Educative Metafiction; The Interplay of Learning, Literacy and Language in Shakespearean Drama and Modern Metafiction

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Educative Metafiction: The Interplay of Learning, Literacy, and Language in Shakespearean Drama and Modern Metafiction

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**Educative Metafiction: An Introduction**

Metafiction is a distinctive genre most often associated with modern and contemporary fiction. It is self-conscious, self-referential, self-dissecting, self-defining. But metafiction is, curiously, not an entirely modern phenomenon. On the contrary, the roots of this very “modern” mode of literature can be traced back hundreds of years, back to Shakespearean theatre. Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights faced a commodification of their work similar to what the postmodernists in the second half of the twentieth century experienced. The growing spectacle of the stage in the sixteenth century and the overwhelming popularity of television and film after World War II changed the cultural climate in which authors in these two periods were writing. In reaction to this rise of mass culture, playwrights in Shakespeare’s day and postmodernist authors turned to metatheatrical and metafictional moments as a means of questioning their art’s new role among the emerging forms of more passive entertainment.

Also contrary to the popular understanding, metafiction is not simply a poststructuralist “free play” of language. The motives of metafiction are much more complicated than that. Rather than simply seeing “how far” they can go, metafictional authors work toward instructing the reader to tackle their experimentation, to engage with it, and to make something of it. These lessons often reveal themselves in the form of scenes explicitly detailing characters in the act of
reading, writing, teaching, or learning. These scenes and the performance that the reader is encouraged to create from them constitute a new type of metafiction that I am calling “educative metafiction.” This new type of metafiction exists at the intersection of three major points: that the act of reading constitutes a performance of the text; that metafictional authors, through scenes explicitly detailing characters reading, writing, and learning, instruct their readers in how to construct an active performance; and that the need for this type of “instruction” grew out of a growing anxiety about the increasing passivity that popular forms of entertainment were breeding in their audiences.

But exactly how does this educative metafiction transform a passive reader into an active performer? The works that I will analyze explicitly detail scenes of language and learning acquisition as a means of making the reader more conscious of how literary language operates. Such scenes of literacy encourage the reader to become a “performer” of the text at hand, an echo of metafiction’s literary ancestor, metatheatricality. Through two case studies — the first involving William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1588 – 1593) and John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and the second involving Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1610 – 1611) and J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) — I will demonstrate how scenes of language acquisition, writing, reading, and teaching in these works of educative metafiction place the reader in the role of self-conscious participant in and performer of the text.

What I am calling the “performer,” Linda Hutcheon calls the “producer”
(76) and Roland Barthes refers to as the “Scriptor” (145). Though we each give a different title to the reader figure, their function is essentially the same. This performer/producer/scriptor is responsible for the activation of a text (which can only lay dormant and meaningless until read). As Barthes puts it: “every text is eternally written here and now” when the performer/producer/scriptor takes on the task of reading it (145). Thus the author’s creation cannot be fulfilled and completed until it is “performed”; that is, until it is read.

Although the basic function of my performer and their producer/scriptor is the same (activation of a text), I have chosen a different term to denote the self-consciousness that I do not see in Hutcheon’s or Barthes’ definition. It is clear that an unread text can have no meaning (for an individual other than the author himself) unless it is read. This is true of any text: a piece of nineteenth-century realist fiction, a collection of poetry, an organic chemistry textbook, an encyclopedia. But the reader’s role in “activating” these texts is not a particularly self-conscious act. The activation of meaning is the process of reading and comprehending what is being read. It is simply inherent in the act of reading, a feature of the reading habit. This is not the case with the reading of educative metafiction. With its self-reflexive language and its explicit scenes of reading and learning, educative metafiction makes its readers conscious of the act of creation/reading that would go unnoticed in the reading of other works. The processes of reading are laid bare in educative metafiction. They become the subject of the text. The “habit” of reading becomes defamiliarized and
each function and step in the process comes into the spotlight to be examined before it is performed.

The term “performer” also ties the “origins” of metafiction to the theatre and the theatrical. The scenes of reading in the works I have selected act as stage directions of a sort. They instruct the reader (through positive example and/or negative reinforcement) in the proper ways of reading. The reader of educative metafiction, rather than being equated with the audience, is actually a direct correlation to the actor — both have a crucial role to play in the performance of a work. Like an actor on the stage, the reader of metafiction must interpret the “script” of the text (an echo of Barthes’ “Scriptor”) and create from the author’s words an original interpretation all their own. But no performance can ever truly recreate an original (the script, the initial performance on an opening night, etc); any performance can only be a futile attempt to do so. Such attempts always innovate on the original and can never recapture it. Though each performance of a text is different, the performers of any given text share a common discourse and, as a result, are all part of the same imagined community of readers. “Educative metafiction” works to emphasize language acquisition’s role in readership, social approaches to texts, and the communities that reading creates.

The performance of metafiction must be differentiated from the unconscious performance required by readers of realist fiction. The performer of metafiction must take creative license in his reading. The performer of metafiction takes the script that
is given to him and, rather than simply giving voice to those words, he injects his own accent, personality, body language, and temperament. In short, the metafictional performance is more involved, creative, subjective, and open to interpretation than the performance of other types of fiction. Because no actor can ever perform a script exactly, the process of reading/performance is inherently open to instability. An author of educative metafiction makes the reader aware of this instability and teaches the reader how to have creative license, how to rework the “script” he or she has been provided with. The reader of educative metafiction is encouraged to reflect upon their creative powers and on the crucial role they play in the performance of the text.

Scenes of reading and language acquisition serve as instructions for the readers themselves and, in fact, they form the very basis of the works I have selected. Their plot structures, dialogue, and character development all hinge on instances of reading, writing, and interpretation. These scenes reveal the authors themselves to be close, interpretive readers and, as a result, they encourage the reader to do the same. The experimental nature of all four works (the ways in which they question and deviate from literary tradition and writing conventions) is encoded with instructions for the reader. In other words, the reader learns to read actively and to interpret the work in the process of reading. In this sense, metafiction teaches us how to read in a way that other genres do not. These encoded scenes of language acquisition, teaching, reading, and writing demonstrate how metafiction is essentially about
learning; specifically, learning about the contours of literacy itself — its reliance on heritage, traditions, and the necessary critique of those things.

**A Theoretical Background**

Although metafictional elements have been in operation for hundreds of years, it was not until well into the second half of the twentieth century that the term “metafiction” came into being. In his 1970 essay entitled “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction,” American critic and novelist William H. Gass coined the term “metafiction” to describe the American experimental texts of the 1960s that turned away from realism. Gass saw in these works an emphasis on the *how* of literature instead of on the *what* of plot. Rather than relying on a linear plot for the content of their novels, metafictional authors took the medium, the language, the process, and the reception of literature as their subjects. The prevalence and prominence of metafictional moments in these works set them apart from all the works (metatheatrical, modern, and postmodern) that came before. In these works, the “meta” of metafiction takes center-stage and, rather than portraying for the reader a beautifully framed scene of harmonious elements, precise detail, and imperceptible strokes, the metafictional author offers up a work in progress. The reader is not asked to suspend their disbelief, they are asked to suspend their non-critical engagement, to encourage their disbelief. The “meaning” of the work is not laid out
by the author but must be reached through the creative collaboration of reader and author.

But to only look at the group of texts that Gass defined (and the ones that followed in their footsteps) is to miss out on a huge portion of the metafictional project that began well before World War II. This narrow focus on postmodern works of the twentieth century fails to take into account how these concepts can apply to texts that pre-existed the foundation of modern metafiction as a category of literature.

Most critics look to Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759 – 1767) as the foundational work of modern experimental metafiction. But I contend that the roots of what we now know as modern “metafiction” can be traced back much further. I propose that the type and frequency of metafictional moments that exist in literature from the post-war era grew out of the metatheatricality in the works of Shakespeare. This is not to suggest that the modern authors I will discuss were consciously imitating Shakespeare’s metatheatricality. The fact is that Shakespeare simply exists in our cultural and literary subconscious; he is the canonical author in English literature. This is a status that he really only began to achieve in the eighteenth century. J.M. Coetzee, in his reimagining of Daniel Defoe’s 1719 *Robinson Crusoe*, and John Barth, with his echoes of Laurence Sterne, are both channeling Shakespeare as third parties because Defoe and Sterne wrote in the age that canonized Shakespeare. But this historical/canonical
connection is tenuous at best. What really binds these two seemingly disparate genres (Shakespearean drama and post-war metafiction) together is their representations of and meditations on education as a means of teaching their readers to understand themselves as part of an imagined community of readers through time, inheritors and innovators of tradition and language. They also teach their readers how literary language works and that acts of interpretive understanding are in some sense arbitrary.

As mentioned above, Shakespeare is a large part of our cultural and literary subconscious and his influence is practically ubiquitous. In addition to more direct adaptations like Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, seemingly unrelated works like *Foe* and *Lost in the Funhouse* also contain echoes, shades, and shadows of Shakespeare’s plotlines, soliloquies, and metatheatrical moments. For an author, the echoes of works they have previously read can be considered a positive inspiration. But they could also have the opposite effect — they could hinder an author’s creativity, leave him feeling as though he has nothing *new* to contribute. This is what John Barth refers to as “exhaustion” (19) and what Umberto Eco has called “the already said.” In his 1967 essay entitled “The Literature of Exhaustion,” Barth defines the problem at hand as “the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities” (19). Although Barth’s terms such as “used-upness” and “exhausted possibilities” seem to focus on the limitations rather than the possibilities of fiction, he emphasizes in this essay what a “new kind of fiction,” a fiction that
challenges tradition and received definitions, can do in light of this “used-upness.” In *Lost in the Funhouse*, as we shall see in more detail in the first of my two case studies, Barth explicitly bemoans the problem of “used-upness” but, interestingly, he goes on to create a vision of the “used-upness” that he fears and hates. It is not that Barth relies on the “already said”; like all other authors, including Shakespeare, he just cannot escape it. What Barth does is not to simply reiterate what others before him have said, but to consciously rework it and make it central to his literary activity.

Each story in *Funhouse* tells the same story: the “difficulty, perhaps the unnecessity of writing original work” (“The Literature of Exhaustion,” 25). This is Barth’s means of sidestepping the problem of the “already said”: making the “already said” the basis upon which each of his stories is built. In doing so, Barth forces the reader to consider the medium of fiction — language and literary influences — rather than just the content.

But this problem of the “already said” is nothing new. The fear of the blank page and the echo of countless indistinct voices can be seen in works from centuries ago. Even Shakespeare is not without his own struggles with “exhausted possibilities.” René Girard, in his chapter entitled “Hamlet’s Dull Revenge: Vengeance in *Hamlet*,” looks at *Hamlet* as Shakespeare’s own meditation on the “exhausted possibilities” of drama that he faced. According to Girard, the long-perplexing issue of Hamlet’s procrastination in enacting revenge upon his father’s murderer can be seen as Shakespeare’s “weariness with revenge and catharsis” — i.e.,
with Elizabethan revenge drama (273). According to Girard, “Shakespeare’s own ambiguous relationship to the theatre is not unlike Hamlet’s relationship to revenge” (274). In other words, just as Hamlet is hesitant to take on the role of traditional revenger, so too is Shakespeare hesitant to create a traditional revenge tragedy.

While Girard’s claims are interesting and one can certainly see that Shakespeare is playing with the form of the traditional revenge tragedy, he may be going too far in saying that “Shakespeare is tired of revenge, and yet he cannot give it up” (274). It seems to me more likely that, rather than being tired of revenge, Shakespeare is remodeling revenge to fit his own style and intent, to encourage his readers to be attentive to its apparent exhaustion and to be questioning of its genre.

Girard frames his analysis of Hamlet as a completely original moment in Shakespeare’s career and, in doing so, fails to take into account that the Bard’s reaction to the “exhaustion” of the blood tragedy is not only found in Hamlet, but throughout his career. There is evidence to suggest that “exhaustion” was on Shakespeare’s mind from beginning to end. In Titus Andronicus (Shakespeare’s first drama, written some ten or fifteen years before Hamlet), Shakespeare was already reflecting on the limitations of the revenge genre. In both Titus and Hamlet we have a situation where some sort of a cultural or personal model becomes necessary for the characters to do what they think they ought to do: for Hamlet it is the ‘mimetic model’ of Laertes who “does not question the literary genre” of the revenge tragedy and for the characters in Titus it is the plot set down by Ovid in Metamorphoses (278).
And at the end of Shakespeare’s career, we can see the Bard still rebelling against the
genre. (Many scholars see Shakespeare’s final play, *The Tempest*, as his repudiation of
the revenge tragedy.) So Girard’s claim that *Hamlet* is a tragedy about revenge tragedy
is not wholly unique to *Hamlet*. Shakespeare’s musings on literary and dramatic
“exhaustion” can be seen in *Hamlet, Titus, Tempest*, and other plays.

In each of these plays, Shakespeare confronts the “exhaustion” already
present in the revenge genre and is able to re-create and subvert it while, at the same
time, staying within its framework. Jorge Luis Borges accomplishes a similar feat with
the short story genre. Barth, in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” uses the works of
Borges to explore the ways in which authors can “confront [this] intellectual dead
end [this idea of ‘exhausted possibility’] and employ it against itself to accomplish
new human work” (25). Many of Borges’ works deal with the issue of “exhausted
possibility” and present the reader with a vision of what such exhaustion would look
like (a project not unlike Barth’s and Shakespeare’s). For example, in “The Library of
Babel” (published in Spanish in 1941 and in English in 1962), Borges imagines the
possibility of an infinite library, which “houses every possible combination of
alphabetical characters and spaces, and thus every possible book and statement,
including your and my refutations and vindications, the history of the actual future,
the history of every possible future” (“The Literature of Exhaustion,” 31). This is a
visualization of what every writer faces when he first sets pen to paper: myriad voices
(the voices of authors, readers, critics) echoing in his head, often drowning out his
own. According to Borges, the writer is unable to escape this vast library if he is not
drawn toward experimentation. Without experimentation, the writer’s work is simply
to be a translator and annotator of established archetypes or, as Barth puts it in Lost
in the Funhouse, “the Heritage” (3).

