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PAUL YACHNIN REFLECTS ON TEACHING *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*
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editorial

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This issue has been a little while coming but is varied and thought provoking to reflect that. I hope that in the summer term the articles in this *Teaching Shakespeare* might provide some inspiration when thinking about your curriculum for next year, especially in Secondary English. Each will give you pause for thought in terms of what you teach, how you assess and how the plays might fit into a broader picture across your curriculum.

This issue I have been lucky enough to not only garner the thoughts and ideas of teachers of Shakespeare, but students too. I am a curriculum leader for English in West London and a teacher in my department ran a trip for Year 7 to see *The Tempest* at Shakespeare's Globe in Southwark. She gathered the reviews students wrote for me to feature in the magazine. From Felixstowe school a sixth former,Ben Gray, has written about watching Frantic Assembly's latest production of *Othello*. I will be candid and admit that my own PhD research is looking into the responses of school audiences to Shakespeare, so I love to read them. However, more importantly than that, I think the inclusion of and serious consideration of performance within our lessons on Shakespeare is important. I would love to feature the work of young audiences more often, so please do use these reviews in your classes and send me more!

Both Henry Sauntson and Cathy Millar explore emergent concepts from the science of learning: elaboration and quizzing. The articles situate these practices within the subject discipline of English literature and consider how and if there is a place for them.

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Paul Yachnin challenges our teaching of *The Merchant of Venice* and asks us to think about Shakespeare from his own personal context as well as a wider, modern social context. Heidi Drake and Patrick Cragg also look at context in their articles. Heidi Drake asks us how meaningful and useful the historical context we include at GCSE is, whilst Patrick Cragg shows how we can use our curriculum from Year 7 upwards to build literary contextual knowledge and let the plays speak to one another across Key Stage 3 and 4.

Putting this issue together has made me think carefully about what I'm doing with my department next year. I hope that it might provoke you and perhaps even inspire you to write a little about your own work in whatever kind of educational setting you inhabit.

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SHAKESPEARE THE WEAVER

PAUL YACHNINN is Tomlinson Professor of Shakespeare Studies and Director of the Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas (IPLAI) at McGill University, Canada

The Globe Theatre in London has just announced that playgoers for the Summer 2023 season's performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will be given this warning along with their tickets: "The play contains language of violence, sexual references, misogyny and racism."

I AM A JEW

Sound familiar? It's from Shakespeare. Shylock says it. I say it too. I'm also a Shakespeare scholar. I've written books about him. I've taught his plays to scores of students. You could say I love Shakespeare. His work is beautiful and true.

For the past few years, though, I've been having a problem with him. For years, I have been living and thriving in Shakespeare's house. But sometimes now, I can hear him – like some noisy, horrible man who lives upstairs – saying crazy, awful things – about Black people, women, Jews, even ordinary people like me and my students.

It started with something sour that I heard, really heard for the first time, at a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. It's the trial scene. Bassanio is trying to talk sense to Shylock. Don't cut a pound of flesh out of the chest of Antonio, he says, take a fortune in ducats instead. But Shylock is adamant. Antonio says to Bassanio:

I pray you, think you question with the Jew.
. . .
You may as well use question with the wolf
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;
. . .
You may as well do anything most hard,
As seek to soften that – than which what's harder? –
His Jewish heart.

Antonio's speech cut me like broken glass. There it was: the play is so much about the hard heart of "the Jew" and how he must be swept out of the way so that the beautiful young Christian people, including Shylock's daughter Jessica, who has become a Christian, can gather together in romantic celebration on the magical, *Judenfrei* island of Belmont. Could Harold Bloom, the great American literary critic, have been right about the play after all? "As an old-fashioned bardolator," he said, "I am hurt when I contemplate the real harm Shakespeare has done to the Jews for some four centuries now."

In the wake of that hard insight, I started to think against the grain of my own teaching and scholarship. I began to see that what some people had been saying about him was true. Shakespeare's plays are rife with:

Misogyny ("*Frailty, thy name is woman!*")

Anti-Black racism ("*What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe*")

Homophobia (no possibility of sexual love between women: "*She loves me sure,*" says the cross-dressed Viola about the love-smitten Olivia in *Twelfth Night* "*I am the man! If it be so, as 'tis, / Poor lady, she were better love a dream*")

Antisemitism ("*liver of blaspheming Jew*"),
and fear and hatred of ordinary people like you and me. He even seems to hate dogs. Here, in *Henry IV*, he combines the speaker's loathing of dogs with his contempt for the common people of England:

O thou fond many, with what loud applause
Didst thou beat heaven with blessing Bolingbroke
. . .
So, so, thou common dog, didst thou disgorge
Thy glutton bosom of the royal Richard,
And now thou wouldst eat thy dead vomit up,
And howl'st to find it.

Why should the works of this long-dead, white, Christian, social-climbing, dog-hating English playwright continue to be taught in high schools and universities and performed in theatres around the world?

I guess by now my love affair with Shakespeare has grown pretty dark and prickly, but in what follows I'm going to recount how I've started to work through my problems with him – and that means always telling the truth. I should mention that many of my students have helped me take the first steps back into Shakespeare's house. Please feel most welcome to come along with me (and them) on this homeward journey, even if we get no further than just inside the front door.

so old, my Lord, and true.

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INTO THE BREACH!

Of course, Shakespeare has not been without his staunch defenders. Some of them remind us that words in plays are spoken by the characters and not by the playwright. So the line about "*liver of blaspheming Jew*" is spoken by a witch – a *witch*! – not by the playwright. That nasty remark about Othello's lips comes from a weaselly white man named Roderigo.

Another line of defense maintains that the plays push back against the hate-filled utterances that we find issuing from the mouths of so many of the characters. The plays themselves, this argument says, are modern and enlightened. Even if plays like *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* are packed with the language of hatred against Blacks, Jews, and women (respectively), they work to reveal the hypocrisy and cruelty of those that hate and the goodness of those that are hated. In a wonderful book called *Shakespeare's Individualism*, the scholar Peter Holbrook says this: "More than any other pre-Romantic writer, Shakespeare is committed to fundamentally modern values: freedom, individuality, self-realization, authenticity."

