

“Giving new validity to old form”: A review of Scott Newstok: *“How To Think Like Shakespeare – Lessons From A Renaissance Education.”*ⁱ

When getting my last book on Shakespeare ready for publication, I came across an article or post by Scott Newstok on Shakespeare and education, speculating on how it would help to improve education today if we thought as Shakespeare did.

There were many points of contact between us, and we agreed to swap our respective books when both were published. That is a minor point when compared to Mr Newstok’s central thesis, that today’s students would intellectually gain from cultivating the same manners of learning that Shakespeare acquired, which I will be discussing later.

Still, vanity propels me to wonder, for example, what Scott thinks of my chapter on the use of sources when he reads it after having written one himself (chapter 8 “Of Imitation”.) Unsurprisingly, we refer to some identical elements such as Robert Louis Stevenson or Aesop’s fables. Some are perhaps more surprising, as we both have the same Virgil quote defending himself against charges of plagiarism from Homer, and we both pick up on Caliban singing of freedom. All elements which bring us to a few of Bob Dylan’s (yes, he is in here, tooⁱⁱ) intersections with Shakespeare.

However, to move on, now, to central themes. I titled this review “Giving new validity to old form” not only because Mr Newstok and I see both Shakespeare and Dylan as being prime exponents of this methodology, but also to draw attention to how Mr Newstok’s principal points are demonstrated in the very structure and tone of his volume.

The ideas of ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ and of a continuing an ongoing conversation with the past are explored and advocated. Furthermore, they are dramatized as sentence after sentence ends in someone else’s words. And yet, despite this, you feel like you are talking to Scott. What you ‘hear’ is conversationally warm and shot through with sudden connections and piercing insights. Newstok’s own voice always comes through despite, (or perhaps because?), so much of what he says is selected from the words and works of others. Thus reading the book is a singularly convincing lesson in the very style the book is proposing as being the ideal way to learn.

There are many delightful insights, such as, on page 39: *Christopher Marlowe’s father rose to become treasurer of the Shoemaker’s Company. Making shoes was the artisanal practice that most resembled making gloves. (In German, the word for “glove” is Handschuh—“hand-shoe.”) Both trades worked with leather, requiring similar labor-intensive techniques: stretching, drying, tanning, dying, cutting, stitching, embellishing.*

As you can see, and it is a delight for us who share his interest, Newstok is very strong on etymology. Consequently, it was no surprise, especially with Scott’s emphasis on poetry being something that is crafted that he reminds us of the shared root in Greek of the words ‘poetry’ and ‘making’. The ‘poet-as-maker’ has a long history and survives in my native Scotland where the equivalent of the English Poet Laureate is termed the ‘Makar’.

Poetry is one example of craft, others include thinking and learning and reading, and it is stressed that Shakespeare was a *playwright*. He had to learn stagecraft, after all. He also had to learn rhetoric, the basis of all the 16th Century thought, which this book claims we must reclaim as a matter of urgency.

Shakespeare’s verbal apprenticeship was served in a schoolroom, the location to which Mr Newstok continually returns.

“Rhetoric wasn’t just part of the curriculum, it *was* the curriculum”, Mr Newstok asserts in chapter two, and from this extrapolates the main thesis of the book and its import for education today, which is his central passion.

To follow his extrapolations you need to read the book, which I heartily recommend that you do. For those unfamiliar with the education Shakespeare would have received, the conclusions drawn from it can initially appear so perplexing as to be seemingly paradoxical. This further shows how far we are today from thinking ‘like Shakespeare’, who revelled in the insights gleaned via seeming paradoxes. For those with an Elizabethan education, and no history of 19th-century Romantic thought, the almost Orwellian list of antitheses that follow here would seem natural, not confounding. It may not quite be “war is peace” or “freedom is slavery” but to quote the Princeton University Press website:

“Challenging a host of today’s questionable notions about education, Newstok shows how mental play emerges through work, creativity through imitation, autonomy through tradition, innovation through constraint, and freedom through discipline.” ⁱⁱⁱ

The very fact these claims *are* challenging to our way of thinking and learning today, in itself demonstrates the importance of this book’s plea for us to learn ‘how to think like Shakespeare’.

That importance to our current situation cannot be over-stressed nor repeated too often. The very next book I picked up on finishing Mr Newstok’s, and have just begun to read, is by a fellow Harvard professor, published almost simultaneously, and in its, impressively combative, preface announces that:

The crisis is not in the humanities; it is bigger. It is in an educational system that devalues the humanities. Humanists are not, I think, interested in saying I told you so, but the election confirmed what we had been saying for decades: there is a dire need to foster the ability, among all our citizens, to interpret information amid the relentless data overload of the digital age. ^{iv}

The lack of questioning and reliance on being spoon-fed information is a recurring worry for all of us in education. There are concerns that the spirit of inquiry has been lost, because we no longer teach people how to think. Instead, we teach them how to get high grades and to take STEM subjects exclusively. Everything is geared to monetary reward, unsurprisingly when, in most countries, universities charge substantial annual fees. As a result, educational success is equated solely with an entry-level salary rather than any ability to imagine creatively or to craft thought through speech.

Returning to *How To Think Like Shakespeare*, as a subset of Newstok’s examination of Elizabethan and modern educational practices, we have a discussion of places of learning. Namely, that is, the difference between being in a classroom, and being taught remotely via a computer screen. This, already pressing issue, has, tragically, taken on an extraordinarily more urgent and immediate relevance in our current situation. We are living through a real-life laboratory experiment into the pros and cons of computerised distance learning.^v Cambridge University, for one, has just announced that all its lectures are to be online until September 2021 at earliest. Many students are baulking at paying fees for lectures via screens rather than in lecture halls^{vi}. Chapter 5 of this book strongly supports their reluctant hesitation in committing to such courses.

An aid to further exploration is given in a guide at the book’s conclusion, “Kinsmen of the Shelf”, to other work relating to each chapter. By the time we reach his recommendations, we are confident that the author fully deserves our trust.

ⁱ Princeton University Press (April 21, 2020)

ⁱⁱ Pages 143-145 are devoted to Bob Dylan.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691177083/how-to-think-like-shakespeare>

^{iv} *Shakespeare and Trump* by Jeffrey R. Wilson Temple University Press; 1 edition (April 17, 2020)

^v Or at least those with access to it are, as ever the already disadvantaged find their educational prospects further diminished. Perhaps this was lesson one of this enforced 'laboratory experiment'.

^{vi} Though this reluctance may also have to do with lacking the freedom to experiment in a new lifestyle and enjoying subsidised student bars while living in halls of residence or other student accommodation, away from parental control. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/20/no-sex-no-booze-how-the-move-online-will-take-all-the-fun-out-of-university>