According to Barth, Borges’ “image[s] of the exhaustion, or attempted
exhaustion, of … literary possibilities … disturb us metaphysically … [because] we’re
reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence” (“The Literature of
Exhaustion,” 29-30). This phenomenon is what Borges referred to as the
“contamination of reality by dream.” This idea “turns the artist’s mode or form into
a metaphor for its concerns” (“The Literature of Exhaustion,” 27). Stories dealing
with the “contamination of reality by dream” encourage the reader to focus on the

how and not the what of language. Doing so forces the reader to consider the role
language plays in constructing rather than merely reflecting reality and to be aware of
their own role in this system. Language forms our perceptions of reality and we can
use language to alter those perceptions and realities. Works in which the language of
fiction influences and sometimes even rules the lives of the characters (such as
Borges’ “Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius” and Shakespeare’s Titus) throw the concepts of
the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘real’ into question and the reader must consider the ways in
which language is the substance of how we construct our individual worlds. This
understanding of language as a performance, as a way we do things, is crucial to
educative metafiction.
The idea of “contamination of reality by dream” is essential to Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*. In “Life-Story” Barth presents us with a narrator who works to figure out whether or not his life is a fiction. The narrator, an author himself, ponders his own reality because it is a reality constructed from and surrounded by words and he realizes that the meaning of those words relies on the attention of some faceless, nameless reader. At a structural level the narrator creates a fictional character of himself by referring to himself in the third person. After a great deal of questioning, the narrator concludes that his life cannot be a fiction because it does not fit the traditional form: “he could not after all be a character in a work of fiction inasmuch as such a fiction would be of an entirely different character from what he thought of as fiction. Fiction consisted of … monuments of the imagination … though assaults upon the boundary between life and art, reality and dream, were undeniably a staple of his own and his century’s literature as they’d been in Shakespeare’s and Cervantes’s” (129). With this line of reasoning, the narrator ultimately comes to a false conclusion. Although he does not believe in his fictionality because such a character never before existed in literature, the fact remains that he is a fictional character. He is Barth’s creation.

Perhaps the narrator of “Life-Story” should have paid closer attention to the examples of Shakespeare and Cervantes that he provided for his justification. Take Shakespeare, for instance. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare employs the same myth (from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*) that Barth himself uses in *Funhouse*’s “Glossolalia”
(according to the sixth Author’s Note, the second entry is provided by Philomela). In Titus, Shakespeare explores the ways in which Ovid’s myth influences (and even dictates) the lives of his characters, thus blurring the line between reality and fiction. The characters of Titus find their lives completely inter-twined with the plots of “the Heritage” of myth that they know so well. They look to the stories set down before them as models for how to live their own lives. Barth’s use of these examples must not be mistaken for missed historicism on Barth’s part. Rather, Barth is acutely aware that metafiction and its questioning of such boundaries is a postmodern phenomenon.

Such instances of literature directly influencing and changing reality reflect the author’s self-consciousness about the effect of his words, his concern about the reception of those words, and the reality that, in completing his work, he must give control over to the reader. This final concern — ceding control to the reader — is particularly important to the metafictional author because he leaves the reader so much work to do. He leaves the reader to construct his or her *version* of the text’s meaning, to take his “script” and create from it an original performance. The author must step back in order for the reader to step up. Roland Barthes outlines this idea of “the death of the author” in his 1967 essay by that name. In this work, Barthes argues that to consider an author’s biography as the ‘key’ to understanding their writing is to miss the point and, ultimately, to do a disservice to the reading (or “performance”). Barthes claims that it is only in the absence of an author that the
reader can do his real work: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that
text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. … [R]efusing to assign a
‘secret,’ an ultimate meaning, to the text … liberates” it (147). And, by extension,
liberating the text from its “intended meaning” also liberates the reader to find his
own meaning as he disentangles (not deciphers) the narrative’s multiplicity (Barthes, 147).
This idea of liberation is central to my thoughts on learning in metafiction. In
demonstrating for the reader the act of interpretation and the realities of language,
educative metafiction frees the reader from the pressure of finding an “intended
meaning” and instead encourages him or her to replicate the examples of successful
reading (and to avoid those inactive or incomplete ones) as he or she makes their
way through the work.

The concept of distancing the reader from the action of the plot is an
instance in which the world of the theatre has influenced and informed that of
metafiction. German playwright Bertolt Brecht defined the “distancing effect” (in
German, Verfremdungseffekt, or “alienation effect”) as that which “prevents the
audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the
actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical
observer” (91). When translated into literature, these “meta” moments force the
reader to break the fourth wall, to dis-identify with the text as “reality” and to take a
critical stance. Metafiction, at its core, asks the reader to alienate him or herself — to
take a critically receptive stance on the how instead of being sucked in to the “reality”
of the world of the what. Therefore, metafiction cannot be read with passing interest. These works are difficult and challenging. They demand attention. Reading metafiction is not like reading pieces of realist fiction with linear plots, relatable characters, and a strong sense of time and place. The experimental nature of metafiction is dense and complex and, in an effort to instruct the reader in the appropriate way to approach the text, authors of educative metafiction provide scenes in which the characters themselves break the fourth wall and question the text itself. Being provided with an example of how to “dis-identify” with the text, the reader is able to fully engage in the completion of the work, in the performance of its meaning.

**An Historical Background**

The metafictional and metatheatrical moments that we have looked at in post-war experimental fiction and in the works of Shakespeare all grew out of similar cultural climates, four centuries apart. Both of these historical moments saw the rise of popular entertainment, the commodification of that entertainment, and a redefining of the place the artist or writer had in this new (or re-newed) market society.

During the sixteenth century, theatre in England underwent tremendous developments in style, form, place, and economic viability. After 1576, public
theatres began to pop up in unprecedented numbers in London and attendance soared. No longer having to rely on the patronage of the wealthy aristocracy, playwrights began to be more concerned with popularity, mass-appeal, and the economics of the theatre than ever before. As a result, they began to tweak the forms they inherited (such as medieval drama and morality plays) to create more and more spectacular productions in order to draw in the widest possible audience. The “Tragedy of Blood” was a phenomenon of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre featuring great amounts of bloodshed in response to audience demand for spectacle and sensationalism. According to Clayton M. Hamilton, “audiences in England were accustomed, on alternate days, to attend a bear-baiting, a play, and a cockfight; and it was but natural, therefore, that they should crave strong sensation in tragedy, and should demand an enormity of bloodshed on the mimic arena of the stage” (411).

The plays featuring multiple beheadings, poisonings, cannibalism, and a mixed bag of other such atrocities were the plays that brought in the most money. A more cerebral play would certainly not have fared so well; set next to the previous day’s bear-baiting such a play would be a bore to Elizabethan audiences. Thus, ticket sales being a writer’s bread and butter, these “tragedies of blood” — works such as Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy (1589) and John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1614) — flooded the stages. Their specific formulae (which included, among other sensational spectacles, incest, outrageous brutality, and massive bloodshed) led to packed theatres and big profits.
Just as Elizabethan dramatists were reacting to the economic concerns of theatre, so too are post-war metafictional authors reacting to their changing place in a society consumed by popular culture. This modern metafictionality is considered a major hallmark of the rise of postmodernism. And Linda Hutcheon has argued that postmodernism (whether in literature, art, architecture, or theatre) is partially the result of “development of mass culture” and posits, “the increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge” (6). This is not unlike the “uniformization” and commodification of theatre that Shakespeare was faced with. And, also like Shakespeare, metafictional authors work to subvert this growing “mass culture” within the frame of a sellable product (e.g., a paperback novel or, in Shakespeare’s day, a seemingly conventional revenge drama). But even the paperback novel was (and is now more than ever) at risk of becoming obsolete in the 1960s. According to Patricia Waugh, “Some critics maintain that the ‘death of the novel’ has occurred as the result of suffocation and dislocation by … popular cultural forms [such as ‘journealese, television influences such as soap opera, cinematic devices,’ etc.]” (64). Faced with these new forms of popular entertainment, metafictional authors began to question the place their writing had among these other cultural forms.

In the face of a changing cultural milieu (the commercialization of the theatre and the turn toward non-traditional forms of entertainment), both sixteenth- and seventeenth-century playwrights and post-war writers exhibit self-consciousness
about the viability of their art forms, about their ability to make meaningful work in a climate of increasing spectacle. Unsure of where their art fit within the new social and literary orders, dramatists in Shakespeare’s day and metafictional authors both turned to meta-literary obsession as a means of reflecting upon their medium and teaching their readers to not be consumed by more passive forms of popular entertainment. I contend that the educative metafiction that binds the Shakespearean stage with later works of postmodernism grew out of a need to reassert the place of literature in a society hungry for sensationalism, spectacle, and “easy” entertainment. Educative metafiction not only encourages attentive reading and active participation, it also teaches us how to do so. Not only does the author of this type of metafiction perform with his words, he instructs his readers in the most active and fulfilling modes of reading.

**Educative Metafiction in Action**

The scope of educative metafiction is not limited to scenes of reading and writing which simply make the reader reflect upon and reconsider the act in which they are engaged. There are many other issues at stake: there are, among others, the economics of drama and literature, the anxiety inherent in an author ceding control of his work to his reader, and the role that convention, tradition, and the canon play in the production and reception of a text. Educative metafiction instructs the reader
to take these and other concerns into account as they approach, process, and perform a text. The two case studies that follow will set out to explicate how four works (two plays and two pieces of modern fiction, the former written four centuries before the latter) go about putting these concerns as well as the act of reading itself at the forefront of the reader’s mind.

The first case study pairs Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* with John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*. The focus of these works is the effect and influence that the language of fiction has on one’s writing, on one’s self, and on one’s conception of the world around them. Shakespeare accomplishes this by depicting his characters in the acts of reading, writing, and interpretation. And Barth does so by challenging the reader to realize the presence of the “already said” in all works of literature and to become a co-creator of his text. This focus on educating the reader grows out of the authors’ joint concern over the commodification of their art forms. Both authors work toward instructing their readers to avoid the passive stance that audiences of sensationalistic, popular entertainment are forced to take; to instead produce for themselves an active performance of the texts at hand and, by extension, of all texts they read.

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* form the basis of the second case study. In these works, Shakespeare and Coetzee both present faulty models of education as a means of revealing their anxieties about the economic realities of the theatre and publishing industries and about the limitations placed
upon the audience of stage spectacles and the readers of mass-market novels. This second case study will argue that these faulty models are ways to educate the audience in the act of interpretation and the realities of language. After setting up these faulty models and emphasizing the creative powers of language, these works conclude with ephemeral, dreamlike scenes, which force the audience and the reader to question all that they have been presented with. These final scenes allow the reader to move within the sign system in a way that none of the characters in the texts can. They allow the reader the space to create an untainted and organic performance of the work that none of the educative figures that came before could be capable of.
Simply put, Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* are problematic texts. Consider *Titus* alongside Shakespeare’s more subtle and psychological tragedies and the play seems like an anomaly, less than a Shakespearean drama and little more than a young writer’s exercise in crafting a revenge tragedy. Barth’s work, in many ways, has the same feel. Its heavy reliance on experimentation can be seen as simply a showcase of his avant-garde style, an aggressively rebellious text that fights to say something new and different but ends up tangled in and strangled by its own devices. *Titus’* depictions of brutal violence, its out-of-place, formal speeches, and its frequent allusions to ancient myths can and have been seen as merely the work of a young writer testing out his tools and devices. Similarly, *Funhouse’s* disjointed, meandering stories, its literal, rhetorical, and syntactical blanks, and its use of direct address to the reader have been dismissed to a certain extent as meaningless experimentation. But such readings are overly simplistic and passive. In their insistence on the importance of reading and writing, Shakespeare and Barth warn us against such passive interpretations. The moments of educative metafiction in these works — their scenes of reading and writing — reveal the ways in which metafiction instructs its readers to not read passively but rather to create an active performance of the text.
In *Titus*, Shakespeare quietly questions the popular form of the “tragedy of blood” mentioned earlier, with exaggerated violence and overly ornate soliloquies. He also re-examines and re-imagines the relationship between the reader and the text through the actions of his characters. Hidden beneath *Titus’* violence and spectacle, there is reading. *Titus* is filled with instances of folklore, mythology, and drama influencing and sometimes ruling the actions of the characters. Books, in fact, are the substance of these characters’ lives. As Jonathan Bate argues, “When the characters are not revenging or raping, they spend their time reading — reading events, reading texts and citations, reading the book of Ovid” (*Arden Introduction*, 35). They turn to books to “beguile their sorrows,” to detect patterns and forms for living, to get answers to the questions presented by their realities (4.1.35). Of all the reading the characters do, the most informative (and destructive) is that of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

In many ways, the pages of *Titus* are ripped directly from Ovid’s story of Philomela: a woman is raped, her tongue is cut out so that she is unable to identify her assailant(s), through a clever conceit she is able to reveal the truth, and cannibalism and trickery are used as revenge for these heinous deeds. Every character in the play is familiar with this myth, but some are able to more fully engage with and perform the text than others. Shakespeare gives us what I will call “Passive Readers” and “Selective Readers” who recognize their place in the Ovid plot and either adhere faithfully to it or alter it slightly to suit their selfish needs. But he also gives us an example of a creative, participating, questioning reader (Lavinia) who recognizes her
role and attempts to escape the story that her life has fallen into. Active Readers like Lavinia prove themselves to be better performative readers than those Passive and Selective readers. These Active Readers are the ones that have learned the lessons that educative metafiction works to impart.

The connection between Titus and Funhouse hinges on their similar response to mass culture and exhausted forms. Additionally, in their shared interest in the characters, conventions, and storylines of ancient myths (particularly Ovidian myths), both works draw upon perhaps the most culturally embedded forms and templates in literature. Although Barth uses classical conventions like beginning in medias res and mythological characters like the hero Menelaus in “Menelaiad” and the figures of Narcissus and Tiresias in “Echo,” his most interesting use of myth for this examination is his subtle inclusion of Philomela — the same Philomela that the characters in Titus draw their storyboards from — in the short and puzzling “Glossolalia.” This “story” consists of six distinct and disjointed paragraphs, each with a different narrative voice. So while Shakespeare employs one work, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, in the course of his entire play, Barth uses many within the span of six brief paragraphs. It is only in his second set of author’s notes — “Seven Additional Author’s Notes,” added one year after the first edition was published in 1968 — that the identities of these six narrators are revealed. His six glossolalists are “Cassandra, Philomela, the fellow mentioned by Paul in the fourteenth verse of his first epistle to the Corinthians, the Queen of Sheba’s talking bird, an unidentified psalmist
employing what happens to be the tongue of a historical glossolalist … and the author” (“Seven Additional Author’s Notes”). Without the presence of the later-added author’s notes, the identities of the glossolalists would be almost impossible to guess because Barth leaves each entry too dense and impenetrable. This enforced reliance on outside sources reminds readers of the work that Barth has set before them: to go beyond the seemingly incomprehensible and meaningless text and plumb the words and the spaces in-between for meaning. Barth leaves the audience to leaf through the pages (from “Glossolalia” to the “Seven Additional Author’s Notes” to Ovid to the U.S. Supreme Court Case of Murray v. Baltimore School Board) and to cite those pages as they construct the meaning of their reading situation, just as Lavinia does. This Ovid connection is key. Barth's use of Ovid suggests that, like Shakespeare, he is concerned with the heritage of myths, not just the tools of narrative as his emphasis on rebelling against established literary conventions might suggest.

