactions took several main forms: verbal outrage, sometimes expressed in insulting or obscene terms; questioning of the funding behind the event, including lobbying for a withdrawal of corporate sponsorship; suggestions of legal action against those involved in the production; and direct threats of violence towards them. Unlike in the British case, most negative comments did not claim that the production misused a ‘real’ Shakespeare or offer alternative passages or interpretations. Instead, they focused directly on the political aspect of the event – the real or imagined attack on the US President under the cover of ‘art’, possibly ‘funded by the taxpayer’.¹⁹ While physical violence did not materialise, a number of theatre practitioners – some of them collateral damage, not even involved in the production – received intimidating emails and phone calls, some going as far as threatening death or rape. The threats were serious enough to warrant police and other government agencies becoming involved in managing the situation. And in one respect the protesters managed to inflict measurable – if only financial – damage on the company, by persuading Delta Air Lines and Bank of America to withdraw their sponsorship. Thus, the offence in this case went beyond the realm of pure debate (even if by ‘debate’ we mean a shouting match) and firmly entered the domains of economics, crime, and law enforcement. Similarly to the British case, the performance exposed festering ‘ulcers’ and ‘wounds’ in American society, particularly the unresolved disputes surrounding the nature of democracy and the style of government that Americans were prepared to embrace, as well as the ever-present fear of political violence. There is also no doubt that it ‘stirred the affects’ so powerfully that some people were prepared to cross not only the bounds of civility but also of lawful behaviour.

Ban offence, ban the theatre?

The fallout of the ‘Trump Caesar’ production seems to offer proof of the negative effects of the modern culture of offence, in which emotion overshadows reason and both artistic expression and free speech are in danger of being stifled by those who replace rational debate with raw expressions of outrage. By his own admission, the play’s director, Oskar Eustis, wished to present both sides of the debate – the dangers of tyranny and the equally serious dangers of opposing tyranny by violent means – and to argue that ‘like drama, democracy depends on the conflict of different points of

¹⁸ Quoted in Shapiro, pp. 233 and 236.

¹⁹ Donald Trump Jr.’s tweet, quoted in Shapiro, p. 237.

view'.²⁰ As James Shapiro argues, 'Eustis wanted a dialogue, even a heated one, while those offended by his memorable production opted for silencing him and his company', trying to stop the play by protests, cutting off the funding, and threats.²¹ However, before we simply conclude that the quality of public debate and democratic institutions have lamentably declined in the twenty-first century, we should note that, in proposing to stop an event that fanned people's 'irrational' feelings, Eustis's opponents were in good – if perhaps unexpected – company.

As we know, Western theatrical tradition has its roots in the traditions of ancient Athenian democracy. Nevertheless, the Greek philosopher Plato advocates banning dramatic poets from his ideal republic:

[...] we shall be justified in not admitting him [the poet] into a well-ordered commonwealth, because he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine reason. As a country may be given over into the power of its worst citizens while the better sort are ruined, so, we shall say, the dramatic poet sets up a vicious form of government in the individual soul: he gratifies that senseless part which cannot distinguish great and small, but regards the same things as now one, now the other; and he is an image-maker whose images are phantoms far removed from reality.²²

Plato's objections to dramatic poetry are remarkably similar to some of the charges levelled at the culture of offence – both are alleged to undermine reason and encourage emotions, which are viewed not only as lower faculties but also as a danger to the rule of law and order in both individuals and societies.

Of course, Plato's is not the only or definitive voice in the debate on the virtue or vice of drama (and, by extension, literature and art in general). His own student Aristotle disagreed with the idea of banning dramatic poets from the commonwealth. Unlike Plato, Aristotle argues that drama's emotional impact can be beneficial: tragedy in particular, by 'arousing pity and fear', can bring about a 'catharsis of such emotions'.²³ The term 'catharsis' encompasses a range of meanings, including 'purgation, purification, transformation, and more'.²⁴ Thus, while Plato sees drama as a route to indulging and giving free rein to emotions, Aristotle presents it as a way of dealing with them:

²⁰ Quoted in Shapiro, p. 21.

²¹ Shapiro, p. 247.

²² Plato, *The Republic* [c. 380-360 BCE], in *Reader in Tragedy: An Anthology of Classical Criticism to Contemporary Theory*, ed. by Marcus Nevitt and Tanya Pollard (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), pp. 12-16 (14-15).

²³ Aristotle, *Poetics* [c.350-330 BCE], in *Reader in Tragedy*, pp. 18-28 (18).

²⁴ Nevitt and Pollard, 'Antiquity and the Middle Ages', in *Reader in Tragedy*, pp. 7-17 (8).

bringing them out into the open and, potentially, refining them into a format that can be productive, rather than destructive, for the right conduct of private and public lives.

