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DR SARAH OLIVE ON DIVERSE ILLUSTRATED SHAKESPEARE FOR CHILDREN

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PEMBE BONDS TAKES A NURTURING APPROACH TO *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

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This edition of *Teaching Shakespeare* is a long time coming for a number of reasons. However, thanks to this extended time between issues, I've been fortunate to experience some wonderful events and read new books relating to the teaching of Shakespeare and to revisit some thought provoking reading around the subject too as I returned both to full time work and to my own PhD after maternity leave.

I have had the pleasure of inviting Dr Sophie Duncan to talk about her book *Searching for Juliet* to my own year ten students and subsequently to the London Association for the Teaching of English. She reminded me how powerful Juliet can be as a character and how diminished she has often been by producers of the play. I attended the launch of Drs Jane Coles, Maggie Pitfield and Theo Bryer's *Drama at the Heart of English* where we were reminded of the radical potential of even small moments of play, dramatisation and acting out in English lessons and of the power Shakespeare has to allow us to explore difficult current events through the lens of apparently distant worlds. Most recently we were treated to a keynote lecture from Dr Wendy Lennon at the Spring London Association for the Teaching of English conference. Wendy spoke of the need to think in an interdisciplinary way when teaching Shakespeare, to include geography, history, other writing, art and philosophy in our teaching. This, she argued was one of the pillars of true 'decolonisation' in our curriculum – a term she went on the problematise.

In our edition this spring, we have five thought provoking articles that I hope will give you ideas and confidence to teach in new and brave ways when presenting your students with Shakespeare in the summer term and as you plan for September. Barbara Bleiman has written about assessment, particularly at A level, and how we might hold on to the notion that the voice of the student, of the audience is vital to our discipline and can be fostered through creative, challenging task setting. Thinking about how to bring one of the trickiest plays on the GCSE specification to her classes, Jodi Nathanson suggests that the play can be considered in the context of a youth excited by the *Mean Girls* reboot, *Wicked* and group dynamics – not shying away from the racism, but placing it in a web of flawed and complex characters that young people are all too aware of. Claire Frampton touches on this too in her article on the Jesus College Shakespeare Project attempted to connect Shakespeare to student life, the contemporary city and the historic surroundings. Sarah Olive shares with us the fruits of a project gathering diverse illustrated Shakespeare for children. Shakespeare for children has been around for hundreds of years, Dr Olive provides you with a range of representations suited to the diverse contemporary classrooms and libraries in your schools. Finally, Pembe Bonds has brought us her reflections on teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to a class with a range of emotional and learning needs. All our articles in this edition draw on ways to link Shakespeare with the contemporary audience.

I hope reading this and other issues of *Teaching Shakespeare* might inspire you to write something yourself. With this in mind, do take a look at the guest edition call for papers from Dr Wendy Lennon in this issue. I hope too, to see some of our readers at the first British Shakespeare Association online teachmeet on April 3rd.

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THE BARD at the BBC

BBC TEACH, the home of thousands of free curriculum-mapped classroom videos for primary and secondary school teachers, has published a new resource

It features a new animated adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* for use with both upper primary and lower secondary pupils in nine short video episodes.

Comprehensive teacher notes have been created by primary school teacher and education consultant, Stuart Rathe. The teacher notes create opportunities to study the play as a unit of work, and include exploration of plot through freeze-framing activities, and a chance to dive into Shakespeare's language and iambic pentameter rhythms. Rehearsal room activities such as adapted duologue scripts and 'Role on the Wall' are combined with clear curriculum links and written outcomes, such as newspaper article and diary writing.

Each video comes with a transcript so that pupils can read along. There is a downloadable sheet featuring a visual reminder of the names and family groupings of the main characters. Teachers can also download a sequencing activity to help pupils recall the order of events in the play. This new *Romeo and Juliet* resource completes a quartet

of animated adaptations on BBC Teach, which includes *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*. As well as the animations, there are also music resources for each play. They have been designed to help pupils to not only learn music, but also put on a musical performance based on the plays.

The *Midsummer Night's Dream* 'musical for schools' for example, was hugely popular during the summer term of 2023. BBC Teach has included everything a teacher needs to stage a memorable performance: videos of the songs, backing tracks to download and sheet music to help pupils rehearse. Children have eight catchy songs to learn as well as a script which is both engaging and fun. The resource also features opportunities to include performers from many year groups with parts that are both big and small.

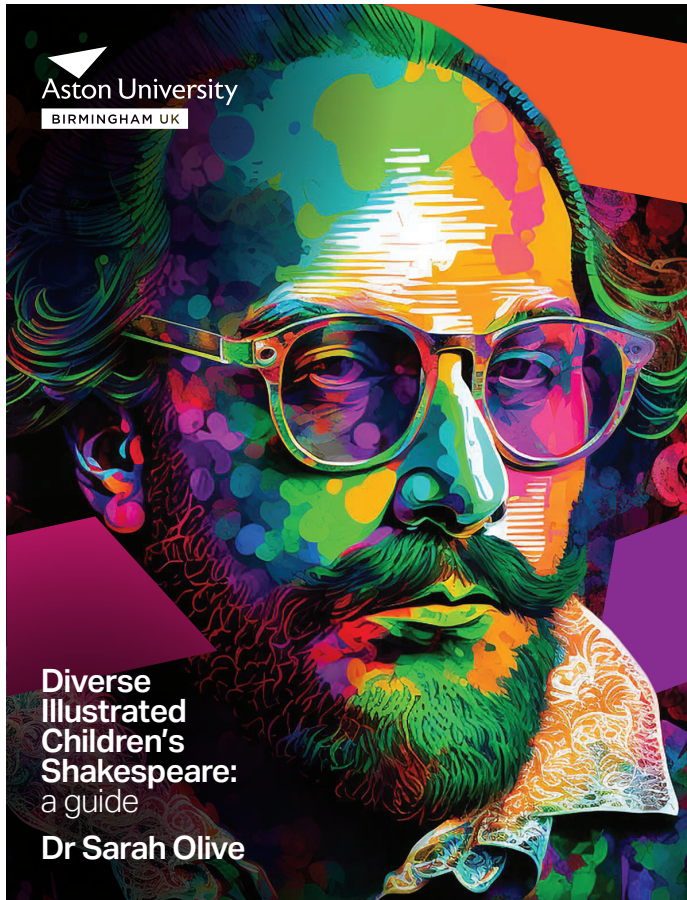
To access BBC Teach's suite of Shakespeare resources, including the new *Romeo and Juliet* animation, please visit: <https://bit.ly/3V4RNhc>

BBC
Teach



Illustration © BBC Teach

DIVERSE ILLUSTRATED CHILDREN'S SHAKESPEARE



DR SARAH OLIVE, Senior Lecturer of English, Languages and Applied Linguistics, Aston University, Birmingham, UK has been working on collating examples of illustrated Shakespeare for children.

Here she has put together a collection of diverse examples of children's Shakespeare that could provide you with ideas for your classroom or library. How would you use these varied interpretations in the classroom? We'd love to know!

This is based on Sarah's chapter on 'Racial Diversity in illustrated Shakespeare for children' in the forthcoming publication *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Visual Culture*.



Race and its representation

- Race is a social construct, a way of categorising people that exists in language and culture, not biological fact.
- Race has tangible impacts on people's lived experience.
- Representations of race impact on the lives of all people in societies that consume them.
- Diverse representation benefits all children: from boosting attainment, belonging, and self-esteem to increasing understanding of diverse cultures and empathy.
- For more on these points read the free PDF by Elliott et al, *Lit in Colour*.