The fourteen stories, the foreword, and both sections of author’s notes in Lost in the Funhouse all ask the same questions that Shakespeare’s Titus does: what is the writer to do with the restrictions and conventions that have been handed down to him? What more is there to say when everything that can be said in fiction has already been said? Although each story in Barth’s Funhouse looks completely different and virtually unrelated at first glance, upon closer inspection the main point of each story becomes clear. All of the series’ stories deal explicitly or implicitly with the
same problem: the problem of the writer at work, working against the received literary traditions, the “already said,” and the conventions of writing. Thus the series can be seen as representative of the “tragedy of writing,” the hardships authors face in the midst of “exhausted possibilities.”

Barth endeavors to turn to “exhaustion, paralyzing self-consciousness and the adjective weight of accumulated history. … against itself to make something new and valid, the essence whereof would be the impossibility of making something new” (109). Metafiction, in Barth’s opinion, is the way out of (or the way around) the problem of the “already said,” a way to sidestep the strictures of the established writing conventions and literary traditions. He tells the tale of the modern writer. He tells the tale of what it is like to work in the face of “used-upness.” He gives us a vision of exhaustion. And exhaustion, Barth suggests, is eternally preferable to the alternative future of fiction: “Silence. General anesthesia. Self-extinction. Silence” (110).

Looking at Barth’s *Funhouse* in this way, it is not difficult to see its inherent similarities to Shakespeare’s *Titus*. Both authors struggle with and subvert (to varying degrees) the forms that have been handed down to them: realist fiction, in the case of Barth, and Senecan drama in the case of Shakespeare. In addition to the critiques hidden (and not-so-hidden) in both works, there are scenes of reading and writing, which serve as both instructions for the reader and as examples of faulty education. But Barth, rather than depicting characters in the act of reading as Shakespeare does,
Barth shifts the role of interpreter and enactor from in-text characters to the reader. The real action of Barth’s work (or, more accurately, the real performance of Barth’s work) occurs not on the page, but in the act of reading itself. Whereas Lavinia and the other characters of Titus see holes in the plotlines of their lives and fill them in with the plots set down by Ovid, Barth leaves the holes in his narrative empty, blank. Barth makes it the work of the reader to fill in these holes. The role of Lavinia, in other words, becomes role of the reader. The reader is instructed to sift through his mental library (which contains both “the Heritage” and works that rebel against it) and to perform a part in the creation of the work’s meaning. Only by reading beyond the what of plot (or, in Barth’s case, plotlessness) and paying attention to the how of language can we appreciate these two very different works for what they really are: dramas about reading, tragedies about writing.

**Authors as Readers**

Both Titus and Funhouse use self-conscious awareness of the operations of language and the stories, myths, and forms that are culturally “in-born” as a way to sidestep the strictures of established writing conventions and literary traditions. With the forms and templates handed down to them, Shakespeare and Barth do not take their tasks as readers and interpreters lightly. They do not stop at close reading and critical interpretation; they take authorial control and work around the constraints of
form to create something new. This self-conscious reading, interpreting, and reinvention is displayed in the language, forms, and innovation of each work and is also transferred into the work of the characters in *Titus* and the readers of *Funhouse*. Through the examples that both the authors and characters of these works set, the reader is taught how to create a performance of each text. The experimentation both Shakespeare and Barth use to question “the Heritage” teaches the reader about the methods of reading that experimentation and allows the reader the space to create a performance of each text that is all their own.

**Critiquing Templates & Questioning “the Heritage”**

Before looking closer at scenes of reading and writing in *Titus*, it will be helpful to have a brief review of the relevant plotlines of the play, specifically those related to Lavinia and her mutilation. The play opens with the return of a victorious Titus from his ten-year campaign against the Goths. Titus brings with him back to Rome several prisoners: Tamora, queen of the Goths, her three sons (Alarbus, Demetrius, and Chiron), and Aaron, Tamora’s Moorish lover. Titus sacrifices Alarbus before Tamora’s eyes and she, along with Demetrius and Chiron, vows to avenge his death. Aaron sets the two surviving sons in action by orchestrating the first step in the destruction of Titus: the rape and mutilation Lavinia (Titus’ daughter), which leaves her unable to communicate the identity of her assailants. Or so they think. Breaking Ovid’s script, Lavinia tries to escape the sacrifice plot into
which she has been forced by citing Ovid and scrawling the names of her attackers into the sand. Following Lavinia’s revelation, Titus captures Demetrius and Chiron, kills them, and, in true Senecan style, cooks their flesh into pies to feed to their mother and Saturnius (the emperor and her new husband). While they are feasting, Titus, forcing Lavinia into a familiar sacrifice plot, slays his daughter to release her from her shame. A typically spectacular massacre follows with Tamora, Saturnius, and Titus all being killed off within three lines.

Looking at this basic plotline of Titus, one can discern two separate sections — Act One comprises the first and acts two through five comprise the second — each exploring a different tragic form. In the first we have the pattern of a rather traditional tragic downfall: a man of high-standing and immense power suffers great loss brought about by external forces and/or conscious, ill-informed decisions and hits a low point far from the height at which he began. This is the story of Titus’ ten-year campaign against the Goths, the slaughter of his sons by his own hand, and his return to a Rome in crisis. According to A.C. Hamilton, “The concept of tragedy which Shakespeare inherited is complete by the end of the first act, while the remaining acts show an extension of the tragic form through language which is uniquely Shakespearian” (207). In his assertion that the play’s second section merely expands the tragic cycle of the first, Hamilton fails to see that Shakespeare is not working with only one form, but with two: the “medieval concept of tragedy” and Senecan tragedies (208). Although earlier in his article Hamilton does acknowledge
the influence of Seneca on the plot and level of violence that Shakespeare presents in
_Titus_, his reductive claim that “the Tragedy of Blood was simply never bloody
enough to accommodate Shakespeare’s plays” does not give Shakespeare his due
credit (202). Shakespeare’s deliberate heightening of the already horrific violence in
works like Seneca’s _Thyestes_ is not just bloodlust as Hamilton suggests. Rather,
Shakespeare uses exaggeration to highlight both the limits and the artifice of this
inherited form. But Shakespeare’s decision to quietly critique _within_ the model he
inherited reminds us of the economic realities of the theatre at this time:
sensationalism sells.

Shakespeare very pointedly constructs characters that constantly have an eye
for the theatrical, for how their stories will appear to the coming generations and
how they will fit into the canon (“the Heritage”). These characters are acutely aware
that their tale is one of spectacle and they want to make it as memorable as possible.
The first, and most explicit, instance of such “posing” occurs in Act Three, Scene
One. After Titus, Marcus, and Lucius discover the brutally mutilated Lavinia, they
discuss possible ways to alleviate her suffering. Titus asks, “Shall we cut away our
hands like thine? / Or shall we bite our tongues and in dumb shows / Pass the
remainder of our hateful days? / What shall we do?” (3.1.130-4). He comes up with
no answer, no way to ease the pain of the situation, but he remains insistent: “Let us
that have our tongues / Plot some device of further misery / To make us wondered
at in time to come” (3.1.134-6). Here, Titus is very aware that he is playing a part in a
story that will be either read or performed for an audience and one that will be read/seen by future audiences as well. And he wants to put on a good show. This idea of “further misery,” of going above and beyond the crime that began the chain of revenge, harkens back to Thyestes. In Seneca’s work, Atreus claims, “You cannot say you have avenged a crime / Unless you better it” (53-4). But this is a less self-conscious statement. For Atreus, his desire to “out do” the crime of his brother is purely for the sake of an artfully executed act of revenge and the glory that comes with it. But he is not aware of his presence in front of an audience. He is not aware of his place within a staged drama. But Titus certainly is. At all times Titus seems to have one eye on his motives for revenge and the other on the spectacle of that revenge; on crafting, what Tamora earlier refers to as, the “complot of this timeless tragedy” (2.2.265). Through the character of Titus we can get a sense of Shakespeare’s frustration with the escalating levels of spectacle required by audiences of his day; his frustration at the sacrifice of realism in the service of sensationalism.

The play also takes a critical eye to the use of the overly theatrical, bombastic language often found in dramatic works. This can best be seen in Shakespeare’s exaggerated formal soliloquies, which stand out like sore thumbs in their contexts and serve to comment on the artifice of theatre. Returning to A.C. Hamilton’s analysis of the form of Titus we pick up on a very helpful observation: the violence of the play becomes “only more horrific through the excessive artifice of language” (201). He goes on to examine Act Two, Scene Four, in which Marcus sees Lavinia
after she has been raped and mangled. Upon first setting sight on her Marcus jumps
into a grand extended speech filled with elaborate metaphors:

Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,
Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips,
Coming and going with thy honey breath
But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee.” (2.4.22-6)

This is quite obviously not an organic response. Describing Lavinia’s mutilated
mouth as having “rosed lips” and being filled with “honey breath” and comparing
the blood pouring from it to a “bubbling fountain” is ridiculous to say the least. This
is pure theatre. And the mention of Tereus (the king who raped Philomela, his sister-
in-law, in Ovid’s Metamorphoses) signals that Marcus sees Lavinia’s mutilation through
the lens of myths and stories. He is more concerned with representing Lavinia’s
suffering in a literary way than with helping her. In this instance, Shakespeare has
taken the traditional form of the emotional monologue, filled it with flowery
metaphors and allusions, and placed it in juxtaposition with equally excessive
violence. This serves to heighten our sense of disbelief, to separate us even further
from the dramatic action (an instance of Brecht’s “distancing effect”), and to force
us to really take notice of Shakespeare’s intent to highlight the artifice of stage
language. It is almost as if Shakespeare is winking and nudging us to notice the
discordant tones that such speeches strike.

Barth’s Lost in the Funhouse is nothing if not an extreme version of Brecht’s
“distancing effect.” Unlike Shakespeare who uses instances exaggeration to distance
the audience and to encourage them to question the conventions of revenge drama, Barth’s work is all distance and alienation. There are no real plot points to follow or characters with which the reader can identify. Even Ambrose, the recurring and most relatable character, remains one-dimensional and distant throughout. The only connection that can arise in the reading of *Funhouse* is the connection between the reader and Barth himself. Barth uses this extreme distancing in order to break the frame of realist fiction and to work toward bridging the gap between the author and the reader. From the very outset of *Funhouse*, before the reader is even introduced to “Frame-Tale,” the Möbius-strip “story” that opens the work, Barth begins breaking the frame of his genre in his Author’s Note dated 1968. He begins by defining what *Lost in the Funhouse* is not: “First, it’s neither a collection nor a selection, but a series” (xi). With this very specific insistence on definition, Barth sets his entire work in direct opposition to traditional genres and categories of fiction. If one were to adhere to those traditional definitions, *Funhouse* would most likely be placed on the “Short Stories” shelf, between James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man* and Samuel Beckett’s *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. But, from his first words to his last, Barth bucks tradition and prefers to straddle the genres of the short story and the novel. He continues, “The series will be seen to have been meant to be received ‘all at once’ and as here arranged” (xi). Perhaps inspired by Edgar Allan Poe’s directive that a poem should be experienced in one sitting, taking no more than thirty minutes to read, Barth “instructs” his readers to not only consider the work as a whole, but to read the
stories in sequence in a relatively small period of time. Of course, Barth cannot expect his readers to complete *Funhouse* in its entirety in only thirty minutes, but Poe’s idea of concentration of experience still applies. Completing the book in a brief time span allows for the most powerful experience of the work because the connections that lie beneath the surface of the stories can be more easily grasped if the other stories are still fresh in the reader’s mind.

Barth’s 1968 Author’s Note continues this “genre-bending” by delineating the different media that best fit each story. He explains, “While some of these pieces were composed expressly for print, others were not” (xi). Whereas stories like “Petition” and “Lost in the Funhouse” would “lose part of their point in any except printed form,” other stories, according to Barth, simply beg for different forms than the one in which they are printed (xi). For example, Barth informs us that “Night-Sea Journey” was “meant for either print or recorded authorial voice, but not for live or non-authorial voice”; “Glossolalia” will be rendered nonsense “unless heard in live or recorded voices, male and female, or read as if so heard”; and “Autobiography” is intended for “monophonic tape and visible but silent author” (xi). With these directives, before even beginning his critique of the literary traditions that have been handed down to him, Barth calls into question the physical form of fiction, its printed and bound form. But, while Barth questions the form of fiction, he still works within it. Rather than producing a conventional paperback (conventional with the exception of the Möbius-strip “story”), Barth could have given his “readers” a
multi-media presentation of his stories in the forms in which he details them in his prefatory notes. Not only would such a project be expensive to produce and terribly impractical, it also probably would not be a big seller. Thus there is an element of economic concern hidden beneath Barth’s work as it is in Shakespeare’s. Also like Shakespeare, Barth critiques the established forms of fiction (short story collections, novels, etc.) while working within the bounds of the physical frame of those forms.

Like the characters in Titus, the narrator of Barth’s “Night-Sea Journey” is conscious of its place and role in the spectacle (i.e. in the excessive experimentation) in which it finds itself. The narrator works with and against “the Heritage” and, in the process, examines the situation of the modern writer navigating his way through various discourses, traditions, and conventions. Like Shakespeare’s examination of “the Heritage,” Barth’s can also be difficult to detect. While Shakespeare hides his critique under grand theatricality, Barth’s “Night-Sea Journey” thoroughly veils his in the guise of a dramatic monologue of a swimming sperm. By beginning his work with the worldview of a sperm, Barth insinuates that discourse and writing conventions are inborn, that “transmitting the Heritage” is the default mode of all writers, just an impulse written into their DNA (4). The sperm carries the seeds of an infinite number of genes just as the writer carries, in his cultural subconscious, the structures, motifs, and conventions of the literary works set down before his time. The narrator-sperm’s fellow sperm do not question this “mission”:

“Ours not to stop and think; ours but to swim and sink. …” Because a moment’s thought reveals the pointlessness of swimming. “No matter,” I’ve heard some
say, even as they gulped their last: “The night-sea journey may be absurd, but here we swim, will-we nill-we, against the flood, onward and upward, toward a Shore that may not exist and couldn’t be reached if it did.” (5)

But, for the narrator-sperm, “reaching the Shore” (which is synonymous with “transmitting the Heritage”) is not a goal that should go unquestioned. The narrator-sperm asks, “Whose Heritage, I’d like to know? And to whom?” (4). Like Barth himself, the narrator-sperm finds originality to be a difficult thing to achieve amid the over-abundance of utterances (the “exhausted possibilities”) in which he swims. But, also like Barth, the narrator-sperm will not simply, blindly swim toward the Shore without questioning what the Shore supposedly is, whether or not it actually exists, and why we should aim for it.

