

A Journey from Literature to Unspoken Art

The choice to undertake this project was originally inspired by a friend of mine who is working on his PhD in theatre (Diemer). He has the tendency to spout his brilliance in normal conversation, and so when in another class the question of whether or not theatre is dependent upon dialogue was asked, I had several examples indicating that it's not as fundamental as one might think. At that time, I had read a play that is mostly a stream of consciousness, but I was very shortly introduced to Samuel Beckett's work *Act Without Words I*. In writing this, Beckett was challenging the idea that spoken words were necessary to create a story within theatre. Instead, he used visual art---props and movements for the actor---to indicate movement within the story.

When I began to brainstorm about an idea for a creative project, this was what was sitting in the background of my mind. At a certain point, I recalled our many class discussions where we were frustrated by Troilus' lack of action and, more specifically, that he couldn't just *talk* to Criseyde. Because everything was cloaked in courtly love, secrecy and secondhand information (via Pandarus, of course) reached almost a comic level. I decided to take it intentionally to that comic level in my project.

The most important aspect that I wanted to maintain was the lack of speech between any of the characters. It is meant to be just a little bit "overdone" or "over acted" as a melodrama might be. Troilus lets escape several deep sighs to indicate his woebegone state. Because of this

desire to keep speech out of the work entirely, I also wanted to create distinct descriptions for the characters to express their inner qualities.

I based my character depictions on Chaucer's interpretation, but modernized them a little. Troilus, for instance, is handsome, but insecure and hopelessly hopeful. I imagine him to be a tall person who has the effect of seeming small, especially in the presence of others with more commanding personalities. Pandarus is, basically, akin to a sleazy used car salesman. I imagined him with greasy hair and slouched shoulders and, perhaps, a very unflattering moustache. Criseyde was my favorite to depict. Because of Chaucer's choice to make her seem more independent and worthwhile in his telling of the story, I wanted to make sure that her character exuded independence---even to a level of power and almost fierceness. I visualized her as somewhat similar to the character of Lisbeth in Steig Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and her character has the tendency to stand in what I referred to as her "signature position," which is to have one hand on her hip and a look on her face that clearly indicates she isn't going to let anyone control her life. The reason I envisioned her this way is likely due to her position in Chaucer's telling as an independent woman who is afraid of losing that independence if she should become involved with a man. In Larsson's novel, Lisbeth is a character who is desperately fighting for her own independence. The merging of the two almost allows both characters to achieve their goals.

I maintained the plot from the first 2.5 books of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. The story is told up to the point when Pandarus has asked Criseyde over to dinner in order to trick her into bed with Troilus. The most significant change that I made in writing this version, however, was to alter the ending of the scene and, thereby, alter the entire futures of all involved. In my

adaptation, I imagined that a Criseyde with the independence described by Chaucer and the drive born out of her imagining with Lisbeth would not stand for being tricked and treated in the way that Pandarus was manipulating both she and Troilus. Once she could see clearly what he was doing, she decided that she wasn't going to have any of that nonsense and she left the scene, presumably to continue living her happy, independent life.

All of the research (with the exception of reading the plays that led me to this curiosity for unspoken theatre) that I conducted in relation to this topic was done after the fact. Specifically, I sought research about Samuel Beckett, non-verbal performance, and for what reasons Chaucer is adapted contemporarily elsewhere.

In a case study of how Chaucer's name is employed in fictional writing, author Pugh discusses that one need hardly look for a reason to draw inspiration from Chaucer when creating a work considering that he is often referred to as "the Father of English Literature." Allusions to Chaucer's works or characters occur across many different kinds of literature from every time period since the time he, himself, wrote. However, Pugh's article discusses specifically the idea that a contemporary author might draw on Chaucer's view as a creator of the foundation of literature in order to create something like credibility and weight in their own works. This is particularly interesting, because it seems to be a continuation of what Chaucer, himself, often did in his works.

In particular, Pugh declares that Chaucer's existence within or an allusion to him within a work has the ability to define constructions of high and low culture. Whether or not this succeeds in elevating the work of the contemporary author depends on the way in which it is written, however. Pugh writes, "When high cultural texts allude to other high cultural texts, their shared

high cultural status is affirmed; when low cultural texts allude to high cultural texts, there is a noticeable shift between tenor and vehicle, which fractures the borders between literary and genre fiction” (Pugh, 418). In writing this, Pugh is explaining that, while authors may seek to allude to Chaucer in an attempt to elevate their own work, it is not sufficient simply to do so without calling into question the stark differences between the work of Chaucer and the work that they are writing.

I found this article interesting, because I believe that Chaucer would have considered it somewhat amusing that an allusion to him would have the power to elevate a work. By adapting one of Chaucer’s own works, I necessarily included him in the recipe for my piece simply by name. Before reading this article, however, I did not stop to wonder whether that would have an effect on how the work itself was viewed. In writing *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer may have been more focused on the retelling of a tragedy, but based on his writing in *The Canterbury Tales*, I can’t help but think that he would have appreciated the humor that I attempted to include in my version. I don’t believe that his name serves to elevate my work, but I also don’t believe that it’s necessary based on my motivations for writing it as I did.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of research that I uncovered was an article about Non-Verbal Representations of Emotion in theatre in Latvia. The article focused on the political motivations for creating these non-verbal representations, but what struck me as fascinating was this choice in the use of non-verbal theatre to represent oppression and strife within the country. Valentīns Maculēvičs, a director in Latvia, is known for his challenge of theatre to continue within a great tradition, but to also improve upon it. His trademark is “a carefully composed tableau” “where the gestures of the characters compositionally arranged and frozen like that in an

illustrative painting visually summarize the emotions and ideas of the situation” (Čakare, 77).

The article goes on to discuss the director’s emphasis on striking acting styles as a part of melodrama. While similar to what I was trying to accomplish, Maculēvičs’ work seeks to exude emotion and melodrama, where my work sought to create a farce out of uncomfortable situations. I would like to think that these are two different (among many different) ways of choosing to create theatre without words.

The inspiration to create this work without words was largely due to Samuel Beckett. As a writer, he sought to challenge conventional theatre and challenge the habits that people developed both in watching and performing theatre. In *Act Without Words I*, the whole play takes place without a single word being uttered. Beckett also has written another play, *Happy Days*, where very little movement takes place, challenging the necessity for strictly blocked movements that sweep the stage in order to maintain a presence (Diemer). In an article discussing Beckett, Tubridy speculates about the reasoning behind Beckett’s choices: “Does he exhaust the possible because he himself is exhausted, or is he exhausted because he exhausts the possible?” (Tubridy). He also notes that Beckett’s plays always come with incredibly “strict stage directions that must be adhered to” because “he was a holistic artist, and the visual, textual, and sensory elements of the performance are of equal importance” (Tubridy). This strict attention to detail is part of the challenge that Beckett creates for both those who would perform/direct his works and those who would view them.

It is among these literary and theatrical giants that I have attempted to tread in undertaking this project. By combining literature with theatre and then including in that the unusual element of no spoken dialogue, I have attempted to create a work that is unique and

which is a representation of the different areas from which its inspiration arose. So, the non-verbal play that I have written, with combined influences from literature and theatre as well as contemporary novels, is, itself, a challenge to the “habits” and “standards” of those areas both in its imagination and formulation.

Works Cited

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