Music

Introduction

MICHAEL WITMORE: From the Folger Shakespeare Library, this is Shakespeare Unlimited. I'm Michael Witmore, the Folger's director.

When pressed to say what they love most about Shakespeare, it's fair to bet that most people would tell you it's Shakespeare's language. The beauty in his choice of words, the poetry, the familiar and famous phrases are what draw us in, above all. So what does Shakespeare become when the words are replaced? This podcast contains one answer.

Throughout 2016, to honor the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, the Folger has sent the 1623 First Folio—the first collection of Shakespeare’s plays—to all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC. On each tour stop, host institutions have provided special programming, designed to offer their own unique perspectives on Shakespeare’s impact.

One of the tour stops is right here in the Folger's home town of Washington, DC, and that stop provided an unusual opportunity for our podcast. During the entire month of October, the First Folio is on display, with a companion exhibition, at Gallaudet University. Gallaudet, which has led advances in the education of deaf and hard of hearing students for more than 150 years, is the world's only university designed to be barrier-free for deaf and hard of hearing students. For as long as Gallaudet has been
around, its students have been performing Shakespeare without spoken words. In presenting the First Folio, Gallaudet has focused its exhibition, performances, and programs on the story of that challenge.

The exhibition—First Folio: Eyes on Shakespeare—was curated by Gallaudet English professor, Jill Bradbury, and in this podcast she takes us on a tour of the exhibition and of the world of Shakespeare in sign language. We call this podcast “To see the wonders of the world.” Jill is interviewed by Neva Grant.

NEVA GRANT: On this podcast we have done a lot of interviews about how different cultures have incorporated Shakespeare into their languages, languages as disparate as Hindi and Arabic and Korean. We're here today to talk about American Sign Language, which on the face of it, you wouldn't initially think was highly translatable to Shakespeare.

JILL BRADBURY: Actually, there are many layers of Shakespeare's meaning that ASL can illuminate in ways that spoken languages cannot. Shakespeare was, you know, written to be performed, and Shakespeare's plays contain a lot of descriptive language, because back in the 16th century, theaters typically didn't use very elaborate set designs, they didn't have the same light effects. So Shakespeare wrote those into his text, to give people the description of the surroundings and the environment, and oftentimes, overlaid that physical description with information about characters. One thing that ASL is able to do is take that descriptive visual language and make it present in ways that spoken language isn't able to do.

GRANT: But at the same time, people who don't speak ASL assume that it's a simplification of spoken English, and therefore, they wonder how something as rich as Shakespeare could translate to something that seems somehow simpler, even though it isn't necessarily.

BRADBURY: Right. So I can show you the example of an ASL poetic form called a 1-10 Number Story. And it's an example of how ASL has its own literary techniques and its own poetic devices that can be used to parallel or express the rich metaphorical and figurative language of Shakespeare.

GRANT: This is a video right here in the exhibit room that people can see when they come to see this exhibit.

BRADBURY: Yes. This is a video loop called “Sixty Years of Shakespeare in American Sign Language” and it has many examples of the kinds of poetic techniques that ASL translators can use to express the literary qualities of Shakespeare's language. What I'm about to show you is a poem that was written by a high school student, and the poetic form is called ASL 1-10 Number Story. The point of the form is to tell a story
using hand shapes that correlate to the hand shapes used to express the numbers one through ten.

**GRANT**: What do you mean by hand shapes?

**BRADBURY**: ASL signs are made up of several different components, and each contributes to the meaning of the sign. Those components include the hand shape, the actual shape of the hand. You can have something like the A hand shape, or the flat O hand shape, or the V hand shape, which are easy to imagine.

**GRANT**: Are those like building blocks almost?

**BRADBURY**: Yes, exactly. And the other building blocks are orientation, which way the palm is facing, location on the body, and so on and so forth. So when you talk about an ASL 1–10 Number Story, what you're talking about is finding a sign that looks like the number one. You can all imagine what the number one looks like, and then a sign that uses the V shape, which is the number two, and so on and so forth, all the way up to ten, which is your thumb pointing up and shaking.

**GRANT**: This is a student who actually wrote a poem?

**BRADBURY**: Yes. The poem is summarizing the story of *Romeo and Juliet* using hand shapes that follow the sequence of the numbers one through ten. So initially what you can see is here is the one hand shape, two people approaching each other. And so you have two fingers coming towards each other...

**GRANT**: Which are two number ones.

**BRADBURY**: Yes, it's two number ones. This is Romeo, this is Juliet. They see each other, and now you have the hand shape for two. They look at each other, and here you have the sort of mimetic expression of two people looking at each other with their eyes.

**GRANT**: What I'm seeing is two Vs, one V on one hand and another on the other hand, sort of swooning at each other, right?

