

Shakespeare and the Language of Possibility

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A Folger Shakespeare Library podcast

Shakespeare's Birthday Lecture 2015

April 16, 2015

Lynne Magnusson: It's exciting to be here on the occasion of Shakespeare's birthday celebrations to speculate about what gave birth to Shakespeare's creativity with language. Thank you all for coming out tonight, and a very special welcome to members of the symposium on "Shakespeare's Language" that's starting tomorrow. Many of you, I hope, are going to recognize your influence in these ideas tonight, and I am so grateful for the stimulation of your work. It may be helpful to know that this paper runs 50 minutes.

This is a paper about a set of small words—words like “may,” “can,” “will,” “should,” “ought,” “must,” “shall.” These words are way more important than people usually imagine. Today I want to focus on how Shakespeare uses them creatively in his plays to ground situations in potentiality or possibility.

I'll address three main questions: First, how is Shakespeare's language of possibility rooted in these small words? Second, what are the origins of Shakespeare's extraordinary creative use of these words? How would he have had access to ways of thinking about these elements in the English language of his day? Third, what analytical methods best illuminate this creative artistry? Should literary close reading be replaced or supplemented by computer-generated linguistic analysis? And what about historical reading practices fostered by Shakespeare's schooling?

Usually unnoted, these small words are among the most common in the language. They are grammatical function words—more specifically, modal auxiliary verbs.

Aristotle, writing about tragedy, affirmed the central element of drama to be the "action." And yet what constitutes the action of a play is often extremely elusive. Many small things happen in plays; much of what happens is a matter of characters' speaking and interacting in language—so much so, that one wants to take a play's language, its speech action and acts of mind, seriously as part of the play's significant action.

The moment is powerful partly because something in the situation and turn of phrase is so familiar to us. This "must, and will" is parent talk, the kind of forceful parent talk we occasionally hear on the street, aimed at governing an unruly child. Casting the demand in terms of third person "He must" and then second person "you" must, strongly directed by another, violates a deeply rooted preference for self-determination, for charting one's own course, getting one's own way. The questions the momentarily infantilized Coriolanus throws back as he reluctantly acquiesces repeat and stress the obligatory "must" guiding his compelled action:

Coriolanus: **Must** I go show them my unbarb'd sconce? **Must** I
With my base tongue give to my noble heart
A lie that it **must** bear? Well, I **will** do 't.
(*Coriolanus*, 3.2.97–101)

There's an important point to be made here about the resources Shakespeare draws upon for his linguistic art. Here, Shakespeare's play of modals picks up the word on the street and taps into what Mikhail Bakhtin said could invigorate literary style: the "social life of language."

If one character's forceful compulsion of another delimits potential action in this tragic play of modals, in Shakespeare's romantic comedy *Twelfth Night*, desire is cast into modal interplay by uncertainty about the status of a relationship (always a condition of a romantic wooing situation). This opens up imagined possibilities. When Olivia's own reaction to Orsino's messenger (Viola, disguised as Cesario) catches her by surprise, wordplay, especially on "would," shapes the potentiality of the situation:

Viola: I am not what I am.
Olivia: I **would** you were what I **would** have you be.
Viola: **Would** it be better, madam, than I am?
(*Twelfth Night*, 3.1.132–34)

We have an unusual kind of punning here, in that Olivia's first "would" ("I would you were") is a full lexical verb, a verb surviving from the Old English *willan*, "to wish or desire." Through the line's echoing repetition, "I would," meaning "I wish, I desire," enters into play with the second "would," a modal auxiliary, but still used here in a way that colors the potential action it signals as desirous, wishful.

In the tragic genre, Shakespeare improvises upon wordplay again with "would" that straddles this lexical word / grammatical word divide at a key moment in *Macbeth* that

highlights the desirous projection of a potential future. The small word "would" reverberates as Lady Macbeth diagnoses a dysfunction in her husband's drive to actualize his ambitious wants and desires, a disjunction between what he "would" have and what he consequently "must do":

Lady Macbeth: What thou **wouldst** highly,
 That **wouldst** thou holily; **wouldst** not play false,
 And yet **wouldst** wrongly win. Thou'd't have, great Glamis,
 That which cries, "Thus thou **must** do" if thou have it;
 And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
 Than wishest should be undone.

(*Macbeth*, 1.5.18–23)

Overall, the interplay of modals in *Macbeth* is a fascinating route into the play's interpretation, particularly if one focuses on how this tragedy disrupts any normal sequencing from deliberated action to accomplished action (or murder), "o'erleaping" the usual chain of antecedents and consequences in the Macbeths' push to have what they want now.

