CONTEXT: NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI & DECEPTION
2021

Appearance vs Reality

notes taken from *RENAISSANCE DRAMA:* ARDEN SHAKESPEARE – BRINDA CHARRY

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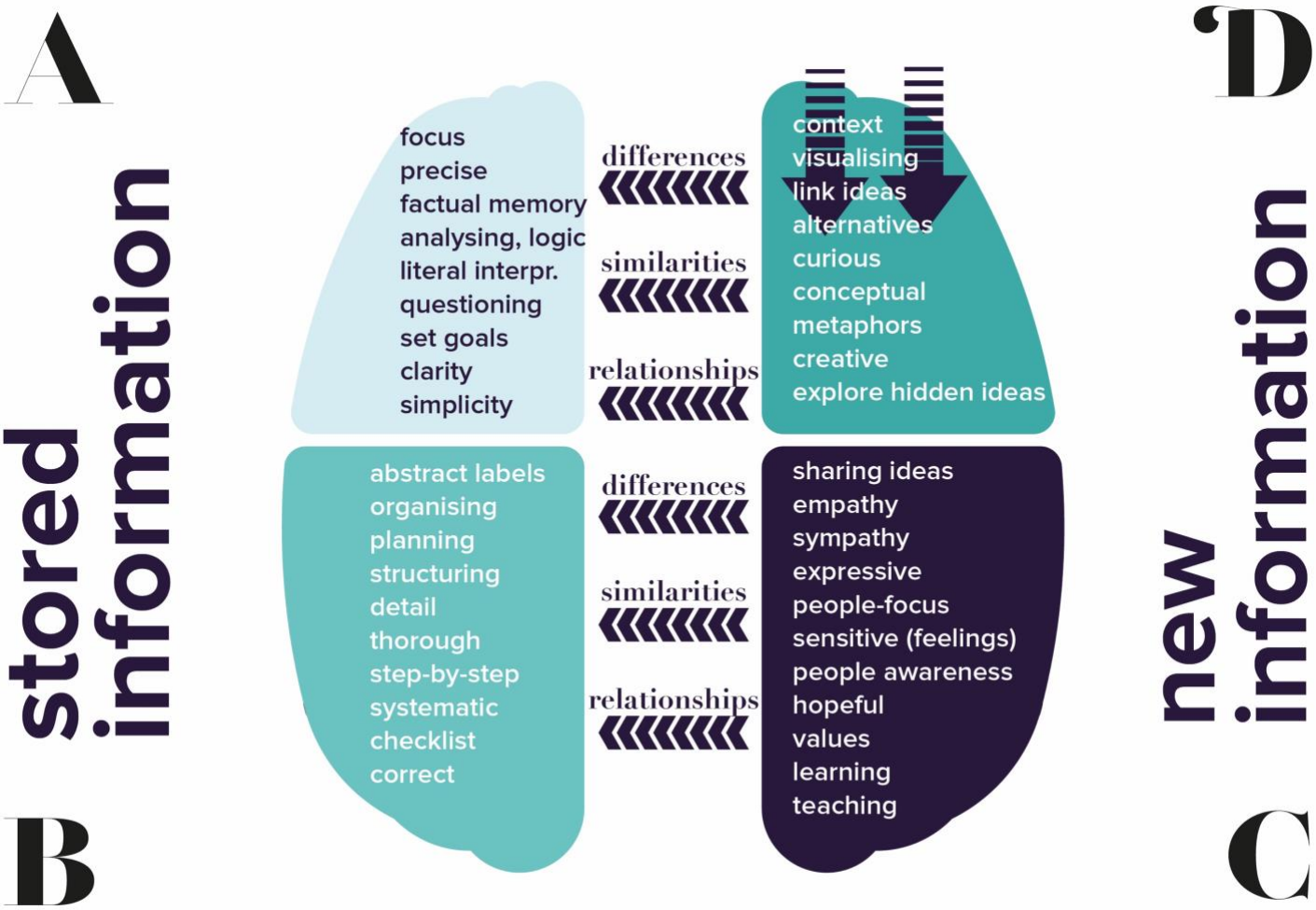

RIGHT-BRAIN QUESTIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT CONTEXT

Whenever you read about context, you should try to ask the following questions

- Is this similar to something in the text(s) I'm reading?
  - What is it similar to?
    - Themes
    - Ideas
    - Characters
    - Symbols
    - Scenes
    - Incidents
    - Etc.
  - What's the relationship between the context and my text?