The debate about the value of drama which Plato and Aristotle initiated has continued in the following centuries, with successive generations of critics and practitioners taking sides in it. As we have seen, in Shakespeare's period, Philip Sidney spoke in favour of Aristotle's view, but the very fact that his treatise is entitled *A Defence of Poetry* indicates that he was responding to those, who, like Plato, found much harm and vice in literary expression, and drama in particular. There is no space here to summarise other, later contributions to the debate, but its persistence owes much to the vexed issues of whether the passions that drama arouses are a good or a bad thing, and whether they are a danger to reason, order, and democratic government – the issues that also preoccupy current commentators on the problem of offence. This is why performative art may be a good testing ground for advancing our understanding of the 'age of offence'. After all, many expressions of offence seem performative, almost theatrical – we do not only *feel* but *act* offended. Perhaps approaching manifestations of offence with the tools of dramatic analysis can thus prove productive.

Moreover, as Sara Ahmed persuasively argues, reason and emotions are not separate phenomena, the former logical and objective, and the latter instinctual and personal. Indeed, emotions 'should not be regarded as psychological states but as social and cultural practices'.²⁵ Emotions are part of our cognitive apparatus, through which we make sense of the world and our place with it. They are not simply instinctive and automatic, but rather they are both produced by and in turn they influence our contact with objects and other people. Thus, if we dismiss them as lower, animalistic reactions which simply stand in the way of the more advanced faculty of reason, we risk neglecting 'the process of production or "making" of emotions'.²⁶ And in doing so, we overlook the social norms and ideological underpinnings which shape our emotions; we neglect the fact that 'emotions "matter" for politics'.²⁷ Since emotions – including that of offence – are both relational and embodied, drama – as the form which deals with embodying, impersonating human interactions on stage, seems to be a perfect laboratory for analysing them.

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²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 9.

²⁶ Ahmed, p. 11.

²⁷ Ahmed, p. 12.



Offensive Shakespeare
Professor Adam Hansen

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As Monika's discussion of Shakespeare's varied uses of 'offence' showed, in some ways Shakespeare is Mr Offensive: you can go online and find Shakespeare insult generators, or buy mugs bedecked with his more memorable roasts. But rather than simply indulging in his obscenities, this talk aims to offer a space to reflect on what place his ability to offend, and our capacity to be offended, has in teaching and learning about Shakespeare. What, in other words, is at stake when we *teach* Shakespeare as, or and, offence. Like Monika, rather than being prescriptive or definitive, I will try to describe and analyse what we're doing, and where we are, in thinking about Shakespeare, offence, and teaching. Through this, I will try to address these key questions:

- **How and why might teaching Shakespeare cause offence, and/or improve our understanding of offence?**
- **In what ways is Shakespearean offensiveness useful or challenging (or useful because challenging) for students?**

I will begin with three brief case studies presenting some of the issues of teaching offensive Shakespeare. As I do, I will complicate what the case studies present. Again, I am trying to map the debate about what is happening with honesty and clarity – not resolve disputes or offer conclusions. In part, I'm doing so for my own benefit as much as anyone else's – as a teacher of Shakespeare now, I need to think about what I'm doing and why. I will end by considering my last question, which can be rephrased as the most important question, and one I've just asked: *why?* Why even bother to teach offensive Shakespeare in the classroom?

Example 1# - Northumbria University

Picture the scene: a few years ago, I was ending a typically scintillating second-year university seminar with about 15 students, on a module we call Early Modern Cultures, which puts the literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in historical context, past and present. We had been looking at *Othello* in its own time, and in ours. Doing this involved me mentioning reactionary responses to what was then the relatively new Black Lives Matter movement. Some of these responses, from people like Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's erstwhile chief strategist, seemed to recycle racist ideas about the inherently violent nature of African-Americans. I thought it might be interesting to set such ideas alongside what people in the play like Iago (but maybe, in time, Othello himself) say about Othello's unstable and demonic identity. In other words, should we see the play as a problem because it gives voice to prejudices and presumptions that still have power today? So, to kick things off, I gave the students a quote about the play from the actor Hugh Quarshie, who said:

"I am left with a nagging doubt: **if a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true?** When a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in make-up and for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men, namely that black men, or 'Moors', are over-emotional, excitable and unstable, thereby vindicating Iago's statement, 'These moors are changeable in their wills'?" *Hugh Quarshie, Second Thoughts About Othello (1999), 5.*

I split the class in groups and asked them to say whether they agreed or disagreed with Quarshie's point. But when the time came for the groups to feed back, a white English and Creative Writing student said 'I don't feel I can answer that...it is not my place to answer that'. They elaborated that they didn't feel they could know how black people might feel about this, and didn't want to be offensive to anyone by assuming they did. Never having encountered this before, I said, 'OK', and we moved on: despite my efforts, the class seemed more animated by the play's gender politics than its racial implications.