SO YOUNG, MY LORD, AND TRUE

I used to think the same thing – that Shakespeare was somehow the messenger of modernity at its best and most emancipatory. But that doesn't seem true anymore – to me and to many others, including to many of my students.

It's Cordelia, King Lear's youngest daughter, who says "*so young, my lord, and true.*" She is a truth-teller. Her father wants her and her two older sisters to declare in public that they love him more than life itself. It's really all about the wealth and power the women stand to inherit. The two older sisters deliver their creepy professions of total love. But Cordelia, the one daughter who really loves Lear, will not play the greedy game of love-speak. When he asks her to speak, she takes a beat, then she says – "*nothing.*" He says, "*so young and so untender.*" She answers back with a full heart, "*so young, my lord, and true.*" For her truth-telling, she is cursed by her father and banished from the kingdom. She returns toward the end of the play to rescue Lear from her sisters' army. She is captured and she is hanged. At the end, Lear carries her body on stage, he howls like a wounded dog, his heart breaks, and he dies.

The students I teach are young and true (fortunately, they do not suffer Cordelia's tragic fate). Many are moved by the beauty and power of the plays, but they also bring forward troubling questions. One class was made angry by how the white magician Prospero in *The Tempest* enslaves the native islander Caliban. He calls Caliban "*this thing of darkness.*" A group in another class performed the last scene from *Othello*. They loved the heroism of Emilia, who speaks out about the murder of Desdemona in a room full of angry, armed men. "*Let heaven and men and devils . . . cry shame against me,*" she says, "*yet I'll speak.*" But they also saw how her fearless speaking out is interwoven with her own anti-Black racism: "*O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!*" she shouts at Othello. One student – I'll call her Cordelia (not her real name) – said that the

> "the students I teach are young and true . . . many are moved by the beauty and power of the plays, but they also bring forward troubling questions."

racism of the play is not just something that issues from the mouths of villainous characters (though, she added, Iago is indeed a master of hate-speech). "Yes," she said, "Emilia is a paragon of courageous sisterhood, but she is also and at the same time a racist. The fear and hatred of the Black man is woven into the fabric of the play."

The metaphor of weaving lit a light in my mind. After all, Shakespeare was a playwright rather than a public intellectual – an artisan (like a weaver) who crafted commercial theatrical scripts out of pieces of other literary works and even out of words he heard on the street. He didn't write the plays in order to broadcast his own views. So, yes, I said, it is true that among the interlaced threads in the weave of the plays, there are plenty of hate-threads. After all, in the literature of the West leading up to Shakespeare's time, there is a bumper crop of hate-speech of all kinds. Just take a look at the parade of conquered dark peoples depicted on the shield made by Vulcan in Book 8 of Vergil's *Aeneid*. And if you'd walked the streets of London at the turn of the sixteenth century, you would have got an earful of mockery and hate – against women, Jews, Turks, Catholics, Puritans, "Blackamoors," and "sodomites."

"It is true that among the interlaced threads in the weave of the plays, there are plenty of hate-threads."

What other threads, I asked, are there in the weave of the play? Any bright ones?

By the way, while I certainly remember what the students said, I don't remember exactly how they said it, so what follows is a dramatic reconstruction of their conversation.

Some of the students stepped up to my challenge. "Like Cordelia said," a student commented, "Emilia grows into something like a militant feminist. And you know, she is still a feminist even though she is also a racist." One young man pitched in: "Othello loves Desdemona. He calls her his 'soul's joy,' and he means it."

The student I am calling Cordelia pushed back. "Wait," she said, "none of what you're calling the bright threads can cancel the others. Hating Black men is not OK. This play is not OK." She turned to the young man who had spoken about Othello's love. "And don't talk about Othello and stuff about his soul's joy," she said, "he murders Desdemona, and he says it's justice." "When I watched the *Othello* movie," the young man replied, "I could understand Othello's anger and violence. I hated it, but I understood. And I could understand how terrible the loss was for all of them, even for Othello."

A student wearing a hijab said, "What about the hatred of what the play calls 'malignant and . . . turbaned Turk[s]'? The whole war that Othello is leading is against Muslims, isn't it?" The young man turned to his classmate and defended Othello. "And didn't Othello say," he said, "that he was like the turbaned Turk?" The student in the hijab looked at him: "Yes, he did identify with the Turk, but Othello said what he said only because he had just killed Desdemona. The Turk that he remembered was a brute like himself." "Yes," said the young man, "that's what I meant. It's like Desdemona says – I saw Othello's visage in his mind. I saw how he saw himself in the face of the Turk." "I saw Othello too," Cordelia said, "the man I saw murdered his wife. Then he killed himself, really just because he was a Black man. In the play – don't you see? – Blacks and Turks are just the same. They all have to die."

There was a moment of silence. Then, I think, we all just got it. We were arguing about anti-Black racism (still a real thing in 2023), women's lives in a world ruled by angry men and men's lives in a world that still places a huge value on masculine honour, and hatred and fear of Muslims (even worse now than in Shakespeare's day). The weave of the play *Othello* bound us together in a safe space where we could think, feel, disagree – and come out to each other – about things that mattered greatly to us.

So, after all and in light of that rough but enlightening meeting of minds, I am going to step back inside Shakespeare's house. It will be good to spend time in conversation with the old, noisy man who lives upstairs. I think what the Globe Theatre in London in 2023 calls the "language of violence . . . misogyny and racism" is no stain on what Shakespeare wrote – something from which we must avert our eyes. The awful things the plays say – about Black people, women, Jews, and others – are really there in these four-hundred-year-old texts, just as they are really here with us now in 2023. They are integral to how the plays do their work of fostering true vision – the ability to look inside ourselves for the seeds of hate and fear that our time and history going back to Shakespeare's time might have planted there – and affording us a safe and beautiful space for truth-telling about what we find in our own time. If we play it right, Shakespeare the weaver might just be able to help us craft a more compassionate fabric out of the variegated threads of our own histories.

So old, my lord, and true.

"The weave of the play *Othello* bound us together in a safe space where we could think, feel, disagree – and come out to each other – about things that mattered greatly to us."

teaching context meaningfully

HEIDI DRAKE is an experienced Head of English in Essex. She has written an A level revision guide on *The Duchess of Malfi* for The Quotation Bank which is out now.