But I want to underline a second important point about resources Shakespeare draws on for his stylistic art, a more complicated point pertaining to language change. The modal auxiliary verbs, which I have suggested provide linguistic means for speakers to express the subjective grounding of situations in potentiality, came into English through a gradual process of change linguists call grammaticalization, whereby lexical words morph into grammatical words or operators. In modals like "may" or "would," even as grammatical function comes to predominate, some lexical coloring remains, generally related to the prior lexical term.

At the time of Shakespeare's writing, both the full verb and modal verb "will/would" were available in Early Modern English, creating variation that Shakespeare makes a resource for his inventive play on the "woulds" in *Twelfth Night* and *Macbeth*. We'll see later how language change makes for fascinating polysemy or wordplay with modals like "may," multiple meanings that turn out to be a gift to the talented writer. My second point, then, about a resource Shakespeare draws fruitfully upon, in this case probably unconsciously, is language change—and the intriguing choices it made available in Early Modern English for Shakespeare to improvise upon in his composition.

Shakespeare's not alone among his contemporaries in highlighting these grammatical triggers. His fellow dramatists also make clear their familiarity and fascination with the

multiple options on offer in the English of their day for inflecting potential action. In Robert Yarrington's *Lamentable Tragedy*, his character resolves to shake off the scruples of conscience and kill his best friend. Here's how he works up to it:

Hence dastard feare, I **must**, I **can**, I **will**
Kill my best friend to get a bag of gold.

In Samuel Brandon's play *Octavia*, the title character, seeking revenge, stretches out the spectrum of modals over a full line of iambic pentameter verse:

I **may**, I **can**, I **will**, I **ought**, I **must**
Revenge this high disgrace.

The order of modals here reflects the character's strengthening resolution. It also passes in quick review the various considerations at which the modal verbs gesture—here, of permission, ability, volition, moral obligation, and compulsion—affecting the situation. The ladder-like series feels like a kind of cognitive mapping out of the route to a proposed action, even if it seems a bit pedestrian compared to Shakespeare's powerful interactions.

His choreography of the various conflicting drives and counterdrives, internal and societal, expressed in how modals interact in characters' deliberations, is usually less programmatic, a more finely tuned subjective register. Consider, for example, Desdemona's negotiations with Cassio, and with herself, about potential help she can provide him. She says to Cassio:

Desdemona: You **must** a while be patient.
 What I **can** do I **will**, and more I **will**
 Than for myself I **dare**.
(*Othello*, 3.4.125–27)

A great deal of situational complexity and character psychology unfolds in this microdrama played out in the modals, as estimations of obstructions are weighed against the courage and generosity of Desdemona's potential action. While this example retains a ladder-like effect of motion towards resolution, rather than the long series of modals found in the Yarrington and Brandon examples, Shakespeare favors more unexpected patterning and combinations.

And yet, one must ask, How could Shakespeare, who almost certainly had no direct education in English grammar, come to engage so closely with what are, essentially, features of the grammar of Early Modern English? As we know, Shakespeare's Elizabethan grammar school education focused on Latin language learning as preparation for the intensive study of classical texts. Instruction in Latin grammar using the authorized text informally called Lily's Grammar occupied a schoolboy's early years. Everybody knows of Ben Jonson's belittling comment on Shakespeare's "small Latin and less Greek," suggesting something less than full mastery of the classical languages.

What I want to suggest next, however seemingly counterintuitive at first, is that the schoolroom education focused on Latin grammar, and also a wider grammatical culture of the early modern period, opened up—in unplanned and unexpected ways—a world of possibility for Shakespeare. That is, Shakespeare learned inadvertent lessons about Early Modern English and its capabilities through the translation, and even more important, through the mistranslation of Latin grammatical categories into the vernacular. Even to the extent he was a failed Latin grammarian, these were lessons that triggered his creative inventiveness with the English language.

Scholars have long emphasized rhetoric in the classics as potent influences from the Elizabethan schoolroom on Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and recent work like Lynn Enterline's has focused brilliantly on schoolroom performance, social relations, and disciplinary regimes. The Latin grammar lessons themselves, however, may still be undervalued as a positive stimulus to his imaginative art.

Nobody today likes grammar, and everybody knows that in at least some Elizabethan classrooms the lessons were reinforced with sadistic beatings. But I want to suggest that something stuck with Shakespeare, ways of thinking about English, from the thoroughgoing lessons on the interpretation of Latin verbs in relation to English expression—lessons emphasizing not just double translation, but also reading procedures that placed close attention on grammatical words, on how to decline, construe, and parse them.

