NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

BOOK REVIEW

How Shakespeare's Stories Set Us Free

Ewan Fernie, *Shakespeare for Freedom: Why the Plays Matter*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Hardcover ISBN: 9781107130852.

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How Narrative Works

To appreciate the importance of *Shakespeare for Freedom* beyond Shakespearean and literary studies, consider what this journal's title recognizes. Narratives *work*; they perform multiple works. I have previously argued the duality of stories working both *for* people and *on* people; stories we never think of affect us (Frank, 2010). Narratives shape our human expectations for how the world works; they affect what we perceive about the world, and how we make sense of those perceptions. Stories teach us who can expect what from life, and what are the likely outcomes of different responses to what life throws at us. Some narrative works enable human flourishing, and others are destructive.

The core narratives of Shakespeare's plays can be named after human passions: falling-in-love narratives, ambition narratives, jealousy, betrayal, revenge, and more. Shakespeare takes a generalized *narrative* template—young people fall in love but face some complication to their being together. He populates this narrative with characters—Romeo and Juliet—who turn the falling-in-love narrative into a specific *story* with a time and place. The process then reverses: Shakespeare's specific stories are so memorable and seem so generalizable that they lend their names to recognizable narratives. It makes sense to speak of a "Romeo-and-Juliet story" as a narrative template. That narrative informs people's expectations and responses for what they count as falling in love, and it

can shape how others respond when two people act certain ways and make claims about their feelings. Shakespeare not only evokes being-in-love. In meaningful sense, *Romeo and Juliet* as a narrative template *creates* experiential expectations of being-in-love, or, in other plays, being jealous, or seeking revenge, and so on through a whole catalog of human experiences, including being free.

Stories also work by teaching people how to tell more stories, especially stories about their own lives. A Darwinian metaphor requires cautions but seems inescapable: stories evolve, with their fitness defined retrospectively by the spin-offs and clones they generate. Shakespeare himself was retelling almost all the stories in his plays, with minor but significant variations on his source-story (Muir, 1977). His retellings are then retold, making Shakespeare's plays one of the most significant *corpus* of stories, not just in English, but globally.[1] A few other story collections might claim equal reach: in the Western tradition, the Hebrew Bible and some New Testament parables, ancient Greek myths and classical tragedies, Norse myths, perhaps the stories known as the *Thousand and One Nights* (which could claim to be the most multi-cultural corpus [Warner, 2011]), and certainly the stories collected by the Brothers Grimm all display considerable evolutionary fitness. Other corpuses of stories might be nominated, but not that many others. How these story collections shape everyday stories and teach people to experience their lives deserves to be a central concern of studies in how narratives work.

Shakespeare for Freedom describes how Shakespeare's stories do the narrative work of making *freedom* an expectation for a full human life. The plays show us variations on characters seeking to be free, exploring multiple possibilities of freedom. Freedom means something different for each character, and what impedes freedom differs in each play. As we, either readers, theatre goers, or people retelling the tale in a further variation, dwell in Shakespeare's stories, and they dwell in us, that narrative process works for freedom.

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[1] The global reach of Shakespeare is attested in numerous books, including Fernie's. For one especially readable account, see Dromgoole (2017). See also Omar and Landrigan (2011) on staging Shakespeare in post-Taliban Afghanistan. An eminent example of Shakespeare's global effect and the contests over how to continue to tell his stories is Aimé Césare's radical adaptation, *A Tempest* (2002). Contemporary adaptations proliferate, and not only in English.