Later, I thought the student was daft (or at least deliberately trying to derail my meticulously designed seminar) – you don't have to be Jewish to find parts of *The Merchant Of Venice* an affront to humanity. Maybe, I reflected, with self-righteous grumbling, this was what Frank Furedi detected in English undergraduates: a 'self-censorship', or internalised 'Politically Correct' policing, of the kind someone like Mick Hume sees as an 'enemy of free speech'.

"In my discussions with English undergraduates, I was struck by the fact that many of them have decided to self-censor...the extensive practice of **self-censorship** has developed into an aggressive conviction." *Frank Furedi, What's Happened to the University?: A Sociological Exploration of Its Infantilisation (2017), vii, 80.*

"[One] **enemy of free speech** today is **self-censorship**" *Mick Hume, Trigger Warning: Is the fear of being offensive killing free speech? (2015), 4.*

"For many, an attack on free speech is an attack on the very idea of the liberal university: Universities are places where, above all, free speech should be honoured, not prevented." *Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, House of Commons, Hansard (12 November 1985), col. 423. Cited in Evan Smith, 158.*

These concerns are not historical, abstract or philosophical, but reach to the current corridors of power, and respond to an apparent crisis in education. In 2018, the then-Universities Minister expressed qualms akin to Furedi's and Hume's:

"A culture of censorship has gradually been creeping in [to universities], and a monoculture is now emerging where some views are 'in' and others are clearly 'out'... [due to] the rise of no-platforming, safe spaces, trigger warnings and protest." *Sam Gyimah 'Civility Under Threat', Research Research (1 October 2018; <https://www.researchresearch.com/news/article/?articleId=1377459>)*

"Although formally introduced by the NUS [National Union of Students] in 1974 as a reaction to the rise of the National Front (NF) in Britain, **'no platform' had its antecedents in the anti-fascist battles of the 1930s and 1940s, and the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.** Since then, it has been continually re-evaluated. ... Even in the twenty-first century, it remains a living and reflexive tactic, which students themselves determine, debate and continue to argue over. ... students have argued for 'no platform' to be **extended to other forms of prejudice since the 1970s**, and ...this has been **continually contested**" *Evan Smith, No Platform: A History of Anti-Fascism, Universities and the Limits of Free Speech (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).*

It is worth pointing out, as Evan Smith does, that Sam Gyimah's predecessor as Universities Minister, Jo Johnson 'launched a parliamentary inquiry into free speech at universities in late 2017, and in 2018 it concluded that the threat to free speech on campus was highly exaggerated' (24-5). Moreover, as Smith has recently shown, students have, for a long time, been keen on challenging views they find offensive, and that challenge has included forms of censorship, such as 'no platforming'.

With that in mind, and not being someone naturally inclined to agree with Conservative politicians of any era, on *further* reflection I started to appreciate that maybe the student had a point, and was actually being sensitive and smart, not naively adhering to some ‘woke’ PC-agenda. If we think in the terms articulated by Ian Smith, they were, however bluntly, problematizing their own status, ‘checking privilege’ and ‘unpacking’ their position as a white student, ‘making’ their ‘whiteness visible’, and undertaking a form of ‘racial self-inquiry’ that, if I were to have the chance to have that seminar again, I would do well to handle better – both more sensitively, and more critically.

Critics [or, indeed students] who have notoriously read Othello’s end as the inevitable relapse of an innately savage black man have failed to understand or have resisted [or have not been taught about] the play’s dialogic demand for **racial self-inquiry**.

“Speaking of Othello, speaking about race within the discipline, requires **unpacking one’s white positioning**, which includes **making whiteness visible and an object for critical interrogation; checking privilege**; and exposing the denials and misinterpretations that...keep race a minority issue and race studies a faddish or questionable enterprise in the era of so-called postracial enlightenment.” *Ian Smith, ‘Speaking of Race’, Shakespeare in our Time*, eds. *Dympna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett (2016), 121.*

So, experiences like this, and working and thinking with Monika, started to sensitise me to how students and teachers could make more of such moments, to understand both Shakespeare and the world in which we’re studying him now.