I won't go much into technicalities, but let me show you how a lesson in declining Latin verbs, particularly defining what Lily's Grammar called the "potential mood" in Latin, put a whole range of English modal auxiliaries onto show. What the schoolboys had to memorize and recite, over and over aloud, sounds a lot like Brandon's verse line, "I may, I can, I will, I ought, I must." Schoolboys declining Latin verb endings for the potential mood, the mood said to show "an abilitie, will or duetie to doe any thing,"

recited the English signs: "I maie or can loue," "I might or coulde loue," "I might, woulde, should, or ought to have loved," . . . "I maie or can loue hereafter."

For each single verb ending Latin offered for the "potential mood," the attention of schoolboys was called to the multiple "signs," a highly various repertoire in English consisting of the modal auxiliary verbs. Paradoxically, Latin lessons brought heightened attention to distinctive qualities of the English language that boys were forbidden to speak at school! Learning Latin verb endings meant seeing how different English was from Latin, one key point of difference being the fascinating proliferation of auxiliary verbs for tense and mood, including especially the small words we've been discussing.

This is a complicated argument, but an important one. Even if Ben Jonson was right about Shakespeare's "small Latin," it does not mean that the rigorous language education of the day did not make a huge imprint on Shakespeare's remarkable grasp of the potentialities of English. To put together a fuller picture of why Shakespeare's plays do extraordinary things with English modals, it helps to set our modern reading practices alongside how Shakespeare learned to read in school. The best play to help us understand this—that is, how modals construe future possibility—is *Julius Caesar*, the Roman play about an event everyone studied in Tudor grammar schools, Caesar's assassination, and also the play that Ben Jonson explicitly mocked for the infelicities of Shakespeare's grammar.

In the first half of this paper, I've tried to illustrate the interest of the potential action in modals in Shakespeare's plays as literary close readers often do—by means of selected examples drawn from a variety of plays. In the second half, I turn to *Julius Caesar* to ask if modal interplay can provide a basis for more sustained interpretation of an episode, or scene, or play.

This is especially interesting since modal auxiliaries are eminently countable. As computer-assisted textual analysis comes more to the fore in literary research—an agenda encouraged by exciting initiatives at the Folger Shakespeare Library, some of which will be explored in this week's symposium on "Shakespeare's Language"—important questions arise for literary interpreters. Is a small word more important because it is more frequent? Does the "fast" or "distant" reading of computer counts take us reliably to what is of literary significance? Is it fruitful to see our own modern day reading practices (both close and distant, slow and fast) in comparison to the slow grammar-based reading and analysis Shakespeare learned in school, to set them in comparison?

I'll begin to explore modal interplay in *Julius Caesar* with a passage selected by literary critical close reading. Then, I'll complement that traditional humanist methodology with evidence turned up by digital counts. Finally, I'll argue that the play's construction of potential action engages in important ways with Elizabethan schoolroom practices of grammatical close reading.

I focus first on the ambiguities of "may"—later, on the assurances of "shall" and "will."

For *Julius Caesar* we need a conception of potential action. As David Daniell points out, the action at its center is "the few seconds of the killing of Caesar." People, he comments, are divided on this "most famous historical event . . . [and] the brutal action to which Brutus gave his power. Was it a necessary culling to save Rome? . . . Or . . . the most senseless deed that ever was done?"

If the centerpiece thus isolates the main action of the play, what is happening in the rest of the play? As Brutus puts it:

Brutus: Between the acting of a dreadful thing
 And the first motion, all the interim is
 Like a phantasma or hideous dream.
 The genius and the moral instruments
 Are then in counsel.

(*Julius Caesar*, 2.1.63–67)

This counsel taking, then, the decision-making negotiation among the eventual conspirators, and the mental deliberations of the key players, constitutes the main actions of the play's opening half.

Especially interesting is Brutus's soliloquy, thrashing out for himself the key issues with modals "must," "would," and especially "may" prominent. Act 2, Scene 1, with Brutus in his orchard, starts with the stir and bustle of outside action: calling out and instructing the servant Lucius, reflection on their different states (he says, "I would it were my fault to sleep so soundly"), Lucius's responsive register of his willingness to serve. By contrast, the stir sets up the quiet of Brutus's mental deliberation, taking us as if from outside action to a more complex action in the mind.

"It must be by his death," Brutus begins, in a sense, at his conclusion, affirming the necessity of the assassination—and goes on to reflect on what for him is the chief issue. It's not personal animosity against Caesar, but a more general need, he says:

Brutus: And for my part I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
 But for the general. [*And then the modal:*] He **would** be
 crowned.
 How that **might** change his nature, there's the question.

