
When distributing a bibliography to his graduate students at the University of Manitoba, Ralph Berry would explain the brevity of his list by noting that in spite of the overwhelming number of books published about Shakespeare each year, very few of them are any good. Following his example, the bibliography which I distribute to my Shakespeare classes is usually quite brief, but expanded, in a manner his undoubtedly is not, to include all the books that Berry himself has written. Ralph Berry’s studies have made their way onto my select list both for the originality of insight and also, most compellingly, for the articulation of a thorough and useful approach to the plays. His approach is characterized, first, by a keen ear for the subtleties of Shakespeare’s language from variations in tone through to the larger patterns of prosody and the curiosities of subtextual repetitions. Secondly, Berry holds forward Shakespeare’s “divine neutrality” in controversial issues of interpretation, looking instead for the solutions to these difficulties in the most intelligent productions of recent years. Finally, Berry views the chronology of the plays as “the key to the study,” for he maintains firmly that “Shakespeare never stopped developing, and that should qualify generalizations based on his practice at any one time” (xviii).

Although I feared at first that social class would prove to be too limited a field for the free range of Berry’s ideas, I was wrong; Shakespeare and Social Class yields insights on virtually every page, from a flash of illumination on a well-worn line in Hamlet to the presentation of the conflicts that arise out of social class in the characters of every play. In his introduction, Berry reminds us, first, that Shakespeare’s plays contain a full range of characters from every social class and that their relationships “express the social order in which they live” (ix). He adds that while “status and income receive intermittent treatment ... rank and occupation are there all the time” (ix). Although Shakespeare includes people of all ranks, Berry feels that the most important distinction made in the plays is the “great divide,” the central class distinction, “between gentlemen and the rest” (xii). Gentility is an indication of “birth, education, wealth, behaviour and values.” Above all, it establishes an ideal of conduct which requires a constant balancing act as the gentleman is confronted by “the usurper, the inferior classes,” and faces challenges of all sorts. In short, there is a “tension between rank and conduct” (xiv) present in each of the
plays. Berry notes, “People are shown making claims for themselves and others via class. What one makes of those claims is part of the most essential plot, the real play in performance” (xv).

Although the class of each character is not always included in the cast list, Berry notes that class is conferred, nonetheless, through a number of different means. Class is conveyed, first, both directly and indirectly through language. It is well known that each speaker in each play has his/her own unique mode of expression, but Berry calls to our attention the fact that these unique language patterns convey rank and education as much as character. A speaker’s language—use of tropes, swearing, imagery patterns—are all indicators of the social system within which the character has developed. Rank and class enter, as well, into the distinction between the characters who speak in blank verse and those who speak in prose. As a rule, blank verse is “the medium of the gentry” while prose is “the medium of those who, for various reasons which include the social, fall beneath the dignity of verse” (xvi). We are all aware of how crucial these distinctions can be in a play like The Tempest wherein an “unregenerate” character like Caliban speaks in the language of the gentry, which identifies him as being of an order superior to the drunken Stephano and Trinculo. Here, Caliban’s language forces a re-evaluation of one who is regarded by many of the other characters as subhuman. Berry also notes that verse is not invariably related to rank for many members of the aristocracy lapse into prose from time to time. However, these times are to be closely considered, for Berry warns that prose may mark a simple lapse into informality or it may indicate a more subtle characteristic such as disorientation or subterfuge.

The discussion of language as a conveyor of rank extends, as well, to a usage which has probably escaped the notice of today’s audience, namely, the distinction between you and thou. Berry notes that you is a “mark of respect when addressing a social superior” while thou “conveys intimacy, whether of warmth or hostility.” Thus, “thou/you is an infinitely subtle mark of distance between human beings, constantly moving on the scale” (xvii). By way of example, Berry looks at the use of thou in a single line in one of the best known scenes in Hamlet and provides a new dimension to the dynamics of Hamlet’s revenge and anger. He writes: “The person addressing the other as thou has the initiative: he claims a social right for himself. Hamlet, who must spend the play addressing Claudius as you (and is so addressed by Claudius: they are not close these two) ends it with ‘Here, thou incestuous, murd’rous damned Dane,/ Drink off this potion.’ With thou, Hamlet releases a social insult, the linguistic analogue to killing the King” (xvii). The use of thou or you can serve as a means of determining the relative social standing of the speakers, for while such things may not always be clear to the audience, the players “always seem to know.”