The narrator of the title story, “Lost in the Funhouse,” also takes to task the conventions and what I am calling the “science” of writing that have been passed down to him. The “science” of writing is not so much fact as it is consensus, consensus come to by those who, over time, take on the task of testing out the limits and powers of language in order to find the “formulae” and “equations” of composition. In “Lost in the Funhouse,” the narrator (Ambrose? Barth himself?) makes it a point to highlight the ways in which this “science” (the Heritage’s conventions of writing style, plot, characterization, etc.) is present in the narrator’s mind at one level or another. For instance, after providing a brief description of Ambrose’s mother, the next paragraph informs the reader, “Descriptions of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of...
fiction” (73-4). There are many such “asides” throughout the telling of Ambrose’s funhouse ordeal. Such instances force the reader to shift his or her focus from the *what* of the plot and to the *how* of the language. The reader’s imagination is not sucked into picturing Ambrose’s mother because her *self* has been reduced to the level of language. Focusing on the language used to describe her, she is turned into a flat, one-dimensional character and the reader’s attention is drawn toward the status of the description as merely a place-filling literary convention, a basic element of storytelling.

In addition to calling attention to these matters of convention, “Lost in the Funhouse” also questions the necessity of such conventions for modern authors. These questions create an interplay between the story being told and the words selected to do the telling, a separation between what the language signifies and the language itself. According to the narrator:

> While there is no reason to regard this pattern as an absolute necessity, like many other conventions it became conventional because great numbers of people over many years learned by trial and error that it was effective; one ought not to forsake it, therefore, unless one wishes to forsake as well the effect of drama or has clear cause to feel that deliberate violation of the “normal” pattern can better can better effect that effect [sic]. (95)

Here, Barth suggests that writers need not adhere faithfully to the “science” of writing. Rather, it is the job of the writer to question the “science,” to experiment, and to create new formulae or, perhaps more accurately, new “anti-formulae.” As he describes it in his essay entitled “The Literature of Exhaustion,” the “technically up-to-date artist” has the responsibility “to rediscover validly the artifices of language
and literature — such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation … even characterization! Even plot!” if they are “aware of what one’s predecessors have been up to” (22-3). With this claim, Barth makes it clear that his mission is to take a new look at all that has been passed down to him, all the standards and measures that many other writers take as gospel.

Barth’s story “Title” is particularly concerned with experimentation with established forms and the reaction the author will receive from the reader. Like Barth, the narrator of “Title” has grown bored with old, time-tested forms and techniques. As he “restarts” his narrative three pages in, he writes how “Once upon a time” the “niceties of technique: the unexpected image, the refreshingly accurate word-choice, the memorable simile that yield [sic] deeper and subtler significances upon reflection, like a memorable simile” were adequate and satisfying (107). But he no longer finds them so. In fact, he finds that the insistence on such formulae interrupts his thoughts, reins in his narrative voice, and keeps him from creation. But the formulae continue to pop up in his mind and in his narrative in the form of “place-holders”: “subjective complements to complete the sentence” (107), “Parallel phrase to wrap up series!” (111), “artistic fill in the blank” (111), “take direct third object” (112), “anticlimactic noun” (113), and so on. These “place-holders,” rather than exhibiting how the author benefits from the “science” of writing, actually showcase the ways in which the “science” inhibits his creativity and blocks his authorial process. The stylistic formulae that the writer has received from “the
Heritage” bind him into a static and limiting structure that does not allow for much experimentation. But the fact that the narrator of “Title” retains these story-element place-holders (“Title,” “adjective adjective,” etc.) is also indicative of his rebellion. Once again, the operations and structures of the language of fiction are highlighted rather than what the language signifies, adding an element of experimentation while acknowledging the places in the narrative where “tradition” would normally reign. By omitting the conventions while leaving the spaces those conventions would have occupied, Barth instructs the reader to fill-in those blanks, to play a role in the completion of the work and the creation of its meaning. This is both an educative effort on the part of Barth and an embracing of the spectacle.

Reading in Titus Andronicus

Having proven themselves to be challengers to their inherited literary convention of revenge tragedy and fiction, both authors instruct their readers to engage in the same level of close, active reading. Shakespeare’s educative efforts can be seen in the actions of his characters: how they read, what they make from what they read, and how they see the literary worlds in which they live. The ways in which each individual character reacts to and uses the knowledge they obtain through reading differs significantly. In these differentiations, I see three “types” of readers emerge: Passive Readers, Selective Readers, and Active Readers. These “types” can
also be thought of in terms of levels of performance. Titus and Aaron, the play’s Passive Readers, simply read the script they are given and perform without taking any creative license. What’s more, they only attend to matters of plot and never take the time to come to their own conclusions; they simply absorb the opinions of others. Chiron and Demetrius are Selective Readers, they read for what they want to find, overlooking crucial details that may complicate or contradict their readings. Their performances are perfunctory and unseasoned. And Lavinia, though she meets a very brutal end, is our ideal Active Reader. She uses “the Heritage,” the myths and stories she has stored away in her mind, she weaves them together, and she performs a wholly original reading of those scripts, one that will bring justice to her assailants and help her to regain her voice. Shakespeare’s implicit question to his audience and readers behind these scenes of reading seems to be: “What will you make of this? Which type of reader (or audience-member) will you be?”

**The Passive Reader**

Although Titus does not realize what story he and his companions are in until Lavinia “quotes the leaves” of Ovid’s book, the literary context of *Metamorphoses* was set in place much earlier by none other than Aaron (4.1.50). In Act One, Aaron is the first character to mention the story of Philomela and, in doing so, he inserts the entire scenario into the frame of Ovid’s tale. Critics have often remarked upon this detail because Aaron, a Goth, seems more familiar with classical literature than
the Romans themselves. In fact, he quotes it more than anyone else. From his very first speech in Act Two, Scene One (“Safe out of fortune’s shot” can be compared with Ovid’s “I am too great for fortune to harm”) to his later comments to Tamora (“This is the day of doom for Bassianus, / His Philomela must lose her tongue today, / Thy sons make pillage of her chastity / and wash their hands in Bassianus’ blood” (2.2.42-45)), Aaron “seems to be working from the same set of texts and same understanding of those texts as the Romans” and he deliberately sets out “to use those sources against the Romans” (St. Hilaire, 329). Aaron assumes the role of “chief architect and plotter of these woes” (5.3.121). He has set in motion an “adaptation” of Ovid’s work and will see to it that it continues to follow the “ravaging plot” set forth by Ovid. In order to adhere each turn of events to Ovid’s myth, he sets Tamora’s sons on their dreadful quest, he forges a letter framing Titus’ sons for Bassianus’ murder, and he takes advantage of the uninformed readings of others. According to Deborah Willis, “Aaron orchestrates much of what happens in Act Two, having scripted in advance a plan to have Lavinia raped, Bassianus killed, and Titus’ sons framed for their father’s murder” (39). This is not an all-together accurate statement. While it is true that Aaron planted the seeds of Ovid’s plot in the minds of Demetrius, Chiron, and others, he is not the “scripter” that Willis suggests he is. Although Aaron employs every plot device he can, he is not able to fully orchestrate his own little quasi-play-within-a-play scenario: he is the “plotter,” but he never becomes a creative “author.” He never puts pen to paper to set his scheme in
its place and instead simply adheres to Ovid’s tale. Thus Aaron is not the
mastermind that most critics, including Willis, read him to be. Plotting without
authoring places Aaron in the traditional role of revenge hero, one who merely
follows the script of revenge without taking creative control of the situation. The
only writing that Aaron admits to is horrifying. He claims:

\[
\text{Oft have I digged up dead men from their graves} \\
\text{And set them upright at their dear friends’ door,} \\
\text{Even when their sorrows almost was forgot,} \\
\text{And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,} \\
\text{Have with my knife carved in Roman letters,} \\
\text{‘Let not your sorrow die though I am dead.’ (4.1.135-40)}
\]

This writing by Aaron does not advance any plot and it inspires no action. Instead, its sole purpose is the destruction of an individual’s stasis. Thus, in his passivity and his lack of creative input, Aaron is guilty of incomplete, inactive reading.

Titus, like Aaron, is also unable to create his own “script” and falls back on established dramatic and literary templates. An example of this can be found in the speech Titus gives just before he slaughters Chiron and Demetrius: “Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust, / And with your blood and it I’ll make a paste, / And of the paste a coffin I will rear, / And make two pasties of your shameful heads” (5.2.186-9). A.C. Hamilton notes the echo of “Jack and the Beanstalk” in these lines: “The words themselves project the horrible act into folk-lore … [and] further project the event into an enveloping framework of myth” (211). Of course this is also a reference to the Philomela myth: once Tereus commits his crime, Philomela’s sister Progne (also the wife of Tereus) kills their son and feeds it to him. Both Aaron and
Titus place themselves in a form or a tale not of their own creation. In the face of great horror (either at the evil of others or at the evil of the self), these men simply employ the storyboards and lines of other authors like Ovid.

But the character of Titus complicates the vision of the Passive Reader that Aaron more neatly embodies. He is a character that knows the power of the written word, yet he does not take on the task of “writing” his own destiny. Words and writing are likened to weapons throughout Titus, helping to emphasize their abilities to enact, thus highlighting the creative powers that setting words to a page brings about. By “creative” I do not mean “artistic,” but rather the power to “occasion” things, to bring about action and provoke response. This idea of writing as capable of not only spurring but also creating action is made literal by Titus on many occasions. In his letter to Saturnine, delivered by a Clown, Titus bundles up a dagger, bringing the power of the words contained within the letter into a physical form. In another instance, he attaches verses to arrows. And to the arrows he sends up into the heavens he attaches pleas to the gods for the return of Astraea/Justice. And in yet another instance, he attaches quotes from the works of Horace to the arrows Young Lucius delivers to Aaron, Chiron, and Demetrius. These arrows and verses, “the goodliest weapons in his armoury,” literalize the connection the characters feel between words and deeds, especially violent and rebellious deeds (4.2.11). However, although Titus realizes that his words have the power to enact, he does not use them to their fullest potential. He makes a few half-hearted attempts throughout the play,
but he leaves the real work of reading, interpretation, and creation to others. This is most clearly seen in the scene depicting Titus at study (Act Five, Scene Two). In this late scene, it is easy to forget about Titus’ activity upon the entrance of Tamora and her sons dressed up and parading around as Revenge, Rape, and Murder. But if we look beyond this spectacle, as Shakespeare is always encouraging us to do, this scene presents a crucial look at writing as action. Upon the knock at his door by the parade of evils, Titus (aloft with papers) opens his study door and demands:

Who doth molest my contemplation?  
Is it your trick to make me ope the door,  
That so my sad decrees may fly away  
And all my study be to no effect?  
You are deceived, for what I mean to do  
See here in bloody lines I have set down,  
And what is written shall be executed. (5.2.9-15)

And so Titus has become an author. This is something not typically seen in revenge tragedies: the revenger physically plotting out his plan of attack. This anomaly is strongly suggestive of Titus’ belief in the power of the written word (as established earlier with the daggers and arrows), but also brings us back to Titus as a conscious (but ultimately impotent) participant in this drama. In writing his “bloody lines” (either lines written in his own blood or lines that outline what blood revenge he will soon perform) Titus comes close to becoming his own dramatist. At this point, he employs contemplation and writing, rather than rash action, as a means to create a plot that will “make [him] wondered at in time to come” (3.1.136). Here, Titus is in the process of becoming an Active Reader, but he is forced back into following
others’ scripts. But what exactly has he written? This is never revealed and perhaps it is not a terribly important detail, but it does leave the reader curious … Did Titus essentially rewrite Ovid’s plot with the obvious character substitutions — Tereus the pie-eater becomes Tamora the pie-eater, etc.? Or did he create a fifth act entirely of his own creation that was interrupted by the entry of the disguised Tamora and her sons?

Whatever his script may have been, Titus is not able to hold on to his authorial control for the remainder of the play; ultimately, he slips from an almost-Active Reader back down to a Passive Reader. He turns away from his own interpretative readings and creative writings and once again comes to rely on established forms. Titus’ ceding of power, which echoes his ceding of the throne in Act One, occurs in the last act of the play. In this final scene, Titus has just served pies made from the flesh and bone of Chiron and Demetrius to Tamora and Saturninus. Before he reveals that he has made cannibals of the emperor and his empress, Titus asks Saturninus for his interpretation of the story of Virginius: “My lord the emperor, resolve me this: / Was it well done of rash Virginius / To slay his daughter with his own right hand, / Because she was enforced, stained and deflowered?” (5.3.35-8). Saturninus responds in the affirmative: yes, it was right of Virginius to kill his daughter because the girl “should not survive her shame” (5.3.40). At the very word of Saturninus’ agreement with the actions of Virginius, Titus immediately follows the “pattern, precedent, and lively warrant” of the myth
and turns to slay his own daughter (5.3.43). This shocking and disturbing turn of
events jolts the audience and the reader back to attention. It practically begs for a re-
read. Why would Titus do such a thing? Why would he defer to Saturninus’ reading
of the story rather than his own? It is clear from Titus’ framing of his question that
he did not originally agree with this reading — he describes Virginius as “rash.” His
reading is that Virginius was reckless, thoughtless, and foolhardy. Why would a man
who had been previously so thoughtful and considerate about the nuances and
artfulness of a perfectly crafted plot suddenly forfeit his authorial power? This line of
questioning only brings us to Titus’ rough draft for his Act Five. The entrance of
Tamora and her sons as Revenge, Rape, and Murder did make his “bloody lines”
obsolete. Without that script to follow, Titus’ turn to Saturninus’ reading of another
established tale was the only place Titus could turn for stage directions and lines. At
the merest of suggestions from Saturninus, Titus jerks Lavinia back into the
patterning narrative of Virginius, one of the many revenge and sacrifice narratives
that Lavinia has worked to escape. As Titus acquiesces, “A pattern, precedent and
lively warrant / For me, most wretched, to perform the like” (5.3.43-4). In relying on
both the plotline of another author and on someone else’s interpretations of that
work, Titus removes himself from a position of any sort of authority or power and,
thus, cements himself as a Passive Reader.