I studied for my GCSEs in the mid-90s. Context of the text (in terms of writing or reading) was not something that was assessed explicitly at this point and it wasn't something that we spent time on. The same was true at A Level. The assessment of Literature has changed somewhat since then and not just in terms of the switch from coursework to final exam.

Both specifications I now teach (AQA at GCSE and OCR at A Level)s explicitly mention context in their assessment objectives. AQA's GCSE English Literature specification includes: 'AO3: show understanding of the relationship between texts and the contexts in which they were written'[1] while OCR's A-Level specification includes Assessment Objective 3: 'Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contents in which literary texts are written and received.'[2] There's been a clear shift of focus in how to approach texts in secondary school between my time as a student and my time as a teacher and it is one that needs to be handled with care.

In a general comment on the importance of context in literary analysis at GCSE level, AQA's Examiners' report of 2018 states; 'Chunks of biographical or literary/historical detail are almost always redundant.'[3] And yet, we repeatedly see in online discussions of the most popular texts explorations of exactly this kind of detail.

Macbeth is possibly the play for which this issue is most clearly seen at GCSE level. This is for several reasons. It remains the most popular Shakespeare text for all the examination boards and its positioning as an occasional play towards the start of James' reign in 1606, and the presence of witches, means that it is ripe for contextual exploration.

Many teachers focus their contextual teaching for this play on James' writing; *Daemonologie* and *Basilikon Doron* (especially in its discussion of the Divine Right of Kings). This often goes no further than a statement that James feared witches and believed that Kings were appointed by God. This level of context as testable and quizzable fact, is usually demonstrated in the 'add-on' sentence in candidates' work as they desperately attempt to address the assessment objectives. The AQA Examiners' Report of 2018 rejects this form of context quite clearly: 'As basic factual information, it doesn't contribute very effectively to an explanation of the characters' attitudes which is the focus of the question'[4].

We need to move students on from dropping in facts that are more suited to a history essay (albeit a low-performing one) whilst also avoiding over-generalisations such as 'an Elizabethan audience would think' which imply that there was one, unified response to these texts at the time they were originally performed. These are not over-simplifications. They are wrong.

> "we need to move students on from dropping in facts that are more suited to a history essay . . . whilst also avoiding over-generalisations."

The real problem would seem to come from subject knowledge of teachers. Not all English graduates will have studied History at A Level, let alone studied the era necessary for the texts that they teach. Indeed not all English teachers are English graduates. There are gaps in subject knowledge. Many teachers attempt to fill these by asking for help online. Whilst this may seem to be a sound idea it runs the risk of entrenching incorrect points.

A teacher asked about the historical positioning of *The Tempest* on a Facebook group to be told by many teachers that it didn't matter if you said Elizabethan or Jacobean because there wasn't much difference and it was 'only just written in Jacobean times'[5]. Whilst the networks that teachers create online can be hugely helpful and are excellent resources in a variety of ways, relying on them to bridge the gaps in subject knowledge will result in the embedding of misconceptions. One of my best resources for dealing with over-simplified misconceptions when studying any tragedy is the Classics department I'm lucky to work with. Further exploration of the links across Greek, Latin and Early English literature has led me to downgrade the emphasis I give to Aristotle for most of the plays and instead look at the importance of Seneca's tragedies and Morality and Mystery plays.[6]

This lack of knowledge leads to over-simplification of the plays at secondary level as well as misconceptions. *Macbeth* becomes over focused on witchcraft and fate. The 'easy' contextual facts. Teaching focuses on the witches and how they were put in the play to please James

"whilst the networks that teachers create online can be hugely helpful and are excellent resources in a variety of ways, relying on them to bridge the gaps in subject knowledge will result in the embedding of misconceptions."

and get his patronage (despite the company already having that patronage). This reading reduces the power of Macbeth's character and the focus on the supernatural can lead to the neglecting of scenes that are considered to not fit in with this, or have context that is too hard. I have anecdotally heard on Twitter of teachers neglecting Act 4 Scene 3 because it's 'long and complicated'. The Porter's speech was also often skipped over in teaching and I've worked with teachers who did exactly that for a variety of reasons. Both these scenes are important to the play as a whole. They're both rich in genuinely useful context. And they could both appear in the exam. In fact, in 2018, Edexcel did just that and set the Porter's speech.[7] There was an outcry from students and some teachers. How could they set *that* moment?

The solution to ensure that students are fully prepared for all moments of the play they have studied coming up in the exam and for ensuring that context in essays isn't a bolt-on at the end of every paragraph is to improve teacher's subject knowledge. But this comes with a warning as well. The success of Stuart Pryke and Amy Staniforth's excellent book *Ready to Teach: Macbeth* shows that there is an appetite for approaching this knowledge gap in a well-researched way. The scene by scene explorations in this book are in depth and well-referenced throughout. However, the level of detail is that which we need to know to teach the text well. To *know* it. This is not the same level as the students need to know to write a good GCSE response in 45 minutes. There is a danger in giving students too much information (for example on the trials surrounding the Gunpowder plot that make their way in to *Macbeth*) and we run the risk of spending too long on historical detail when the focus must always be the text itself.

"we run the risk of spending too long on historical detail when the focus must always be the text itself."

When it comes to the use of context in the exploration of Shakespearean texts for examination, it could be said in many ways to be an 'equivocator'. Knowledge is needed; but not too much so it becomes a distraction from what is in front of us. It must not be over-generalised; but not esoteric. What it must be is relevant. Teachers need to be discerning therefore in terms of what we choose to pass on to students. The deciding factor for this should be: will it help them understand the text and/or write a response. This, for me, means sitting on my hands in terms of the changes that it's likely that Middleton made to *Macbeth*. Whilst I might discuss them with an A Level class, it isn't helpful at GCSE. Context for school students is quite a big picture element. An element that I find useful to explore in terms of *Macbeth*, is the idea of having an heir or a legacy to pass on. Elements that enable links to be made across scenes and characters and show how the plays hang together can be hugely useful for this and are easier to understand and remember than when precisely James published *Basilikon Doron*. Or what specific Catholic traitor said or did what specific thing when.