Example 2# - Durham University

I didn’t have long to wait to encounter another. Just down the road from my own institution, Durham university was working through its own issues with offensive Shakespeare, surrounding the use in Shakespeare teaching of what are known as ‘Trigger Warnings’. The Durham student newspaper reported things like this:

“...**no one is saying that *Titus Andronicus* should be taken off the curriculum** because of its potential to trigger victims of sexual abuse. This, ironically, is what **trigger warnings** are for: to **give vulnerable people the choice to opt out of a potentially harmful discussion, whilst still leaving the topic open for those able to contribute**. ...I really cannot see how anyone can be offended by trigger warnings, which do not in any way prevent us from discussing difficult topics and save some people a lot of pain. ...”

“Durham English Students are expected to sit through lectures and tutorials discussing Lavinia’s rape in *Titus Andronicus* (although we did get a trigger warning about bestiality with regards to part of the lecture on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*).” *Simon Fearn, ‘In defence of trigger warnings’, Palatinate: Durham’s Independent Student Newspaper (May 7, 2016).*

This state of affairs prompted much discussion from concerned commentators, taking the line of Claire Fox, who condemned what she saw as phenomena like this ‘privileging subjective interpretation’; a case of students saying ‘I don’t wanna do this, and if you make me that’s a micro-aggression’.

“This **privileging of subjective interpretation** means we are all easy targets for being accused of hate crime.” *Claire Fox, ‘I find that offensive’ (2016), 22.*

For Frank Furedi, again, such scenes indicate a repressive silencing and naïve misunderstanding of ‘aesthetic experience’, because Shakespeare is *meant* to upset you.

“That some students now seriously believe that warning them about the content of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is an example of good academic practice might seem puzzling to the millions of readers who regard the **emotional upheavals** provoked by his plays as part of a **wonderful aesthetic experience**.” *Furedi, What’s Happened to the University?*, 150.

Now, we might counter: what is anything we do if not subjective interpretation? Indeed, most marking criteria for students’ work privilege subjectivity. In other words, students are meant to showcase their originality, and universities reward it. Equally, we might argue back that ‘emotional upheaval’ is no guarantee of ‘a wonderful...experience’ – arguably if you are really upset by it, you are really feeling it, but that does not make it ‘wonderful’. Certainly, this is how the seminal Shakespearean and philosopher of censorship and desire Jonathan Dollimore felt, on reading *Othello* while going through various psychological crises:

“... *Othello* made **too much sense** to me – so much so that I could no longer even read it.”
Jonathan Dollimore, *Desire: A Memoir* (2017), 42

There *is* censorship here: Dollimore confesses he could not carry on reading. But this is in intense response to, rather than petulant dismissal of, Shakespeare’s work. And for good reason: we only censor what we think has power. But this means we need to find a way to engage with what disturbs us, and maybe trigger warnings are one way to do this. There are others, perhaps – I and many other university tutors use something like ‘Rules of engagement’, like these from a module I teach on Shakespeare’s contemporary, Christopher Marlowe:

“On this module we can expect to engage critically with some potentially controversial or disturbing ideas and arguments. ... many of Marlowe’s ideas were challenging in their own time, and many remain so. Equally, the ways many people – including students – think about Marlowe can generate arguments, if not controversies. ... it is important to remember that we base our arguments on evidence from the texts and contexts we are studying. These contexts include our own responses here and now to the texts: what you bring to and get from Marlowe really matters. But this should not mean your arguments can fall back on saying ‘I believe...’ or ‘I feel...’. Instead, say what you think the text or context says, always conducting your arguments, and confronting assumptions, within appropriate and constructive modes of expression. As we will learn, Marlowe was taught to think in terms of *argumentum in utramque partem* (arguing/defending in both directions): let’s see if we can do the same.”

My third case study, from Cambridge, is like Durham’s, but especially notable for the publicity it generated:

Example 3# - Cambridge University

“Trigger warnings” were printed alongside the description of at least one English literature lecture and one seminar due to take place this term. One was a lecture on violence, which was billed as a discussion of “control and consequence; when do we laugh at violence, and why?”, focussing particularly on Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* and *Titus Andronicus*, and Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*.” *Camilla Turner, ‘Cambridge students warned Shakespeare plays may distress them’, The Telegraph (18 October 2017)*

Initial responses to the publication of this report in the comments section of the version of the article published online were hyperbolic to say the least:

“It would appear that education has come to an end. **The age of enlightenment is over**”

“History shows that **when civilisations become too soft they often disappear**”

“What this is about is the creeping control of language and **the continued assault on free speech emanating from the cultural Marxists**. These people have a stranglehold over academia and with every new piece of ideological insanity emerging from their twisted minds it becomes more impossible to not notice”

“I bet that the poor little darlings all have box sets of Game of Thrones, **do those carry a trigger warning?**”

In turn these responses triggered others in the comments section, which criticised other posters' hyperbole:

“May I suggest the Telegraph **includes a trigger warning** at the top of page one, indicating: “Warning, this newspaper contains material which some readers may find intensely irritating. Those who are easily distressed are advised not to read any further”.”