The Selective Reader
Chiron and Demetrius, the play’s Selective Readers, are never able to comprehend the entirety of any situation with which they are presented. This is true for two reasons. First of all, their readings are uninformed and incomplete. Second of all, they have Aaron, their “tutor,” looking over their shoulders, trying to make sure that they adhere to Ovid’s plot points and play the roles they are supposed to, whether they understand them or not. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the verb to “tutor” can mean, among other things, “to keep in order, maintain; to provide with means of subsistence; to see to the upkeep of things.” This seems a very appropriate title for the type of work that Aaron engages in: he keeps the actions of Chiron and Demetrius in line with Ovid’s plot. But he is able to manipulate Chiron and Demetrius precisely because they themselves do not engage in interpretive reading (of either situations or books). When the dreadful trio receives the be-versed arrows from Titus, Chiron recognizes the words as those of Horace but merely feigns his knowledge of their meaning. Demetrius reads, “Integer vitae, scelerisque purus / Non eget Mauri iaculis, nec arcu” which translates as “the man of upright life and free from crime does not need the javelins or bows of the Moor” (4.2.20-1). And here begins Chiron’s posing: “O, ‘tis a verse in Horace, I know it well: / I read it in the grammar long ago” (4.2.22-3). An image comes to mind of Chiron’s nose jutting up into the air and with an air of superiority — the theatricality of knowledge. But Aaron’s aside reveals that he is able to see through Chiron’s “better-than-thou” show to realize that the lines “wound beyond their feeling to the
quick” (4.2.27-8). Demetrius adds to our sense of the brothers’ cluelessness with his conception of this arrow as a gift: “But me more good to see so great a lord / Basely insinuate and send us gifts” (4.2.37-8). He and Chiron both understand these lines because they learned them in grammar school, but their knowledge of and ability to apply the lines to the current situation is lacking, as Aaron notes in his aside.

Chiron’s feigning intelligence and Demetrius’ obtuseness are all Aaron needs to continue his role as “tutor” and as upholder of the plotlines set down by Ovid. The characters of Chiron and Demetrius represent the dangers that come from inattention to both one’s reading and one’s reality. Shakespeare seems to suggest that without taking in all levels of detail and shades of meaning in order to come to one’s own understanding, all power is surrendered.

The ways in which Chiron and Demetrius disobey their “tutor” and alter the Philomela story also reveal them to be Selective Readers: they go beyond Aaron’s verbal insistence that Lavinia lose her tongue and proceed to chop off her hands. This “going beyond” not only recalls Atreus’ approach to revenge, it also suggests a familiarity with the story on the part of the otherwise simple-minded brothers. The brothers knew that, in Ovid’s tale, the silenced Philomela was able to weave a tapestry to reveal the identity of her assailant. Obviously wanting to avoid punishment for their unspeakable deeds, the brothers brutally remove Lavinia’s hands. We now know what the brothers were reading for: plans for avoiding detection. And they relish their opportunity to exercise creative control in this plot
point. After their brutal rape and mutilation of Lavinia, they mercilessly tease her and her lack of authorial power. Chiron tells Lavinia, “Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so, / And if thy stumps will let thee, play the scribe” (2.3.3-4). Of course Lavinia is unable to do so because they have taken her most powerful tool — verbal communication. But while she is temporarily without a voice, Lavinia is not completely without language. She still has reading.

The Active Reader

The scene of Lavinia’s revelation (Act Four, Scene One) is a remarkable one both for its outlandish visuals and its deeply entrenched allusions. The scene opens with a mutilated Lavinia chasing Young Lucius (her nephew) from off-stage onto a stage shared with Titus and Marcus. This is not a playful chase. In fact, upon seeing Titus and Marcus, Young Lucius cries out in terror, “Help, grandsire, help! My aunt Lavinia / Follows me everywhere, I know not why” (4.1.1-2). The men are similarly confused by Lavinia’s actions but assure the boy that his aunt means him no harm. Marcus compares her to Cornelia, a Roman mother who educated her sons, the Gracchi, who later became revolutionary politicians. According to Marcus, even Cornelia did not take as much care in reading to her sons as Lavinia took with Young Lucius. So Lavinia is not only a great reader, she is also a great teacher. This becomes clear as early as line 20 when Young Lucius tries to figure out his aunt’s behavior and claims, “I have read that Hecuba of Troy / Ran mad for sorrow”
These lines are further evidence of Ovid’s presence in the play: Hecuba was pulled directly from the *Metamorphoses*. Young Lucius’s mention of Hecuba here suggests that Lavinia may have given him lessons on Ovid.

Even Titus, in helping Lavinia open the books Young Lucius has dropped, testifies to her superior abilities: “But thou art deeper read and better skilled” (4.1.33). And her skills help her turn to the precise pages that she needs: “the tragic tale of Philomela” (4.1.47). Lacking the ability to weave a tapestry as Philomela did, Lavinia goes to the source material and “quotes the leaves” of Ovid’s book (4.1.50). She was the first to realize what story they are in and, in citing Ovid directly, she reveals to Titus and Marcus that Aaron has placed them into the Philomela frame. It is not until that page is laid open that Titus and Marcus recognize the reality of the situation:

Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl,
Ravished and wronged as Philomela was,
Forced in the ruthless, vast and gloomy woods?
...
Patterned by that the poet here describes
By nature made for murders and for rapes. (4.1.51-8)

Though the pattern is made known, Lavinia’s assailants remain unidentified at this point. To remedy this, Marcus instructs Lavinia to write of “the traitors and the truth” in the sand (4.1.76). Again, this is a plot device pulled from Ovid. Although this scene does create quite a ridiculous spectacle (according to the stage direction, *She takes the staff in her mouth, and guides it with her stumps, and writes*), it helps to frame writing as *action* just as Titus’ arrows and daggers do. She could have possibly gotten
her message across with an equally absurd game of charades or she could have simply pointed out her assailants. But Shakespeare is very deliberate in his insistence on writing here. The power of the author to set people into action is very real to Shakespeare and his characters. Lavinia sets forth her meaning in writing and can only hope her readers will understand.

It is important to note that, while Lavinia “cites” Ovid in her writing, she does deviate from the script provided by the *Metamorphoses*. In her writing she finds a small degree of creative control. As Bethany Packard notes, Lavinia substitutes the Latin word *stuprum* (meaning ‘rape’) for Ovid’s choice of word *raptus* (meaning ‘robbery’ or ‘abduction’). This subtle difference that Lavinia inserts into her version of Ovid’s narrative takes away the connotation of women as property, things to be stolen or ‘taken’ that the original word *raptus* has. *Stuprum* shifts the focus from the shame to the crime. In substituting *stuprum* for *raptus*, Lavinia is attempting to remove herself from the plots of both Ovid’s *Fasti* and Livy’s *History of Rome*, which outlines the story of Lucrece. In this particular plot, Lucrece is raped by Sextus Tarquinius, the king of Rome. And, as the story goes, Lucrece soon commits suicide in order to end her shame. This “sacrifice” narrative is the one that Lavinia wishes to escape. And her writing of *stuprum* rather than *raptus* is her attempt to change her “script” from Lucrece’s to her own. But, as discussed earlier, Titus (our Passive Reader) pulls Lavinia back from the brink of freedom and forces her into yet another revenge-sacrifice narrative, that of Virginius.
Although Lavinia represents the ideal active reader, Shakespeare does not let her have a happy ending. In fact, her rape, mutilation, humiliation, and subsequent death are perhaps the most atrocious, violent scenes in the entire play, human-flesh-pie-eating included. What are we to make of this? Shakespeare does not seem to be warning us against the type of reading Lavinia engages in. In fact, her downfall is directly the result of poor readings of others, not her own. Perhaps Lavinia’s tragic end is Shakespeare’s comment on his own situation as an author. He, like Lavinia, is trying to escape the formulaic revenge narrative that is expected from him just as Lavinia is trying to escape her role as victim of sacrifice that she sees on her horizon. And both writers are, to a certain extent, impeded in their writing. Audience expectation has figuratively tied Shakespeare’s hands and bound him to familiar scripts (like *Thyestes* and *Metamorphoses*), forms, and insistence on spectacle that bring in a substantial profit. He presents his audience with exactly what they craved: blood-loss, beheadings, and cannibalism. But, underneath the spectacle, Shakespeare works to break down and critique the very forms he seems to faithfully adhere to. His presentation of characters constantly engaged in reading and interpretation suggests that he wants his audience to do the same. He is urging his readers to engage with the drama, to question it, and to come to their own conclusions. He will not paint his intentions with broad strokes; he will not merely point out his subtle meanings and say “this is what I mean,” or “tis so.” Shakespeare’s lack of authorial imposition highlights the Bard’s ideas about learning from and about literacy and the power of
language: that it can only come about through engaged, analytical, independent readings.

**Reading & Performance in *Lost in the Funhouse***

Although instances of the above “types” of readers can be found scattered throughout *Funhouse* (the narrator-sperm of “Night-Sea Journey,” for example, is an Active Reader, whereas the narrator of “Life-Story” is a Selective Reader), what is of most interest to this examination are the ways in which Barth’s experimental narrative style goes about testing his readers to determine which “type” they are. The numerous performance opportunities that Barth leaves in his work serve to categorize his readers, to separate the Passives and Selectives from the Actives. In short, the work of the characters of *Titus* — reading, analysis, interpretation, creation — becomes the work of Barth’s audience.

Many critical studies have focused on Barth’s *Funhouse* as either postmodern free-play or an exercise in nihilism. For example, Jac Thorpe considers the effect of Barth’s works to be inherently negative and ultimately unimportant: “Barth says nothing — positively. There is nothing positive to say. No truth to tell. All one can do is tell the story. By implication, one says a very great deal, of course, about all that need not be said. But it is all negative. A statement of the human condition is an outline of black upon gray” (116-7). This is an overly simplistic reading to say the
least. It fails to take into account the ways in which Barth’s seemingly “all negative” presentations of the “already said” actually demonstrate the creative heights that writers can reach. Each story in Barth’s series shows the author at work who, in the face of an “intellectual dead end,” is able to make the “all that need not be said” the very basis of his tales rather than the impetus of his destruction. In doing so, the author encourages the reader to work toward a similar creative height, to remove him or herself from a position of passivity and into one of active engagement.

Barth presents his Funhouse as a challenge to the reader using direct address and explicit instructions for reading. Barth’s two sets of author’s notes provide guidelines for reading and comprehending the work. Barth’s notes and explicit calls to the reader realign the reader and the author in a more interactive relationship. Barth envisions this new kind of relationship in “The Literature of Exhaustion” when he advocates “to eliminate not only the traditional audience … but also the most traditional notion of the artist: the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect; in other words, one endowed with uncommon talent, who has moreover developed and disciplined that endowment into virtuosity” (20). Barth’s vision of doing away with this “Aristotelian conscious agent,” like Barthes’ idea of the death of the author, essentially strips the author of the final say in the performance of his or her work. Rather, the author allows the reader the space and freedom to take some degree of creative license in producing the meaning of the text. But how does Barth work toward achieving this new
relationship of co-creation? He does so by using direct address to inspire (and insult) his readers into action and by leaving blanks for the reader to “fill in.” Like Shakespeare, Barth’s goal is educative: he leaves work for the reader as a means of instructing him or her in the act of engaged performance of his work.

Just as the book itself pretends to be an improvised “work in progress,” the reader must continually work to construct meaning. In his book *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Wolfgang Iser describes the task at hand for the reader of experimental fictions such as *Funhouse*: the “reader is constantly feeding back reactions as he obtains new information, there is just such a continual process of realization, and so reading itself ‘happens’ like an event, in the sense that what we read takes on the character of an open-ended situation, at one and the same time concrete and yet fluid” (68). Barth constantly bombards his readers with new information, information that is neither logical nor intricately described. This refusal to explicitly detail *how* to interpret his text forces the reader to sit up and engage; to work for the meaning instead of simply having it handed to them. For Iser, this process of constant interpretation is one that we all do subconsciously. But Barth calls our attention to it; he makes us conscious of what is subconscious.

Barth often taunts his reader into such a posture: “Are you paying attention? I dare you to quit now!” (106); “The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it’s you I’m addressing, who else from inside this monstrous fiction. You’ve read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? … Can
nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where’s your shame?” (127). This type of direct interrogation of the reader not only dares the reader to stop reading, but it shifts the narrative from the position of an author’s monologue to that of a dialogue between reader and author. When faced with such taunts, the reader is spurred on, inspired to prove the author wrong and find meaning where, seemingly, there is none to be found.

Once Barth has properly taunted the reader into a more active kind of reading, the reader is then thrust into the role of performer of the text. Lavinia’s active reading, interpretation, and “writing” are now the work of the Funhouse reader if he or she chooses to take it on. And Barth allows quite a bit of space for the reader to take on a degree of control with the holes or blanks that he leaves in.

Occasionally these blanks will be literal, as in final line of “Title,” which reads: “How in the world will it ever” (113). It is important to note that there is no punctuation at the end of this phrase, no period, no question mark, no exclamation point. Nothing. This is a literal blank that the reader, if he so chose, could fill in as he pleased. Here, Barth subtly encourages the reader to think of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, specifically its blank-page “description” of Widow Wadman. On the page facing that ink-less page, Tristram (and, by extension, Sterne as well), calls upon the reader to “conceive this right — call for pen and ink — here’s paper ready to your hand. — Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind … please but your own fancy in it” (422). Sterne’s blank page and Barth’s in-text blanks both serve the same two functions.
First, they emphasize the shortcomings of language. The narrator has no words that can sufficiently and objectively describe the subjects at hand (the Widow and the “Title”-narrator’s abhorrence of self-consciousness). Any words that could have been selected would not do the subjects justice. Thus both authors confront that lack that their language has left them with. Second, after visually depicting the limits of language, these blanks invite the reader to take a more active role in the creation of the works. These literal blanks are points in the narrative where, like Titus and Lavinia, the reader should pick up a pen and take creative control. But this is a metaphorical call to action. The reader need not actually write in his copy of Funhouse in order to be fully engaged. The act of “writing” on the page should actually be a cognitive exercise. The reader, being open to the myriad voices of all his past readings, should be able to tap into those echoes and to take heed of his own interpretations and his inner literary critic. But whether or not the reader will fully take on the project that Barth has left for him remains an unknown for the author.

In other instances of performance opportunity, Barth leaves “slots” for the reader to fill in. As Deborah A. Woolley notes, “Some of the blanks are grammatical: ‘I’ll fill in the blank with this noun here in my prepositional object’ [“Title,” 105]; ‘The novel is predicate adjective’ [“Title,” 109]. … Others are syntactic or rhetorical elements: ‘as is the innocent anecdote of bygone days’ [“Title,” 109]. … Narrative elements become mere slots, named but not filled: ‘Conventional startling opener’ [“Title,” 106]” (472). But Woolley makes a slight misstep when she claims, “self-
consciousness has made it impossible for him to bring the story, and his lover, to a climax and to fill in the blank or the womb — in other words, to create” (473). While this is the case on the story-level, it is not the case if we pull back from the narrative of the story (if it can even be rightly called a “narrative”). These blanks do not signal the failure of the writer to create, rather they signal the writer’s ability to create in spite of the conventions that are forced upon him. Barth lays bare the “science” of writing and, thus, that “science” becomes the subject of his story. These slots remind the reader of his position in the “funhouse” of literary traditions and writing conventions. Barth keeps the reader constantly aware of how the influence of “the Heritage” touches all writing. Thus, at various points throughout the series, the reader is immersed in the process of writing, lost in the hall of mirrors just like Ambrose and, by extension, Barth himself.