Ensuring that the context we explore with students links clearly to the themes of the texts, enables the text itself to shine through and continue to be the focus. It leaves space for the students to respond to the text themselves. It is what we should be aiming for.

"ensuring that the context we explore with students links clearly to the themes of the texts, enables the text itself to shine through and continue to be the focus. it leaves space for the students to respond to the text themselves. it is what we should be aiming for."

Footnotes

1 https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-8702-SP-2015.PDF p.16 (accessed 06/04/2023)

2 https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-8702-SP-2015.PDF p.20 (accessed 06/04/2023)

3 https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/sample-papers-and-mark-schemes/2018/june/AQA-87021-WRE-JUN18.PDF p.7 (accessed 06/04/2023)

4 Ibid. p.8

5 Facebook group: English Department KS3 (teachers only) https://www.facebook.com/groups/1934313593546030 the comment was made on the 29th March 2023 and was accessed on 06/04/2023

6 A cursory glance at Aristotle's unities of time, space and action should make it clear that they are not hugely relevant to most Shakespeare plays. A close look at the make up of Shakespeare's tragedies in terms of plot and character show that they don't really fit Aristotle's description of a good tragedy anyway. And that's before getting into the debate of whether or not Aristotle was detailing rules he thought everyone should follow.

7 https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/GCSE/English%20Literature/2015/Exam-materials/1ET0_01_que_20190516.pdf p.24 (accessed on 06/04/23)

Curriculum as Literary Context

PATRICK CRAGG is an experienced English teacher in West London. He has recently been working with the British Library creating resources using their Discovering Literature platform.

Planning an English curriculum means navigating between two extremes: a Key Stage 3 in which text choice is almost infinite, and a GCSE syllabus dominated by four or five key texts. In all of this, the single point of commonality is Shakespeare. He remains the "ever-fixed mark" of English, mandated by the National Curriculum for all children to study.

It should follow, then, that students sitting down their GCSE in English Literature are comparative experts on Shakespeare, their study of *Macbeth* or *Romeo and Juliet* usefully informed by their work in Key Stage 3. Perhaps students have accumulated contextual knowledge about Shakespeare's time, and even some facility with his language and techniques. But the multiple encounters that students have with Shakespeare across Key Stages should allow for a different *type* of knowledge about Shakespeare in comparison with the other writers on the course.

Students have often hoovered up the social and historical context around a given Shakespeare play, but rarely, if ever, do they reference the literary or theatrical context of his work. There is very little sense in exam responses that students know that the Shakespeare who wrote their GCSE text is the *same* Shakespeare who wrote the plays they studied in KS3. I would like to suggest some ways to use comparison between texts as a source of new ideas that can enrich students' understanding.

Comparing characters across plays, and across key stages, is one way to produce rich ideas and deepen understanding, even when the texts are very different. How does Macbeth compare as a ruler to Oberon from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Prospero from *The Tempest*? Like Macbeth, Oberon is quick to anger and prone to over-reaction, even malice, but the outcome is determined by those plays' respective genres. Oberon's wrath can summon "floods" and "contagious fogs", and his idea of sport is to make his beloved fall in love with a donkey. Macbeth, in his tragic play, is a source of suffering and murder rather than comedy or sport. But while the murders of Banquo and of Macduff's family are a far cry from the antics of Oberon, the jealousy and entitlement of men in power is a constant. Their contrasting personalities are illuminating: after his first meeting with Lady Macbeth, does Macbeth show a flicker of enjoyment, of laughter, of sensuality? His increasing joylessness and numbness to events is as important in revealing the effect of his violence, all the starker when contrasted with his fairy counterpart.

> "Comparing characters across plays, and across key stages, is one way to produce rich ideas and deepen understanding, even when the texts are very different."

Prospero, meanwhile, sheds a different light on Macbeth. In Prospero we see an outwardly benevolent ruler who insists on the "care" he has shown Miranda and Caliban, but whose methods of rule are imprisonment, coercion and violence. His character raises questions that might be useful for students of *Macbeth* to answer: does Macbeth have any just claim to power, as Prospero had in Milan, and asserts (rightly or wrongly) on his island? No. But it is significant that Macbeth never gives a justification for taking the throne, never gives a political motive, doesn't represent any alternative model of kingship. And yet Macbeth, though his tyranny is on a grander scale, is no hypocrite: he never claims a tenderness or benevolence that his actions betray.

If students have studied other tragedies at KS3, what makes Macbeth unique within the genre as a tragic hero? One suggestion could be, *he knows that what he's doing is wrong*. Othello's sense of morality is tragically warped but he believes he is righting an ill by murdering Desdemona; Hamlet grapples with the rightness of killing Claudius but the project of avenging his father can be seen as just. Most student readers probably see Romeo as driven to extremes by overpowering love, but the concept of *amorality* can be brought across to Macbeth. Romeo's Act 5 journey to Juliet's tomb, his killing of Paris and his suicide, are driven by a compulsion that goes beyond consideration of right and wrong. The same could be said of Macbeth's capture of the throne.

So a sense of what makes a character studied at GCSE unique amongst their counterparts from different texts can make student responses more sophisticated and perceptive. Putting Shakespeare texts across Key Stages into dialogue with each other can be a rich course of new ideas and angles on familiar characters.

eLABORATIVE INQUIRY AND *MACBETH*

HENRY SAUNTSON is enry is an experienced Senior Leader and has worked in Peterborough and the surrounding area since qualifying as an English teacher in 2008.

Perhaps English teachers can borrow from the effective pedagogies of their peers in other subjects; we can approach the teaching of the seemingly other-worlds of Shakespeare's stories like a Geographer would teach about a foreign country; we can explore the life that Shakespeare himself lived through the mechanisms and approaches an Historian would deploy; we can seek to embrace the social and cultural worlds of his works in the same way that an RE teacher or Sociologist would highlight cultural principles; we can approach the interpretation and analysis of his language (to many a form of foreign language) in the style of the MFL practitioner . . . All of these teachers can demonstrate the power to engage and enthuse students in their domains, so why can't we harness this in our English classrooms when tackling the Bard?

