CONTEXT: KINGSHIP

notes taken from *THE ARDEN GUIDE TO RENAISSANCE DRAMA* (ARDEN SHAKESPEARE, BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING): BRINDA CHARRY

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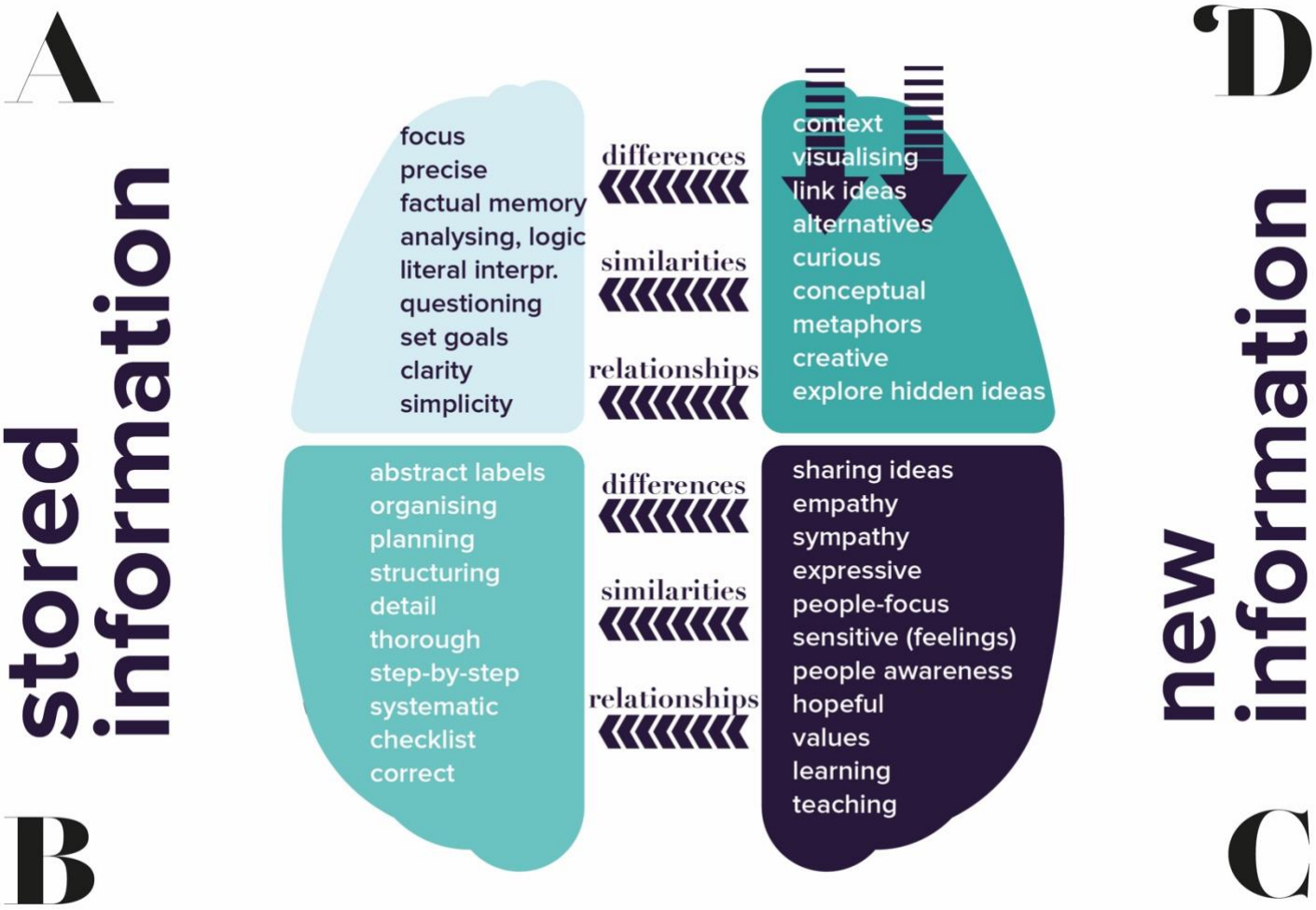

RIGHT-BRAIN QUESTIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT CONTEXT

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
  - 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

THE THEME OF KINGSHIP IN THE RENAISSANCE

Drama regularly took up the theme of kingship:

- How did one assume power?
- What were its limits?
- Who was a legitimate king?

WHO HELD POWER?

Centuries before the Renaissance, the Magna Carta sealed by King John in 1215 had declared that the supremacy of the monarch was conditional.

- This meant that political authority would be exercised by the king as well as by Parliament.
    - In practice, noblemen who were powerful feudal lords had also exercised considerable power.
        - The Tudor era, however, saw an increased centralization of power.
            - By a series of acts of Parliament between 1531 and 1534, Henry VIII not only severed the English Church from Rome but also proclaimed 'this realm of England an empire', 'governed by one supreme head and king'.
                - Consequently, the monarch became the central authority who unified the national community and protected it from internal dissent and external threat.

DEBATES OVER POWER

While he or she (the monarch) was advised by the Privy Council and by the two houses of Parliament, the monarch still selected members to serve on the Privy Council and also retained the right to call Parliament. Writers like…

- Sir Thomas Smith (*De Republica Anglorum* [1583])
- and Richard Hooker (*Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Policy* [1594])
    - continued to insist that government be participatory.
        - The king had supreme authority, wrote Hooker,
            - but he 'hath no power to do without consent of the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament'.
                - In spite of such urgings, the reality was that the monarch was the single most powerful force in England.

THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

The English monarchs emphasized the theory of 'the divine right of kings', according to which the king's power was God-given and the king need not be subject to any human authority.