An Archaeology of a Narrative *Corpus*

Ewan Fernie is professor at the Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham, located in Stratford-on-Avon, where the Royal Shakespeare Company has its theatres. He is the author of several previous books on Shakespeare and co-editor of the *Shakespeare Now!* book series that publishes shorter, experimental critical studies that seek to tease out new relevance in Shakespeare's work. These books often begin with the author's autobiographical connection to Shakespeare. In its encouragement of that autobiographically engaged voice, this series can be described as an on-going exploration of critical freedom.[2]

Shakespeare for Freedom has, on my reading, four central aspects. First, Fernie's remarkably researched cultural history describes how Shakespeare has inspired diverse works of political freedom in different countries over several centuries, including the Chartist movement in mid-19th-century England, democratic reform politics in Hungary at the same time, and the Robbin Island Shakespeare, a copy of the collected works that circulated in the best-known South African political prison during apartheid, with passages inscribed mostly notably by Nelson Mandela. In the accumulation of these historical moments, we see how Shakespeare has been literally a force for freedom.

Second, Fernie offers close readings of particular plays, focusing on specific usages of *free* and *freedom*, and asking more generally what counts as being free in different plays. He begins with the Prince's lines spoken after he breaks up a brawl between the Capulets and Montagues at the beginning of one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *Romeo and Juliet*: "To know our further pleasure in this case, / To old Freetown, our common judgment place" (1.1.99–100). Fernie describes the history of Freetown as a literary device and a real place: Villafranca, still existing outside Verona, "deriving its name from its tax-free status from 1185" (p. 81). Freetown as metaphor resonates throughout Shakespeare's plays, sometimes as an aspiration, and often as a place. In *As You Like It*, the Forest of Arden is a version of Freetown. The freedom that Rosalind finds there by dressing as a man exemplifies Shakespearean freedom.

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[2] As one example, Phillippa Kelly (2011) frames her discussion of *King Lear* within her own coming-of-age and career development as a woman in Australia. *Lear* is understood through the lens of Australian politics and cultural policies.

Throughout the plays, many ways of being free are depicted. But modes of villainy also undeniably express a kind of freedom.

Third, Fernie devotes considerable attention to the dangers of freedom, as these also are depicted in the plays. The dark side of the cultural history is freedom gone morally amok that justifiably claims Shakespeare as an influence. The most notorious case is the actor John Wilkes Booth, assassin of Abraham Lincoln. Booth had multiple Shakespearean influences, but styled himself especially on the example of Brutus, the idealistic assassin in *Julius Caesar*. Fernie is especially insightful on how stories are dangerous. He provides sustained, generous and insightful discussions of Shakespeare's critics who argued why his different freedoms—freedom both of the text and in the text—are destructive. Among these critics, Tolstoy may be most notable; he detested Shakespeare, for carefully argued reasons.

Fourth, and overall, Fernie significantly updates and extends the case made by Jonathan Bate's 1998 book, which, for my interests at least, is the most insightful recent Shakespearean study.[3] Bate was rescuing Shakespeare from what was a prevalent British political appropriation of his plays and his image to support conservative politics. Everyone wants to enlist Shakespeare to their side, and because Shakespeare's brilliance lies in making all sides plausible and even admirable, his work is readily enlisted to multiple political positions. Fernie's history of interpretative responses to Shakespeare shows different ways that literature can be political; how political impulses develop through personal stories, and how these stories then act upon persons. Shakespeare himself exemplifies freedom as he is repeatedly enlisted and appropriated, yet always slips out of the limiting effects of these enlistments, refusing one-side-or-the-other stances. That is his freedom, again, not only *in* the texts but *of* the texts.

Fernie brings these different aspects together in a wonderfully seamless book. *Shakespeare for Freedom* exemplifies sociology of literature: it shows how Shakespeare's plays reappear and act differently on and for people in multiple historical contexts; who has read and *used* Shakespeare—how, in what conditions, to what effects. But these sociological interests must involve literary criticism, attending to the internal dynamics of how the plays effect their effects. Fernie's stories of

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[3] Bate's (1998/2008) title, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, is not boilerplate praise; his topic is how the conception of *genius* originated as a way to describe Shakespeare. Bate writes a cultural history of what different centuries counted as "genius" in Shakespeare.

people whom Shakespeare has worked for and on create new concentric circles of Shakespearean characters: stage performers and producers; literary critics and philosophers; political reformers and assassins. *Shakespeare for Freedom* is thus an exemplary study of how one narrative corpus has worked, relating historical moments to textual detail. But what is *freedom* in Fernie's understanding of Shakespeare?

