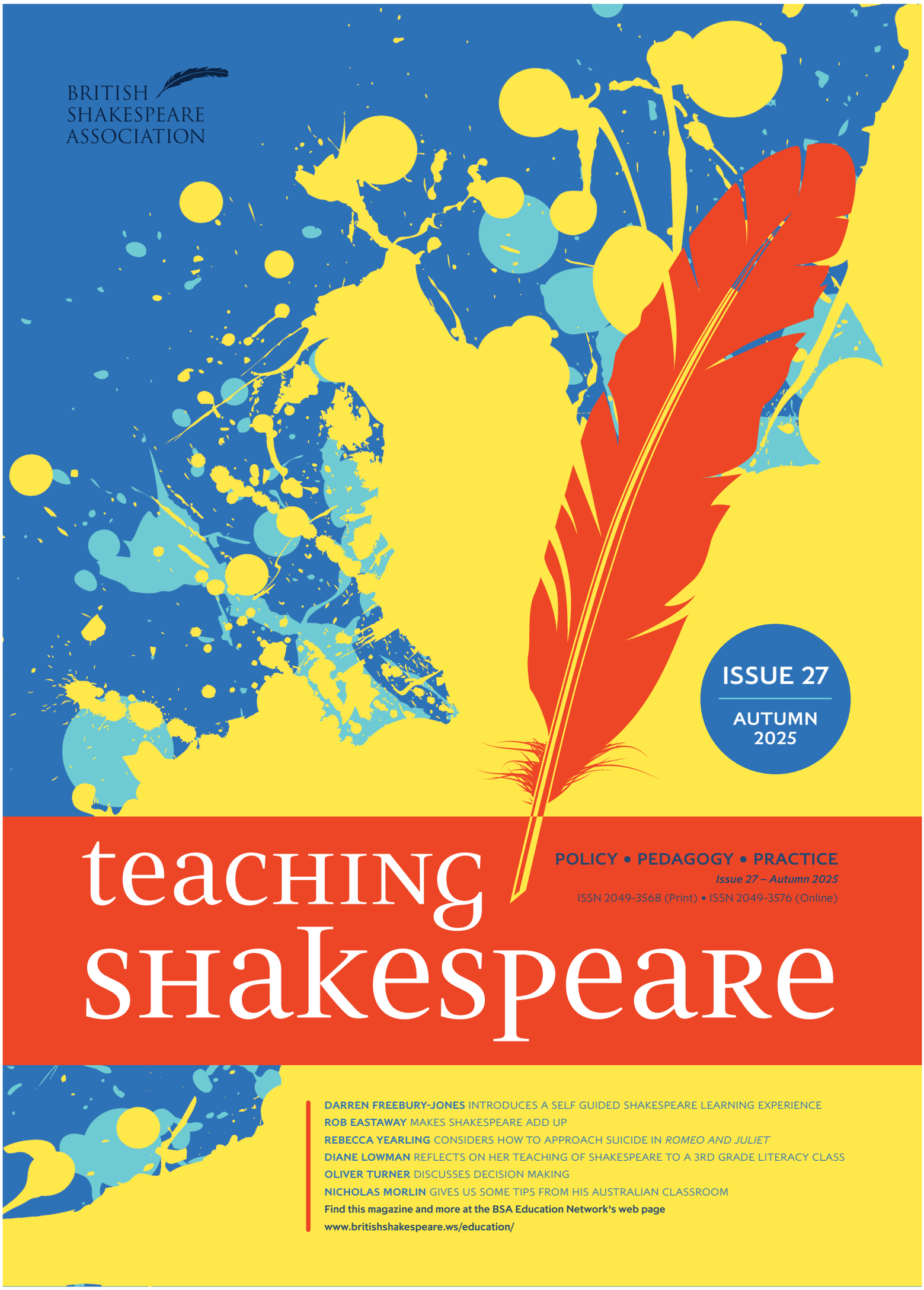

teaching shakespeare

POLICY • PEDAGOGY • PRACTICE

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DARREN FREEBURY-JONES INTRODUCES A SELF GUIDED SHAKESPEARE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