A knowledge of social class is also useful to the actor in developing, and the critic in analyzing, characterization. Berry cites Coriolanus as an example of a character that cannot be understood without coming to terms with his class background. In this case, as in many others, “class is an ellipsis of motivation” (xviii) which the actor or critic can utilize.
Shakespeare’s sense of social order, like everything else in the plays, changes with the major phases of his career. An understanding of the chronology of the plays, therefore, assists in interpreting the social patterns. Berry provides a useful enumeration of “the main periods and emphases of Shakespeare’s work as they bear upon social class” (xx) and discusses each play in terms of this chronology. In summary, the early plays, Berry asserts, are characterized by “stable relationships between classes and fixed counters” (xix). All of this changes in the middle comedies, where the social issues are more complex with social frictions often at the core of the play’s actions. The second tetralogy of history plays present a complete panorama of social classes and tests the English class system under the “pressures of war.” In the major tragedies, “class” is “completely assimilated into character and motivation.” While the later plays “bring all social values into question,” the final romances offer a return to order, with a diminished interest in class structures (xx-xxi). Berry’s discussions of the individual plays are grouped according to this chronology. While each chapter is worth reading, a sampling of the new interpretations that arise from a consideration of social class in some of the best-known plays will suggest the strengths of Berry’s approach.

The discussion of The Taming of the Shrew, for example, tempers much of the distaste that contemporary feminists and social critics feel about Petruchio’s crude courtship of Katherina. Rather than a cruel “taming,” Berry sees the main action of the play as “an account of an Elizabethan marriage, as negotiated by a pair of tough-minded practitioners” (25). The marriage “contract” is based upon the value system of the nobility, a code of manner which both Katherina and Petruchio share. Baptista, who structures the courtship, “has gotten where he is by the certainties of family merger and marriage contracts.” Crucial here is Berry’s reminder that all of the male actors who control the play are gentlemen. Katherina’s refusal to marry has set a road-block in the way of their gentlemanly negotiations. The way is cleared in the “key” passage, the “wasp” dialogue (2.1. 212-16) which ends with Petruchio’s assertion that he is a gentleman (in spite of his obscene suggestions). Berry adds that Petruchio’s statement is “advanced as a measure of conduct,” (26) and Katherina and he negotiate their relationship within the terms of this code. Once this behavioral code is established between them, Petruchio and Katherina both learn to live within the boundaries of their bargain: “Gradually, the behaviour of both is encased within a class formation. Petruchio and Katherina are learning to live as a gentleman and a gentlewoman” (28). Berry sees Katherina and Petruchio as equal partners in the agreement they have negotiated.

Twelfth Night reveals some of the problems when the class and rank of characters are less sure, and the code of conduct is emmeshed in the struggles of individuals between class and identity. Berry notes, “In no play of Shakespeare’s is it more important to place the characters socially, and in none do they spend more time in pursuit of their definitions” (68). The “heavily charged atmosphere” of the play is the result of the “frictions, ambitions and resentments” as the social classes interact (73). Berry terms the play “an anatomy of social mobility,” wherein “three of its
personages marry upward (Sebastian, Viola and Maria), and two seek to (Sir Andrew and Malvolio.)” The action of the play revolves around the maneuvererings between “those who have” and “those who desire,” wherein “identity is sometimes asserted, sometimes infringed upon” (73). In his interpretation, Berry helps to sort out the class of each of the central characters and looks at some of the great actor’s solutions to the problem of Malvolio’s alienation from the final concord of the others.

Social commentary and the problems of social position inform and color each of the history plays in the second tetralogy. Henry IV, I, for example, presents a “panorama of English social life” out of which the major characters grow. Berry compares Hal to an anthropologist field-worker who intimately observes the customs and languages of the world he will inherit. Berry terms Hal’s position an ambivalent one, for “Shakespeare shows a young man not yet invested in the authority that will be his, having to deal with all social classes from tinkers to the Lord Chief Justice. Con men, friends, offers, criticism, traps, he has to surmount them all” (78). The social commentary arises from Falstaff’s part in the war scenes. Berry concludes that war, as Falstaff presents it, “is an affair of the poor, the unemployed, criminals and dropout. Those who can afford to, pay to dodge the draft. This bleak and patently accurate analysis of the social formations used by the military comes from one who is himself something of a dropout from the knighthood” (82). These elements combine in the creation of a truly epic drama, “with its extraordinary sense of life as it is lived” (77).