For students to develop literacy in Shakespeare it needs to be treated as a specific cognitive domain, a specialism that encompasses a gamut of approaches and understanding; in particular, it requires a great deal of that hoary favourite, 'cultural capital', but also an acceptance on behalf of those that teach Shakespeare that they too possibly don't really understand everything, or that at the very least they still have much to learn, like Jacques as he leaves the 'convertites' of the Forest of Arden. After all, when interpreting Shakespeare we are not only unpicking his language and imagery but also his grasp of stagecraft, the way he meets the needs of his audience and indeed his own thought patterns; he was a playwright, with emphasis on the spelling of the second syllable of that word – these plays were crafted, built, wrought; he was writing for an organic roster of male actors in a company whose primary purpose was to entertain a largely illiterate crowd, commenting as much on the society of the time as the messages within the text, itself the subject of much debate and critique. Do we expect students to appreciate the structural complexities of a text that was written to accommodate the ability of the performing company to double-up parts, or to indicate darkness without the use of artificial light, for example?

So, how do we seek to engage students in a subject in which we ourselves have to admit we have incomplete pedagogical content knowledge? Firstly, that admittance is no quittance – it is our starting point. We approach Shakespeare with an open mind, willing to absorb the myriad possibilities of interpretation and the endless analysis; there is no 'right' answer. If this is the message we communicate to students from the outset then we start off

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"Do we expect students to appreciate the structural complexities of a text that was written to accommodate the ability of the performing company to double-up parts, or to indicate darkness without the use of artificial light, for example?"

in the right frame of mind, and the right forum for critical dialogue – as Freire said, this dialogue must take place in a climate of hope, and without perceived hierarchy; it is appropriate for our students to be aware that we are far from the experts in the room either, but we have a greater understanding of the tools that may lead us to develop expertise in certain areas.

'*Consciously we teach what we know; subconsciously, we teach who we are*' (Hamachek, 1999)

We cannot teach Shakespeare's works if we ourselves do not engage with them; there are many of his plays that simply defy teaching because of not only their inherent complexities but also their lack of supporting material and their transient nature as works of literature – how, for example, can one teach a text that has multiple iterations or has been constructed out of a process of informed estimation. We are still debating, 400 years on, which version of King Lear we approve, let alone teach. We also must acknowledge and make clear the fact that certain elements of all the plays within the curriculum canon are simply not worth focussing on – we don't teach every line of *Lord of the Flies*, so we don't need to teach every scene of *Othello*; we make informed, professional decisions that allow us to embrace the two 'eff' words allowed in our classrooms – efficiency and effectiveness.

So, where there is no agreed approach, no clear path and – in some cases – vastly different base texts, what do we do? Well, we inquire. We question. We elaborate. Yes, Macbeth meets the witches on the heath, but why? What would have happened if Banquo had met them first? Would that have happened? Why not? In this way, through a model of elaborative inquiry built on foundations of declarative knowledge of plot, character, setting and context, we make the invisible visible; we allow students to practice their thoughts, rehearse their responses, hone their analysis in the wonderfully non-committal world of 'what if?'.

Shakespeare's audiences weren't watching – largely, at least – from some higher intellectual plane; they were

"We inquire. We question. We elaborate. Yes, Macbeth meets the witches on the heath, but why? What would have happened if Banquo had met them first? Would that have happened? Why not?"

there to be entertained. They wanted – and therefore got – recognisable themes and characteristics. You couldn't even '*Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe*' until Heminges and Condell published the First Folio in 1623. We could argue that the first attempts and opportunities to rely study both the man and his work arrived in 1664 with the publication of the updated Folio, and the social freedoms of post-Cromwellian England, but even then he doesn't appear in the more populist realms until, at the earliest, the 1730s, and then the study of his work is not referenced in schools until the 1770s. Harvard University received their first copy of Shakespeare's works in 1720, over a 100 years after Shakespeare's death. The in-depth analysis of his work for the purposes of education began well after his works ceased to be relevant from a point of social context; subsequent generations of academics and students have taken it upon themselves to analyse in depth what to many at the time was merely light entertainment; we should embrace this ideology in our teaching of the plays to the students of 2023.

Ultimately, to 'succeed' in the study of Shakespeare students have to demonstrate an ability to articulate their understanding of the text, an awareness of Shakespeare's intended effects on his audience and the importance of the social context in the interpretation of the work, as well as the wider craft of a playwright in constructing material for an audience and telling a good story. However, these nets of summative assessment with their standardized hole sizes assume that all the student fish are the same in dimension (an idea from William T Randolph) and, if not, they fall through the holes and therefore cannot be counted. To me, this is anathema; how can we apply standardized assessment criteria and attributes of 'success' to work which in itself is defined, redefined, interpreted, reinterpreted, performed, adapted and deconstructed in myriad ways across the globe on innumerable occasions every year, and for the past four centuries? Instead, we get rid of the concept of any 'right' responses to Shakespeare questions beyond the foundational, declarative knowledge, and we seek more to understand; we seek to explore and inquire – then we seek to find justification in the text and its many layers of meaning.

All teaching of any text – be it Shakespeare, Stevenson, Steinberg or Sachar – starts with declarative fundamentals; plot, character, setting; what happens to whom, when and where. These should always be established so as to be sure there is a firm foundation on which to build stronger schema; consolidate the connections through regular retrieval and practice without the need to delve too deeply into the complexities of the language.

Once these are in place, students can be encouraged to elaborate; to generate responses to questions and

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problems using their existing knowledge. Elaborative interrogation is a strategy that is highly effective (Dunlosky, among others) but also straightforward to facilitate; students read a fact to be remembered, ask themselves (or respond to) questions about how and why things happen, and then formulate a response. By encouraging students to produce explanations about the ideas they are learning, the process of EI enhances learning by supporting the integration of new information with that existing prior knowledge, thus enhancing the ability to accurately recall this information at a later date. Students' understanding of the material is improved if they are challenged to think about the relationships between different concepts and ideas, and demonstrate understanding of those ideas or concepts are either similar to – or different from – one another. EI is best suited to the acquisition and embellishment of facts and, like all pedagogies, should be applied in the appropriate context and circumstance – it is not a panacea for student Bard-woes, but it might be a useful remedy to certain symptoms.