ROB EASTAWAY MAKES SHAKESPEARE ADD UP

REBECCA YEARLING CONSIDERS HOW TO APPROACH SUICIDE IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*

DIANE LOWMAN REFLECTS ON HER TEACHING OF SHAKESPEARE TO A 3RD GRADE LITERACY CLASS

OLIVER TURNER DISCUSSES DECISION MAKING

NICHOLAS MORLIN GIVES US SOME TIPS FROM HIS AUSTRALIAN CLASSROOM

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editorial

THIS SUMMER I saw the Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Winter's Tale* and for two reasons it was rather poignant for me personally. Firstly, I brought my six week old daughter with me, having only seen it once before many years ago and, therefore, having forgotten quite how harrowing the play might be for me as a mother to not only a newborn daughter but also to her older brother. I watched with tears as Perdita was wrenched from her mother's arms and then again as Mamillius died of grief as his mother was sentenced for treason. I was hugely moved by Yael Farber's visceral presentation of child loss, especially as Hermione wept, covered in breastmilk in her cell awaiting condemnation. However, what also struck me was the chance to see Madeline Appiah as Hermione. For my PhD research I watched Appiah rehearse and perform as Lady Macbeth for the National Theatre's *Macbeth for Schools* in 2016–17. She was a formidable Lady Macbeth and having passed my viva just before having the baby it was a delight to see her in another powerful female Shakespearean role.

These anecdotes, perhaps, help me to highlight how individual the experience of watching Shakespeare can be. Very few people in the theatre that day saw any connection to Lady Macbeth in Appiah's performance, only three or four of us were carrying babies under one year. For me these two truths shaped how I experienced the play quite intensely. Our articles in this edition as always suggest varied ways of seeing Shakespeare and presenting it to young audiences but they also point to the ways that the knowledge, interests and experiences children have might shape their points of view.

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Both Rebecca Yearling and Darren Freebury Jones focus on one of the most popular plays for GCSE according to AQA – *Romeo and Juliet*. Yearling's article considers the subject of suicide which must be confronted when teaching, Young people today are bombarded with suicide related content online and teachers of English need to think about this modern context when introducing and discussing the play. Freebury-Jones shares a new course on the play from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. The self-led course includes unique content based on objects, artifacts and research from the Birthplace Trust and Shakespeare's houses.

Rob Eastaway and Oliver Turner take interdisciplinary approaches to the teaching of Shakespeare in fascinating ways. Whilst Turner explores his teaching of a course on decision making, Eastaway introduces his book on mathematics in Shakespeare's plays. Both articles, though very different, show how we can make connections between Shakespeare's writing and the wider world.

Finally we have Diane Lowman and Nicholas Morlin who generously share the ways that they have approached Shakespeare with students in Connecticut and Australia. Facing familiar challenges for teachers around the globe introducing Shakespeare to children, they reflect on their experiences of successful strategies for engaging those who may not immediately be gripped by Shakespeare, even those as young as eight!

contents

BAZ LUHRMANN'S *ROMEO + JULIET*

***ROMEO AND JULIET* is one of the most commonly-studied Shakespeare plays in UK schools, particularly at KS3 and GCSE. Unlike Hamlet and Othello, which are more usually reserved until A-Level, many teachers see Romeo as appropriate for younger learners – in part, perhaps, because its themes (love, family conflict, interfamilial violence) feel more accessible for 14–16 year olds, and also perhaps because it is the only Shakespeare play to feature lead characters who are close in age to the students themselves (Juliet is thirteen; Romeo's age is unknown, but he is presumably also a teenager). Moreover, the play is likely also to be popular with teachers because the story it tells is already so famous. Given that Shakespeare is often thought of as being forbiddingly difficult, the appeal of approaching him via a plot whose contours are already broadly familiar through popular culture is understandable.**