Here we meet up with a fascinating kind of ambiguity or wordplay, that the modal auxiliary verbs in English exhibit. Modal verbs are distinctive in covering a double range of meanings. On the one hand, "epistemic," pertaining to knowledge claims. The epistemic registers a speaker's estimation of likelihoods: Is a proposition or an eventuality possible, likely, necessary, or certain? On the other hand, "deontic," pertaining to obligation and permission. The deontic registers the societal and other drives and counterdrives, duties, and dispositions orienting a speaker's potential action.

Our language thus fosters cognitive mapping of decision-making processes that potentially entangles reasoning processes with the push and pull of duty and desire. This ambiguity enters into the "woulds" and "mays" of Brutus' speech. "It must be by his death" is epistemic, setting out the necessary conclusion of a line of reasoning. "He would be crowned" evidently follows along in this line of reasoning, the "would" signaling exploration of a hypothetical situation, a possibility: take the case that he is crowned, consider how that might change his nature. Ambiguity enters with the modal "would." It can mean he wants to be crowned, desires the crown. Is Caesar's crowning a matter of reasoned likelihood in the overall situation, the epistemic "would"? Or is it a matter of Caesar's volition and his ambitious drive, the deontic "would"?

As Brutus assesses the potentialities of the complex situation, metaphor combines with the deepening ambiguity of the modals. The metaphoric language positions the agency and threat of the situation apart from Caesar's agency and culpability—with us, even, rather than him:

Brutus: It is the bright day that brings forth the adder,
 And that craves wary walking. Crown him! that!
 And then I grant **we** put a sting in him
 That at his will he **may** do danger with.

Brutus even defends Caesar against any inclination to abuse greatness, yet a sense of threat takes definition from the double meanings of the modals, particularly modal "may," on which Brutus' decision-making turns:

Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell's text analysis tool, the web-based Voyant, allows us to visualize comparative frequencies of any of the modals, or indeed any word in the canon. Here we see "shall" frequencies graphed across the plays; it has comedies, then histories, with tragedies the last 10 dots on the right.

Northwestern University's analysis tool, WordHoard, developed by Martin Mueller with others, which uses syntactically tagged data, confirms this finding. WordHoard, furthermore, offers a statistical measure of the likelihood of this result. We see the logged likelihood for this frequency in *Julius Caesar* with respect to the Shakespeare corpus, and its four-star rating registers the comparative score for "shall" as statistically highly significant.

Since "shall" and "will" are alternative future markers, it makes sense to check "will's" frequencies, too. For "will," *Julius Caesar* also scores high—highest among the tragedies, although there are higher frequencies among the comedies, notably *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

For "will," Voyant's is a rough result, since it does not distinguish nouns and verbs. The parsed and tagged corpus of WordHoard produces a more accurate result, weeding out examples of "will" as a noun. The logged likelihood rating for the high frequency of "will" again shows statistical significance, though a two-star rating, not such a dramatic result as for "shall." Here is a rough composite for these assured futures, with *Julius Caesar* highest among the tragedies by a significant margin.

But to come to the question of interpretation, does the high frequency in *Julius Caesar* of "shall" and "will" have any literary meaning? Can we read the significance of these forms and isolation from their particular contexts? Or is the result best used to guide us to some specific episodes that might repay close attentive reading of modals, like we've been undertaking? Let's take a look at the future counts in the play.

It's unsurprising that a play with a Soothsayer is preoccupied with futurity and the shaping of destiny. "Shall" and "will" contrast with "may" on the scale of epistemic modality by projecting potential states not as possible, but assured. Often parsed as the future indicative tense—though, strictly speaking, English has no inflectional future tense—"shall" and "will" come closest to what Aristotle called "future fact."

Even though, in human affairs, future action is always contingent, potential, projected, or hypothesized, authored plays are special cases where outcomes do not follow with as free a play of possibility for the characters as in the temporal world. And the historical

Antony's speech is grammatical illogic; the temporal sequence is skewed. In a play that makes much of the interim "Between the acting of a . . . thing / And the first motion," here any interim for self-counsel or choice is wiped out by the strange power of the addressee. Shakespeare captures in dialogue, and in Antony's speech-act construal of his own grammar, a strange kind of Caesar effect.