Race in Illustrated Children's Shakespeare

Shakespeare's plays explicitly feature characters of colour. Examples include Cleopatra, Othello, Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*), and the Prince of Morocco (*Merchant of Venice*). However, film and theatre no longer rely on explicit cues in Shakespeare's texts, speculation about his intentions or original staging to enact racial diversity¹.

Support for diverse Shakespeare is well established in the policies of UK public arts funders and leading organisations such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT), and Shakespeare's Globe. Casting actors in 'non-traditional' or 'colour-blind' ways and portraying roles as characters of colour are widespread practices in filming and staging Shakespeare.

However, illustrated children's Shakespeare does not reflect the racial diversity of Shakespeare on screen and stage. Nor does it reflect the UK's population, including school populations (36% of pupils identified as BAME in the 2023 school census in England)².

We studied 83 illustrated Shakespeare books for children, stocked in the physical and online shops of the RSC, SBT and Globe. They included fictional and non-fictional picturebooks, graphic novels, manga and illustrated chapter books. We found:

- Only 1 book involved an author of colour: the foreword was attributed to them.
- There were 9 illustrators of colour, out of a total of 52 (17%).
- Less than half of all characters were depicted as people of colour.

This booklet includes a list of texts designed to support diverse illustrated children's Shakespeare – whether you're reading, teaching, selling or making it. Some of these books are models of inclusion. Others offer talking points around problematic representations. Many fall somewhere in-between.

Creators of Colour

The lack of creators of colour is exacerbated by many series having the same illustrator and author (or adaptor of Shakespeare) for each of the volumes in it. More diversity was seen in series with more creators involved.

The small amount of books by creators of colour tended to be aimed at older children. This may suggest that a white default is even stronger in publishing illustrated Shakespeare for young children.

Illustrated Shakespeare compares poorly with children's publishing generally in terms of the diversity of creators. Besides this being inherently problematic, it may perpetuate the over-representation of characters as white people. This study found that creators of colour were associated with texts containing more characters of colour.

Characters of Colour

People of colour still constitute a minority of characters in illustrated children's Shakespeare. However, a figure of around 50% in this study compares favourably with that of 20% in children's publishing generally in the UK (see the free PDF, *CLIP: Addressing Disabilities 2023*).

Characters of colour in these books overall occupied a wide range of roles – hero(ine)s, villains, lovers, friends, nobles, professionals and labourers. Fact books, however, tended to stereotype people of colour in racist ways, including them only in sections on slavery and criminality.

Characters of colour were rarely well served by the front covers, which were less diverse than the books' contents. Over three-quarters of covers did not depict characters of colour. In several cases, this was despite their contents featuring main characters of colour.

A note on terminology

This leaflet uses 'people of colour' and related terms to refer to the racial diversity of characters, as portrayed in these illustrated books, and their creators, as evidenced by public biographical data. Such terms represent our view of the best available fit for a study based on visual data. The nature of the data meant this study found it difficult to identify white ethnic minority creators and characters, except where the latter involve caricature. Related terms include global majority and BAME people, retained where we cite studies that use them.

Reading List

Bold and Brave Women from Shakespeare

Bold and Brave Women from Shakespeare is a picturebook that stands out as the only book in this study with some text attributed to an author of colour. While overall authorship is attributed to an organisation – the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust – Anja Chouhan, one of its lecturers, is identified as the author of the foreword. The book includes a range of characters drawn as people of colour.

Graphic Novel series

The Graphic Novel series published by Franklin Watts features illustrators and characters of colour, drawn in a range of roles, in Shakespearean settings. Noteworthy volumes in the series include:

- *Much Ado About Nothing* – Wendy Tan Shian Wei (illustrator), Steve Barlow and Steve Skidmore (adaptors).
- *Romeo and Juliet* – Wendy Tan Shian Wei (illustrator), Steve Barlow and Steve Skidmore (adaptors).
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – Edu Coll (illustrator), Steve Barlow and Steve Skidmore (adaptors).

Shakespeare Shake-ups series

Books in the Shakespeare Shake-Ups series of chapter books by Mark Beech (illustrator) and Ross Montgomery (author) adapt the plots to a British school setting. The pupils are drawn to suggest the school's multicultural make-up. Volumes in the series include:

- *Fortune's Fool* – based on *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Hurly Burly* – based on *Macbeth*
- *Rock Bottom* – based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Tripwrecked* – based on *The Tempest*

Tragic No Holds Bard

For older students, *Tragic*, the two-part graphic novel rewriting of *Hamlet* along the lines of a whodunnit, features characters with diverse racial and sexual identities. Dana Mele is the author, with Valentina Pinti (illustrator) and Chiara Di Francia (colourist). Similarly, *No Holds Bard* is a fast-paced graphic novel written by Eric Gladstone. It reimagines several plays with LGBTQ+ storylines, including racially diverse characters and creators: Gabrielle Kari (line artist), Ines Bravo (colourist), Aditya Bidikar (letter artist).

Manga Shakespeare series

The 'noughties' Manga Shakespeare series is published by Self Made Hero. With Richard Appignanesi adapting the text in each volume. It features illustrators and characters of colour, many East Asian, reflecting the medium's Japanese origins. Sci-fi, fantasy and shōjo genres frequently inform the artwork. See, for example:

- *Twelfth Night* – Nana Li (illustrator)
- *As You Like It* – Chie Kutsuwada (illustrator)
- *Romeo and Juliet* – Sonia Leong (illustrator)
- *Julius Caesar* – Mustashrik (illustrator)
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – Kate Brown (illustrator)

Manga Shakespeare (continued)

Adherence to manga conventions often creates ambiguously racialised characters – although manga publisher Saturday AM has outlined best practice on *How to Draw Diverse Manga*. Obviously racialised characters in the extensive series demonstrate variable takes on diversity. Contrast the *Macbeth* (Robert Deas - illustrator) featuring an entirely Japanese post-apocalyptic samurai 'cast' with:

- *The Merchant of Venice* – Faye Yong (illustrator), which distinguishes Jewish characters with heavy, kohl eyeliner.
- *King Lear* – Ilya (illustrator), which is set among First Nation and settler Americans, with a 'Red Indian chief' cover.
- *Othello* – Ryuta Osada (illustrator), which features a shining white title character on its cover, although inside he appears a darker shade of greyscale than other characters.

Manga Classics series

More recently published, the Manga Classics Shakespeare volumes frequently feature East Asian heritage creators as both adaptors and illustrators, again using a manga style that ambiguously racialises characters. They write engaging final sections on the 'making of' each book. Creators of the volumes read for this study include Julien Choy (illustrator), Crystal S. Chan (story adaptor), and Michael Barltrop (modern English adaptor).

Shakespeare for Everyone

History and fact books dealing with the life and times of Shakespeare often fail to depict historic and current social diversity. The people drawn in *Shakespeare for Everyone* by Sarah Tanat Jones (illustrator) and Emma Roberts (author) help this picturebook towards fulfilling its title.

Orchard Shakespeare series

The Orchard Shakespeare series (Andrew Matthews – adaptor, Tony Ross – illustrator) contains some similar discussion points around representing diversity to the above volumes in Manga Shakespeare. Drawings of Othello, Shylock and Cleopatra contain elements of caricature in the depiction of Black, Jewish, and Egyptian characters. It limits racial diversity to the few characters of colour identified in the plays. It remains widely stocked.





EXAMINING SHAKESPEARE AT A LEVEL

IS IT ALL THAT IT COULD BE?