However, *Romeo and Juliet* is also a play that contains some sensitive material, given the presence of teenage suicide as a central theme. In a student focus group on Shakespeare's violence that I held in early 2024, an A-level student commented:

Unicorn: I was just thinking about it and *Romeo and Juliet* is widely known as almost something to strive for? I think people, often, couples, compare themselves like, 'Oh, we're Romeo and Juliet. It's so cute. It's, like, we're in love.' But I think that glamorisation of such a violent play is quite harmful on, like, a wider scope, you know?'

('Teaching Shakespeare's Violence' student focus group. The students used pseudonyms to protect their privacy).

Teachers can, of course, encourage their students away from seeing suicide for love as desirable by emphasising other ways of reading the lovers' end: as a tragic waste; as a critique of a society in which young people are trained to see violence as the solution to their problems. However, there is still a risk that, as 'Unicorn' describes, some young people will see the play as romantic, and the lovers' intense, single-minded devotion to each other as in some sense an ideal.

From this point of view, I want to reflect on the wide-spread use in secondary school teaching of the 1997 Baz Luhrmann film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*.

"I think that glamorisation of such a violent play is quite harmful on, like, a wider scope, you know?"

It is easy to see why teachers like to use this film in their classes. Its casting of attractive actors such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes in the lead roles, its modernised setting, and its use of cinematic techniques that recall the style of music videos, such as rapid cross-cutting and zooms, are all factors that have helped the film have 'a profound effect on the teaching of Shakespeare in the classroom', making it feel both accessible and exciting to young people (Irish, 2000, p.15). However, I would also argue that Luhrmann's treatment of the play's suicide scene is deeply problematic, not just because of the general glamorousness and beauty of the actors that Luhrmann cast as the lovers, but also because of the active changes he makes to the source material.

In Shakespeare, the setting of the final-act suicides is the Capulet family tomb, which Juliet vividly describes in her speech before she takes the sleeping potion. It is a place of claustrophobia and confinement, 'To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in'; 'an ancient receptacle / Where for this many hundred years the bones / Of all my buried ancestors are packed' (4.3.33–40). It is also underground: Romeo describes how, to enter, he must 'descend into this bed of death' (5.3.28). However, in the Luhrmann film, the setting is utterly different. There, Romeo finds Juliet lying in what appears to be a cathedral: a huge, airy room filled with candles and neon crosses (fig. 1), where she has been laid in state upon a lavish bier. This tomb is both beautiful and romantic, with the blue of the crosses recalling the blue of the fish tank and the swimming pool where the lovers first met and first kissed.

Luhrmann then adds to this effect by cutting the play text radically. Of course, almost all modern film adaptations make cuts to the Shakespearean texts they adapt, as the typical Shakespeare script is too long for a two-hour film. However, it is significant that all the changes to the text that Luhrmann makes are ones which work to increase the romanticness of the scene, and also the sense of the inevitability of the couple's death.

"It is significant that all the changes to the text that Luhrmann makes are ones which work to increase the romanticness of the scene, and also the sense of the inevitability of the couple's death."

First, Luhrmann cuts the presence of two other corpses. In the play, Juliet comments that she will share the space of the tomb with her recently-murdered cousin, 'bloody Tybalt [...] fest'ring in his shroud' (4.2.41–2). Romeo, meanwhile, kills Juliet's suitor Paris in the churchyard just outside the tomb's entrance and then carries the corpse into the building with him. The tomb in the play is thus packed not only with the mouldering bones of Juliet's ancestors, but also with the bloody corpses of two recent murder victims, in a way that emphasises the horror of violence and the senseless waste of human life cut off in its prime. However, Luhrmann removes both of these: there is no evidence of Tybalt's corpse in the church, and Romeo and Paris do not in this version meet and fight outside the tomb.