Narrative Freedom

Fernie comes closest to defining freedom in his extended discussions of Hegel's writings on Shakespeare. "Shakespeare can help us to understand Hegel's portrayal of freedom as a positive and absolute commitment to the endless contradictions and compromises of life and responsibility," Fernie writes (p. 209). Among the many contributions of *Shakespeare for Freedom*, I found Fernie's reclaiming of Hegel's radical vision to be among the most significant. But how does Shakespeare help us, as Fernie says, to understand Hegelian freedom?

Fernie's own understanding of freedom is laid out as the book opens. Freedom has two sides that are complementary. One side is freedom for whatever it means to "be yourself" (p. 2). All of Shakespeare's characters, heroes, villains, bawds, lovers, and fools struggle to be some version of a self that faces opposition in its realization. They seek to be what Hegel described as "free artists of their own selves" (as cited in Fernie, p. 52; subsequently quoted several times with elaborated interpretation). How far this ideal can be achieved is a major contention within Shakespearean criticism, as any social scientist would expect. The idea of the self as anyone's "own" is among the most contested in different academic literatures.[4]

The necessary complement of "be yourself" is the freedom to be different from what you have been. "This is the freedom not of being (what you are) but *becoming* (what you might be), the freedom to cast off all that you have been till now in a sudden, insurgent desire to be otherwise" (p. 4). As Fernie says a bit later, this is freedom "*from self*" (p. 5). Those thoughts lead Fernie to characterize freedom as "a specific and welcoming disposition toward life" (p. 5). If that lacks specificity,

[4] In Shakespearean studies, the crucial text provoking these controversies is Greenblatt (1980). I have spent my career as a sociologist asking what is the "self" in Erving Goffman's (1959) classic work, which I regret Greenblatt does not engage.

defining freedom is not the point for either Fernie or Shakespeare. The need for stories—Shakespeare's plays—is also the limit of definitions.

We—scholars, political activists, anybody trying to do the right thing—turn to stories because definitions become progressively less useful as any idea gets bigger, and freedom is among the biggest, up there with *dignity*, *truth*, and *love*. We turn to stories because it's less useful to be told in universal and abstract language what freedom is than to be shown recognizable characters struggling to be free in the troublesome conditions of their complicated lives.

How stories show us lives in order to teach us how to live brings us to an apparent paradox about Shakespeare, about Fernie's case for turning to Shakespeare to enact specific political freedoms, and about how narrative works. A fitting epigraph for the paradox of how stories represent the real is Polonius's famous line from *Hamlet*: "And thus do we of wisdom and of reach / … By indirections find directions out" (2.1.65-67).[5] In briefest terms, what is most real is often discovered by way of the fantastic, which is no news in some academic fields and a subversive provocation in others. A couple of Shakespeare's plays are explicitly fairy tales (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*) and most of the others depend on folkloric motifs and tropes. The paradox is that stories can be more truthfully representational of the real, and more real in their effects on those who hear them, because the plot is improbable. The same paradox underlies the representational reality of dreams claimed by Freud.

To be more specific on this important point, after Fernie states the two sides of freedom to be yourself and to be different from yourself, he offers as an exemplar Rosalind in *As You Like It*. I will fill in more plot details than Fernie offers to his readers. Rosalind is the daughter of Duke Senior who has been deposed by his brother, an event that happens with some regularity in the corpus of Shakespearean stories (Lake, 2016). After the coup, Duke Frederick allows his niece Rosalind to remain at court, because of her closeness to his daughter, Celia. Then, in another typical Shakespearean reversal, Duke Frederick becomes suspicious of Rosalind and banishes her. She and Celia take off together to the Forest of Arden, where Duke Senior and his loyal nobles are camping in a pastoral

[5] As often in Shakespeare, what in context is a self-serving statement by a morally questionable character can be, out of that context, a useful aphorism. But the aphorism remains haunted by the original usage. No truths are simple.

fantasy setting, although the women choose to live apart from Rosalind's father's camp and keep their identity secret.