A recent set of Twitter exchanges about exam questions at A Level, past and present, got me thinking about changes in examining practices and their implications for learning in English Literature courses, including the whole conceptualisation of what the subject is. I went back through some of my own archive material, looking at questions set by Awarding Bodies and also examples of student writing that I have accumulated over many years. Here I offer a few thoughts on some of what I've found in relation to the study of Shakespeare, but it could equally apply to other authors and genres too.

THE LOSS OF COURSEWORK

Looking back at examining and exam questions from the past, I was struck by a number of things. First, there's the question of what is now no longer examined, (and therefore taught), as a result of the loss of a significant amount of coursework.

Many specifications do not currently offer the opportunity to do any Shakespeare coursework, focusing the small number of marks available on other genres and periods. Looking at student coursework folders from 1980s, I saw students writing extended pieces, on Shakespeare texts – substantial essays that ranged across the whole play and drew in a broad selection of evidence. There was also much more variety in the nature of the tasks set (either determined by the teachers themselves or chosen by the students from a range of possible tasks). Because the conditions under which coursework was undertaken could be taken into account, not every piece was necessarily written in the same way, or even necessarily after studying the whole of a play.

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So, for instance, I found a piece by a student of mine, about *Twelfth Night*, written after going to see a production at the Riverside Theatre and before we had even finished reading the play in class. He was not a very high attaining student, but I gave him a relatively high grade, on the basis that his strong analysis of the production was entirely his own, unsupported by classroom work. It seemed to me that his own personal views were well founded, interesting

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and showed real insight into the characters and themes of the play. I knew the ideas and phrasing were his own, because we had been to the theatre together and there were no model essays or set formats for him to draw on. The plagiarism issue was dealt with here, quite simply. His parents were not with him, watching the play! ‘This is what he is capable of, unaided’, was my judgement – a very different kind of judgement to that made nowadays, when it is almost inevitably ‘This is what they are capable of, with a huge amount of support, teacher input, supplying many, if not most of, the ideas, on this particular single occasion when they are being tested.’

The coursework essays that I found included such production reviews, a close focus on a single scene, wide-ranging discussions of the role of characters, contentious or unusual readings put to the test and so on. For instance, one essay on *Measure for Measure* explored the fascinating idea that Angelo and Isabella were, in fact, very alike, both representing aspects of the same world view and way of behaving.

WHAT'S MISSING FROM EXAMINED WORK

Looking at articles submitted by students to *emagazine* over the 15 years of it being published by EMC also provides interesting insights into the examining of Shakespeare and its severe limitations. While many students simply submit an essay to the magazine, often prompted by a teacher, there are also occasionally pieces that do something radically different. It's great to see the affordances offered by these different kinds of articles. Many students are clearly capable of so much more than a standard exam essay allows. Recent examples include the student who wrote about the skull in Hamlet. This piece was provoked by her interest in a song by David Bowie that references Hamlet and Yorick's skull. She went on to look at the skull as a symbol of death in paintings of St

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Francis of Assisi, dramatist John Webster's works and the *Rokesby Venus*. This was an original piece of the highest quality – way more ambitious, wide-ranging and well-researched than one might have hoped for from an A Level student, yet sadly probably highly unlikely to be included in her A Level assessment (though perhaps as an EPQ – an Extended Project Qualification).

As with the piece on the Riverside production, the way this piece was conceived was uniquely her own and it was clear that there was no likelihood of plagiarism. I did actually check with her teachers but was pretty sure from the unique juxtaposition of texts that it had to be her own. The element of choice, and a self-generated angle and title, provide one way in which one can guard against plagiarism. If the student has to come up with a thesis or choose a fresh angle, they will be less likely to regurgitate what they've read elsewhere. David Bowie and the skull protects more against that than the tired question about why Hamlet delays, or whether Macbeth is a free agent or subject to supernatural control by the witches.

Another recent piece, also on *Hamlet*, reinforces this. The student recounted her experience of creating a signed translation of the play, for a local theatre production. The student not only shared the experience of devising the signing and then doing the signing for a live performance but also reflected on the insights she gained into the play itself – a highly illuminating read all round.

A third kind of writing that we sometimes see from students in *emagazine* is that which takes a broader angle on Shakespeare as a playwright, considering his iconic status and the whole notion of 'bardolatry'. In 2013, a writer caused a public stir by suggesting that Shakespeare should no longer be studied in his original language but rather in modern translation. As editor of *emagazine*, I called for a response from students and they were eager to join in the debate. We published three short pieces by students, all of whom argued cogently against this idea, explaining why Shakespeare's language was not too difficult for students and making the case for the language itself being an essential part of the value of the texts. Again, this kind of broad, cultural thinking sadly has little place in the current A Level specifications – except perhaps as part of an induction, or an element in enlightened teachers' enrichment offer, but certainly not for examination.

RECREATIVE WRITING

One final area that is almost entirely excluded from current examining in English Literature specifications (with the exception of one OCR option for coursework, and some Lang/Lit specifications) is the recreative angle, where

interpretation takes the form of transformation, writing in the style of, or taking on the voice of characters, to provide insights into character, theme and plot.

John Hodgson, in his excellent article, 'Authenticity, Validity and Reliability in A-level English Literature' January 2017 FORUM 59(2):183, remembers the kinds of tasks that teachers generated for their students: Creative assignments discussed in consortium meetings included the use of a minor character in one play as a major one in another (after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*).

What a great idea for textual transformation as critical/creative analysis!

Mainly, it wasn't that common in the early coursework I saw on Shakespeare, perhaps because writing in the voice of a character or recreative writing can be somewhat harder with early modern texts, than with modern ones, and drama as compared with fiction. However, as the Hogarth Press adaptations of Shakespeare by Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Howard Jacobson and others show, it's a rich seam to mine. I myself have written stories based on Shakespeare texts in my book *An Inspector Called* – one from the perspective of Fleance in *Macbeth*, another written in the voice of Juliet's nurse's sister, lamenting the role given to her, and a third playing with notions of the desert island in relation to *The Tempest* and other texts. I would argue that recreative writing is just as much an interpretative form as critical writing and I think it's deeply regrettable that there's so little scope in current A Level study for it to either be done, or assessed as evidence of students' critical response.

FINAL EXAMS – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

When it comes to changes over time to the exam questions and marking for timed examinations, there's a big piece of research just waiting to be done. I can't pretend to have done a thorough look at past questioning – pre-curriculum 2000, the changes in 2008, the ones in 2015 and also differences across specifications during these periods. However, just looking at a few past papers and exam reports gives an illuminating glimpse of how much has changed and what the impact of that has been.

In my view, the introduction and application of Assessment Objectives has been a double-edged sword. The AOs have defined more closely what the subject entails, which may have been no bad thing at the outset, but the way they have been used has increasingly constrained and shrunk what counts as literary writing, atomising elements that should only ever have been seen as operating in a holistic way. Reliability seems to have trumped validity in judging

whether a qualification is fit for purpose. One can see this in the questions, Mark Schemes and Examiners' Reports and the extent to which they foreground fulfilment of precise requirements, or rather emphasise the importance of students' own personal response and thoughtful ideas about the text.

So, for instance, here is a question from 2007 – after the introduction of AOs admittedly but in an earlier form. It is from an OCR Literature paper and it asks 'How far do you agree that the ending of *The Tempest* leaves unanswered questions.' It is followed by two bullet points saying, 'In the course of your answer: explain clearly how Shakespeare presents the ending of the play; comment on what the play suggests about forgiveness.'

Now, a question like this seems to me to be a wonderful, fresh invitation to a student who has been thinking hard about the play for themselves. It demands thinking on your feet. It opens up lots of possibilities.