The process consists of two parts of a factual statement – the subject (the character, setting, idea the statement is about) and the predicate (the clause that contains the verb and the fact) – for example, 'The witches [subject] plan to meet Macbeth after the battle [predicate]'; the next step is take the statement and, very simply, ask 'Why?'. The process of EI then allows the student to clarify the relationship between the subject and the predicate, whilst also developing their confidence to explore their schema and offer critical alternatives; they already know the future; they control Macbeth's destiny; they want Macbeth to be at his highest ebb before he suffers his hamartia; to show the audience the level of power they wield at the outset – the list of possible and viable answers goes on and, more importantly, is pretty inexhaustible; it is very hard to get this question 'wrong', and only through an underlying flaw in the fundamental knowledge would this be the case. If such a flaw is evident then EI has helped with its diagnosis, and appropriate therapy can then be applied. EI works even better if it can prompt processing of the similarities and the differences between related information; for example, 'Why might the witches plan to meet Macbeth after rather than before the battle?'.

It works – try it; take a fact from a Shakespeare play, and embellish it in the minds of the students using Elaborative Interrogation. Combine this process with praise and extrinsic motivation to enhance curiosity and allow the students to become inquisitive; through inquisitiveness we can promote and foster engagement without the high-stakes threat of the need for full and detailed word-level understanding.

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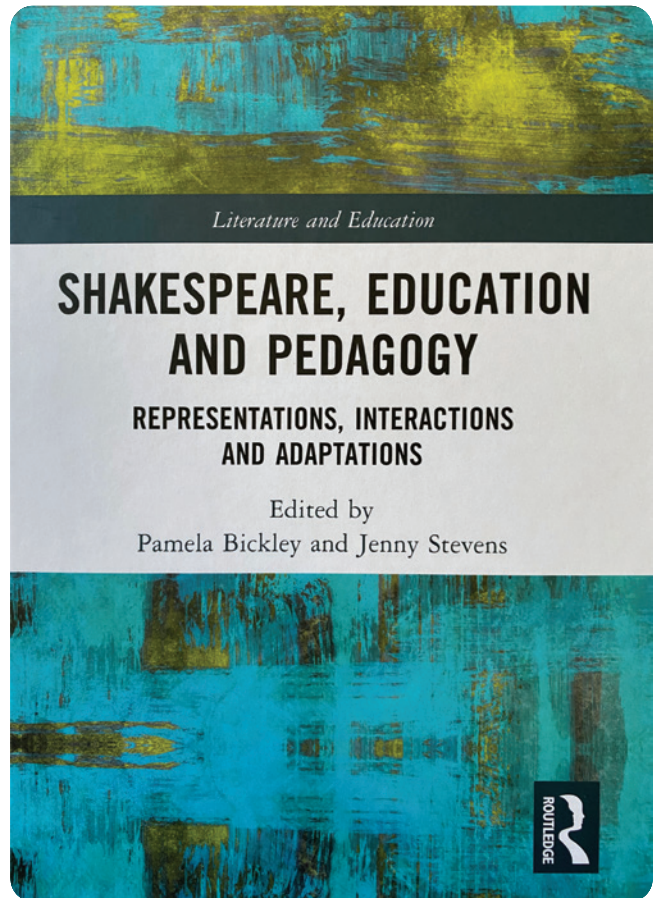
Shakespeare, Education and Pedagogy

BY ROWAN MACKENZIE

This book encapsulates a wide variety of ways in which Shakespeare has shaped the pedagogical process from his own lifetime to the present day, both within formal educational settings and through the art of performance and the cultural capital of Shakespeare in modern contexts. The three sections each focus on a different aspect with the chapters aligned to those they sit alongside; bringing a cohesiveness to the collection.



SHAKESPEARE AS EDUCATOR ACROSS TIME

The first six chapters offer an insight into the educational role of Shakespeare's work throughout the last 400 years, both as a source of perceived inspiration and mentorship, as identified by Stephen Watkins in his chapter on his influence of Dryden, and acknowledging the debt owed to Rex Gibson's influence in the introduction of active Shakespeare across schools from the late 1980s. Jenny Stevens does also acknowledge the complexities of his inclusion within the National Curriculum with its focus on assessments and attainment which is often at odds with the concepts of collaborative embodiment of rehearsal room techniques. Sean McEvoy's chapter completes this section with an examination of the plays' 'emancipatory political standpoint' (p.55) and the way in which both in secondary and tertiary education Shakespeare is often used as a lens through which current political and social justice agendas can be refracted.

THE REPRESENTATION OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN THE PLAYS

The subsequent four chapters examine the way in which *Measure for Measure* confronts the contemporaneously accepted tenets of religious instruction, the challenging of traditional gender stereotypes and the highlighting of masculine romantic failings within the comedies, the links between the Classics, Shakespeare and 'complex discourses of power and privilege' (Oakley-Brown, p. 87) and Prince Hal's rejection of the traditional monarchical educational journey in favour of his life experiences in the taverns of Eastcheap. Jane Kingsley-Smith's examination of rhetorical techniques within the comedies allows her to draw out themes of gender, power and romance across the comedies; extrapolating 'the ways in which Shakespeare's female instructors mitigate their threat to male superiority by repeatedly downplaying their knowledge' (p.75) to consider the 'magical allure' (p.78) of the ways in which Shakespeare's female characters undertake education to satsify their own thirst for knowledge. Andrew Hadfield's contemplation of Prince Hal's formative years prior to his accession brings a new focus to Henry V's reign as King and the Machiavellian nature of his rule.

21ST CENTURY SHAKESPEARE: THE INDIVIDUAL, THE COMMUNITY AND THE WIDER WORLD

The eleven chapters which form the final section examine the role of Shakespeare in today's troubled times and the extent to which his works can be used to explore both individual and communal issues and traumas. Malcolm Hebron's close reading of Sonnet 60 leads him to conclude that 'we need to open the doors to a more personal way of seeing' (p.107) than currently accepted educational practice, with its focus on assessments, allows. Several chapters scrutinise the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which altered the way in which learning was effected across the globe. Whilst the World Health Organisation announced on 5th May 2023 that COVID-19 was no longer assessed as a public health emergency the legacy it has had on the educational experience of an entire generation cannot be underestimated.

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concrete questions, malleable answers

CATHY MILLAR is an English teacher who has recently completed the MA in Shakespeare and education at UCL Institute of Education. This article is taken from some of her work done as part of that course. .