To protect herself and Celia on the road to the Forest of Arden, Rosalind has adopted male dress, calling herself Ganymede, a name with provocative sexual ambiguities. She takes to being Ganymede, particularly enjoying not being recognized by her father. As Fernie notes, Rosalind retains male dress and identity long after any necessity requires it. Rosalind embraces being something different, which is Fernie's point: "no one simply coincides with what she or he is" (p. 183), and later, they "render themselves as pictures *in process*, which henceforward they themselves will be able to reshape and change" (p. 186).

But as much fun as Rosalind is, do her actions deserve Fernie's description as an "insurgent desire" (p. 4, quoted earlier)? Rosalind and Celia's insurgency is comfortably funded by the jewels they bring to the Forest of Arden and use to buy a farm. Celia and Rosalind further comfort themselves by enlisting Touchstone, the court fool, to accompany them. Again, the issue is whether the story's folkloric qualities of fantasy detract from holding up Rosalind as an exemplar of the freedom to be different from what you are. More generally, if *freedom* is political, as Fernie argues that both personal and communal freedoms are, how useful are Shakespeare's folktales in real political worlds?

My argument, to which Fernie brings me but which is not his explicitly, is that Shakespeare's stories are useful for people to live with as a preparation for turning to the practical difficulties of real-world politics of freedom. We return to the paradox of representation. What exactly is "real" about any world is not so simple; or, put differently, it is from provisionally inhabiting worlds that seem counter-factual—such as the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*—that we humans can prepare ourselves to sort out what's real in our own worlds. *Preparation* is the substantive problem of many of the plays, in which characters are well or badly prepared, and may or may not be given time to prepare. A comedy is a story in which characters are given time to prepare; literally a grace period. Fernie does not ask, and Shakespeare does not say, how Duke Senior came to be deposed. In *The Tempest*, it's explicit that Prospero, another deposed Duke, was remiss in how he governed, and while his brother was ambitious, his coup also filled a gap that had been left open. Duke Senior needs to spend time in the Forest of Arden, leading a pastoral-fantasy life, to prepare to return to rule better than he ruled before. In Freetown places like the Forest of Arden, you learn what you need to be in order to return to a world that needs you to be that person.

The Forest of Arden is many things, but not least it's a metaphor for *narrative space*, the space of being caught up in a story that has all the fantasy elements of the most engaging stories. Rosalind and Celia's fantastic adventure is all the more useful as preparation for insurgency because of its fantasy elements as a story, including taking along a good supply of jewels readily convertible into property. The issue is not whether the story is realistic as a depiction of freedom or whatever else. The issue is whether the story can prepare those who dwell in it—who become caught up in its world—to subsequently engage the real of their own worlds; that is its narrative work. Rosalind eventually puts a dress back on; her father will return to be a ruler. We the audience leave the theatre, after spending our time there. The work of the story is not to be a guidebook to what happens back in the real. Instead, the story works to change our sense of what is real, and what might be possible, back in that world.