The clearest parallel is a God effect, evident in Reformation theological debates. As Brian Cummings demonstrates, when Erasmus and Luther debated the freedom or bondage of the human will, they touched on how God's situation warped grammar rules, especially in relation to verb tense and modality. Similarly, in *Julius Caesar*, the fears and political debates about Caesar's threat to Roman liberty are cast grammatically, with Caesar's position warping the normal rules of grammar.

Grammatical perplexes involving "shall" and Caesar also stand out in Act 2, Scene 2, the scene that WordHoard shows has the highest frequency of "shall" use. Caesar's wife, fearing ill omens on the day of Caesar's assassination, tries to persuade him to stay at home:

Calphurnia: What mean you, Caesar? Think you to walk forth?
You **shall not** stir out of the house today.
Caesar: Caesar **shall** forth. The things that threatened me
Ne'er looked but on my back; when they **shall** see
The face of Caesar, they **are vanished**.

The last two lines replicate the dynamic of Antony's speech. Threatening things are already vanished when they "shall" in future see Caesar's face.

Caesar's repeated assertion, "Caesar shall forth," provides the scene's structural scaffolding. It recurs as a leitmotif, varying to "Yet Caesar shall go forth," and "Caesar shall go forth," until about mid-scene, where Calphurnia kneels. Caesar vacillates and changes his refrain, "And for thy humor I will stay at home."

Caesar's change from "Caesar shall" to "I will" is marked not only by the repetition and variation of this new tune, "And tell them that I will not come today," "I will not come," Calphurnia "on her knee / Hath begged that I will stay at home," but also by an explicit disquisition over modal auxiliaries, as Caesar himself analyses, parses "shall," "will," and "cannot."

critics get it wrong here. Their bias is to discover a significant theme for the play and the lexical content words, like noun “will,” rather than in the modal verbs, “will” and “shall,” unfolding contested futures.

In *Julius Caesar*, threats to human liberty are just as often and as powerfully represented in the dialogic interplay of “may,” “will,” and “shall” as in the big, and sometimes empty, theme words the conspirators make their rallying cry directly after the assassination—“Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!”

Let me conclude with Cicero.

A central figure in Latin schooling, Cicero has a very small role in *Julius Caesar*. Speaking to a fear-filled Casca, who is disturbed by apparent portents or signs of the future, Cicero admonishes:

Cicero: Indeed it is a strange-disposèd time,
 That men may **construe** things after their fashion,
 Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.
(*Julius Caesar*, 1.3.33–35)

His word “construe” cannot be accidental. The main thing Elizabethans did with Cicero’s words, year after year in grammar school classrooms, was to construe them. With three of the ten uses of “construe” in Shakespeare’s works occurring in *Julius Caesar*, he seems to have had this practice, which occupied such a central place in Elizabethan schooling, on the mind.

Construing made “slow” grammatical readers of schoolboys. It meant struggling with the difficulties of Latin as they worked towards English translation, and this meant contending with the disjunction between the synthetic forms of Latin, which express grammatical relationships by inflectional endings, and the increasingly analytic forms of English, which depend on grammatical function words.

It meant paying a great deal of attention to the English auxiliary verbs, which the boys learned in construing to describe as “signs” of Latin tenses and moods. If the mode of “slow” contextual reading I’ve juxtaposed to computation’s “fast” reading seems alien, or perhaps contrary to our sense of the rapid uptake of language required by Shakespeare’s theater audiences, it has a strong precedent in the grammatical culture and educated reading and sermon listening practices of Elizabethans. What is the English “sign” of this or that Latin mood or tense? the Elizabethan schoolmaster would

repeatedly have asked. How do you construe it into English? And so, Shakespeare developed his attention to the minutiae of the English language.

Far from trivial, construing the signs of tense and mood and interpreting their speech-act force in particular contexts was for Elizabethans a means to open up questions of the highest significance, as we see in sermons and religious controversies slowly unpacking the ambiguities of scriptural passages. The Puritan William Fulke, for example, demolished the position of a Catholic opponent by berating him for mistaking “doth” (not “have”) as a sign of the past tense—like a schoolboy, he said, misconstruing Terence:

if one of your boys that learned Terence had so construed, would you not have straight way asked him, [“What mood and tense does it have?”] . . .

Similarly, in *Julius Caesar*, key questions about human liberty and what threatens it are dramatized in the use and interpretation of signs of the future.

To construe them aright, it helps to add to our resources for literary close analysis, not only the new tools of computational counts and digital text analysis, but also a deep-rooted historical understanding of the grammatical education that helped to shape Shakespeare’s fertile language of possibility.

What I’m suggesting, then, is not so much that new methods replace old, or old new. What I’m arguing instead is for a fruitful cross-fertilization. There’s room here for everyone.