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Shakespeare's Guide to Hope, Life, and Learning A Review Essay

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Book reviewed: Dickson, L., Murray, S., & Riddell, J. (2023). *Shakespeare's guide to hope, life, and learning*. Univeristy of Toronto Press.

The format is the most astonishing element of the collection of essays found in *Shakespeare's Guide to Hope, Life, and Learning* by Lisa Dickson, Shannon Murray, and Jessica Riddell. Designed as a series of conversations, each essay is penned by an individual author. Then, in the margins, the three collaborators (and at one point, their research assistant) carry on dialogs around the ideas raised in the main body of the essay. The form asks how print scholarship can be communal without eliding individual voice. While having the look of a Word document with the comments still turned on, the marginal dialogue evokes the feeling of the chat function in an online class. It is digital communication made print. Through this innovative form of textual presentation, the authors model the techniques at the heart of their volume — critical hope and critical empathy — by showing the messy process of academic thinking, rather than delivering a polished product.

At the heart of the authors' explorations of Shakespeare in the classroom are ideas which are generally excluded from scholarly and pedagogical discourse: hope, empathy, and love. But, as the authors articulate, these "affective concepts" are not effective without the addition of critical thought (15). Critical hope and empathy form the theoretical background of the book, as the authors explore how they inform the study of Shakespeare. In this context, hope is employed to help "us see the world as it could be, as well as how it is," (10) which then enables us to move confidently into the unknown. Empathy, then, is a relationship with the other which enables engagement with diverse and even contradictory ideas. The authors sum up their definition of the terms as such: "Critical empathy means working hard in the midst of all [the] messiness. Critical hope is the momentum that impels us forward" (15).

We come to know the three authors through the volume. In the opening "Dramatis Personae," they share their personal journey with Shakespeare and how they came to embrace critical hope, empathy, and love as their lens and the guiding principle for their classrooms. Through this intro, the essays, and the marginal discussions, the three authors emerge as playful characters. The reader grows to know their underlying motivations, hopes, and fears as we see them struggling with the challenges of hopeful pedagogy and scholarship.

The volume is divided into four parts, each of which focuses on a Shakespeare play taught in college courses: *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, and *Hamlet*. While learning is at the heart of the volume, this is not a book of teaching techniques, rather it asks the question: "What does it mean to create a *critically hopeful* classroom?" (17). Jessica, Shannon, and Lisa each approach this question differently, exploring their roles as teachers, learners, thinkers, and humans living in a messy world. In the following section I identify their approaches to each of the four plays.

The Essays

King Lear

In the first essay, Jessica models two techniques — monkey wrenches and rabbit holes — to create what she calls a “curiosity-driven classroom” (26). She argues these methods offer students critical empathy through the invitation to “revel in complexity” (31). Shannon then argues that the (now) old-fashioned technique of close reading, when paired with critical empathy, allows the classroom community to “hold two conflicting, even contradictory ideas or responses in our heads at the same time.” (34) Moreover, she shows that building this skill can be useful outside the classroom. Lisa, inspired by Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach*, comes to the realization that the play is, in itself, a lesson on “the consequences – mental, social, political – of living a divided life” (45). As Lear cannot rule over a divided kingdom, a fearful, divided instructor cannot effectively reach students. She concludes that when the teacher comes to teaching whole and creates safe spaces for collaborative inquiry, they have a hopeful, ethical classroom.

As You Like It

Jessica takes the events of *As You Like It* as a lesson on pedagogy, as Orlando learns to fashion himself via his teachers: Duke Senior and Rosalind. Through the characters’ journey as teachers and learners, she articulates the importance of delight and joy in the teaching process to “stir the heart and shape the mind” (68) – the goals of a hopeful classroom. In her essay, Shannon demonstrates how “this play offers a radically hopeful idea about the good life and how best to live it” (70). Setting off the philosophies of Duke Senior (optimistic) and Jaques (pessimistic) she reveals how, with a critically empathetic lens, we are able to “feel the truth” of both men’s point of view (77). Finishing the section, Lisa reveals how utilizing embodied research techniques in the classroom is an exercise in critical empathy, revealing Shakespeare’s “contradictory demands” on the bodies of the characters (85).