“It's PC gone mad. **Even Roy Rogers films come with trigger warnings now.**”

“Trigger warnings are just a tiny label, not a big deal, and you're all massively overreacting. ... **Trigger warnings are** just that, a warning. A little symbol ... **no different from having a content warning on a movie**, just so anyone going to the lecture knows what to expect. It's to warn those with traumatic pasts, **not to dissuade and censor** the learning of the average student. The lecturers here aren't expected to tone down their content at all; on the contrary, trigger warnings are to prevent them from having to do that.”

Joking aside, the final comment, ostensibly from an actual Cambridge student, is vital if not paramount. This sets out how something like a ‘trigger warning’ about potentially offensive Shakespearean material is a way to open up and facilitate debate. I will return to this point presently.

In the meantime, building on Monika's points, I will overlay what we have seen in these case studies with the following observations:

‘Thou but offend'st thy lungs to speak so loud:’ (*MoV*, 4.1.142)

1. Teaching has always been subject to conditions, controls, censorship, interventions, bowdlerizations and silencing:

“Teachers appointed to instil knowledge into the minds of the citizens should not teach that which is false or noxious....they should not teach that which tends to disturb civil society...” *Samuel Von Pufendorf, ‘On the Duties of Citizens’ (1682), in Paul Barry Clarke, Citizenship (1994), 92.*

2. So has ‘free speech’:

“The unrestrained communication of thoughts and opinions being one of the most precious rights of man, every citizen may speak, write, and publish freely, provided he is responsible for the abuse of this liberty in cases determined by the law.” *‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens’ (France, 1789), reprinted in Thomas Paine, The Rights of Man (1791-2).*

3. So has literature, including Shakespeare:

“*Titus Andronicus*...I shall leave out of account, because, even if Shakespeare wrote the whole of it, he did so before he had either a style of his own or any characteristic tragic conception.” *A.C. Bradley, Shakespearian Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth (1904; rpt 1994), 21.*

Here, Bradley discounts (that is, *silences*), a play on the grounds of Shakespeare's artistic immaturity; is it a coincidence that this play featuring rape, mutilation, murder, and interethnic relationships, is one so many students now study, with or without trigger warnings (or pleasure)?

But thinking of 'trigger warnings', the last observation I'd make at this point is that we have to understand 'trigger warnings' have unclear effects.

4. Trigger warnings have a mixed press, and unclear effects:

"Much support for trigger warnings arises from the desire to provide students with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other disadvantaged groups with an inclusive, level academic playing field. ... However, others believe that trigger warnings **hamper academic inquiry and "coddle" students by sheltering them from any stressful material they may encounter...thereby undermining their preparation for the "real world"** beyond the campus gates. ... Trigger warnings do not appear to be conducive to resilience...Trigger warnings do not appear to affect sensitivity to distressing material in general, but may increase immediate anxiety response for a subset of individuals whose beliefs predispose them to such a response." *Benjamin Bellet et al. 'Trigger warning: Empirical evidence ahead', Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry, 61 (2018), 134-41.*

This fascinating study randomly assigned literary passages varying in potentially disturbing content to online participants without PTSD, but gave only some of those participants trigger warnings prior to reading. The findings were ambiguous. The researchers thought trigger warnings were not good for participants' resilience – they **'hamper academic inquiry and "coddle" students by sheltering them from any stressful material they may encounter...thereby undermining their preparation for the "real world"'**. However, they found that trigger warnings probably also don't really affect anyone who doesn't already have PTSD. In other words, the jury is out.

'privileging of subjective interpretation'? (Fox, 22)

Another way of thinking about trigger warnings and how they might have an impact on how we teach and learn about Shakespeare is to *historicise* their use. I don't have time to map that history here, and others have already done it better, but perhaps we can see a prehistory for trigger warnings built into the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Think of it like this: countless plays for the early modern stage or page feature prologues and epilogues conditioning audiences' responses, begging for applause, and humbly genuflecting to ensure no-one will be or has been offended. This made good business sense and showed political acumen in an age of censorship and book burning, when theatres were commercial concerns relying on aristocratic patronage.

But this version of a humility *topos* verges on self-parody and a critique of those forces which would presume to contain or censure a playwright's wit. We can see this self-conscious parody of the desire to avoid causing offence *within* plays, too, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, just before the rude mechanicals' final performance:

QUINCE (as Prologue)

If we offend, it is with our good will.