That takes me back to what Fernie does say explicitly, writing about the 19th-century Chartist political reformer Thomas Cooper: "Crucially for Cooper … Shakespeare wasn't so much a model as a stimulus" (p. 135). That distinction between *model* and *stimulus* says a great deal about what work we can expect stories to do, and what we best not expect them to do. Especially in medical practices, in law courts, and in research settings, stories are expected to report with representational exactness. Stories can be harnessed to do that work of being a model of past events, but stories find their freedom by being a stimulus to a future that requires reshaping the past.[6]

Much else could be said about what Fernie teaches us, but in this review for a journal that is broadly social scientific, one other point clarifies narrative research. "Shakespeare makes no attempt to give us an overarching myth," Fernie writes. "He offers only series of plays. One comes to an end; another begins. There is no final, definitive synthesis" (p. 7). As often in *Shakespeare for Freedom*, much provocation is loaded into few words. We should not seek to abstract a *theory* of freedom from Shakespeare's plays. What we should appreciate is the affirmation of a *struggle* that "will never be over" (p. 7).[7] That emphasis on unfinalizable process can be difficult for social scientists to affirm in their research

[6] On my reading, the first, clearest statement of this idea is Mattingly (1998), albeit stated with different emphasis. I take up the discussion in Frank (2010).

[7] Fernie does not cite Charles Taylor, but he echoes Taylor's (1991, p. 71 ff.) reclaiming of the motto of the Red Brigade, "*la lotta continua."*

practices, especially how they write. Journals and funding agencies reward finalized "findings" that claim generalized applicability. In the face of those expectations, Fernie states what I take as true: "Shakespeare expresses the unavoidable and unending power of contingency" (p. 7).

Instead of a theory, we have a "series of plays" (p. 7, quoted above). So-called narrative analysis should take that seriously. Each play is a singular, unique story; each "retains its own separate integrity" (p. 7). But Shakespeare's collected plays are what I called earlier a *corpus* of stories. A corpus of stories might be literary or it might collect ethnographic or interview materials. Such a *corpus* is a distinctive kind of body, with each story whole in itself, but the whole of the corpus affecting the sense of each part. Within the series of Shakespeare's plays, what can be understood about any specific character broadens and deepens when we consider other characters who share some variant of the same dilemma. To know Duke Senior, it helps to think of Prospero. Rosalind is complete in herself, but living with her as a stimulus is enhanced by thinking of Shakespeare's other cross-dressing women of the road, including Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Imogen in *Cymbeline.* Just outside that circle is Isabella in *Measure for Measure* who, like Rosalind, undertakes a quest leading through the surreal landscape. But Isabella seems an inversion of Rosalind: she continues to wear her novice nun's habit in which she first appears. That habit represents Isabella's struggles to *continue to coincide* with what she first appears to be, while most of the play's other characters show themselves to be otherwise than their first appearance. At the play's end, Isabella's freedom is an open question, and that variation enriches our sense of the problem of being free. What makes a collection of stories into a *corpus* is how plots and characters cross reference each other, elaborating recognizably common dilemmas.

Narrative Knowing

Fernie shows us many variations on freedom in Shakespeare's plays, and variations in how Shakespeare's plays have been taken as resources for projects of political freedom in life outside the theatre. For readers of this journal, perhaps more significant is what Fernie's discussion of historical figures like Thomas Cooper teaches us about a narrative way of knowing. Cooper, in his aspiration to freedom, seems closest to being Fernie's real-life counterpart to Rosalind. Cooper lyrically describes Shakespeare as offering him "'wondrous knowledge of

the heart'" (as cited in Fernie, p. 129). The story of Cooper's life shows that phrase is earned. He was a self-educated man from the industrial north of England who devoted himself to voting reform that was considered sufficiently radical for him to be incarcerated. Cooper was offered the opportunity of attending Cambridge, which he wanted almost as much as anything, but the cost was a promise of his future silence on politics. He turned down the offer. Fernie writes that Cooper "experiences this Shakespearean vision as more than just a sublime enhancement of his own ego—it opens into his vision of social freedom as such" (p. 129).

Fernie situates that vision of social freedom on a dual axis of historical breadth, in which Shakespeare's plays act as a stimulus to freedom in different times and places, and textual depth, in which specific characters seek to be free, creating language that evokes their particular freedom. Fernie's far-reaching contribution can provoke scholars from multiple disciplines to think differently about how narrative works generally, and more specifically, how narrative research can enhance the power of stories for freedom.

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