Henry V

Shannon’s essay explores two sides of hope: “hope in,” which is communal, and “hope for” which is self-focused (104). Through a rhetorical unpacking of Henry’s use of language (and hope within his rhetoric) she reveals how “critical hope, unyoked from critical empathy, can be dangerous” (94). Similarly, Jessica also investigates Henry’s rhetorical turns to demonstrate how Shakespeare asks audiences to hold two things at once: that “Henry V an orator of hope” and that he is “a rhetor gone rogue” (118). Bookending the essay with a celebration of orators of hope, she emphasizes how the development of “rhetorical literacy,” by studying plays like *Henry V*, “has the potential to heal through empathetic exercise. Lisa, to create a course rooted in critical hope and empathy, makes a space to set her students “free

inside it with Shakespeare” (122). Classroom activities like the “world café” (125) and debating staging possibilities, reveal how “Shakespeare educates us in critical empathy by giving us multiple places to stand” (127) both physically and intellectually.

Hamlet

In her essay, Lisa demonstrates the technique of developing a “somatic connection” (133) with *Hamlet*. Unpacking three “encounters” between her students and the text, she reveals that creating a safe space for students to wrestle with the “weirdness” of the play allows them to develop the supple thinking needed for critical empathy. Jessica’s essay explores teaching techniques that failed, as they did not align with her classroom goals (this insight comes from Lisa in a marginal comment). Coming to the conclusion that *Hamlet* (and teaching it) requires leaning into the “complexity of unknowing as an act of critical hope” (160) we see Jessica take a vulnerable leap along with her students. Opening with the “possibility that a meditation on death can be a hopeful practice,” (161) Shannon views *Hamlet* via Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*. She reveals how the duality of life shown in the play (life is futilely brief *and* wonderful) is a narrative of critical hope and empathy.

The Conversations in the Margins

The marginal conversations fulfill many purposes. They function as an endnote, with additional information from the main author, and as a sidenote opening up intertextual connections. They become rabbit holes the authors fall into without completely disrupting the flow of the argument. The margins become an additional place of learning, as the authors point out rhetorical forms, make connections between texts, offer up teaching techniques, share the wisdom of their students, and connect the plays to current events. The conversations make the labor of teaching and scholarship visible as they reveal process and the passage of time between the first time of writing and the time of publication. Through this, we see Shannon, Lisa, and Jessica model their hopeful ethos through their playfulness, kindness and love for each other and the work, ability to learn from each other, willingness to call each other out/in, and as a place for them to share their personal responses to the plays.

The Reader’s Experience

In (perhaps) a form of critical hope, the authors have created a book in which they cannot control how it is read. Unlike most codices, which follow a linear format, this book can be engaged with in multiple ways. Will the reader be disciplined and follow the thought of the author and then engage with the marginal dialogue? Or will they interrupt the flow of thought in order to read the interstitial comments? Or will they (as I subversively started to do) read all of the marginal dialogue first and then engage with the author’s text with the broader conversation in mind? In all three, the thoughts of the author are constantly shaded or shaped

by the margins. There are moments where the messiness of the various conversations make it difficult to follow all of the trains of thought (see 99). The reader has to work hard to connect each sidebar with the thought that inspired it. Given the authors' belief in embracing the complexity and messiness of critical hope and empathy, this may actually be a facet of their larger aims.

Takeaways

This book provides a unique method of exploring Shakespeare in the classroom utilizing critical hope and empathy. The single-mindedness of the volume helps to reinforce the authors' main ideas, but also becomes repetitive reading the volume beginning-to-end. While the authors state it is not explicitly a teaching volume, the reader can gather some new techniques to create their own engaged, hopeful classrooms.

About the Author

Lezlie C. Cross is an Associate Professor at the University of Portland. Her published articles and book reviews appear in *Theatre History Studies*, *Theatre Annual*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* and *Theatre Survey* as well as the book projects *Shakespeare on Broadway*, *Women on Stage*, *Shakespeare Expressed: Page, Stage, and Classroom* and *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*. Her book manuscript, *The Edwin Booth Prompt Books: A Social and Theatrical History*, tracks the editing, publication, and use of Edwin Booth's acting editions of Shakespeare. Lezlie is also a professional theatre artist who has worked at regional theatres across the nation.

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