Second, Luhrmann cuts the role of Friar Lawrence. In Shakespeare, Romeo's death is followed immediately by the appearance of the Friar, who enters the tomb just in time to find Juliet as she wakes up. Her first words on waking are therefore addressed to him: 'O comfortable friar, where is my lord? [...] Where is my Romeo?' She has not yet noticed Romeo's corpse. Friar Lawrence, having understood the situation, immediately urges her to come with him:

Friar: *Lady, come from that nest*
Of death, contagion, and unnatural sleep. [...]
Thy husband in thy bosom there lies dead,
And Paris, too. Come, I'll dispose of thee
Among a sisterhood of holy nuns.
Stay not to question, for the watch is coming.
Come, go, good Juliet, I dare no longer stay.
Juliet: *Go, get thee hence, for I will not away. (5.3.151–60)*

Friar Lawrence therefore serves to emphasise that Juliet, even at this desperate point, still has a choice. She does not have to die with her husband; she could live and build a new life in a convent. Luhrmann, however, removes Friar Lawrence entirely from the scene. Instead, when Juliet wakes, she is alone with Romeo, who has just taken his poison. When he expires a few moments later, it is therefore easier for a viewer to forget that Juliet might have other options than to join him.

Meanwhile, once Luhrmann's Juliet has taken Romeo's gun and shot herself in the temple, collapsing next to the body of her husband, Luhrmann follows with a final shot of the lovers from above, the camera spiralling upwards from the bodies in a way that suggests the ascent of their souls into heaven – where, perhaps, the viewer might assume that they will be reunited. This is not an idea present in Shakespeare. Christians at the time were taught that suicides did not go to heaven, and Romeo and Juliet themselves never suggest that mutual death might allow them to be together in a better place. For them, death is simply chosen as being preferable to a life spent apart. Again, therefore, Luhrmann constructs his film in a way that increases the romance surrounding the suicides, and downplays all those aspects of the original play that seem designed to remind readers or spectators that this conclusion is neither desirable nor inevitable.

To conclude: I am not, here, advocating that the Baz Luhrmann *Romeo + Juliet* should not be used in the teaching of Shakespeare in secondary schools. The film is undeniably popular with young people, and any film that gets students excited by Shakespeare is a valuable aid to a teacher. However, I would argue that those who use the film in their teaching need to acknowledge and address its more 'problematic' aspects. As a pamphlet issued by the Samaritans charity comments,

A significant body of research, conducted across the world over the last six decades, links certain types of media depictions of suicide with increases in suicide rates. According to this research evidence, readers may identify with characters in literature (real and fictional), especially if they are charismatic/glamorous/romantic and can be idealised. (Samaritans, 2020, p.2)

The Luhrmann *Romeo* works to make the lovers and their fatal decision seem glamorous and idealised in just the way the Samaritans warn about. It seems wise then to recognise this problem in class, drawing students' attention to how Luhrmann alters and romanticises the source text, rather than allowing the film to reinforce the preconception some students may have that dying for love is a desirable goal.

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a new self-led course on *Romeo and Juliet*

THE SHAKESPEARE BIRTHPLACE TRUST have published a new resource aimed at teachers seeking Continuing Professional Development opportunities.

Self-led Romeo and Juliet sits on the Teachable platform and contains useful materials to enhance classroom teaching for students first encountering Shakespeare's play at Key Stage 3, and for those who want to broaden their knowledge for Key Stage 4 and above. Teachers can discover many new and intriguing aspects of Shakespeare's tragedy of love, while working their way through the individual sections at their own pace. The course is packed with interactive elements; videos of talks delivered by experts at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Shakespeare's hometown, Stratford-upon-Avon; scene extracts performed by actors in Shakespeare's family homes; and a range of other resources and activities.