And reading the exam report on this question is a lovely reminder of what examiners can be looking for in English Literature exams. The comments do not foreground the mechanics of essay writing and the highly specific fulfilment of AOs – have they quoted, shown how language shapes meaning, used clear expression and so on – but rather focus on the ideas themselves. Foreground is ideas, background is the operations that allow students to express these ideas well.

The best candidates tended not only to list the unanswered questions in the various plot strands at the end of the play, but also to construct a theory about the open-ended, questioning nature of the play. Prospero's forgiving of Antonio was one of the main topics considered: it was regarded either as part of the process of completion or as raising unanswered questions about Antonio's state of mind and the genuineness of the forgiveness. Many candidates made use of contextual information about the place of the play in Shakespeare's writing career and some were aware of genre considerations: the lack of complete resolution suggests romance rather than comedy.

Going further back, I found the Chief Examiners' Report from 1988 for the AEB 660, 50% coursework specification. Peter Buckroyd, the Chief Examiner, gave a strong steer to the specification and superb training for those teachers who did it, and the general preamble offers a fascinating insight into what mattered in that style of examining. Though I'm sure many teachers and Examiners now would concur with much of what is said, the forthrightness of the messages he gave are clear and powerful.



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Marks are awarded generously to candidates whose prime study has been of the texts set rather than of secondary sources. A play, a novel or an anthology is not set so that teachers can dictate notes on it to their students who simply reproduce these in the examination room. It is certainly not set to enable students to go out and buy commercially produced notes which then substitute for the text set [. . .] No examiner can mistake the language of the teacher, or far worse, the language of the 'crib-book' for the genuine article – the student's own voice.

“the student's own voice needs to be heard . . . tragic if, in today's climate, those voices only ring out in activity on the margins of the curriculum, rather than being absolutely at the heart of the whole examining process for the subject.”

Though this was said about the whole exam, it applied equally to the Shakespeare element, perhaps even more so. With so much published criticism on texts like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and a vast number of publications specifically directed at students and the demands of the exams, it is all the more difficult for teachers and students to hold their nerve and trust to the essentials of the subject, which are about what a reader/viewer makes of a text/production, what thoughts, feelings and unique insights they can bring to bear. The student's own voice needs to be heard, as it most definitely is in the examples I quoted earlier in this article. Tragic if, in today's climate, those voices only ring out in activity on the margins of the curriculum, (such as in EPQs or *emagazine* articles) rather than being absolutely at the heart of the whole examining process for the subject.



ACCESSIBLE SHAKESPEARE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN OXFORD COLLEGE

The Jesus College Shakespeare Project (JCSP) is ‘a new collaboration between the College Access and Development Teams which aims to present abridged versions of Shakespeare’s plays for audiences of local schools and a wider audience of College alumni and supporters’. This is a quotation from the Welcome page of the programme for the first play in the project, *The Comedy of Errors*, November 2021. In an Oxford University Drama Society podcast interview, Artistic Director Peter Sutton, explained that the ‘idea was conceived when thinking of how Shakespeare could be integrated into the 450 year celebrations of Jesus College, and how could this be integrated with access work’. There are plans for productions of each play in the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, with one play produced each term. The project is about increasing the accessibility of Shakespeare, Sutton stated that it is about ‘How to make complicated plays accessible, especially to young people, in terms of the “whole canon of work” and the education outreach’ (Sutton 2021). A similar project is the Royal Shakespeare Company’s First Encounters project, information on the RSC website states that ‘... productions are created to give 7–13 year olds a fantastic first experience of Shakespeare whilst also being brilliant introductions for anyone new to his work. Using edited versions of the original language, they bring the plays to life on stage in just 90 minutes’ (RSC no date). The JCSP productions were planned to last approximately 90 minutes, and they take place in the college hall.

The structure of the paper is to first consider some recent writing which relates to the style and themes of the project, discussion of the project in the context of the cultural history of the college, and its recent development, the processes of script editing and casting for the productions, then discussion of the first three plays in the project. Focussing on selected ideas and themes this paper will explore the relevance and topicality of the works of Shakespeare in terms of the project.

Recent writing which relates to the themes of the JCSP, includes an article by L. Gardner; ‘Staging Shakespeare: Is too much reverence holding UK theatre makers back?’ (Gardner 2021). The article discusses contemporary approaches to Shakespeare in British theatre. How

Shakespeare is the national playwright, and observations about how British directors are intimidated to embrace innovative approaches to production of his plays, because they are constrained and intimidated by the cultural heritage of the works. Gardner writes that UK Shakespeare productions ‘sometimes feel like a burden rather than a gift and intimidating to artists rather than liberating...’. Gardner discusses the thoughts of directors and academics about ‘breaking down the walls that have often made the playwright untouchable’, observing that British productions of Shakespeare could be more innovative, rather than be blinkered about preservation of historical directing techniques. Gardner writes that foreign directors are more likely to produce Shakespeare with fresh perspectives and includes a quotation from Romanian director, Alex Istudor who is based on the UK, that he perceived a lot of Shakespeare produced in the UK seems like it ‘...has come out of a museum, not out of a director really interrogating the play’ (Gardner 2021). The directing style of the first JCSP performances did preserve historical aspects such as original language, and the performance took place in a venue which had a relationship to the time of Shakespeare – Jesus College was founded by Queen Elizabeth I of England. It was also innovative in many ways unique to the project.

A recently published book, *Culinary Shakespeare: Staging Food and Drink in Early Modern England* (2016) explores culinary dynamics in Shakespeare’s plays. A sentence in the introduction states that ‘Shakespeare was fascinated by how the meaning of food and drink change according to different contexts, and his fantastical uses of food always bring us back to lived experiences’ (Goldstein, Tigner & Wall 2016 p.5).

The JCSP productions are set in a college hall and have integrated eating and contemporary food-featuring international brands. This seemed to facilitate consideration of the relationship of food and the cultural heritage of Shakespeare, to issues about food, locale and globalisation. Essays in the book ‘keep in mind’ the relationship between-’topical pressures of current debates about locavorism and the trade in global food commodities’, while considering ‘Shakespearean food and drink as starting points for mappings locales of food production, consumption, and spectacle’ (Ibid. P.9).

Jesus College was founded in 1571 (Jesus College no date), and the location of the college hall where the



Photo © Sophia Calame/Jesus College Shakespeare Project 2022

performances take place is a historical environment dating from the Shakespearean era, featuring a large portrait of the founder Elizabeth I dated 1590. As a citizen, I observed the development of the new Northgate building on the street facing side of the college onto a pedestrian shopping street, Cornmarket, with the billboards hiding street level building work. These boards featured text and images giving information about the contemporary development of the college, with planned modern facilities and a digital hub, in relationship to information relating to development of awareness of the cultural history of the college, part of how the college presented its developing image to the outside world. This included a colour reproduction of the portrait of Elizabeth I. To give quotations of a couple of sentences from the text on the billboard display that seemed to relate to the JCSP; 'Jesus Fellows remain experts in Elizabethan studies, their research giving new insights into the Elizabethan Age', another sentence read 'Northgate will help us make new links with other colleges and University facilities, provide space for outreach activities with schools, and share ideas with the public through talks, films, performances and exhibitions'. These displays were designed before the JCSP was conceived, so connections with the themes weren't direct.

When I interviewed Peter Sutton about the process of script editing, he stated that he uses Arden 3, which is a 'modern spelling edition', reads it through a couple of times and then makes the cuts. Arden editions are used by 'a lot of undergraduates' because it has '... modern presentation of text but has all those critical notes', so it is clear what changes editors have made (Sutton 2022). With some editions of Shakespeare, changes are made which

'can alter the meaning of the text', however Arden editions will say 'if they've altered the text . . . what they've done to it' (Ibid.). The edit for JCSP made by Sutton doesn't assume prior knowledge of the text.