That you should think: we come not to offend

But with good will. To show our simple skill,

That is the true beginning of our end. *MND* (5.1.112-15)

[Palgrave (2007) editorial note: 112 will. Quince inadvertently inserts a full stop here and changes the meaning of the line]

Can we read this as an early modern trigger warning? The ambiguous punctuation, echoed in modern editions, makes us ask: do or don't the players mean to offend? If they don't mean to offend, they mean instead simply to evoke good will. If they *do* mean to offend they *also* mean to do so only ('But') with good will. With his wordplay, Quince signals – and queries – intention ('our end'), but also tries to condition audience response. Quince also introduces conditionality ('If we offend'); offence is not a given but depends on subjective responses. And Quince's paradoxes ('the true beginning of our end') highlight the oxymoron of working with 'simple skill': this is simple *and* skilful language, at once silly, banal and profound, powerful and weak, just like a playwright themselves. Maybe Shakespeare saw the ironies of trying to both protect and provoke those he sought to enlighten. When it comes to those now trying to enlighten others about Shakespeare, through teaching and offence, what, then, is the state of play?

Mobilising Offence in/as Shakespeare Teaching – Example 1#

I will now move to a conclusion by looking at a couple of recent approaches or models to recognising offence in the Shakespearean classroom, and for mobilising offense as something possible or useful for students.

If you don't know it, James Stredder's great book sets out his ideas for the 'active' Shakespearean classroom, fizzing with techniques from drama teaching. Obviously, as Stredder notes, there are health and safety implications attached to such activities. These implications are not just for our *physical* wellbeing, but for 'areas of the mind and the emotions', too, including trauma, and can focus on offence in the classroom: 'personal memory may be touched very painfully for a particular individual, causing an unexpected and unwelcome breaking out of feeling'. In other words, Stredder sees the potential risks and benefits of bringing offence into Shakespeare teaching:

"Safety awareness is vital, too, in imaginative work, which **may disturb areas of the mind and the emotions**, and reveal them to others in ways that have not been anticipated and may be distressing. This can happen, of course, in serious work of any kind.

In an apparently academic classroom discussion, **personal memory may be touched very painfully for a particular individual, causing an unexpected and unwelcome breaking out of feeling. ...**

If educational work is serious and sensitive to differences of all kinds within groups, it should have the resources to withstand the potentially negative effects of such rare incidents – and quite possibly turn them into positive experiences. ... Insult games assemble pairs or groups as antagonists in order to explore and enjoy the energy, humour and inventiveness of Shakespeare's 'insult' language." *James Stredder, The North Face of Shakespeare: activities for teaching the plays (2009), 31, 156.*

I have equal admiration for the work of Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi. They say:

"The purpose of teaching Shakespeare's plays is to increase a student's familiarity with complex texts. ... But the teaching of Shakespeare is a vehicle rather than a destination: advanced learners need increasingly sophisticated literary skills to face all complex texts." *Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 7, 8.*

Through engaging with 'complex texts', like Shakespeare's, people can find a way to talk about complex issues, particularly around identity. If we don't do this, we diminish Shakespeare and we ignore what matters about ourselves in relation to others.

In a recent webinar on teaching Shakespeare, they explicated their aspirations and concerns in relation to events like the Black Lives Matter movement, by asking whether Shakespeare might be compared to the kinds of statues of problematic historical figures that some in the movement have in their sights and want to pull down. Thompson and Turchi asked: is Shakespeare at risk of being pulled down too? They raised this question not out of a desire to cause that iconoclastic censorship, but to prevent it; and not out of a desire to condemn the movements that see the need for making statues fall, but in profound fellowship with them. In that webinar they conveyed this clearly:

“[I]f we don’t have a way to talk to our students and to make the learning of Shakespeare coincide with the learning of truth...then it’s done [ie. learning about Shakespeare is doomed]...Shakespeare does allow us to talk about race...in truthful ways.” *Ayanna Thompson in conversation with Laura Turchi, ‘Shakespeare Teachers’ Conversation: Teaching Anti-Racism through Shakespeare’ (31 July 2020; convened by Gillian Woods, Birkbeck University)*

But, as Stredder noted, doing this kind of complex engagement with complex texts risks being seen to give offence. This is a risk worth taking to keep Shakespeare alive and to show what matters about the lives of those talking about him:

Mobilising Offence in/as Shakespeare Teaching – Example 2#

“Where better to talk about complex identity issues than through complex texts? ... [If we don’t engage with ‘complex identity issues’] rich differences among...students are ignored, thereby rendering those differences unmentionable and irrelevant. ... Silence is never neutral with regard to difference. It communicates values, assumptions and hierarchies for race and social identity...[T]he costs of silence and colour-blindness are experienced by all: not just by people of colour.” *Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 13, 74-5.*