In still other instances the blank is not literal, rhetorical, or syntactical. This final type of performance opportunity is perhaps the most obvious and jarring: the word “blank” is left in along with an explicit challenge to the reader. “You can’t fill in the blank; I can’t fill in the blank” (106); “actual blank. And I mean literally fill in the blank. Is this a test?” (111). Such instances position the work’s “lack” of meaning as the fault of the reader himself, not that of the author. It is the reader’s responsibility to “pass” the “Active Reader test” and fill in the blanks that Barth has left for him or her, the blanks that Barth claims the reader “can’t fill in.” According to Iser, these “apparent inconsistencies” in the narrative — a staple of modern
metafiction and postmodernist works — “act as hindrances to comprehension, and so force us to reject our habitual orientations as inadequate. If one tries to ignore such breaks, or to condemn them as faults in accordance with classical norms, one is in fact attempting to rob them of their function” (18). These blanks are not narrative elements that can be glossed over. Rather, as Iser suggests, these blanks make the reader sit up straight, engage with the holes in the narrative, and discover (or create) the function of the blanks left by Barth.

But, without the guarantee that his readers will take on such an active role, the author remains anxious and unsure about his work’s reception. In “Anonymiad,” the final story of *Funhouse*, Barth presents us with his “vision bottled” that he has sent out to sea (199). Both the anonymous narrator and Barth have no control over how their creations will be received or whether or not they will ever be received at all: “Perhaps, I’d tell myself bitterly, it had been written already, even more than once; for all I knew the waters were clogged with its like, a menace to navigation and obstruction on the wide world’s littoral” (198-9). All that the narrator (and, by extension, Barth) can do is blindly send his works out into the void of a faceless readership and hope that someone will receive and appreciate his work. The strong thread of anxiety that can be traced through the closing story of *Funhouse* reveals the author’s concerns about how his creation will be received. Are Barth’s words going to “float voiceless in the wash of time like an amphora in the sea” (199)? Barth ends the work with an isolated, simple line: “Wrote it” (201). This is an enigmatic way to
conclude an enigmatic book. But, upon closer inspection, it signals the basis of Barth’s anxiety: what the “Read it” stage will look like and how well it will go. This stage is completely out of Barth’s hands and solely the responsibility of his readers.

§§§

Both Shakespeare and Barth are concerned with our awareness of how we are influenced by what we read, how what we read changes how we write, how we read, and how we live our lives. As Iser suggests, books deliver “different information to different readers — each in accordance with the capacity of his comprehension. … The literary text acts like a sort of living organism, which is linked to the reader, and also instructs him” (66). But exactly how literary works “instruct” the reader is dependent on what “type” of reader you are and on what level of attention you pay. These instances of educative metafiction encourage the reader to engage in the performance of active, interpretative reading.

Placing such a strong emphasis on the creative power of the reader, both Shakespeare and Barth open up their works to myriad different variations, meanings, and types of performances. The experimentation with established archetypes that both works present leave them open to an even wider range of readings than do realist fiction and traditional revenge dramas. And such experimentation requires more active involvement on the part of the reader. This level of reading engagement
is a tall order. And perhaps that is the greatest tragedy about writing: no matter how hard the author works to create something wholly original, his audience may not pay close enough attention, may not read with an interpretive eye, may not sense all of the nuances of meaning and shades of critique. The reader may take the easy road and regard the work as mere spectacle — as a tragedy of blood in the case of Shakespeare and as “free play” experimentation in Barth’s case. But both Shakespeare and Barth work to ease their anxiety to a certain level by providing an example of active, interpretive reading in their works. As the narrator of “Title” exclaims, “your own author bless and damn you his life is in your hands! He writes and reads himself; don’t you think he knows who gives his creatures their lives and deaths? Do they exist except as he or others read their words?” (127). Both authors know “who gives his creatures their lives and deaths.” Their pens alone do not give characters life; only collaboration between a reader and his words can do that. Thus the reader is provided with in-text examples of how to properly (and improperly) read in Titus and explicit invitations to co-create are offered up to the reader in Funhouse. Once the authors have set their words to the page and completed their works, all they can do is cross their fingers and hope that their efforts will be appreciated, that the “Read it” stage will go as well as they had hoped.
“The World of Words”:
Faulty Education & Reader Liberation in *The Tempest* & *Foe*

These next two texts (Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Coetzee’s *Foe*) are quite a strange pair when it comes to their scenes of educative metafiction. Unlike in the previous case study, the scenes of education in these works are neither positive nor negative examples of reading and writing. These scenes simply depict faulty models of education, models in which the motives are economic and the student is a secondary concern. More than providing for the reader instructions for how to read or how not to read the works, these faulty models reveal the authors’ concerns over the increasing commodification of their art forms and the effect their works have on their audience. It is only in the conclusions of each work that the authors provide instructions for how to (or, perhaps more accurately, provide the freedom to) perform a text in the face of these economic and social concerns. These moments of educative metafiction that depict teaching, learning, writing, and reading work to instruct the audience in the acts of interpretation and the reality that language must be mediated through (but not necessarily ruled by) dominant social, economic, and literary systems.

In these two works of educative metafiction, the economic realities of drama and literature weave their way into the processes of teaching and writing, muddling the line between these very distinct processes. This muddling results in presentations
of faulty models of education that figure language as an economic means to an end and in which teaching is purely motivated by self-interest. As I see it, the teacher and student figures have rather clear parallels to the two agents of fiction: the author and the reader. This is not the partnership between author and reader found in the activation of metafiction. This is the relationship that exists between an author concerned with sensationalism and popularity and the reader upon whom that language is thrust. Looking at these works’ faulty models of education with this parallel in mind reveals Shakespeare and Coetzee’s shared anxiety over the reception of their words: how large their audience will be and the lasting effect their language will have. In a sense, both authors worry about what their words (which are mediated through the pressure to produce a big hit) are teaching their audiences about the meaning and purpose of drama and literature.

Only in the closing sections of these texts do the authors provide the reader with a respite from these concerns. In their codas, both Shakespeare and Coetzee set their focuses on the activation and performance of the texts rather than their popularity or reception. That is not to say that the authors do not care about the success of their works at all. Rather, as the authors encourage the reader to realize in the concluding scenes of their works, there is room amid the economic realities of publishing for creative interpretation and original performance. Shakespeare and Coetzee encourage their audience and readers to imagine how reading, language, and interpretation work; to take the economic and social realities of drama and fiction
into consideration, but to not allow those realities to inhibit or influence their individual performance of the work. The freedom allowed to the audience and reader in the concluding scenes of each work stands in stark contrast to the slavery and self-interest that determine the faulty models of education found throughout the play and the novel.

Through these themes of language acquisition and liberty, Coetzee’s *Foe* is, on many levels, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. While the most obvious narrative thread in *Foe* is a reimagining of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Tempest* is one of the seemingly imperceptible threads (along with Defoe’s *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders*) that are tightly woven into Coetzee’s novel. Derek Attridge notes subtle echoes of the play in the final section of *Foe*: “the first two scenes of *The Tempest*, with their memorable blending of loss and salvation, though never quite quoted, shimmer through the writing” (66). But he is rightfully hesitant to call *Foe* an adaptation of *The Tempest* based on the mere commonality of several individual words such as “ooze,” “shore,” “washing,” etc. He asks, “How can one word be a quotation?” (66). The truth is, it cannot. But what Attridge has failed to do is to look beyond the words and between the lines; something that both Coetzee and Shakespeare implore us to do. Although Coetzee borrowed character names and basic plotlines from *Robinson Crusoe*, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, with its emphasis on the creative powers of language — its ability to create fictional worlds as well as to
create our understanding of our actual worlds — seems to have been just as much on Coetzee’s mind as Defoe.

The Creative Powers of Language

Books and storytelling are central concerns in each of these two works and a great deal of emphasis and importance is placed on one’s ability to write and/or read creatively (i.e., to be actively involved in each of those processes in a way similar to Titus’ Lavinia). Language in these works, whether written or spoken, is figured as a force. For instance, the magical powers of Prospero, the leading player in The Tempest, come directly from his reading. The consistent ties drawn between Prospero’s sorcery and his education links reading not only with knowledge but also with power. Before the action of the play begins, Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, was deposed by his jealous brother Antonio and, along with his young daughter, Miranda, was then set adrift at sea. On their small raft, the exiled pair had nothing with them but the basic necessities for survival: food, clothing, water … and books. While drifting in the open sea, Prospero was also drifting in the sea of language and ideas that his books contained for him. These books taught him magic. These books gave him powers to enact and to orchestrate (a more spectacular literalization of the power exercised by Lavinia). Prospero brought this magic onto
the remote island where he and Miranda landed. Inhabiting this island was Ariel, a spirit, and Caliban, the deformed son of the witch Sycorax.

At first Prospero took charge of Caliban’s schooling and even acted as a father figure of sorts to the poor orphan he found upon first arriving on the island. Prospero initiated the language lessons that Miranda gave to Caliban, for which the orphan was at first grateful: “thou strok’st me and made much of me … then I loved thee” (1.2.334, 337). And Caliban returned the educational favor and instructed Prospero in the ways of the island. He “showed [Prospero] all the qualities o’th’isle: / The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile” (1.2.338-339). But soon Prospero ceased Caliban’s language lessons and came to look upon him as merely “a savage and deformed slave.” This is the point at which we first meet the combative pair. At this point their relationship had exited their “school” phase and entered the master/servant phase. Why this shift? Prospero is quite explicit about the events that transpired: “I have used thee / (Filth as thou art) with humane care and lodged thee / In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate / The honour of my child” (1.2.346-349). Caliban’s attempted rape of Miranda, his attempt to fill “this isle with Calibans,” was read by Prospero as an act of resistance to his authority and to Miranda’s role as educator (1.2.352). Prospero’s “punishment” for Caliban was to cease Miranda’s tutoring and withhold Caliban’s education.

Into this scene come Antonio, King Alonso, and their crew. Prospero, using the magical powers he has gained through the study of his books, creates a tempest
and causes Antonio’s passing ship to wreck, separating the crewmembers from each other. Three interwoven plotlines result from this occurrence. In one, Caliban, along with Stephano and Trinculo (two drunkards from Antonio’s crew), devise an unsuccessful plan to overthrow Prospero whom Caliban has grown to resent. When plotting revenge against his master, Caliban tells Stephano and Trinculo, “Remember / First to possess his books, for without them / He’s but a sot, as I am” (3.2.90-92). Caliban has just enough knowledge to realize the power of Prospero’s books (and, perhaps, of books in general) but Prospero has left him without the tools to create his own meaning, to create his own performance. As a result, his revenge scheme fizzles out under its own plotlessness. Meanwhile, in the second plotline, Prospero uses his magic to orchestrate a romantic relationship between Miranda and Ferdinand (Alonso’s son). And the third narrative thread involves Antonio and Sebastian (Alonso’s brother) plotting to murder Alonso so that Sebastian can take the throne. With his book-learned magic, Prospero plays a hand in each of these plots and gradually leads each player closer to him. The play concludes with Prospero’s final orchestration: after pardoning Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian, and Caliban for their betrayals, Prospero commands Ariel to produce favorable weather conditions for their return to Naples. Before their departure, Prospero promises to entertain them all with the story of his twelve years on the island, after which he will break his magic staff. This promise from Prospero concludes the play with an added emphasis on language and storytelling.
Prospero’s epilogue in which he breaks his magic staff also signals his connection to the Bard himself, thus furthering this emphasis. According to Colin McGinn, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare’s final play, is filled with the Bard’s reflections on “the medium through which he wove his own spells” (142). He reinforces this connection between character and author by referring to Prospero as “Shakespeare’s surrogate” (139). This is a reasonable epithet to a certain extent as both figures (Prospero and Shakespeare) are concerned with presentation and audience awareness. In the opening scene of the play, Prospero reveals to Miranda the true tale of how they came to be on the island. At several points throughout his account, Prospero stops to ensure that Miranda is paying close enough attention: “ope thine ear, Obey, and be attentive” (1.2.37), “Dost thou attend me?” (1.2.78), “Thou attendst not!” (1.2.87). Prospero wants his immediate audience, Miranda, to be captivated by his tale. But this is true in a larger sense as well. If we step back, from stage to audience, these entreaties for attention could be seen as Shakespeare’s own self-conscious and anxious urgings to the audience to be attentive. Working in an increasingly consumer-driven culture, these urgings are Shakespeare’s push against audience passivity. He wants his audience to realize the power that is inherent in storytelling and to work to achieve the type of “magic from books” that Prospero was able to.

Placing a similar level of emphasis on language in general and storytelling in particular, Coetzee’s *Foe* does much to complicate and highlight the role of literacy
and learning on Defoe’s original island setting. In Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe wrote daily and placed great importance on taking note of the occurrences of each day and on scratching out a mark to count the days as they passed. Coetzee’s Cruso places no such emphasis on words and writing. According to Susan Barton (the female castaway Coetzee has inserted into the original tale), “Cruso kept no journal, perhaps because he lacked paper and ink, but more likely, I now believe, because he lacked the inclination to keep one, or if he ever possessed the inclination, had lost it” (16). Cruso also lacks other necessities that Defoe’s castaway made use of: he has no clay, no musket, no goats, no corn, no rice. By implication, Coetzee equates Cruso’s lack of these tools with his lack of writing. Reading, writing, and language itself are tools for thriving but, according to Cruso, they are not necessary for surviving. Cruso does not teach his man Friday to have a great stock of words because survival without words is possible. Cruso feels no need to teach Friday to understand language more complex than functional demands and simple vocabulary relating to the features of island life and his day-to-day tasks. But after Cruso dies on the ship en route to civilization, Susan takes over his duties as teacher. And she has very different ideas about the purpose of Friday’s education and what it should include: she wants to instruct Friday in the art of language so that the narrative of his stay on the island may be told. Again, as in *Tempest*, the emphasis here is on books and storytelling, not on literacy. Teaching Friday how to write is simply a means to a selfish end (i.e., successful publication) for Susan.
Ultimately, it is Daniel Foe (the author Susan hopes will set her story in proper prose for publication) who breeds this self-interest in Susan. From beginning to end, without ever really considering the literary merits of Susan’s true story, Foe insists on sensationalism. Foe is so concerned with creating a “confection” of Friday’s story that he neglects the wishes of Susan and the realities of Friday. Foe’s urgings to Susan to include cannibals, muskets, and pirates in her tale are quite obviously his attempts to gain audience attention. He does not want the story to be a mere “loaf of bread” that “will keep us alive … if we are starved of reading” (117). He wants more crowd-pleasing delights; he wants “tastier confections and pastries” (117). This vision of books as “confections” reflects an anxiety about the realities of the business of books. In the publishing world, books are not produced solely based on their own worth and merits; books are produced to sell. Daniel Defoe himself was a very economically driven author in the new literary marketplace of the eighteenth century (the era that canonized Shakespeare). In line with Defoe, Coetzee’s Mr. Foe is also strongly motivated by the increasing sensationalism and spectacle of mass culture. To Foe, books are pieces of merchandise, items to be bought and sold. This idea of books as merely products for consumption is not the romantic, artistic idea that most writers begin with. This is a reality brought about by experience in the publishing industry. The most basic anxiety of the author “Will my book be read and appreciated?” is translated into “Will my book sell?” For Foe, the worth of a book is the sum total of its gross sales.
Once the stakes have been set — that is, once the importance of storytelling and the economics of language have been made clear — the scenes of education can begin. These works constantly remind us that language is a creative force and that without it we are bound, limited, silent. Under the pretense of bringing freedom to their students (Caliban and Friday), the teacher figures in each work (Miranda and Susan) begin their educative efforts. But soon their efforts fall short and economic concerns overshadow their previous “humanitarian” efforts.

