

## **Letter from President Coppélia Kahn, January 2009**

We all teach Shakespeare, and we all have our toolkits. Paper topics, handouts, video clips, our precious markedup Nortons, Ardens, Riversides, Folgers: you name it. There's something else that we rely on as well, something that doesn't exist on paper: our voices. Is it imaginable that we could teach a class on Shakespeare without reading Shakespeare aloud? One line or twenty at a time, we have to read the words to our students, some of whom may never have heard Shakespeare read aloud before.

I've begun to notice that my students have grown slightly deaf to the sound of Shakespeare's words. Statistics tell us that hearing loss among those under twenty-five, caused by over-exposure to amplified rock music, is on the rise. The hearing loss that I've noticed is another kind: insensitivity not just to sound effects puns, word play, assonance, but to the sound of Shakespeare's language in general. Take, for instance, the repetition of one character's turn of phrase by another. In teaching Othello, I always call attention to Brabantio's couplet as he leaves the Venetian council scene: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee." He warns the hero of a female duplicity considered innate. This idea is central to the spurious "ocular proof" that Iago foists on Othello, especially when he advises him, "Look to your wife. Observe her well with Cassio." When I recently read that last line aloud and asked, "What character has spoken like this before?" no one could hear the repetition, even though I had firmly established the significance of looks and looking, of deception and women as deceivers, in the play.

Perhaps having students do some acting in class would bring the language home to them. But many are too shy or nervous to speak their lines well, and theater majors tend inadvertently to overwhelm the others. In classes of twenty-five or fewer, I often ask students to read a passage aloud before we set about discussing it. The results are usually disappointing. They're embarrassed; they stumble over unfamiliar words, ignore caesuras, misplace a crucial emphasis. Not wanting to embarrass them further, I don't dwell on their mistakes. But I do send them to the music library, which houses a rich collection of recordings. There they can hear Gielgud or Branagh, Mirren or Dench, model the lines for them. This semester, I'm trying out a new exercise in spoken Shakespeare. I've made it a requirement for students to choose a passage of ten to twenty lines, memorize it, recite it to me or my TA, and comment briefly on it in response to our questions. So far, the results are surprisingly good. Students have tended not to choose famous speeches or passages we've discussed in class, but, rather, passages they've discovered by themselves, in a hunt through the assigned plays for something they can manage. Studying their lines, they've grown to understand and appreciate what the words mean through hearing how they sound. One student who hardly ever spoke in class morphed before my eyes into Olivia in Twelfth Night after her first encounter with Cesario, as she "catches the plague" and falls in love. Delicately, she acted the part rather than just reading it. Another who had always seemed rather pedestrian delivered Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech with righteous indignation and bloodthirsty resolve, every accent exactly in the right place.

On the other side of the podium, I take care with my own readings. When I go over my lecture notes, I read aloud to myself the passages I've marked out for detailed discussion. I think about pace, emphasis, pitch, pauses. Too shy of acting ever to impersonate the character whose words I'm speaking, I try simply to sound the note of that particular speech, to put across the wit, pathos, or passion of it. If some or all of the speech has entered into memory, I look right at my students as I speak the lines, and get their attention for that moment. If I stumble on a word or misplace an accent, I take advantage of it, and say, "No, that's not right. I'll do it again," and start over, once more with feeling. At the very least, they know that I respect these words as spoken words, that the sound of them carries their meaning.

Our culture is more and more image-driven. Cellphones take photos, videos travel around the world on YouTube, the computer screen operates by icons. Undeniably, the technology of images has helped to keep Shakespeare alive, popular, and in the curriculum. Not at all do I mean to slight the value of film and video for performing and especially for teaching Shakespeare. But I do mean to suggest that there's also a particular value in hearing Shakespeare, without the images. In the nineteenth century, reciting Shakespeare was a common school exercise, a pastime, a valued accomplishment. Famous speeches were often recited in parlors and school auditoriums, entering the general ear. Quite apart from the video technology now at our disposal (which sometimes doesn't work, anyhow), we have a simple but effective instrument for teaching—and enjoying—Shakespeare: the human voice.