About the casting process, Sutton has cited the director Tyrone Guthrie, that 'as a director 80% of the job in some ways is casting . . . It doesn't take 80% of the time – because that is probably one of the biggest interpretative choices...' (Sutton 2022). Gender balancing is an important part of the project. He planned to have a 50/50 balance of male and female identifying performers. The interpretation of individual characters depends on the role and casting – in the production of *The Comedy of Errors*, the two Dromios were played by female identifying performers, performing as male characters – the casted actresses looked similar. The diversity of casting was also important (Sutton 2021).

In terms of the creative process working with the cast and the script, Sutton has stated that as a first step, he always undertakes a reading of the whole text with the cast. The next stage is the paraphrasing exercise, where 'We spent the first week of rehearsals going through [the script] line by line and using the RSC method of translating every line into our own words, it takes time but it's incredibly revealing. We've discovered so many ideas that way, so it means that the actors know what they're talking about'. Ideas develop through this process, and it is as 'collaborative as possible, we've worked a lot of interpretation through as a cast collectively, rather than me enforcing it on the cast' (Sutton 2022).

With the performers in modern dress, the productions

evoked contemporary situations and college dynamics. The productions had a unique relationship to the Elizabethan era, while also facilitating audience engagement with the contemporary relevance of Shakespeare. Information from the Welcome page of the programme *The Comedy of Errors*, the first production in the project, states that as well as being filled ‘with laughter and excitement’, it also ‘engages with deeply contemporary issues, such as the plight of migrants, the questioning of traditional gender roles, and the privileging of trade over human lives’ (Sutton 2021). Sutton has stated that the choice of play was made before the COVID pandemic, however since the storyline is about the separation and later reunion of a family, for him, ‘COVID / post COVID / still in COVID’ is still ‘the world we’re living through’ and this ‘does have a resonance with *The Comedy of Errors*’ that he ‘would never have guessed in 2019’ (Sutton 2022).

To focus in detail on some aspects of the production, an early scene in the play evoked a changing room – a mirror was an aspect of the minimal stage set, which stayed on set for the whole play. This seemed to be a way of making the audience feel closer to the characters, as usually changing clothes in theatre happens offstage. The audience sitting opposite the mirror were reflected as well as the actors, and this would have made them feel part of the action and see a reflection of themselves sitting on a bench in an Oxford college dining hall. A reference to a mirror in the script near the end of the play seemed to reference the mirror as a piece of furniture onstage, where one of the ‘twin’ Dromio characters says reflections about ‘being’ a mirror of the other Dromio.

Contemporary food brands were present in the performance. The first performance of this play had a relationship to food – at Gray’s Inn on the 28th December 1594, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, Sutton has stated that this ‘was a chaotic night, they were all drunk... all sorts of errors were happening offstage as well as on, it was the sort of boozy night they were having’ (Sutton 2022). To give an example of eating in the JCSP production, the Loan shark character ate an Itsu takeaway (an Asian inspired brand). This was food the actor had had in rehearsal, since the rehearsals happened at tea time, and it was decided this would be integrated into the performance. Sutton has stated that ‘The situation is very much in our world that . . . the brands are there’. Food in the show was bought on Cornmarket – this brought aspects of the city into the college, giving a sense of contemporary student life and a sense of being part of eating in hall.

The second show in the project in February 2022 was a production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, one of

Shakespeare’s earliest plays. In the question and answer session with the cast and audience after the show, Sutton stated that this was a weaker play than *The Comedy of Errors*, and there are inconsistencies in the style of writing. In the discussion, it was mentioned that it was felt that the play has a difficult ending, rather than the happy ending you expect, this is an example of an inconsistency. Notes in the ‘Welcome’ page of the programme state that this play was written ‘by a writer who is yet to develop fully. The structure and language can feel uneven and the sudden changes of tone likewise jarring’. For this production, the play had been considered ‘on its own merits’ (Sutton 2022). To give an example of the integration of college dynamics, in the first scene, a character, Valentine sets off travelling from Verona, with a large suitcase which he drags across the floor. This was evocative of how contemporary students transport their belongings to and from college, might leave a college to go travelling, sparking thoughts about the world outside college walls.

The third production in the JCSP, in May 2022 was *The Taming of the Shrew*. The action of the play is set in Padua and Verona. In one scene, a character looked at a city map on a smartphone, holding the phone in a way that members of the audience could see the screen. This was a clever way of integrating ideas about geography and was part of the contemporary presentation of the play. The storyline is focussed on two sisters Bianca and Katherine, and the arrangement of their marriages – their father a Paduan businessman. For this production, the wooden benches were arranged so that the audience was sitting along two sides of the hall in an L shape, with the tables and benches along one side of the hall left empty so they could be used in the performance. For example, in a scene where a guitar is tuned for a music lesson, the musician sat on a table. Peter Sutton has written about the staging of the feast scene at the end of the play and how this worked in terms of the arrangement of furniture, giving a sense of the action:

‘The final scene of *The Taming of the Shrew* was staged to resemble a formal dinner which would take place within the Hall in its College context. Despite the formality and the pretensions of the wedding guests, bar Petruchio and Katherine (who were seated together appear from the formal group), the tensions between the characters bubbled over – fuelled by the characters’ having drunk a lot at the reception – leading to a break down in the formality (such as Bianca clambering over the table). It was against this context of exposed privilege that Katherine gave a very pointed and direct version of her (in)famous final speech, pointing out the clear hypocrisy of the rest of Paduan society’ (Sutton 2023).

To conclude, in this paper I have introduced related themes and ideas and described the first three plays in the JCSP. The unique style in which these plays were produced presented the works as relevant to contemporary audiences, facilitating contemporary engagement with the works in an environment where the audience are on the same level as the actors. The spoken text from the scripts evoked the location where the plays were set, the performances took place in a historical dining hall and the style of the productions evoked a contemporary environment.

The performances were successful and set the tone for further development of the project, with ambitious plans for performances of, eventually the complete works of Shakespeare, at the cutting edge of the development of education practice relating to Shakespeare, and the development of ideas relating to college access.

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TRUST FUND BABIES, FOLLOWERS AND QUEEN BEES

A MODERN LOOK AT SHAKESPEARE'S *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

JODI NATHANSON has been a High School English Teacher (grades 9–12) for over 20 years and currently teaches at the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto. She received her degrees from Queen's University in Ontario, where she majored in English, minored in Drama and graduated from the University's Concurrent Education program. Jodi holds an English Honours Specialist from OISE and has also filled the role of Co-Head of the English Department at Tanenbaum CHAT. Her work has been published in the *E-journal Literary Yard*, in the online literary magazine *The Bangalore Review*, *Canadian Teacher Magazine* (print and online) and online in *The Wilderness House Literary Review*. Jodi lives with her husband, 2 teenage girls, a dog and a cat in Toronto. She loves fiction novels (especially the classics) and believes strongly in the power of words.

I am a High School English teacher who has been teaching grade 9 English for more than 20 years. One of my favourite parts of the job is teaching the Shakespeare unit to young students, many of whom have never encountered the Bard's work before. It is a privilege, a challenge and a calling because being able to expose young minds to Shakespeare's timeless brilliance is a rare gift. In this day and age where students' attention spans are much shorter (thank you TikTok) teaching a full length Shakespearean "Problem Play" written in 1598 is not an easy feat. Consequently, I find myself looking for ways to hook the students early, so that they "buy in" to the unit and engage with the material for more than a few minutes at a time. In recent years, I have noticed how the social hierarchies and friend groups in *The Merchant of Venice* are a relatable avenue into Shakespeare's complex and classic text, which explores many apropos concepts such as prejudice, social injustice, the outsider and what it means to be human.