So, as I say, Thompson and Turchi recognise the risks and opportunities of offense in the Shakespeare classroom, and give some examples of how it might work:

“Shakespeare’s plays may offer lines that some students are not willing to speak: ... ‘As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear’...Students preparing scripts for classroom performance may be tempted to edit out or otherwise de-emphasize troubling lines. Teachers may want to point out that theatre companies, textbook editors and politicians have all edited Shakespeare for the same reason. Especially when one has to perform lines that are awkward [or offensive?] socio-politically, one may want to change the script. ... **Advanced learners should be granted the opportunity and authority to edit Shakespeare** [including by not doing Shakespeare?], but they need to be held accountable for these decisions and all decisions must be subject to scrutiny [by?].” *Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 80-81.*

These are really inspiring but also suggestive assertions: is this work empowering or not, for staff or students? What matters, here, though, is the way longer histories of understanding Shakespeare as offensive and as censored can be brought to bear on current understandings of his problematic power. Thinking like this exemplifies Thompson and Turchi’s approach, built on openness and transparency: teachers saying *with* not just *to* students that *this is what we’re doing with Shakespeare and why*.

Thompson and Turchi use the idea of the seminar as a safe space in which to have these discussions. But this isn’t to shut down debate or destroy Shakespeare. Instead, ‘the potential for bad choices and significant discomfort’ and the ‘risk of offence’ as people grapple with potentially

sensitive issues have to be acknowledged, in order ‘to ask questions and make statements about race, gender, ability and sexuality [and class?]....without fear of censorship’.

“In a curriculum that pushes identity to the forefront of discussions about Shakespeare and performance **there is the potential for bad choices and significant discomfort**, and so we urge overarching principles of **direct talk and safe spaces**.

Teachers have a responsibility to let students know **that the classroom is the place to ask questions and make statements about race, gender, ability and sexuality [and class?]....without fear of censorship**. Even with this acknowledgement, **neither the students nor the instructor should then believe that there is no risk of offence** when one asks about or points out areas of tension. There will be tense moments because **these conversations are not occurring elsewhere in our students’ lives.**” *Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 83.*

In their recent webinar, Thompson and Turchi emphasised this embrace of offence as a tool for teaching, in precise, practical terms, where the mobility applies to students changing their minds:

“Someone saying something that may be offensive at the beginning of the semester, and then moving his or her thinking throughout the semester is OK...I do like to say...that there are going to be times when we all say something that offends somebody else and this [the seminar or class] is precisely the place where you should do it, because this is the place where we’re meant to learn together.” *Ayanna Thompson in conversation with Laura Turchi, ‘Shakespeare Teachers’ Conversation: Teaching Anti-Racism through Shakespeare’ (31 July 2020; convened by Gillian Woods, Birkbeck University)*

As you can tell, I’m a Thompson and Turchi fanboy – their progressive pedagogy is all about debate, inclusion, and drawing on the identities of learners to help them understand what is going on beyond as well as within the classroom, in our urgent now. Their pedagogy is also about using and reinvigorating Shakespeare to achieve this. When people read Shakespeare, they read themselves – a truth evident in many periods and contexts. If we can’t read ourselves in or through Shakespeare, then we won’t read him.

Models of English

Their approach fits well within the model of learning English which is about ‘critical literacy’. But in an attempt to be ‘critically literate’ ourselves, and deepen our reflections, might we see some problems with Thompson and Turchi’s approach to offence in the Shakespeare classroom?

Firstly, Shakespeare has been put to work informing the many political persuasions people *also* use to read themselves, from fascism to communism, nationalism to postcolonialism. So while aiming for progressive outcomes, the challenge remains: what if Shakespeare doesn’t change but emboldens the white supremacist in your seminar group?

Moreover, emphasising the present-day value of something, especially thinking or teaching or learning about a complex problem, is vital. But it poses a risk, even if you are doing this for progressive ends. To put this another way, Thompson and Turchi want to help students use Shakespeare to help themselves understand themselves. But that isn’t all Thompson and Turchi suggest reading complex texts like Shakespeare is good for: ‘All students need these skills to be prepared for university and employment in the twenty-first century’.