        - In what way(s) is it similar?
    - Why might the author have made that connection?

TEXT COLOUR CODE

- Background information
- Important information that links to text
- Examples

KINGSHIP: EXCESSES OF POWER

The excesses of power fascinated playwrights in the Renaissance

- The Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli had famously argued that 'virtue' in kings was not to be equated with traditional morality but meant prowess and cunning.
    - Machiavelli's ideas were admittedly more complex than stated here,
        - but remorseless Machiavellian rulers were represented and even caricatured on the Renaissance stage.
            - Besides, a number of 'tyrant plays' depicting despotic rulers were staged.

KINGSHIP AND TYRANNY

The issue of tyranny was a fraught one.

- Many thinkers, notably John Ponet (A Short Treatise of Political Power [1556]) argued that no community should tolerate dictators who should be deposed
    - and, if necessary, killed,
- while others were of the opinion that the consent of the public is necessary for rule
    - but kings cannot and should not be deposed by the people.
        - On stage, Caesar in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar (1599) is a dictator,
            - but the play holds that deposing of an existing government is an even greater evil.
        - In Shakespeare's Macbeth (c. 1606), Macbeth, once he becomes Scottish king, is described as a 'tyrant' who deserves to be killed.
        - The emperor Tiberius in Ben Jonson's Sejanus (1603) is frighteningly despotic,
        - and other tyrant kings – Mustapha, Selimus and Solimon, for example – also ranted and raved and indiscriminately killed on Renaissance stages.
            - Many plays, especially Jacobean ones like…
                - John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi (1612– 13),
                - John Marston's The Malcontent (1603),
                - Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy (c. 1585– 89)
                - and Thomas Middleton's The Revenger's Tragedy (c. 1606),
                    - depict the royal court as a corrupt and unjust place.

NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI'S '*THE PRINCE*'

From Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince (1532). Trans. Daniel Donno, 1966. (© Random House)

The Italian thinker Niccolò Machiavelli's famous political treatise The Prince (1532) was widely read across Europe. In this well-known excerpt, Machiavelli argues that a king need not necessarily be virtuous.

Therefore a prince will not actually need to have all the qualities previously mentioned, but he must surely seem to have them. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that having them all and always conforming to them would be harmful, while appearing to have them would be useful. That is, it will be well for him to seem and, actually, to be merciful, faithful, humane, frank, and religious. But he should preserve a disposition which will make a reversal of conduct possible in case the need arises. It must be understood, however, that a prince – especially a prince who has but recently attained power – cannot observe all of those virtues for which men are reputed good, because it is often necessary to act against mercy, against faith, against humanity, against frankness, against religion in order to preserve the state. Thus he must be disposed to change according to the winds of fortune and the alterations of circumstance dictate. As I have already said, he must stick to the good so long as he can, but, being compelled by necessity, he must be ready to take the way of evil. Hence a prince must take care never to utter a word that is not implicit with the five above-mentioned qualities; and he must never appear to be anything but the very soul of clemency, 11 faithfulness, frankness, humanity, and religion to all who see and hear him. But of all the qualities he must seem to have, none is more important than the last. Generally, men judge by the eye rather than the hand, for all men can see a thing, but few come close enough to touch it. All men will see what you seem to be; only a few will know what you are, and those few will not dare to oppose the many who have the majesty of the state on their side to defend them. In all men's acts, and in those of princes most especially, it is the result that renders the verdict when there is no court of appeal. Let the prince conquer a state, then, and preserve it; the methods employed will always be judged honourable, and everyone will praise them. For the mob is always impressed by appearances and by results; and the world is composed of the mob.... A certain ruler of our time, whom it is better not to name, preaches nothing but peace and faith, yet he is the extreme enemy of both; and if he had been true to either of them, he would more than once have lost either power or reputation.