"I HAVE NOTICED HOW THE SOCIAL HIERARCHIES AND FRIEND GROUPS IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* ARE A RELATABLE AVENUE INTO SHAKESPEARE'S COMPLEX AND CLASSIC TEXT, WHICH EXPLORES MANY APROPOS CONCEPTS SUCH AS PREJUDICE, SOCIAL INJUSTICE, THE OUTSIDER AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN."

The lyrics from the Broadway musical, *Wicked* definitely apply to *The Merchant of Venice* as Shakespeare's play

is, in some respects, "all about popular" (*Wicked*). In the opening scene, set in Venice, Italy, the audience meets the brooding Antonio, the play's Merchant and one of its main characters. The audience sees that Antonio is well respected and holds a high status position within his friend group of stylish Venetian men, despite the fact that he seems to be the only one who needs to work to maintain his comfortable lifestyle. His close bond with Bassanio, a popular gentleman, helps to solidify Antonio's high rank amongst his peers. Bassanio is physically attractive, charming, and comes from a wealthy family; everyone in Venice seems to want to fraternize with him and Antonio is his number one. Bassanio's affluent parents have cramped his style by "disabl[ing] [his] estate" (Shakespeare 1.1 123) because they are, most likely, frustrated with their son's prodigal ways and sense of entitlement. Bassanio spends excessively on parties and entertainment and even borrows money from his friends to satisfy his hedonistic desires, which reveals that he is indeed flawed, despite his obvious popularity. The main plot of the play involves Bassanio using Antonio's good "credit" (1.1180) to secure a loan with a much despised moneylender. The irresponsible and shallow Bassanio needs ready cash in order to fund an elaborate journey to Belmont, so he can woo and win the beautiful heiress Portia, marry her for her riches, clear his debts and solve all of his financial woes. Antonio's money is all tied up in his ships and "ventures" (1.1 42), but he expects a windfall once they come in. Antonio agrees to give his best buddy, Bassanio, a second loan despite the fact that Bassanio is already in debt to Antonio for a previous one. The idea that perhaps the two men privately harbour romantic feelings for one another, complicates matters further and might explain why Antonio is so generous and willing to compromise his beliefs to do business with his enemy, the Jewish Shylock, on Bassanio's behalf. Antonio only wants happiness for his closest and dearest companion. The other members of their circle seem to be aware of this special bond between the "sad" (1.1. 1) merchant Antonio and the frivolous gentleman Bassanio and constantly defer to them or leave them alone with one another. The best friend dynamic is something that is certainly familiar to today's teenagers; it can feel intense for those in the relationship and isolating to those outside of it.

Every clique contains followers, who are a key element to a group's energy and make up. Salerio and Solanio have no distinct personality traits or defining features and therefore, students often confuse the two characters.

Their main role is to provide background information through lengthy speeches and they are also present in the play's most social scenes. They care deeply about Antonio's mental and physical health and they want to please him. They know their place in the hierarchy, have no interest in social climbing and seem content just to be included. After all, Bassanio throws the best parties in all of Venice and being part of his posse ensures that they will always receive an invitation. Comments like, "Fare ye well: We leave you now with better company" (1.1 58–59), upon the arrival of Bassanio, Gratiano and Lorenzo, indicate that Solario and Solanio recognize how Antonio prefers his "worthier" friends' (1.1 61) company to theirs, but they do not mind. Antonio denies that he plays favourites, but Solario and Solanio have the ability to read social cues and they know when to disappear. Further, when Salerio informs Bassanio, "We'll make our leisures to attend on yours" (1.1 69), he reveals how easygoing he and his friend are and how they will rearrange their free time around Bassanio's more important schedule. Salerio and Solanio are relatable; they are aware of their position in the group and they do not make any waves or demands. They do not seem to care that they lack power and status since they have the knowledge that it feels better to be included in this "squad" than to be excluded. The two also have each other. All of this feels very real and today's teenagers relate to Salerio and Solanio's desire to belong to a group, even if the group itself is not as ideal as it may outwardly appear.

Other characters who seem content to "follow the leaders" are Lorenzo and Jessica. Lorenzo is a handsome, young, romantic, too distracted by love to lead with anything but his heart and his love interest happens to be Shylock's daughter, Jessica. Although she sacrifices everything, including her religious faith, to fit in with Lorenzo and his Christian buddies, she will always be seen as an outsider because of who her father is. Lorenzo seems

to be insecure about this and constantly seeks approval from his Christian pals. It is not enough for Lorenzo to like Jessica; he needs his friends to like her, too. "Beshrew me, but I love her heartily" (2.6 52) he says in a self-deprecating manner after Jessica has stolen jewelry and money from her father's house in a desperate attempt to fit in and to prove her newfound loyalty to her new crowd. Lorenzo's friends support him and even facilitate Jessica's escape from her father's "sober house" (2.5 36) through the streets of Venice, so the two lovebirds can secretly elope. The gang even covertly manages to get Shylock out for the evening, by inviting him as a guest to Bassanio's party, solely for that purpose, and Shylock grudgingly accepts, because deep down, he most likely longs to be included, too. One must remember that this is the same man who, after years of enduring persecution from the Christian community, tells Antonio, "I would be friends with you, and have your love" (1.3 134) even after Antonio has "spit[] upon [Shylock's] Jewish gaberdine" (1.3 107) and beard (1.3 113). The Venetian men may seem to accept Jessica, for Lorenzo's sake, but they continually refer to her as "a gentle, and no Jew" (2.5 51), punning on the word gentle/ gentile, drawing attention to her desire to change from Jewish to Christian and while Lorenzo might see his beloved as "wise, fair and true" (2.5 56), neither she nor he can escape her "otherness". The characters in this play feel like they need to overcompensate in order to be accepted and this is very relatable to young people today, who so strongly crave a sense of belonging with their peers that they will sometimes compromise their morals and change their identity in order to fit in.

Additionally, like most friend groups, all members of the elite Venice crew possess distinct personality traits, which affects their social standing within the group. Gratiano, for example, is the "clown" or joker. His chums find him entertaining (albeit embarrassing at times), but there is no one who is more fun at party; Gratiano's *joie de vivre*



Illustration © Mario Breda/Shutterstock.com

is unmatched. Gratiano is garrulous and often dismissed because his friends are not all that interested in his ideas about life, even though his speeches do, upon closer examination, contain more substance than “two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff” (1.1.116). They tease him constantly. During Shylock’s trial scene, he is presented as one of the most anti-semitic and cruel characters in the play, but before this point, the audience might feel some sympathy for this character who might want to break free from “play[ing] the fool” (1.1.79). Perhaps Gratiano, like many teenagers today, feels weighed down by the expectations of his peers and would like to be treated more seriously, but he sticks to his habitual role because that ensures inclusion and a valued place within the group.