- Political power thus legitimized itself by claiming heavenly sanction.
    - While Elizabeth was a pragmatic ruler who claimed divine authority even as she negotiated and sometimes compromised with Parliament, James was more insistent on the absolute and divine authority of kings.
        - As he stated in a 1609 speech to Parliament: 'The State of the Monarchy is the supremist thing upon earth: for Kings are not only GOD's lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon GOD's throne, but even by GOD himself they are called gods.'
            - The monarch's divinity clearly invested him with absolute power,
                - but it also required him, in his role as a 'lieutenant' of God, to…
                    - administer justice,
                    - reward good,
                    - punish evil
                    - and work for the public welfare.
                        - In other words, the 'godly prince', as described in James's writing, had weighty responsibilities even as he had great privileges.

PUBLIC RELATIONS EXERCISES (THEATRE?)

Rulers also had to engage in sophisticated public relations exercises to win the admiration and loyalty of the people.

- For instance, the 'cult of Elizabeth' was a clever public relations strategy
    - It projected Queen Elizabeth as a goddess as well as a Protestant heroine and a Protestant substitute for the Virgin Mary.

LEVERAGING PUBLIC DISCOURSE FOR POWER

Elizabeth made use of the medieval discourse of chivalry,

- describing her courtiers as her knights and herself as the mistress they served.
- She also represented herself as the wife of her nation
- and mother of her people.
    - As she said in response to repeated urgings to marry and bear children:
        - 'I am already bound unto an husband, which is the kingdom of England' and 'everyone of you, as many as are English, are my children and kinsfolk'.

KINGSHIP AS PUBLIC THEATRE

Elizabeth also recognized that kingship was theatrical

- and involved the successful performance of a public role.
    - While James was irked by the need to stage himself for the public eye, complaining that 'a King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly do behold', Elizabeth revelled in performance.
        - Her public appearances were carefully orchestrated and marked by display.
            - If this was the great age of theatre, the Queen was perhaps its principal performer.

THE RISE OF THE PUBLIC THEATRE

London, the capital where these games of power were being played, was a rapidly growing city.

- Its population increased from 120,000 in 1550 to 200,000 by 1600.
- It attracted people from other parts of the country and from Europe
    - It became the centre where…
        - professionals,
        - tradesmen,
        - apprentices,
        - criminals
        - and rogues congregated,
            - even as it was the site of power and leisure for the elites.
                - It was in this urban milieu that the public theatre arose.

ADVANCEMENTS AT THE ROYAL COURT

London's status as capital city also encouraged drama in other ways.

- The royal court was an important site for…
    - political advancement,
    - intrigue,
    - fashion
    - as well as artistic performance,
        - and actors were drawn into its orbit.

CENSORSHIP IN DRAMA

Both Queen Elizabeth and King James delighted in plays and had them enacted at court.

- William Shakespeare's acting company received the patronage of the king in 1603,
    - even as the players were subject to government control through a licensing and censorship office.

REPRESENTATIONS OF KINGS IN RENAISSANCE DRAMA

Kings as represented in drama are fascinating figures –

- god-like
- and awe-inspiring
- yet morally complex.

RENAISSANCE THEATRE: POLITICALLY CONSERVATIVE

Shakespeare's history plays represent the monarch as central to the nation's history and celebrate outstanding kings.

- In its valorization of kingship the theatre can be read as a politically conservative institution,
    - perhaps even as an instrument used by the state to further its own interests.
        - But the stage also exposed the contradictions of power.
            - Marlowe's Tamburlaine is a successful world-conqueror,
                - but he is also a megalomaniac who seizes power through trickery and brutal violence.
            - Richard in Shakespeare's Richard III (c. 1591) is duplicitous and murderous

- and Shakespeare's Henry V too does not hesitate to betray his old friends.
    - Drama depicted royal power as complex in other ways.
        - The tragedy Gorboduc (1561) tells of the disasters that result when a king disregards his councillors.
            - In all history plays the monarch's personality, with both its frailties and strengths, was rendered all too human.
                - Edward II in Marlowe's play of the same name is a weak king who loses the affection of his people and comes to a brutal end.
                - Edward II (1593) also recognizes that power is illusory and transient –
                    - 'But what are kings, when regiment is gone, / But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?' (20, 26– 27), wonders Marlowe.

CRITICISMS OF REPRESENTING KINGS ON STAGE

Critics of the theatre worried that even depicting kings on stage was an irreverent act.

- As the anti-theatrical commentator Stephen Gosson wrote,
    - 'For a mean person to take upon him the title of a Prince with counterfeit port and train, is … within the compass of a lie.'
        - By playing kings on stage, actors actually drew spectators' attention to the fact that a large component of power was successful performance.
            - In doing so, they stripped kingship of its sacred aura.
                - In Shakespeare's King Lear (c. 1603– 06) the old, mad, frail king who realizes that he is all too human and 'smells of mortality' is a reminder of the non-divinity of kings (4.6.129).

KINGSHIP: EXCESSES OF POWER

The excesses of power also fascinated playwrights.

- 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.

RENAISSANCE DRAMA: PROPAGANDA?

So when it comes to the depiction of monarchy, while drama was conservative and propagandistic in some ways, it cannot, as David Bevington reminds us, be equated with official propaganda.

- The better playwrights questioned and deconstructed power
    - and their audiences had diverse responses to the plays, ensuring that the 'drama possessed a vitality of independent expression'.

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 disposition10 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.

Bibliography

Charry, Brinda. The Arden Guide to Renaissance Drama (Arden Shakespeare) (pp. 4-9). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.