The Student

The figure of the student is, of course, crucial to this examination of language and learning in these works. The student role is filled by Friday in Foe and Caliban in The Tempest. Both of these two figures represent the savage “other” and the enslaved and their relationships with their teachers reveal much about the social aspects of language and learning and about the malleability of human knowledge. One of the essential connections between these two student figures hinges on the “nature versus nurture” debate. Although the phrase was first coined by Francis Galton in Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry Into Its Laws and Consequences (1869), Shakespeare uses this alliterative pair in The Tempest over 250 years before Galton. Revealing his frustrations with his slave Caliban, Prospero shouts,

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost!
And, as with age his body grows uglier,
So his mind cankers. (4.1.188-192)

Here we have an interesting stance in this classic debate. Rather than seeing the human mind as completely formed by either nature or nurture, Shakespeare envisions a middle ground. These lines suggest that one’s “nature” sets limits on what knowledge one can attain through “nurture.” Thus Caliban, a “born devil,” cannot be properly or fully instructed in the arts of language and civilized behavior. Those lessons simply will not “stick” because his innate mental constraints will not allow them to adhere. According to Prospero, Caliban’s innate self is bestial and devilish and thus not capable or worthy of further education and literacy. Although Caliban’s language lessons were cut short, his “education” continued down a different path: Prospero began treating Caliban as a mere servant and he “educated” him in labor. He does not teach Caliban how to use language and the power of books to enact and perform (something that Prospero has proved himself perfectly capable of). Instead he teaches Caliban to use his body to work. When Caliban tries to “marry into” Prospero’s family, his actual role of servant is crystallized. Because Caliban’s access to new language has been cut off, he cannot exist or be represented in his own terms; he cannot exist as an autonomous entity. He can only exist within the master/servant paradigm. Thus Caliban is never allowed real freedom because of the constraints imposed upon him through language and learning by Prospero and Miranda.
The play leaves Caliban with a questionable future, with no plot points foreshadowed. In the final scene, Prospero reluctantly re-adopts Caliban: “this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (5.1.275-276). But what is to be Caliban’s fate? Will he remain on the island as Prospero, Miranda, et al. return to Italy? Or will Caliban travel with them to Milan and carry on with his education? Both seem incongruous with the vision of Caliban that we have come to form throughout the course of the play. According to Glen A. Love, Caliban “remains a figure of potentiality. ... His future is unclear, but not denied; rather, he has been placed in abeyance, a work in progress” (138). It is as though Caliban has been left as Prospero’s rough draft, a draft that he started but has no idea as to how to continue or to finish. As Prospero’s “unfinished draft,” Caliban’s meaning is incomplete. He is not the author of his own story and he can only be given meaning within the context of his larger social and cultural reality.

Allowing Caliban to remain an “unfinished draft,” Prospero concedes that his efforts are over; that there is nothing more he could do for Caliban. This is, of course, not true within the context of the play. Prospero could very easily resume Caliban’s education and allow him a certain level of autonomy back in Milan. But he does not. It is suggested that when the curtain closes, no more character development can occur. Their lives exist only within the frame of the stage. In a certain sense, Shakespeare must concede the same truths. Just as Prospero can do no more for Caliban, Shakespeare can provide no more “instruction” to his audience.
That is not to suggest that Shakespeare is somehow “enslaving” those attending his play. But he does command control of his audience in one crucial way: he determines their access to language during the course of the play. Much like Prospero, Shakespeare decides which words and ideas are given to those in attendance. But his audience’s experience of those words is ultimately out of his control. Shakespeare’s palpable anxiety in *Tempest* comes from the reality that his audience is, to some extent, enslaved by the ever-escalating spectacle of the theatre. The audience-passivity that sensational theatre fosters has left Shakespeare unsure that his words will be fully appreciated. Thus Shakespeare’s audience will remain a “thing of darkness,” a faceless mass of people, a group Shakespeare can never be sure he has truly reached but that he can do nothing more for.

Caliban’s supposedly innate devilishness also reflects Shakespeare’s uncertainty about the character of his audience and the effect of his drama on them. Though Miranda and Prospero sought to bring language to Caliban in an effort to “civilize” him, they ended up corrupting him. The same language that gave Prospero his magical powers has only given Caliban the ability to curse his teachers. While the creative powers of language and storytelling are portrayed throughout the play as mostly positive (as seen in the character of Prospero), the corruption of Caliban makes us rethink those powers, makes us suspicious of the effects of language. This dual nature of language reflects the concerns about the social effects drama that arose during the commodification of theatre that occurred over the course of
Shakespeare’s career. As Diana E. Henderson notes, worries abounded in the sixteenth century about “the public theatre’s social functions but also about the socio-political and economic changes shaping it and the society it was helping to transform” (242). The central question of this historical moment was, how will the audience “read” the situations, dialogue, and characters with which they are presented? This worry suggests that, just as Prospero learned sorcery from books, theatre audiences could obtain similar powers (for good or evil) and creative (or destructive) impulses from the language of drama. This is Shakespeare pointing out the double-edged sword of language: it is capable of both empowering and corrupting an individual. Here we can see Shakespeare, in his final play, exhibiting a small degree of worry over the effects of his language: will his words corrupt? Turn his audience into Calibans? Or will his words empower his viewers and readers with creative powers?

Similar anxieties about audience corruption existed in the second-half of the twentieth century, not just over the potentially corrupting powers of television and film but of experimental writing (such as William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*) as well. But Coetzee is not as concerned with potentially corrupting his audience as Shakespeare is. Rather, Coetzee uses his student figure to focus on the silence inherent in more passive reading. Friday, the “other,” comes to represent the unknown, unknowable, tongueless reader. Friday, like the reader of sensationalistic fiction, has language forced upon him by those who care more about the economic
gain resulting from their interaction than on his understanding of that language.

Coetzee’s Friday is an even more explicit representation of the conception of innate mental capacity displayed in *Tempest*. At the outset of Coetzee’s novel, it appears as though Friday’s limited understanding of language is a result of Cruso’s unwillingness to teach his manservant. As I noted earlier, Cruso maintains that knowledge of simple commands is all that Friday requires: “This is not England, we have no need of a great stock of words” (21). The mention here of England separates Friday and Cruso from “proper” civilization, a place where, at the time, blacks had a higher level of autonomy and access to education than in the Caribbean colonies. Susan believes that “the unnatural years Friday had spent with Cruso” not only forced him to be silent and dependent, but also “deadened his heart, making him cold, incurious, like an animal wrapt entirely in itself” (70). Friday, as an isolated animal, is a completely blank slate without even the evil inclinations of the devilish Caliban. This language brings to mind the passive and obedient Friday of *Robinson Crusoe* and reinforces the connection to that canonical text.

There is, however, one incredibly distinguishing characteristic in Coetzee’s Friday: he has absolutely no speech, he is without a tongue. As discussed earlier, Coetzee’s choice to force this limitation on his Friday brings this student figure in line with the reader of sensationalistic/mass-market fiction. Both figures have the same level of “say” in the physical text itself. But on another level, the loss of Friday’s tongue can also be seen as a physical representation of the limits that
Shakespeare hints at in *The Tempest*. It literalizes the idea of innate constraints; Friday, quite literally, has a cleared palate. He may, as Cruso claims, have had his tongue cut out by slave traders. Or, as Susan suggests, Cruso may have cut out Friday’s tongue in order to turn him into a completely subservient and dependent slave. Or perhaps he was born with this deformity. The truth is never revealed. What’s more, Coetzee never gives us definitive evidence that Friday’s tongue is in fact missing; Susan is unable to see into Friday’s mouth when Cruso bids her to look. Thus the details of Friday’s “lack” are kept ambiguous and Friday is left with the inability to have language “stick.” Even though he is able to comprehend simple commands, he cannot take his language further: he cannot create his own speech, he cannot write on his own blank slate. Friday’s tonguelessness is a lack that can be filled only by the dominant culture and by his “caretakers” — Susan, Cruso, Foe. Unlike Caliban, Friday has no communicable means of conveying any type of resistance he may feel like presenting and he is left with “no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others” (Coetzee, 121).

Whereas Caliban can conceive of freedom but not attain it, Friday remains ignorant of its possibility as far as Susan is concerned. She claims that Friday “does not know what freedom is. Freedom is a word, less than a word, a noise” (100). Because the meanings constructed by and contained within the larger language system continue to elude Friday, Susan and Foe interpret his speechlessness as his lack of self-definition and ability to attain any level of liberty and autonomy.
Whatever symbolic/performative sign system Friday may use and understand, to
Susan and Foe his inability to produce language in either spoken or written form
renders him a figure that will be forever dependent. Near the end of the novel,
Friday dons the garb of a writer and sits at Foe’s desk, scribbling. The marks he
creates may have some meaning to him (his repeated scrawling of the letter ‘O’
echoes Defoe’s Friday who refers to prayer as ‘saying O’), but their meaning cannot
serve a function in the larger world that he inhabits, the “world of words.”

But is Friday really ignorant of the concept of freedom? Is he less free than
Susan because he cannot take part in her language system? Although Susan certainly
thinks so, there is evidence to suggest that this is not the case. The truth is that
Friday has a performative sign system that is all his own. His music, his dancing, his
petal-strewing rituals; these are Friday’s signs. It is just that Susan, frustratingly, does
not have access to the meaning of those signs. In this way, Friday actually possesses
a freedom that Susan could never obtain. Susan attempts to “write” Friday’s story, to
narrativize it, to quantify it and qualify it. She does this not for Friday’s benefit but,
as the next section will demonstrate, for her own.

Both of these examples of faulty education illustrate a certain ambivalence
about the powers of language: it can be used to teach and to enslave, to improve and
to pervert, to tell the truth and to lie. What’s more, we all contain within ourselves
another dichotomy: we are at once slaves to language (as in the case of Caliban) and,
at the same time, we are constituted by it (Susan’s insistence that Friday is what she
makes of him, i.e. what is written about him). Our identities are built up of both of
these figures. We are all a Prospero who can use language to bring about action and
change and we are all a Caliban/Friday whose words cannot convey their meaning or
simply go unheard. The educations of these student figures suggest that language is
the substance of life. The implication that the reader is at once a Prospero and a
Caliban/Friday encourages him or her to reconsider the ways in which they use
language and how language constructs individual identity and reality.

The teacher figures, as I will demonstrate in the next section, are not
concerned with helping their students’ words be heard or improving their lives with
language. Their concern rests solely on economics.

The Teacher

The teachers in both the novel and the play work to educate their students in
order to achieve selfish ends. Though their lessons are couched in the guise of
humanitarian efforts, what lies beneath the surface are economic motives. Miranda
and Susan, the sole females in both works, serve this function with the same ultimate
result.

When we first meet Shakespeare’s student-teacher pair in Act One, Scene
Two of The Tempest, Miranda remembers how she once worked with Caliban to teach
him language:
I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other. When thou didnst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known. (1.2.354-9)

Miranda considered her work to bring Caliban into the world of English power-relations (master Prospero, servant Caliban) and proper English language to be a humanitarian effort. In her mind, as well as in Prospero’s, imparting the knowledge and faculty of language onto Caliban was the first step in granting him the freedom of self-expression, the ability to make his own meaning known. But in this introductory scene it is quite clear that Prospero and Miranda did not follow through with this benevolent mission. Though they once instructed Caliban in using language to exercise some amount of intellectual autonomy, within the timeframe of the play they do not allow him to be free. They have enabled him to understand the concept of freedom but they do not allow him to exercise that concept. Caliban has learned just enough to recognize this injustice and he abhors the “gift” of language that he has been given. He was taught “how to name the bigger light, and how the less” (1.2.335) but he asserts, “… you sty me / In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me / The rest o’ the island” (1.2.342-4). He is given enough knowledge to know there is more to the world than what is immediately present to him but he is not given the freedom to seek out more concrete, intimate knowledge of those things. Thus he is left with a voice with which he can only express his frustrations and his miseries. Because his language cannot be performative — that is, because it cannot
lead to any real action — Caliban is effectively rendered speechless much like Coetzee’s Friday.

As discussed earlier, Caliban’s education becomes an education in labor. He becomes enslaved not only by the authority of the powerful Prospero but also by his own inability to function in the larger sign system. Both Prospero and Miranda know the power of language. Throughout The Tempest, the command of words is treated as a magical power. They know that if Caliban had more access to the written and spoken language, he might be able to orchestrate and enact the way that Prospero does. And they are well aware that this increased freedom and creative power would result in one less slave. Their decision to cease Caliban’s education was surely motivated, to some extent, by the economics of the situation. Caliban is a native of the island and he can do the physical labor that neither Miranda nor Prospero could or would do. That is why he remains a slave. Even after Prospero has pardoned Caliban at the conclusion of the play, Caliban remains an untold tale. He remains unable to attain performative language and Prospero makes no hint at resuming the education of his slave. We are left with a Caliban with limited language; language that allows him to “name the bigger light, and … the less” but that does not allow him to have access to books and thus his potential for autonomy and influence/control is nonexistent (1.2.335).

At the conclusion of Foe, Friday, the student figure, is also left with the inability to function within the larger language system. But Coetzee allows his Friday
to have a certain type of freedom that neither Caliban nor Susan (Friday’s teacher) could obtain. It is with similarly self-serving purposes that Susan first embarks on her mission to give language to Friday. At the outset of the novel, Susan believes that only through setting one’s story on the page can it have lasting meaning. She even tries to convince Cruso to write down his experiences in order to authenticate them. But, as the story progresses, she becomes disillusioned. Susan wants her story to be told but is skeptical about writing’s ability to truly represent reality. Upon viewing Foe’s collection of “a multitude of castaway narratives” Susan speculates that most of them are “riddled with lies” (50). Foe’s emphasis on creating a spectacle of Susan’s experience and the “blank” figure of Friday (about which any story could be written, uncontested) leads Susan to realize the extent to which all representation must be mediated through the dominant culture. And at the end of her narrative, Susan comes to accept the cultural and economic concerns that rule representation. Her questions shift from the one asked earlier about “truth” in representation to economic concerns, to attracting as wide an audience as possible.