**BRADBURY**: Right. Right, right, exactly. Eventually you see as we go on in the story, you get to the end where the two lovers commit suicide, and Alexandria, the student, signs with her two thumbs across her wrist, which it looks like the slitting of the wrist. And so the thumb shape is the 10, and the slitting of the wrist, and she ends with the hands resting against her chest, as one does in a death pose.

It's a little bit like writing in verse, where you have a formal structure, a pattern overlaying the meaning of the words, and you have to follow the pattern, but you also have to pick the signs and the words that tell a story that make sense.
GRANT: That is a really vivid example. It will really help people understand how Shakespeare is translated into ASL. But at the same time, there's all sorts of poetry and nuance, there is meter and rhythm and rhyme, as well as archaic words that are part of the Shakespeare experience, so you can't help but think that something will also be lost in translation.

BRADBURY: Well, I think that's true of translating Shakespeare in any language, whether it's a sign language or a spoken language, because no two languages are exactly equivalent. When you translate Shakespeare into a different language, you're really translating him into a different cultural context and cultural background. That's something that you, yes, you do maybe lose some of Shakespeare's original meanings, but you also gain some meanings that are specific to that context.

The same could also be said of performing Shakespeare. Every performance of Shakespeare's text is an interpretation of the text. Directors will choose to use visual elements to emphasize different parts of the text and give it their own particular meaning and interpretation. That's another theme that we're very interested in during this First Folio exhibition month: looking at the ways in which visual choices, be they visual languages or the visuality of the theater, influences people's reading and interpretation and experience of Shakespeare.

GRANT: What you just gave us with that poem is a summary of the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. But in a situation where deaf people are going to a theater to see a full play performed in ASL, how would the actual poetry of Shakespeare's language unfold?

BRADBURY: There are many different approaches to expressing the poetic nature of Shakespeare's language, and some ASL masters, which is what we call people who work on translation of English to ASL for theatrical context, some ASL masters may prefer to deal with the language more simply, whereas others would like to give people the full kind of experience of the complexity of Shakespeare's language. So, for example, you might use different poetic techniques like rhythm, the movement of the sign, to express some of the sense of meter. You might use different repeated hand shapes. We talked about hand shapes and the way that different signs can use the same hand shape as kind of building blocks, and in the translation, you might look for signs within a particular passage, within a soliloquy, for example. You might look for signs that have the same hand shape so that you can suggest the connections between different signs and different parts of the speech. You may have visual tropes that reoccur throughout the performance, through the entire performance. There are ways within the language, and then also ways within the staging, that visual elements can give deaf audiences that full sense of the richness of Shakespeare's language.

GRANT: It seems like it would be a real challenge for the translator to do all this; they have a lot of choices, ways that this could go.

BRADBURY: Yes, they do, and that's part of the artistic aspect of it: taking Shakespeare's original text and turning it into a modern work of art. But I also think that,
you know, again, the process is very similar to what directors and drama coaches do with hearing productions of Shakespeare's work, because they have to go in and they have to make decisions about what parts of the texts they're going to cut and what parts they're going to emphasize. They have to work with the actors to make sure that the actors understand Shakespeare's language, which parts they should emphasize, which parts they should not emphasize. I think there are a lot of parallels between the translation process and working with the actors in an ASL production, and the process of working with hearing actors and Shakespeare's text.

**GRANT:** The reason we're here at this exhibit, and the reason that this exhibit was mounted, is because you have a copy of the First Folio, which was temporarily donated by the Folger Shakespeare Library, just down the street. Why don't we walk on over there and have a look?

**BRADBURY:** Sure.

**GRANT:** Here we are and here is a copy of this lovely First Folio laid out in the case before us. I know these have been exhibited all across the country this year, and whenever these are exhibited, they're always open to the same page, right?

**BRADBURY:** Yes, it is open to the soliloquy to be, or not to be, that is the question, in *Hamlet*. The Folger Library picked this particular page because this is one of the most iconic passages in Shakespeare. If you had to ask a hundred people “What line from Shakespeare do you know?” most of them would say “to be or not to be.”

**GRANT:** It gives us an opportunity to talk about how iconic verse can be translated into ASL and it gives us an opportunity to talk about the kinds of choices the translators use when they translate verse into ASL because here with “to be or not to be” you have options.

**BRADBURY:** Right. One of the first challenges that comes up when translating “to be or not to be” into ASL is the fact that ASL doesn't actually have a “to be” verb. It's very similar to many languages, such as Hawaiian and many Native American languages, they don't have a verb to express “to be,” and so immediately you have to decide how are you going to handle that. Are you going to translate “to be” as “to live, to die” or “to exist, to not exist”? Philosophically there can be some differences between living and existing, between death and not existing, you know, it's a question of emphasis.