EARLY HUMANIST FAITH IN THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

For Erasmus (a Dutch scholar of Northern Renaissance [1469 - 1536]), speech was the distinguishing mark of humankind.

- Early Humanist thinkers (scholars of classical Greece and Rome) had implicit faith in the power of the word –
    - its ability to persuade people to the good
    - its role in uncovering the truth.
        - What had little place in their thought was the consideration of what it meant if language were to be harnessed for malign purposes
            - as in slander
            - and calumny.

GROWING SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

In the course of the early modern age, the initial enthusiasm for rhetoric (persuasive language) gave way to an increasing scepticism about language (Ascoli and Kahn 1993).

- The ambivalent attitude towards rhetoric might have been intensified by the political situation in Italy.
    - A devastating wave of invasions of the peninsula by foreign powers, which began in the late fifteenth century, ended the independence of the flourishing city states.
        - In addition, the Humanist ideal of educating the rulers was felt to have been an overwhelming failure.
            - Disillusionment about the abuse of persuasive language for immoral ends became widespread,
                - and confidence in the close relationship between eloquent speech and inner virtue was more and more eroded.
                    - In reality, doubts about rhetoric were not a new development.
                        - They hark back to debates that had raged in antiquity between supporters of rhetoric and its detractors.
                            - The most famous attack on the ethical basis of rhetoric was made by Plato.
                                - His dialogue Gorgias was hugely influential and set the parameters for arguments about rhetoric ever since.

PLATO'S DIALOGUE GORGIAS

Gorgias was an ancient philosopher who specialised in rhetoric.

- He belonged to a school of thinkers known as Sophists, who were professional teachers who taught the skills of oratory and argumentation to their affluent clients for a fee, a practice that was heavily criticised by Socrates and Aristotle.
    - In dialogue with Socrates, he comes across as a cynical opportunist who is interested in rhetoric as the art of cajoling others,
        - not as a path to gaining insight into truth.
            - Rhetoric was a tool of power that would enable one to convince others to adopt one's own viewpoint.
                - The ethics of what one was arguing was irrelevant.
                    - For Socrates, language ought to be used solely to instil virtue into citizens.
                    - For Aristotle, rhetoric should be used for ethical means and avoid false pathos (manipulation of emotions for improper means)
                        - What Gorgias was describing was not an art, but an artful talent in pleasing people by telling them what they wanted to hear.
                            - Famously, Socrates draws an analogy between rhetoric and cooking.
                                - With regard to the human body, medicine and gymnastics provide cures and salutary means to improve health – these are what he calls arts. A practice that uses gratification to gain its ends is nothing but flattery.

EXCERPT OF PLATO'S DIALOGUE GORGIAS

It seems to me then, Gorgias, to be a pursuit that is not a matter of art, but showing a shrewd, gallant spirit which has a natural bent for clever dealing with mankind, and I sum up its substance in the name flattery. This practice, as I view it, has many branches, and one of them is cookery; which appears indeed to be an art but, by my account of it, is not an art but a habitude or knack. I call rhetoric another branch of it, as also personal adornment and sophistry – four branches of it for four kinds of affairs. (463a–b)

GOOD – THE END GOAL OF LANGUAGE

It might be helpful to bear in mind that when Plato, who recorded the dialogue – Socrates himself has not left us a single line – is using the term 'art' (techne)

- he is referring to something more akin to a craft than what we might term art.
    - The ancients differentiated between different forms of art:
        - 'techne' was the word used for a skill that served a practical purpose,
        - while 'poesis' was the term that might generally be said to describe the creation of beauty.
            - What is at stake in the debate between Socrates and Gorgias is the goal any practice aimed for.
                - The end of all action should be the good, not pleasure, Socrates argues (as did Aristotle).
                    - Socrates lumps rhetoric with cookery, sophistry – a debased form of philosophy in Socrates' mind, which failed to strive for the good – and adornment.
                        - All four skills might create pleasure, but it was far more important to instruct people how to be virtuous.
                            - Instead, what these arts were concerned with was catering to our fondness for superficialities.