For the simple fact that Friday’s mysterious life would enliven her own story, Susan works to bring Friday into “the world of words” in which she and Mr. Foe live (60). Her all-consuming concern with creating an interesting narrative that will please readers and get her recognition, along with Mr. Foe’s insistence on Friday’s capacity to learn to write, compels her to begin the seemingly impossible mission of educating Friday. And, interestingly, she begins Friday’s first “formal” lesson with writing. She
does so not because she sees language as a means of surviving and thriving for Friday, but because the keys to an interesting narrative of their shared island experience lie trapped within him. She tries to teach him to write but all he can manage at first is a series of marks on a slate, an act as inscrutable as his old ritual of strewing petals into the sea. Eventually, Friday is able to reproduce Susan’s writing (her marks): “Friday wrote the four letters h-o-u-s, or four shapes passably like them: whether they were truly the four letters, and stood truly for the word house … and the thing itself, only he knew” (145-6). In focusing solely on writing instruction, Susan neglects to really consider any sort of alternative form of communication such as sign language or the possibility of creating a “pigeon” language of sorts from Friday’s non-communicative communications — his music (both the flute and his own “singing”) and/or his dancing. Rather than considering such alternatives, Susan instead focuses on instructing Friday to write and, in doing so, she reveals her ultimate goal — to create colorful text with which to fill the dull, empty pages of her book. She claims that, “to tell my story and be silent of Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty” (67). Susan and Foe treat writing as a self-interested economic means to an end, even in relation to the constitution of their selfhood — Susan does not desire money like Foe, but substantiation. Yet she goes about pursuing substantiation in very economic ways.

Trying to conform Friday to her own sign system, Susan fails to truly consider Foe’s suggestion that “as there are many kinds of men, so there are many
kinds of writing” (147). She ignores Foe and continues to view Friday’s marks as devoid of any meaning. And Friday’s “otherness” allows Susan to exploit his lack of language and to choose to read his silence as consent. Thus Susan’s continuation of Friday’s education is not a humanitarian mission but rather an economic mission, a mission to extract from Friday the story that will get her book read. Susan feels liberated by her access to language but she is unable to write her own narrative for herself. Instead, she relies on Foe to write her story down for her. In her inability to write and her reliance on language, Susan is actually much more constrained than her “primitive” student.

The Death of the Author & the Liberation of the Reader

The final figure in this examination of language and learning is the author of the texts themselves. The authors in these works, while still concerned with economic success, were not solely motivated to write by the potential earnings of their works. Their concern lies in liberating their readers. The concluding sections of both works offer the reader a way of engaging with language that avoids the economic pitfalls Foe and, in a different sense, Prospero as well were so concerned with and the enslavement that Caliban and Friday faced. The reader is freed from the restraints of “intended meaning” and of increasing spectacle by being “instructed” in the unstable nature of language itself — how it changes against the control of any
subject and how it both inherits and innovates tradition. The newly liberated reader has the freedom to move within the sign system that is forbidden to Friday as well as Caliban. The conclusions of each work remind the reader that language itself has no intended meaning — that it is an arbitrary sign system that we manipulate and that simultaneously determines us beyond our control. This realization grants the reader a type of freedom that none of the characters in either the play or the novel seem to be able to attain.

In the final scene of *Tempest*, Prospero’s earlier pleadings to his audience to “Obey, and be attentive” resurface:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into this air
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (5.1.148-158)

In this speech, we can see yet another instance of Brecht’s “distancing effect.” Here, Prospero removes himself from his role within the play and clearly serves as “Shakespeare’s surrogate,” imploring the audience to return to reality and examine what it is that they have just experienced. After the tempest of action has made its way across the stage and through five acts, the actors and audience are quiet. The rush of language and the flurry of action, magic, and spectacle have ended. All that
remains is silence and the memory of that “insubstantial pageant” (5.1.156). Bringing attention to the silence, Prospero, who has thus far demonstrated the power of language, encourages the audience to consider the ways in which language constructs their own realities just as it has constructed the stage spectacle. Life, Shakespeare suggests through Prospero, is fleeting; meanings are fluid; the audience plays just as large a role in the creation of meaning as the author does. Those “cloud-capped towers” and “gorgeous palaces” could be dream visions or concrete realities — perhaps the towers and palaces of London. If the line between life and dream is as blurred as Prospero suggests, could not “the great globe itself” be Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre? Because the transitory images that Prospero sets down could exist either in the dream state or the waking, he highlights the importance of audience awareness and interpretation. In a sense, Prospero has gone from commanding attention for perhaps enslaving purposes (“Obey!”) to showing the audience why attention is for the benefit of their liberation.

In the play’s epilogue, Prospero finds that his creative powers have been reduced to what his audience (both within the play — Caliban, Miranda, et al. — and the theatre audience) can consume, how they will take in what they have been presented with and what they will make of it. We are presented with a Prospero whose “charm’s are all o’erthrown” and whose strength is diminished (Epilogue, 1). He addresses the theatre-goers and asks for their applause to release him from his duties. In his “Shakespeare’s Origin of Species and Darwin’s Tempest,” Love calls
Prospero’s epilogue a “devolution’ … a passing on to a successor of an unfinished responsibility” (138). Here Love is referring to the problem of Caliban and what is to become of him. Love continues by describing Caliban as “a sea change, left for deeper divers than Prospero, or even Prospero’s creator, to plumb” (138). If Caliban is Prospero’s “unfinished draft,” the author is abandoning his project and leaving Caliban’s story for the audience to decide how it ends. Earlier, in the play’s final scene, Prospero conceded his authorial “failings”: “I’ll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, / And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I’ll drown my book” (5.1.54-57). Prospero breaks his staff (magic wand? pen?) and leaves the work of interpretation to his audience. Thus Prospero and, by extension, Shakespeare leave the audience with a project not unlike the project that Coetzee leaves his readers with: to plumb the world of the “other” and construct a meaning of their own.

But there is a detectable authorial anxiety about how the audience will react to this “drowned book.” In the play’s epilogue, we find Prospero asking to be absolved, asking to be released from the tales he has told. Though he tried to dramatize Caliban and his other island-dwellers, Prospero ends his revels with a plea to the audience, a plea for applause: “release me from my bands / With the help of your good hands” (Epilogue 9-10). Prospero the actor, the sorcerer, the creator, the surrogate-playwright, asks to escape the confines of the stage. He asks for permission to abandon the unfinished (and perhaps the unfinishable) story of Caliban. But he
will not leave without the clapping of those “good hands.” Without that, Prospero (and thus Shakespeare himself) could not be assured that their work was a success, that audiences will return, and that a profit will be made.

The same concerns lurk in Coetzee’s “drowned book,” in the floating, dreamlike imagery that overtakes his novel in its closing section. In the “dive” of this final section there are, as Attridge suggests, single-word echoes of *The Tempest* but there are also larger images that are familiar. For instance, the mysterious “most ridiculous monster” (2.2.157) from *The Tempest* is refigured in *Foe* as “a woman or a girl, her feet drawn up inside a long grey dress, her hands folded under her armpits; or is it that her limbs are unnaturally short, the stunted limbs of a cripple” (153). And the “baseless fabric of this vision” (4.1.151) is transformed into physical imagery in *Foe*: the easily-torn curtain hiding Friday’s body, the “grey woollen scarf” wrapped around (and at the same time composing) the woman’s face, the nightshirt and shift, the dust and decay (153). Like Shakespeare’s “insubstantial pageant,” Coetzee’s creation closes with a scene teeming with the ephemeral, surreal, and malleable.

In stark contrast to the rather straightforward style of the first three parts of *Foe*, the final section is enigmatic and completely different in both tone and content. The reader is plunged into two dreamlike worlds with unnamed narrators, strange figures, and strange scenes of shipwreck and death. Coetzee closes the novel by placing us in the world of Friday, in a world where language (the signified and its signifiers) has dissolved. As the unidentified narrator relates, “this is not a place of
words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused” (157). Coetzee’s coda, with its imagery of floating, unraveling fabric and yellowed, crumbling paper, gives Barthes’ “death of the author” a physical form. Coetzee (the author), Foe (the in-text creator), and Susan (who writes letters to Foe about her experience but cannot write her narrative for herself) have disappeared from the page and the scene. All that is left is a mosaic of strange imagery, a knot of words that the reader must disentangle.

Coetzee’s unnamed narrators in the final section of *Foe* challenge their audience to step back and reassess what they have been presented with. Here, Coetzee presents us with his “drowned book” and in doing so he forces his audience to question everything. Even a basic question like “who is speaking?” must be carefully considered. Is it Susan? Foe? Coetzee? The reader? While there is no definitive answer, the presence of the novel’s opening line — “At last I could row no further” (155) — upon a stack of crumbling papers suggests two things. First it suggests that the author (Coetzee) can write no more and that he is ceding control of his work over to the reader. Second, the presence of this stack of decaying papers strongly suggests that the narrator is, in fact, “the reader.” If the two distinct voices in the final section are viewed as two readers’ interpretations of the novel itself, then perhaps this is Coetzee’s call to action. Perhaps we, as readers, are meant to follow a directive that Coetzee voiced through Susan earlier in the novel: “It is for us to descend into the mouth (since we speak in figures). It is for us to open Friday’s
mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of seashell held to the ear” (142). Just like Prospero, Coetzee leaves us with an unfinished tale, with a “drowned book” that we must perform in order to create its meaning or, perhaps more accurately, our versions of its meaning.

The questions lurking between the lines of Coetzee’s text seem to be: What are you going to make of this novel? Will you leave it unread on yellowed and crumbling sheets of paper? Or will you dive deeper into the text to seek out threads of familiarity, to ask more questions of the silenced characters, and to plumb the home of Friday for answers? In this final section, both the author and the reader are sucked into the act and process of adaptation and interpretation. It is the obligation of both the reader and the author to play a creative part in the performance of the work.

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The liberation that the epilogue of The Tempest and the fourth and final section of Foe allow the audience and reader stands in stark contrast to the educative and economic models of language that proceed them. Prior to these concluding sections, the faulty student/teacher relationships in each work mirror a faulty reader/author relationship. All of the members of these relationships are not getting the most out of the language (either the language of lessons or of fiction) that they
share. In a faulty relationship, the student and the reader become enslaved to the one who brings them language. They are bound to the purposes and meanings that their teacher/author have set down for them. And the teacher/author, in turn, is not concerned with the lasting effect of their words. The teacher, wanting to capitalize on the subservience of their student, and the author, motivated by sales and driven by sensationalism, are the self-absorbed products of a market society based on social stratification and economic gains. Both Shakespeare and Coetzee are aware that these faulty relationships (in both education and in the reader/author dynamic) are the reality of their art forms. They realize that economic concerns have to play a part in their writings. And they realize that their audience may remain a “thing of darkness,” that they might be passive and inactive in their readings. But, as they conclude their works, both authors loosen the chains of these realities. They give their audiences the freedom to work within the constraints of the system and to create their own performance of the meaning of the texts. These coda sections allow the reader to have a tongue, to have a say in the text that neither student figure could have in his own life. And the authors themselves are allowed the space to meditate on and subvert the economic concerns that rule their industry.
Conclusion

The case studies pairing Shakespearean drama and postmodern metafiction show us how educative metafiction can rewrite literary history and demonstrate how metafiction can work to instruct the reader to engage in an active performance of the text. Taking into consideration the palpable deliberateness of each word, image, and allusion, these four works are operating on several different levels. They question their genres; they subvert conventions; they reveal the authors’ anxiety about their experimentation; they teach the reader how to avoid the passive reception of language and ideas that popular entertainment has bred in them; and they instruct the reader to take creative license in their own performance of the works’ meanings. What these texts accomplish is to convert the authors’ self-consciousness into the reader’s self-consciousness, to make the reader acutely aware of every step in the reading process, to analyze it, and then, finally, to perform it actively, not just approach it passively.

Patricia Waugh, in her work entitled *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, counts fourteen different types of metafictional elements. Among them are “self-reflexive images … critical discussions of the story within the story … continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions … use of popular genres … and explicit parody of previous texts whether literary or non-literary” (22). My theory of “educative metafiction” does not only add an extra item to this list of
elements. The effect of educative metafiction goes beyond these experimental devices.

The performative aspects of educative metafiction (the ties that my two case studies have made between Shakespearean drama and modern metafiction) essentially rewrite a part of literary history. Authors in these two distinct literary periods both wrote in the midst of (and often rebelled against) the rise of mass culture and the commodification of their art. This basic but essential similarity display the effect of the “long” Shakespearean stage on postmodern authors and it also displays the ways in which Shakespeare himself used metatheatricality as a means of questioning and subverting his own genre.

Educative metafiction also involves a complete rethinking of the goals of metafiction in general. This new type of metafiction shows us that this genre is not simply a poststructuralist “free play” of language, as it is often understood to be. Rather, metafiction has much more complicated motives that are tied to mass culture and to the instruction of the reader who is constantly bombarded by more passive forms of commercial entertainment. In short, educative metafiction teaches us that metafiction itself is a critical and instructive project that is at once social and literary.
Of course, one could make the case for One Thousand and One Nights or Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales as being the very earliest examples of metafictional moments. But, while these works do certainly reflect on their writing and existence as artifacts, they do not really embody the experimental nature of the literature that emerged after World War II. The shift that William H. Gass noted when he coined the term “metafiction” in 1970 is crucial here: while metafictional moments are found in these works, such moments are not the main focus and, as a result, the works in their entity cannot rightly be called “metafiction.”

According to Barth’s 2011 Atlantic article “Do I Repeat Myself?,” “When the eminent Italian critic and novelist Umberto Eco visited Johns Hopkins some decades ago, he spoke of the problem, for contemporary writers, of the ‘already said.’” These “tragedies of blood,” the controversy surrounding the theatre, and the new emphasis on plays as market commodities were all part of “the Heritage” that Shakespeare was handed. Although Barth uses this term in “Night-Sea Journey” to specifically refer to the structural conventions of narrative, I think it also encompasses the economic realities of publishing, the expectations of the audience, specific literary genres, and those works, like ancient myths, that are culturally ingrained.

B.L. Joseph describes the Senecan drama as having “outsie personages, five acts and impassioned speeches” which “develop the popular theatrical genre, revenge tragedy or the tragedy of blood” (121).

Barth’s idea of “transmitting the Heritage” is reflected in Harold Bloom’s later theory of the “anxiety of influence” which he posited in a book by that name in 1973. Bloom’s early work reads like a father/son conflict in genealogy — the son always trying to avoid the impositions/authority of the father, but always being undermined by that authority in the background as well.

See Ovid’s Io, Metamorphoses, 1.804-6.
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