**GRANT:** To have to make that decision is in some way to rob that particular phrase, in this example, of its nuance, of its ambivalence, in a way. Because the translator has to make a decision, it’s no longer the audience’s decision.

**BRADBURY:** That's correct. So, for example, one of the ways that I have seen people translate “to be” into ASL is simply to say “to live, to die.” But I've also seen people use the person identifier—which is the index finger pointing up like a one, just pointing up—to represent personhood or consciousness, human existence in the world. And so that's
a different way that you can choose a sign that will express a different sense of the phrase “to be, or not to be.

GRANT: Can you do me a favor? Let's try an experiment. We all know “to be or not to be, that is the question.” Could you sign that and talk me through what you're doing like we did with the poem? Maybe you can do two different versions, just to get a sense of the variety?

BRADBURY: Okay, so one approach to translating “to be or not to be” in ASL would be to take it simply as a question of “to exist or not to exist,” “to live or to die.” If we were to sign “to live,” we would make the A hand shape, which is fingers down, thumb up. You would pull them gently upwards, each on one side of our chest, and pull them gently upwards towards our shoulders.

GRANT: It's sort of the hand shape that someone would use if they were cinching their knapsack on their back to make it tighter.

BRADBURY: Yes. And then “to die,” we just want to shift our bodies slightly, shift our shoulders slightly, so that we are facing a little bit different direction than we were when we started signing originally. This shows the differences, that there is a choice being made. We push our shoulders, turn our shoulders to the left, turn our shoulders to the right, we're expressing a contrast, a choice to be made. And “die” would be two hands in opposite orientations, one open hand facing up, one with the palm down, and then we would turn them opposite each other.

GRANT: The hands are flat, like you're making pizza dough, except one is up facing the sky and one is down facing the ground.

BRADBURY: And so grammatically, the shift of the body is very important, because that gives additional information to the viewer, that it's not just the hand shape. If I stood here and did the hand shape like this, it wouldn't really have that much meaning. But the fact that I'm shifting my body when I sign “live, die,” is suggesting the conflict, the choice that has to be made, the urgency of the choice that needs to be made, that Hamlet is confronting in this soliloquy.

GRANT: What's an example of another interpretation?

BRADBURY: In the example I just gave you, the emphasis was on the choice “to live or to die.” In this other version—which I can show you, or you can see in our videotape that is focused on “to be, or not to be” soliloquy—it's a more stripped-down translation, where the actor simply stands and he puts one hand out and looks at it. And again, we have the upwards, the hand shape, and then he puts his other hand out and looks at it. And then he looks at the audience and moves his hands back and forth to suggest the choice.
**GRANT**: Both hands are flat and open, as if the person might be catching a small ball that's being hurled from above, both hands are up and flat, almost like an entreaty.

**BRADBURY**: Or maybe you're holding two things and you're trying to decide between them? You're at the store, you're holding two things and thinking, “Which one do I want?” What's interesting about this is that it takes out all of the questions about existence and boils down the passage to: there is a choice to be made. The actor goes in to perform the soliloquy and provide the context that helps us understand what those choices are. But the immediate question that is presenting is a choice, one way or another, which do I go?

**GRANT**: You've just given us two examples, but I'm assuming there are many, many others, right?

**BRADBURY**: Yes, there are many different ways to translate “to be, or not to be” into ASL and into other languages as well. And so this video that is a part of our component is focused on the “to be, or not to be” soliloquy and provides several different translations of the passage from different periods of time in American Sign Language. It also contains 15 translations of “to be, or not to be” in international sign languages. So even the people who don't know any sign language are able to watch the videos and pick up on things that are interesting and enrich their understanding of both Shakespeare and Shakespeare in sign language.

**GRANT**: What else should we take a look at while we're here?

**BRADBURY**: Well, one of the things that we wanted to educate people about was the long history of Shakespeare in ASL and at Gallaudet University. And so we have a section of the exhibit that contains panels with information about early Shakespearean productions at Gallaudet, and also in the deaf community.

**GRANT**: Before we head over to the next spot, how old is Gallaudet?

**BRADBURY**: Gallaudet was founded in 1864.

**GRANT**: I have a feeling that the history of Shakespeare performance goes back just about as far.

**BRADBURY**: Almost as far, yes, indeed. The earliest mention that we have been able to find of Shakespeare at Gallaudet dates back to 1882. There is an article in the newspaper that talks about a Gallaudet student performing a section of *As You Like It* at a benefit for a local Washington, DC charity written up in the newspaper. There are mentions of Gallaudet students performing at benefits and providing literary entertainment for people in Washington DC almost since—I think 1866 was the earliest, when they first started popping up, and they show up quite regularly in the late 19th-century newspaper.
And so it’s clear that ASL performance was very popular in the DC area and appreciated by people.