Lastly, there is no doubt that the “It” girl in this play is the beautiful, rich and brilliant heiress, Portia. Men desire her and women want to emulate her. She is ruthless when she describes the suitors who all long for her hand in marriage and she is very particular and snobby in her tastes. Her late father designed a casket game, before he passed away, and suitors “from every coast” (1.1.168) come “in quest of her” (1.1.172). Everyone seems to be aware of Portia’s elevated “worth” (1.1.168) and the men are quick to objectify her. The racist comments Portia makes about the Prince of Morocco, who is willing to risk everything for a chance at her hand, are often cut from modern productions because it becomes nearly impossible to like and respect Portia when she is supposed to be the heroine of this play. Nerissa is her best friend and confidante, but she is also Portia’s Lady in Waiting who is employed by her. This creates an interesting best friend dynamic. Portia continually reminds Nerissa of the difference in their social status whether it concerns their double marriage (Portia to Bassanio and Nerissa to the inferior Gratiano) or how she will “prove the prettier of the two” (3.4.63) when they dress up as men for the infamous trial scene where Portia saves Antonio from Shylock’s wrath and knife. Many students have noted that Nerissa copies almost everything Portia does, but it is always the ring trick, where Portia has the idea of testing Bassanio’s loyalty and Nerissa does the exact same to Gratiano, that they find most pathetic. Additionally, to make matters worse, Jessica worships the flawed and narcissistic Portia. When Jessica arrives in Belmont after her conversion to Christianity and marriage to Lorenzo, one notices that Jessica is, once again, viewed as an outsider. Upon her arrival, Gratiano jokingly calls her Lorenzo’s “infidel” (3.2.217) despite the fact that she has abandoned her father and her Jewish roots. Gratiano later tells his wife to “cheer yond stranger” and “bid her welcome” (3.2.234) because he recognizes how Nerissa and Portia seem to be tolerating Jessica, but there is no warmth. The Belmont women are not particularly inclusive

or kind to Jessica and the more they ignore her, the harder Jessica tries to win them over; it is certainly uncomfortable to watch. Jessica even goes so far as to exaggerate and possibly lie about her father Shylock’s vengefulness and bloodthirsty desires when she shares, “When I was with him, I have heard him swear to Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen, that he would rather have Antonio’s flesh than twenty times the value of the sum” (283–286). If this is not enough, Jessica uses Cosmic imagery to describe how much she adores Portia saying how the “poor rude world Hath not her fellow” (3.5.76–77). This is painful, yet recognizable behaviour and any teenager would recognize the realistic and troubling power dynamics that exist amongst insecure individuals trying to win the approval of the “Queen Bee”.

“I WOULD ARGUE THAT THE VALUE IN TEACHING THIS DIFFICULT, YET EYE OPENING TEXT, ORIGINALLY MARKETED AS A SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY, IS MORE MEANINGFUL AND RELEVANT THAN EVER GIVEN TODAY’S CURRENT CLIMATE.”

The Merchant of Venice, a 16th century play, is predominantly known for its antisemitism and racism and characters who are both mistreated and behave poorly. I would argue that the value in teaching this difficult, yet eye opening text, originally marketed as a Shakespearean comedy, is more meaningful and relevant than ever given today’s current climate. Through its portrayal of flawed characters, from all backgrounds, Shakespeare’s timeless work instructs that we need to do better and be better as humans. *The Merchant of Venice* can be a challenging text to teach to today’s youth; however, no one understood human behaviour and group dynamics better than Shakespeare did. This is not new to us, but it is certainly something that one can address to make the relationships in a seemingly dated play like *The Merchant of Venice* seem as contemporary as those in Tina Fey’s ever popular movie *Mean Girls*.

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a NUTURING active approach to *the DREAM*

PEMBE BONDS is a recent graduate student of the UCL Institute of Education, where she trained for her PGCE in Secondary: English.

On learning I would be teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* during my second PGCE placement, I thought of how to make Shakespeare's tale full of fairies, mishaps, mischief, love and quarrels, immersive and practical for students, encouraging creative and critical responses. The complicated relationships between friends, lovers, and parent and child are at the play's core, and character connections became the focal point of lessons with my Year 7 class – a nurture group of 15 students with additional social, emotional, behavioural, and learning needs. Shakespeare's plays, as with all literary, dramatic and musical works, have the potential to appeal to audiences of different backgrounds and ages due to the meaning we bring to and make of them. In Emma Smith's *This Is Shakespeare*, she puts forward that 'Shakespeare takes shape through our interpretations.' The essence of Shakespeare is in the 'reading, thinking, questioning, interpreting, animating', namely 'our engagement with the works'. As an interactive and transformative entity, Shakespeare inspired me to think about how I could provide my students with the opportunity for experiential learning; role-play, writing in role, and recreative writing were effective avenues for this.

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My second placement was at a Church of England secondary school for girls in an upmarket area of Central London with an ethnically diverse student population, nearly half of whom spoke English as an additional language. I wanted to enable my Year 7 students to bring themselves into the play and find ways to relate and form meaning, regardless of their backgrounds and prior knowledge of Shakespeare, so one of the first activities we did was to discuss different scenarios presented in the play and what choices students would make if they were in the characters' shoes. One such choice was listening to or disobeying a parental figure who forbade them from being friends with someone. This idea generated heated discussion among students, eliciting unanimous "Nos!" from the girls, with one student, Frances, remarking that "It's about what I want, not them", 'them' meaning her

parents. Students then did a short role-play activity in pairs, playing either the child or parental figure and considering what they would say and how they would respond to the other person's position. Most groups took on rebellious daughter and overbearing parent personas, which it could be said accurately reflects Hermia and Egeus' dynamic in the play, except for Mina's group, who decided to take a more sensitive and nuanced approach.

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Mina, who role-played as the parental figure, portrayed a concerned parent offering well-intentioned advice about relationships to their daughter. Over the limited time that I taught her, I got the impression that Mina came from quite a traditional background in that respecting authority and her parents' cultural beliefs and values were important to her. After reading through the play's first scene, where Egeus brings Hermia to the Athenian court to demand she marry his choice of suitor, the class summarised their impressions of Egeus, writing their thoughts on the question, 'Is Egeus a good father?'. Mina interpreted Egeus' controllingness as indicative of his caring and worry for his daughter – he 'wants the best' for her and for 'everything to be perfect', she wrote. This piecing together of the narrative and character intentions by Mina exemplifies Emma Smith's description of Shakespeare's plays as 'incomplete' works, urging us to fill in the gaps in our perceptions between 'what's said and what's unsaid'. On the surface, Egeus is harsh and overbearing. For Mina, Egeus' care for his daughter is not explicitly said, but his actions reveal him to be a caring and protective parent. Mina's reading of the play and its characters are inextricably linked with her cultural identity and what she perceives a father's role to be.

DIRECTING A SCENE

During one lesson, students directed and acted out the scene where Helena, in love with Demetrius, desperately chases after him, only to be cruelly rejected. Students experimented with conveying the character's feelings through body language and tone of voice; some chased each other around the classroom, some raised their voices in anger or frustration, and others acted more solemnly, using the different heights of tables and chairs to illustrate

Demetrius' power over Helena. Students then read an excerpt from Helena's diary expressing her feelings of unrequited love. They were tasked with writing Agony Aunt letters to Helena in response, offering advice as they would to a friend. This activity encouraged empathy and allowed students to develop letter-writing skills and show textual knowledge. Opinions among students were divided on who they felt the most sympathy for after performing the scene, which sparked an impromptu class debate. Some students unequivocally expressed sympathy for Helena, recognising her crippling insecurity and branding Demetrius 'mean'; others understood Demetrius' frustration. Mary, who was particularly concerned with sexism, gender roles and gender inequality in the play, was on Demetrius' side. Her reason was Helena's over-persistence despite repeatedly being told no, and the lack of self-respect she exhibited when she referred to herself as Demetrius' 'spaniel', a matter Mary was so irritated by that she wrote, 'Get a grip!' on a post-it note in her book. As a trainee teacher, it was rewarding to see students form and vocalise strong opinions about the play and take such an interest in class activities.

“THIS activity encouraged empathy and allowed students to develop letter-writing skills and show textual knowledge.”