WHY SOCRATES WAS SCEPTICAL ABOUT LANGUAGE

Socrates admits that there might be a kind of rhetoric that would be ethically acceptable and that would serve to improve the morals of the people.

- However, he has never encountered an orator or statesman of Athens who has set his sights on this target.
    - In the coming centuries, Socrates' qualification of his critique of rhetoric rapidly dropped out of the picture.
        - What was continually rehearsed in the controversy between defenders and proponents of rhetoric was the Platonic argument that rhetoric was merely a superficial art that appealed to the senses or catered to the emotions rather than directing our attention to the truth.
            - It pandered to our eternal fascination with surface impressions.

APPEARANCE VS ESSENCE AND THE RISE OF SHAKESPEARE

In the Early Modern period, the criticism of eloquent language was subsumed under a larger attack on pleasing exteriors as opposed to essences.

- It gained a fresh impetus in the fiery polemic that circulated during the Reformation. Religious reformers insisted that rather than an outward show of religious practice, it was one's inner feeling that counted.
    - They launched a virulent assault on the ceremonies, images and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, which they branded as idolatrous.
        - Humankind was too busy worshipping external signs to pay proper reverence to God, they claimed.
            - Attractive appearances and ornament only served to distract us from the real truth – the Word of God.
                - They were delusionary phenomena that deceived us about the only reality that mattered.
                    - A ferocious drive to eradicate images and pleasing shows of every kind erupted throughout Europe.
                        - In England, sacred relics were smashed, religious statues were defaced and medieval decorations were destroyed.
                            - The crusade against idolatry touched upon the lives of ordinary citizens, too – in Stratford-uponAvon, Shakespeare's birthplace, it was Shakespeare's father, town bailiff at the time, who was given the order in 1563 to whitewash the wall paintings in the Guild Chapel.
                                - And it was the abolishment of religious drama that led to the spectacular rise of the commercial theatre in London, which made his son immortal.

THE APPEARNCE VS REALITY DEBATE : MACHIAVELLI'S INFLUENCE

there were other ways the Renaissance responded to the debate about rhetoric and truth, appearances and reality.

- Perhaps the most drastic attack on the optimism of early Humanists was made by Machiavelli in his masterpiece *The Prince* (1515).
    - For Cicero, the highest goal for a man was to enhance his honour. T
        - he way to achieve this was through virtuous living.
            - Humanists strongly endorsed the Ciceronian emphasis on virtue as indispensable to a member of the ruling class in order to govern well
                - Machiavelli shares the view that the most important good to aim for was honour and glory
                    - but he differs radically about how to fulfil this aspiration
                        - The core precept, according to Machiavelli, was to adapt to the situation at hand. If this involved immoral acts, so be it
                            - To rule wisely, there was no necessity to be virtuous
                                - The important thing was to maintain the appearance of virtue. What counted was the image, not the reality.