I'm teaching *Hamlet* to my Year Nine class and we have taken a break from the narrative to test their knowledge of the play – quotations, character, and plot. It's been great fun to teach and the pupils have thoroughly enjoyed the story and characters but now I need some kind of formative assessment. Knowledge tests, particularly quizzes and short answer 'retrieval practice', are buzz words in education at the moment, presented as a sure-fire way to reveal a pupil's progress and understanding. I decide to try out quizzing and short answer questions designed to be 'low threat, high challenge'. Amongst gap fills and straightforward question and answer tasks I also include the exhortation for the pupils to answer 'in their own words' – a commonplace phrase in exams. Later, when I mark them I realise that this simple instruction is actually unexpectedly revealing.

> "my year nine class's responses clearly adapt shake-speare's language to make it their own – even on this small scale their responses are revealing."

'Get thee to a nunnery.' In your own words, what does Hamlet mean?' is one of the questions on the sheet of paper. My Year Nine class's responses clearly adapt Shakespeare's language to make it their own – even on this small scale their responses are revealing. Their responses range from a literal translation 'go and become a nun' to understanding the emotional inference: 'He is saying that he never loved her and she needs to leave'; 'He is rejecting her'; 'He is saying you should never marry him or anyone.' Many show understanding that it is an insult: 'He is saying that she is acting immature and deserves to go to a nunnery'; 'He means that she is going crazy and should be sent away'; 'He is saying you're ugly and you might as well be a nun'; 'It means like go and purify yourself'. Kevin suggests it is also a threat: 'Go to a place where you will never have children, never get married'. The responses are peppered with adolescent idiolect (references to immaturity, 'you're ugly') and slang filler ('it means like'), as well as experimentation with more academic language, such as 'purify' with its contextual connotations, and even rhetorical rhythms with 'never have children, never get married.' Clearly, my pupils are beginning to appropriate and adapt Shakespeare's words and ideas to make them their own.

The language in the quotation is open to interpretation. What seems a limited, concrete question has a multiplicity of answers. They are all valid responses but some are arguably more powerful than others. This is part of the complexity of language and learning in English (and the fact that there is a mark attached does make this test, and ones of its ilk, problematic). Even in this brief quotation from the play and their own equally brief answers, the pupils' own perceptions, experiences, imaginings and knowledge are making themselves visible.

> "even in this brief quotation from the play and their own equally brief answers, the pupils' own perceptions, experiences, imaginings and knowledge are making themselves visible."

Again, this becomes apparent when I look at a set of equally brief questions on the same test. This time the pupils needed to complete the missing words in the quotation from *Hamlet*. For example, the class was asked to complete the quotation 'There is something _____ in the state of Denmark.' Incorrect words chosen by the class included tragic, off, sinister, hiding, fishy, strange, revenge and dense; all words chosen instead of 'rotten'. Some are synonyms; some slang; some terminology ('tragic'), some key words ('revenge') . Similarly, there are misquotes with: 'The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King' which they are once more asked to explain in their own words. Ted: 'The play is the bait wherein I'll catch the conscience of the prey. He is saying the play is going to bait Claudius out.' George: 'The play is the truth wherein I'll catch the conscience of the killer. His play speaks the truth of what happened.' Again the answers are plausible: the word choices are wrong but the understanding is not.

These answers would not have scored highly in the test. However, if we take these mistakes as windows into the pupils' understanding or (as it is a test) their grasping at words that seem to make sense then they can be quite illuminating. Shakespeare's complex language un-doubtedly creates difficulties in for my Year Nine class but they are up for the challenge. They are picking up on ideas of meaning within language: experimenting, testing words out and, in this case, trying to make them fit. You can see learning in action even in such a small task. They are feeling their way to the answer and though this would be marked

wrong, it is clearly not far from being right. They are visibly in the process of acquiring a new language – both Shakespearean and the academic language the school requires of them for formal, discursive writing.

My tentative conclusions? Formative assessment using a knowledge test can be revealing but in English it must be interpreted with care. English cannot (and should not) be reduced to a series of ticks and crosses, right and wrong answers. On a broader scale, It is important that a text like *Hamlet* does not become an unquestioned artefact, the next generation unable to make it their own. To finish in the 'own words' of my pupils 'the play is the truth' or may be 'the trap' or may be 'the bait' but in this case not so much the artefact 'the thing'.

"formative assessment using a knowledge test can be revealing but in english it must be interpreted with care."

HAMLET KNOWLEDGE TEST

1. A) Complete this quotation: 'Something is ______________ in the state of Denmark.' (1 mark)

1. B) In your own words, what does this whole quotation mean? ______________ (1 mark)

2. A) Complete the quotation. The ghost says: 'I am thy father's spirit, Doomed for a certain term to walk the ______________' (1 mark)

2. B) In your own words, what does this whole quotation mean? (1 mark)

3. A) Hamlet gives a soliloquy that begins "To be, or not to be: that is the question". In your own words, what is Hamlet saying here? ______________ (1 mark)

3. B) What is a soliloquy? ______________ (1 mark)

4. A) Why is Hamlet angry with his mother? Why does he say 'Frailty, thy name is woman'? ______________ (1 mark)

5. A) Who is Hamlet speaking to when he says this "Get thee to a nunnery?" What does Hamlet mean? ______________ (2 marks)

6. A) Complete the quotation. Hamlet says: 'The play is the ______________, where in I'll catch the conscience of the ______________.' (2 marks)

6. B) In your own words, what does this whole quotation mean? ______________ (1 mark)

THE TEMPEST AT SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE THEATRE MARCH 2023

In this short piece we have reflections on *The Tempest* at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in March 2023 by year 7 students. They have been anonymised to protect their identities as they wrote the reviews as part of a homework assignment rather than for the purpose of writing for publication (as seen with our student review of *Othello*).

You can see clearly how their teacher has scaffolded this task to help them shape their ideas but still each one is unique and speaks to the complexity and multiplicity of the school audience. I hope these might provide food for thought in terms of how students at your school are invited to respond to Shakespeare's plays when they watch them as we continue this series of student written pieces.