Year 7's end-of-unit assessment was a choice of written tasks in which students could either write about a relationship in the play they found particularly interesting or write a letter from the perspective of a character to another character, describing what they liked, disliked and would change about the relationship. These tasks diverged from the conventional formula of essay-style writing as a means of assessment, where students might typically respond to a question exploring Shakespeare's presentation of specific themes or characters, for instance. The assignments were student-led and empowered them to recreate or delve more deeply into the story in their voice and from their perspective, with the play as a springboard rather than a parameter within which to structure their ideas, allowing them to express themselves more authentically as writers and thinkers.

Several students found the relationship between Helena and Hermia, which, as Frances aptly pointed out, is 'not a love relationship, but a friendship', to be most interesting. This was unsurprising, given the discussions Helena's betrayal of Hermia (in revealing her elopement plans to Demetrius) and their fight over Lysander generated in the classroom. Was Helena a bad friend for revealing Hermia's secret? Or was she merely looking out for Hermia, whose hasty elopement would have meant disregarding Athenian

law and her father's wishes? Were they a bit silly for nearly sacrificing their friendship to compete for a man's affection? These questions again elicited debate among students, and it was clear that there was an element of relatability for some in this representation of female friendship. The social dynamics in the classroom were ever-changing, with students exhibiting positive interactions and friendship one day to isolating each other and having intense disagreements the next. It is no wonder that the friendship between the two pivotal female characters in the play became a particular point of interest for students navigating their own friendships at school. This speaks to Shakespeare's works embodying people and situations we recognise and relate to today.

For her end-of-term written assessment, Mary wrote a letter as the Queen of Fairies Titania to her husband, Oberon. The relationship between the two characters is known for being quite tempestuous, and we spent some time as a class exploring this, including creating a soundscape to represent the disruptive effects of their bickering on the surrounding natural environment. Many students found their relationship fascinating for the magical and dramatic elements it brings to the play. One narrative detail students discussed was the lack of resolution to the couple's problems. Writing in the role of Titania, Mary gives Oberon an ultimatum – she 'hates' that he always puts his 'needs before everyone else' and asks that they 'stop arguing' or 'there can be no future' for their relationship. In Mary's letter, Titania scolds Oberon for his spiteful behaviour towards her, including playing tricks, stealing a changeling boy (a human child taken in by the fairies) from her care, and never apologising.

This task enabled Mary to deepen her understanding of Titania's character, make inferences about her feelings towards Oberon, and develop the narrative in her own way. She explored her perception of Titania as a kind and maternal figure who cares about the changeling boy for altruistic reasons and for whom losing was the 'worst part' of her ordeal, as opposed to Oberon, who wanted to use the boy for 'vain, selfish reasons' as a servant of his court. Through her letter, Mary explores another side to the story – Titania finally confronts Oberon and expresses indignation at him for having tricked and humiliated her, urging him to change his behaviour, something we never see her do in the play. We observe Titania go from an unwaveringly strong and feisty character who refuses to yield to Oberon to a lovesick woman who falls prey to his scheming. In Mary's reimagining of events, she shows creativity and insight into the characters and story, and Titania reclaims her power.

Daphne, a student I would describe as a reluctant writer, wrote in the role of Helena to Demetrius in what she described as a ‘poem in a letter’:

‘To Demetrius, I am currently quarrelling with EVERYONE. Who do they think they are to MOCK ME? Yes, alas, I know I’m not the fairest of them all. I do deserve a chance. My fair Demetrius O, why are you so shallow? . . . I have tried, I HAVE TRIED for you to just ignore, the beautiful, sweet-hearted lady I once was before.’

“the freedom of expression from occupying another’s reality allows DAPHNE to experiment with language.”

This unique and imaginative piece of writing demonstrates the benefits to students of writing in role. The freedom of expression from occupying another’s reality allows Daphne to experiment with language – she uses punctuation, capitalisation and rhyme to convey the character’s tone and emotion. The task develops her understanding of the historical period in which the play is based, as she uses archaic spellings and words such as ‘alas’ and ‘O’ in place of ‘Oh’ to express Helena’s melancholy at suffering from unrequited love. The intertextual reference of ‘fairest of them all’, originally from the 19th-century folk tale Snow White, reveals Helena’s feelings of inadequacy and envy towards her best friend Hermia, who, due to being the object of Demetrius’ affection, is the person Helena constantly compares herself to. Writing in role gives students a voice and enables them to, as Cecily O’Neill and Theresa Rogers remark in *English in Australia: “Drama and Literary Response: Prying open the Text”*, ‘speak about the world of the text from within it’.

Teaching the Year 7 nurture group gave me much thought about ways to bring Shakespeare to the classroom. What worked well with this particular class, perhaps partly due to them being a small group, was the incorporation of seminar-style lessons, in which discussion skills were an explicit part of students’ learning. Making predictions and discussing and sharing opinions about the play allowed students to bounce ideas off each other and develop confidence in forming responses and interpretations of the text. A continuum line, where students were presented with a statement or question and organised themselves along the line depending on how much they agreed or disagreed, was a great, practical way of engaging students and developing their abilities to articulate and

“making predictions and discussing and sharing opinions about the play allowed students to bounce ideas off each other and develop confidence in forming responses and interpretations of the text.”

expand their analysis, which was particularly effective for students who struggled with language skills. The question ‘Does *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have a happy ending?’ elicited insightful responses from students, ranging from ‘all’s well that ends well’ outlooks to questioning the ethical implication of Demetrius being the only character to remain under a love spell at the play’s end.

In addition to class debates, drama-based activities were particularly effective in engaging students and establishing the world in which the story takes place. As a class, we did several hot-seating activities where students read through or performed a scene and then interviewed each other in their character roles afterwards, driving inquiry, participation and inspiration, enabling students to hear different perspectives and create a personal connection to their learning. Another lively and enjoyable drama-based lesson involved students using a random selection of words to craft insults in Shakespeare’s language. Students were working on recreating the famous lovers’ fight scene and spent the opening part of the lesson hurling creative insults such as “Thou slithering fang-toothed serpent!” at each other. Students had great fun, and the activity allowed them to experiment with and apply new vocabulary and capture the characters’ emotions. In theory, this activity sounded chaotic and potentially disruptive in a classroom setting, but I realised during my placements that some ‘organised chaos’ in the classroom is quite OK.

“Shakespeare’s plays present a world of possibilities for thinking about, questioning, interpreting, and animating.”

Shakespeare’s plays present a world of possibilities for thinking about, questioning, interpreting, and animating. Writing in role and role-play, especially, allows for the deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge and ideas with students as co-creators in their learning of Shakespeare.



call for papers: shakespeare, race & pedagogy

DR WENDY LENNON is delighted to be the guest editor for the summer edition of the *Teaching Shakespeare* magazine and welcomes a wide range of contributions. Your topics may include but are not limited to the following areas:

- ★ Approaches to teaching Shakespeare in a secondary school (KS3 and KS4)
- ★ Teaching A Level Shakespeare
- ★ Teaching Shakespeare in international settings
- ★ Reflective and effective examples of teaching Shakespeare and race
- ★ Live performances and active approaches to teaching Shakespeare
- ★ Shakespeare in the primary setting
- ★ A rationale of a Shakespeare Scheme of Work
- ★ LGBTQ+ approaches to Shakespeare in the English classroom
- ★ Shakespeare and gender studies
- ★ Shakespeare in translation
- ★ Shakespeare and EAL students

We welcome submissions from a wide range of teachers, educators, and practitioners. Articles should not exceed 2000 words and can be as short as 500 words.

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