THE RISE OF THE 'MACHIAVEL' IN RENAISSANCE DRAMA

Machiavelli was endlessly vilified for his views and condemned as cynical and unethical and was widely regarded as the source of the political principles he expounded;

- his name became a byword for cunning and depravity
    - A popular stage villain – a 'Machiavel' – emerged
        - a devilish
        - unscrupulous schemer
        - and combined elements of the cruel tyrant
            - a favourite character in tragedies by the Roman playwright Seneca, with the comic devil or his henchman in medieval drama known as the Vice.
                - The 'Machiavel' was a roaring success in the theatre and he inspired a host of figures
                    - Christopher Marlowe's devious villain Barabas in The Jew of Malta, a pair of crafty Venetians,
                    - Volpone and Mosca, in Ben Jonson's Volpone
                    - the murderous malcontent Bosola in John Webster's Duchess of Malfi
                        - Shakespeare's own Machiavellian characters include
                            - Richard III
                            - Iago in Othello
                            - Edmund in King Lear
                            - Macbeth
                                - However, a number of Elizabethans – amongst them Walter Raleigh and Francis Bacon – paid tribute to Machiavelli's acuity in analysing the workings of power and in exposing political realities.

CATIGLIONE VS MACHIAVELLI

By contrast, Castiglione was the darling of Renaissance society

- His description of the importance of presenting an elegant exterior and displaying polish in one's manners, speech and dress was embraced as a guidebook by courtiers all over Europe and formed the template for an entire genre, the Renaissance courtesy book
    - A significant number of these texts were addressed to social hopefuls in the lower ranks of society.
        - Castiglione's notion of sprezzatura (or nonchalance) articulated the imperative of creating the right impression
            - It was not sufficient to acquire a slew of courtly skills; it was far more effective to produce a facade of effortlessness in all one said and did
                - Castiglione's courtiers go even further

- Count Ludovico Canossa, the chief interlocutor in Book 1, explains to the select circle that acquiring an air of nonchalance did not merely assist in presenting one's talents in the best possible light
    - There was a bonus to be had.

CATIGLIONE'S SPREZZATURA

Sprezzatura, brings with it another adornment

- when it accompanies any human action however small, not only reveals at once how much the person knows who does it
    - but often causes it to be judged much greater than it actually is
        - since it impresses upon the minds of the onlookers the opinion that he who performs well with so much facility must possess even great skill than this
            - and that, if he were to devote care and effort to what he does, he could do it far better. (1.28)

SPREZZATURA: ANOTHER FORM OF DECEPTION

By putting on a front of insouciance one could delude one's peers into thinking that one possessed qualities one did not actually have

- In other words, it was a blueprint for deception
    - The genre Castiglione adopts, the dialogue, enables him to incorporate critique of the ideas put forward in the book within the text itself
        - Accordingly, one of the courtiers protests emphatically
            - In Book 2 Gaspare Pallavicino objects,
                - 'This seems to me to be not an art, but an actual deceit.'
                    - In response, Federico Fregoso declares,
                        - 'This is an ornament attending the thing done, rather than deceit; and even if it be deceit, it is not to be censured.'
                            - He goes on to cite the example of a goldsmith who skilfully enhances the beauty of a jewel and claims, 'Surely he deserves praise for that deceit, because with good judgement and art his masterful hand often adds grace and adornment to ivory or to silver or to a beautiful stone by setting it in fine gold' (2.40).

CASTIGLIONE AND MACHIAVELLI: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

The line Fregoso is treading is a fine one

- First, he attempts to whitewash the idea of deceit by replacing the term with 'ornament'.

- Next, he draws an analogy to a jewel and the skill with which a craftsman sets off the properties of a precious stone.
    - What he evades is the question whether the strategy of sprezzatura might be applied to cover a lack instead of to present an accomplishment in a better light.
        - In truth, the response Castiglione offers to the vexed issue of appearance and reality is not very different from that of Machiavelli.
            - For the latter, whether or not the Prince was virtuous was largely irrelevant.
                - Of paramount importance was the semblance of virtue,
                    - not what qualities the Prince might actually possess. Similarly, Castiglione's courtiers advocate dissembling if it is useful in creating the impression that the courtier excels in a particular field.
                        - The truth is beside the point – all that matters is the appearance.

Bibliography

Charry, B. (2017). *The Arden guide to Renaissance drama*. Bloomsbury The Arden Shakespeare, pp.28 - 35.