In his analysis of King Lear, Berry gives a new force to the rather tired discussions of the thematic importance of the concept of natural order in the play. He begins by asserting the crucial importance of the opening scene to the larger concerns of the play. By understanding this scene, wherein Glouchester introduces his illegitimate son, Edmund, the later blinding of Glouchester seems much less an act of gratuitous cruelty than an outcome of his own actions. In his treatment of the son of whom he is ashamed, Glouchester can be seen as “a type of callousness and insensitivity—the aristocrat who will neither acknowledge properly nor cut off his bastard, and thereby, breeds a malcontent” (103). The play, in a larger sense, then, “depicts with an unillusioned clarity, the consequences of a failure to assimilate a well-born outsider into the social order” (103). The climax of the play, the heath scenes, also are imbued with questions about social class. As the world and its structures appear to be falling apart, all social order is challenged and put together again on a new basis. These scenes reflect the persistent rebellions against the social order that permeate the play. The final battle in the play, that between Edgar and his brother, brings social standing to the foreground: “The contest between right and wrong is fought out within a class and is so emphasized” (111). Edmund, throughout, focuses the limitations of the social system. He has a “stark choice, submission or revolt,” which “is the disabling weakness of the social order that Shakespeare diagnoses” (111).

The world of The Tempest offers other possibilities than submission or revolt. Of the later plays, this one yields particularly well to an analysis in terms of social class. As Berry notes, “Master and man: that is the relationship to which The Tempest turns again
and again,” (180) as Ariel and Caliban seek independence from Prospero’s control. Social class and identity are interwoven in their quest for freedom. The storm at sea, the tempest of the opening scene, reveals at once the “class tensions” of the old world which are being brought, like so much luggage, to the new. Each of the characters is given an opportunity to reflect upon the possibilities of a new world and new social structure upon arriving in Prospero’s domain. Berry is intrigued by recent interpretations of the play which emphasize its social content. He cites, specifically, Jonathan Miller’s production which viewed the play as a “myth of decolonization,” for Berry believes that remains “the most urgent and compelling of the possibilities in the text” (185). While Shakespeare was not omnisciently commenting upon colonial practices three-hundred years in the future, he was deeply concerned with the inter-relationship of “service and freedom” (185) which shapes our social and political analysis today.

If there is a weakness in Berry’s book, it surfaces particularly acutely in the discussion of The Tempest in the absence of any discussion of Miranda. This omission reflects the general lack of interest in the class struggles of the female characters. For example, although Berry does consider Katherina in The Taming of the Shrew to be a participant in the social contract she forms with Petruchio, nothing has been said about her alternatives to such a contract. In the discussion of The Tempest, Miranda is mentioned only in passing in connection with the discussion of other characters. She certainly deserves as much space as Ariel, for her world has been suddenly infused with social relationships she has never considered, nor been educated to consider. Her need for an education within a wider social context, her need at adolescence to widen her personal horizons, her need for the freedom to select a mate, are all topics which touch upon the very ideas of “service and freedom” which Berry has identified as central to the play.

In spite of the lack of interest in the social standing of Shakespeare’s female characters, this book can be recommended to anyone, whether student or specialist, for its wealth of insights, which range from the illumination of a single line to the shaping of a conceptual framework that encompasses all of the plays. The clarity and readability of the text is also noteworthy. Berry strikes that delicate point of balance between specific reference and conceptual theory that so often eludes the scholarly author. The reader is never buried in a plethora of footnotes about footnotes; Berry attributes his sources quickly and efficiently and develops his own interpretations without belabouring the point. Most importantly, Ralph Berry’s book turns the reader back to the plays with renewed interest, eager to locate a strand of a new colour within the intricate tapestries of Shakespeare’s works.

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