“All students need these skills to be prepared for university and employment in the twenty-first century...” *Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi, Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach (2016) 13.*

This reduces the study of Shakespeare to the acquisition of ‘the transferrable work readiness skills that businesses need’, because ‘employers need access to a pipeline of graduates’. Sadly, this fits in with how too many people with too much power see education, including higher education. Such education will turn learners into ‘thinking, complex problem-solving and decision-making individuals’, prepared for ‘complex-decision [sic] making’ and ‘people management’. If we learn ‘cognitive flexibility’ by giving and taking offence in the Shakespeare seminar, we can learn how to manage people in complex organisations. We all need to work with people from different cultures and places. We can’t allow offence to derail productivity. We need to be taught to be sensitive so the wheels of commerce keep on going.

Offence and Employability: The Business Case

“Higher education providers need to provide degrees with lasting value to their recipients. This will mean ... teaching students **the transferrable work readiness skills that businesses need**, including collaborative teamwork and the development of a positive work ethic, so that they can contribute more effectively to our efforts to boost the productivity of the UK economy. ... **employers need access to a pipeline of graduates** with the skills they need...” *UK Government, Department for Business Innovation & Skills, Green Paper on Higher Education Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (2015), 8, 11, 19.*

“The higher education sector...needs to transform itself to remain relevant to the changing landscape. **The focus of higher education needs to change from providing employability enhancements, to prepare learners into thinking, complex problem-solving and decision-making individuals.** Based on current trends in the job market, some of the proposed enabling factors for the individual learner are as follows: Focus on judgement-driven skills: Preparing the student for complex-decision [sic] making by inculcating the softer aspects of the job requirements in the curriculum – negotiation skills, analytical thinking, complex problem-solving, communication skills, **people management** and cognitive flexibility.” *Ernst and Young and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Future of jobs and its implications on Indian higher education (India, November 2016), 6.*

This corresponds with another, more reductive, instrumental model of learning English: ‘English as skills’. As we have seen though, alternatives are possible, not least, finally, in the form of the idea of the student as a ‘Citizen Scholar’: ‘A student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of society’.

The Citizen Scholar

“A student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of society: **a student who is a Citizen Scholar.**” *James Arvanitakis and David J. Hornsby, ‘Introduction’, in Universities, the Citizen Scholar and the Future of Higher Education, eds. Arvanitakis and Hornsby (2016), 1-6, 1.*

Thompson and Turchi, I think, subscribe to this view far much more than the instrumental 'skills' model. They talk about using Shakespeare's complex texts to help students understand *all* complex discourses and debates in society. Given some of the contradictions we find ourselves in, critical literacy has never been more necessary.

In a neo-liberal world, how can we be both self-interested consumers and entrepreneurs *and* social-conscious citizens? How can our students? Another complex contradiction that we and our students need to be able to read critically derives from marketizing education in the liberal university. If students are consumers, and universities really are, as some neo-liberal ideologues would suggest, a 'market place of ideas' that cannot countenance censorship, then why shouldn't they get what they pay for? Who would pay to be in an *unsafe* space?

Finally, if people seem concerned by calling out a culture of 'microaggressions', might we read such a culture as a response to what Ira Wells calls 'a politics of macroaggression' ('The Age of Offence: The politics of outrage, and the crisis of free speech on campus', *Literary Review of Canada: A Journal of Ideas* (April 2017), <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2017/04/the-age-of-offence/>)? This 'macroaggression' has dominated the last few years in the US and beyond. In the face of merciless, faceless globalised forces, populists react by telling us to take back control; what is 'woke' culture but a comparable attempt at taking back control of the political realm from the worst excesses of populism?

I can't answer these questions or resolve these contradictions here. But I will end with this point. As we have seen, Thompson and Turchi are aware of the role thinking about offence can play in helping students become 'Citizen Scholars', because it can encourage a crucial constituent of that identity: *cultural humility*. Cultural humility is 'a commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique...a desire to address and change power imbalances...the development of partnerships...', a commitment which involves asking: 'Might I be offending...?'

"a commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique...a desire to address and change power imbalances...the development of partnerships...**Might I be offending, or prying into someone's life...?**" Milton Nomikoudis and Matthew Starr, 'Cultural Humility in Education and Work', *Universities, the Citizen Scholar* 69-84, 71-2, 76.

This is *not* about censorship or silencing, but about dialogue and deep respect.

This is also *not* a world away from where I and we began, with that moment where a white student of mine said they didn't feel they could talk about black responses to *Othello*.

Now I might see such moments as a way to discuss being white, as much as to understand being black.

So, in a spirit of accepting my own cultural humility, and knowing what I now know, I am a world away from letting go again of the chance to make more of such moments.

Questions:

- Why Offensive *Shakespeare*? Is he uniquely offensive? Are there other authors whose potential to offend is something we should be concerned about or interested in?
- What is the relationship between the marketisation of Higher Education and concerns about 'free speech' on campus?