**GRANT**: It sounds like from what you’re saying the students were really active in the community, performing and probably doing other things as well.

**BRADBURY**: They were. You have to remember, too, that in the 19th century, deaf education was still very new, this concept that deaf people could be educated and could become productive members of society if they were taught through sign language. People from DC with no connection to the university would come over to campus for the graduation ceremonies to see the students do their commencement exercises in sign language.

**GRANT**: What did you want to show us over here?

**BRADBURY**: What we have in the display case here is the program from the earliest performance of Shakespeare at Gallaudet. This is a program for “An Evening of Dramatic Entertainment” from 1882. It has two components. One is shadow pantomime and the other is open pantomime. And under shadow pantomime, you see various acts from *Julius Caesar* being performed.

**GRANT**: Shadow pantomime, tell us what that is.

**BRADBURY**: The concept is that you would have a screen of some type, maybe a sheet, and behind that bright lights projecting. The actors would perform in front of the lights so what the audiences would see would be the shadows of the performer. It’s clear that in the shadow pantomime the actors weren’t actually using ASL, but they were using more of a gesture and mimetic style to act out the plays. And in the open pantomime, you see the declamation of “All the world is a stage” from *As You Like It*, that was probably performed in sign language as opposed to the gesture and mime of the shadow pantomime.

**GRANT**: What’s incredible about what you just said is that Shakespeare was being performed in ASL from a very early time.

**BRADBURY**: Yes.

**GRANT**: This is not some modern development, this goes back almost as far as the school does.

**BRADBURY**: Yes, and for all we know, it could go back even further. There has not been very much research done on Shakespearean productions at the state schools for the deaf, for example. The American School for the Deaf was founded in the 1840s, I believe, so it’s quite possible that Shakespeare in ASL in America goes back even further than 1884.
GRANT: I don't speak ASL, but I did have an experience that made me realize how vivid and expressive sign language can be. I saw a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Synetic Theater in Arlington, Virginia. You’re probably familiar with them?

BRADBURY: Yes, I'm a season ticket holder. [LAUGH]

GRANT: So, then you know that they do all of their work, and a lot of what they do is Shakespeare, they do it with pantomime and dance and a form of sign, it's not ASL but it's very expressive gesturing. I recently went to see their version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I've probably seen a dozen versions of the play and I have never understood it or felt it in the way I did when I saw their version, they did an amazing version. It makes me realize that while some people might argue that something is lost in translation, I think the point that you've been making here is that something is also really gained, or something can be gained, when you translate Shakespeare into ASL.

BRADBURY: Synetic Theater is one of our artistic partners in the First Folio month at Gallaudet University. They've been involved with us in various ways in our programming. I think what Synetic and Shakespeare and ASL have in common is this recognition of the power of the visual and the power of the body to express Shakespeare's meaning. That is something that deaf people have recognized for a very long time. There is a poem that was written in the 1760s by a deaf man who went to see a performance of Shakespeare by David Garrick, the Shakespearean actor of the 18th century.

In the poem, the author mentioned that he didn't need to hear Shakespeare's words, he didn't need to be able to hear, because Garrick's body and his facial expressions and his performance expressed the meaning of Shakespeare's words so well. Through the power of the body, you could have a deeper understand of Shakespeare's meanings and his words than you could simply through sound alone. And I think that's one of the things that we really want to express and help people to understand through our First Folio programming month.

GRANT: You must be really proud of this exhibit.

BRADBURY: I do. I want to live here. [LAUGH] I want to be in here all the time and just admire it. This is a very special project for me because as an academic you don't often have the opportunity to put together a scholarly work that many people will experience and many people will learn from. I feel that this is a really unique opportunity for me in my career, and I'm very grateful to the Folger for providing that opportunity for not only me, but for many people across the country.

GRANT: This was such a great tour. Thank you so much.

BRADBURY: Thank you for coming to campus.
WITMORE: Jill Bradbury is a Professor in the English Department at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. Gallaudet's exhibition First Folio: Eyes on Shakespeare runs through October 2016. Jill was interviewed by Neva Grant.

“To see the wonders of the world” was produced by Richard Paul. Garland Scott is the associate producer. It was edited by Gail Kern Paster and Esther Ferington.

We had help from Kaitlin Luna, Gallaudet's Coordinator of Media and Public Relations. Jill Bradbury’s sign language interpreter during the interview was Loriel Dutton.

Shakespeare Unlimited comes to you from the Folger Shakespeare Library. Home to the world’s largest Shakespeare collection, the Folger is dedicated to advancing knowledge and the arts. You can find more about the Folger at our website, Folger-dot-edu. For the Folger Shakespeare Library, I'm Folger Director Michael Witmore.

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