I think these speak for themselves but perhaps some noteworthy elements of them are the attention paid to stagecraft; mentions of the Globe theatre space and how that affected their feelings about the performance; and their ability to draw comparisons between different versions of the play they've seen with a sharp understanding of how they might be viewed as audiences and of how different as forms film and theatre can be.

REVIEWER 1: NOT DARK ENOUGH

When I first watched the play I thought it was going to be darker in a way (it probably would have been if it wasn't meant to be performed for children) and the lessons we did kind of backed that up. I'm mostly talking about the manipulative Prospero.

The set again was quite impressive and the actors moved the set in a way that the audience wouldn't notice while talking to said audience to kind of distract them.

I do understand that the play was for children but I still kinda expected something a bit more dark and a show that would show the darkside of the characters.

REVIEWER 2: REALLY GOOD

I thought the play was going to be different from what it was. I thought it was going to have a big stage and be a great performance. The stage was small but perfect. They used it very well and the performance was better than I thought it would be.

I thought it was nice how they changed the scene from the ship to the island. They would sing a song and it would change. The acting was really good like when they had to fall asleep or when they were on the ship in the storm how they were swinging all about. The actors were still doing the performance even if people were talking or not listening and if something went wrong they would keep on going.

I thought the play was really good. In total there was good acting, good props and a good way to change the scene. I think it was amazing and better than the one we watched in class.

"It was similar to the film we watched in class, although the atmosphere felt more special at the Globe theatre as we were up close to the actors which made it feel more realistic."

REVIEWER 3: SPECIAL, MAGICAL

What were you expecting or predicting the play to be like?
I expected the play at the Globe theatre to be much shorter than the version we watched in class.

I didn't think the play would be able to show the magical side of *The Tempest* but it did with confetti and smoke which felt more special than the film version.

I enjoyed the play because it showed what people would have dressed like in Shakespearean plays.

The set of *The Tempest* at the Globe theatre was much more simple than the film we watched in class, also the same set was used throughout the play and in the film the background changed for different scenes.

What was your experience of watching the play, what was it like? It was similar to the film we watched in class, although the atmosphere felt more special at the Globe theatre as we were up close to the actors which made it feel more realistic.

I felt more able to concentrate at the theatre as it was happening right in front of me. I really enjoyed it and would definitely like to go again.

OTHELLO: A HISTORICAL CLASSIC TURNED MODERN MASTERPIECE, BY BEN GRAY

Frantic Assembly's 2022 production of Shakespeare's classic play of jealousy and betrayal reimagines Othello's downfall and eventual demise in the contemporary setting of a bar, consisting of a gambling machine and the set's centre piece, a pool table. With this, the conflict between the Republic of Venice and Ottoman Empire is changed to that of two gangs. The staging beautifully unfolds into a desolate alleyway where most of the physical conflict takes place, a brilliant modern interpretation of a battlefield. The lighting shifts and atmosphere of *Othello* are electric, lending a perfect reflection to the scenes whilst being fun and unique. Purple, intimate lighting is used masterfully to show Othello and Desdamona's love for each other, and, true to Frantic Assemblies style, scenes of passion and romance are conveyed through powerful abstract movements and dances. You get a sense of the character's love, anger and suspicion of one another through the movements that director Scott Graham so cleverly planned out intricately, along with his co-choreographer Perry Johnson.

Of course, the modernisation of *Othello* lends it a far more relatable story of betrayal, unfaithfulness and heartbreak. Grounding Othello, Iago, Desdamona and many more as simple adults living in an urban town helps entice the audience, allowing contemporary viewers to understand this play in its full glory. We feel for them, we understand their pain, their desires and their lust so much more now that they are just like us, not high ranking soldiers of a far away country. However, their Shakespearian speech hinders the audience from fully connecting with our protagonists, but as with Frantic Assembly, their message and story are told more through physical means, not the spoken word, and they mastered that with *Othello*.

Now, you cannot talk about this production without mentioning the wonderfully talented cast. Michael Akinsulire portrays Othello with so much emotion, waves of anger, bliss and love hitting like a tsunami. When Othello is at his angriest, in the climax of the play, you feel his pain, his torn heart. Akinsulire embodies the character powerfully, from his strong movements to his empowering and oddly terrifying voice. Joe Layton as Iago works extremely well, with him lending a sort of snaking personality, constantly watching and slithering between Othello and Desdemona (Chanel Waddock). From the way he stands to how he speaks to Othello, you clearly see his intentions throughout the entire play, even before he speaks of his plans. Even the smaller characters, such as Bianca (Hannah Sinclair Robinson), Montano (Oliver Baines) and Roderigo (Felipe Pacheco) are played so perfectly that it seems like they are all real friends, their companionship at the beginning portrayed incredibly.

"The modernisation of *Othello* lends it a far more relatable story of betrayal, unfaithfulness and heartbreak. Grounding Othello, Iago, Desdamona and many more as simple adults living in an urban town helps entice the audience, allowing contemporary viewers to understand this play in its full glory."

Ben Gray is a sixth former at Felixstowe School.

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Teaching had to be migrated on-line and it was only through the 'dedication, resilience and passion' (Sullivan, p.130) of educators and students that learning continued despite the turmoil of those three years. Other topical, fundamental issues relating to gender, sexuality, racism and climate change all have chapters dedicated to their exploration; highlighting the ways in which Shakespeare can be utilised to explore contemporary, contentious issues and bring them into sharp focus. The inclusion of Tom Magill's chapter on his transformation 'from felon to filmmaker' (p. 137) and the impact of *Mickey B* ensures that the growing field of carceral Shakespeare features in the collection while Robert Shaughnessy's chapter is concerned with neurodiversity and the need for accessible theatre for all.

This collection includes contributions from academics, teachers and practitioners giving a balance of perspectives which considers the wider research into this field alongside individual case studies which the authors have themselves been involved with throughout the delivery of the projects. It is however interesting in such a global collection that the contributors are predominantly white Anglophone scholars and the voices of people of colour, Latinx and other representatives from our culturally diverse world are not heard in the first person. It is assumed that the responses for the call for papers to contribute to this collection drove this aspect of the contributions but it does seem a shame that more diverse voices are not centralised within the book which makes a significant contribution to the field of Shakespearean pedagogy.