The course follows on from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's *Self-led Macbeth*. It consists of four primary sections, enabling teachers to get an introduction to the play, a refresher before returning to classroom teaching, or to take a deep dive into its social, cultural and textual history. In the first section, teachers can explore the play's plot, its characters, key themes featuring across curricula, from love to death to masculinity and femininity, and a timeline situating Shakespeare's play in the chronology of his works and life events.

The second section focuses on how Shakespeare's language informs his characters and creates atmosphere. There is a list of key terms and statistics, such as on the distribution of verse and prose in *Romeo and Juliet*, and videos featuring Shakespeare experts, including course leader Darren Freebury-Jones. These videos reveal the function of the Prologue; how Shakespeare creates effects for actors and audiences in 2.2, the so-called 'Window Scene'; as well as in 4.3 of *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet prepares to drink the sleeping potion. Each video incorporates extracts from these scenes featuring professional actors, filmed at historic properties in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The next section of the course includes interactive elements showcasing items in the Birthplace Trust archives and collections, such as rapiers and drug jars, linking these items to their social and historical contexts

"teachers can discover many new and intriguing aspects of shakespeare's tragedy of love, while working their way through the individual sections at their own pace. the course is packed with interactive elements; videos of talks delivered by experts."

as well as explicating their significance in Shakespeare's drama. There are lecture videos delivered by Freebury-Jones offering theatrical contexts on Shakespeare's tragedy: discussing when the play was written, where it was staged, its printing history and its early reception. Another lecture video explores some of the literary sources that inspired *Romeo and Juliet*, affording insights into Shakespeare's craftsmanship and creative process. This section also highlights Shakespeare's musical imagery and performance, enhancing understanding of the various media employed in this drama.

The fourth and final section offers an account of the play's performance history, including Thomas Otway's adaptation in 1679, which, though drastically different from Shakespeare's text, dominated the stage for the following 70 years. Other productions and creative choices examined include David Garrick's staging at Drury Lane in the eighteenth century, which was heavily altered, revealing the ways *Romeo and Juliet* has been interpreted according to different milieus. Additional notable productions include Peter Brook's unsentimental version, which opened at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in 1947, and Michael Bogdanov's at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1986, which featured a flashy sports car in a production billed as the 'Alfa Romeo and Juliet'.

This section also looks at how creatives have sought to keep a well-known play like *Romeo and Juliet* fresh for modern theatre audiences, focusing in particular on beginnings and endings, such as Michael Boyd's attempt to subvert audience expectations by having David Tennant's Romeo deliver the Prologue for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2000, as well as productions

"the course emphasizes the play's interpretative flexibility and how that can be liberating for teachers and students who approach the questions shakespeare raises with their own personal, informed responses."

that offered no reconciliation for the Montague and Capulet families at the end of the play. The section features another lecture video delivered by Darren Freebury-Jones, which dives into the afterlives of *Romeo and Juliet* in art, film and music, emphasizing the value of adaptation for Shakespeare and subsequent creatives. Teachers can also broaden their understanding on 'Love's Legacy' in the play, from the impact of famous lines that have a curious habit of appearing in Valentine's Day cards to Shakespeare's intertwining of the themes of love and hate throughout his tragedy.

The course emphasizes the play's interpretative flexibility and how that can be liberating for teachers and students who approach the questions Shakespeare raises with their own personal, informed responses. *Self-led Romeo and Juliet* and *Self-led Macbeth* are packed full of useful information and include interactive, illustrated elements covering all aspects of Shakespeare's plays. The courses are designed to increase teacher knowledge and confidence, with information and provocations to be applied to classroom teaching and tailored for specific exam specifications.

To access *Self-led Romeo and Juliet* at a cost of £55, please visit: https://learn.shakespeare.org.uk/p/introduction-to-romeo-and-juliet

‘Shall I compare thee to a sunburnt Land?’

A PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING SHAKESPEARE IN AUSTRALIA

NICHOLAS MORLIN reflects on the ways in which he has engaged students in his Australian context, overcoming some of the challenges specific to Australia but also many we would all recognise.

When one thinks of the ‘Australian Context,’ images of the red outback and harsh heat may come to mind. However, Australia has modernised while maintaining its ‘Aussie’ identity. Classic early Australian literature, such as My Brilliant Career by Miles Franklin, reflects this, exploring identity and social change. But how can Australian students relate to the non-Australian William Shakespeare? Most schools mandate at least one of his texts to be studied due to their enduring relevance. Shakespeare first arrived in Australia with British colonisation, brought by early settlers as a mark of civilisation. The first known Shakespeare performance, Henry V, Part 1, was staged by convicts in 1800 at Sydney’s Government House. After the Federation of Australia (1901), debates arose over literary traditions in education, leading to a balance between British classics and a distinctive emerging Australian literary voice.

However, many young Australian students struggle to engage with Shakespeare due to a combination of linguistic, cultural, and historical challenges. The archaic language can sometimes feel disenfranchising to the students. The length of Shakespeare’s soliloquies and dialogue can feel inaccessible to a generation that is accustomed to fast-paced digital content. Additionally, the historical and cultural contexts of Shakespeare’s plays can seem irrelevant to young Australians, who struggle to see any connections between Elizabethan concerns and contemporary Australian life.

These are the issues I endeavour to solve when teaching any Shakespearean text.

AVOID RELIANCE ON MODERN TRANSLATIONS

Some may argue that the language is too difficult for students, after the constant growth and reinforcement of their understanding of the language, it only allows them to expand in understanding the concepts of Shakespeare. Annotations and guided analysis of the plays allow students to understand the main ideas of Shakespeare.

> “Instead of diluting the language, an approach like this allows them to develop an understanding of the text as a whole.”

The priority for the modern student is to understand key themes in Shakespeare. Constantly reassuring the students that if they do not understand every single word in a page of the play that they are not failing. If the students are able to determine what Shakespeare means on the page, then they have successfully understood the text. Instead of diluting the language, an approach like this allows them to develop an understanding of the text as a whole. Students usually begin a text understanding approximately 40% of the words on a page without needing to consult a dictionary. However, by the end of the unit, I have found that almost all the students understand about 90% of the words on the page.

DELIVER THE WORK AS INTENDED – THROUGH PERFORMANCE IN AN OPEN SPACE

Acting out the work creates a authentic understanding of Shakespeare. A few lessons every week, I dedicate to having the students perform plays outside or in an open classroom. Australia (as with other places in the world) had a revival of open-space learning environments in the last decade. We have been able to utilise this in Australia but have an impromptu stage and arena in some cases. Purchasing some cheap props also seemed to help with the experience allowing those who are usually not engaged always race to recite Macbeth if it allows them to be playing with plush swords. Encouraging students to perform scenes, engage in dramatic readings, or even watch live productions helps to demystify the text, allowing them to grasp meaning through tone, expression, and movement – something that may be lost otherwise.

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS AND SHAKESPEARE

There are several interpretations of Shakespeare with an Indigenous lens. “Indigenous adaptations, such as Hecate (2020) and The Shadow King (2013), reimagine Shakespeare’s works through a First Nations lens. These interpretations bridge cultures, linking Shakespeare’s themes – power, justice, identity – to Indigenous story-telling traditions. Showing students excerpts of this allows them to see how Shakespeare’s works can be adapted to reflect diverse cultural perspectives and experiences. By engaging with such Indigenous interpretations, the students are able to explore how Shakespeare’s themes such as – power, justice, and identity – relate to the

Indigenous people's history and customs. Subjecting them to these adaptations inculcates critical thinking by showing the student that literature can both mirror culture and portray history.

ASSESSING SHAKESPEARE IN THE CLASSROOM – 'ET TU, RUBRIC?'

The most generic form of assessment for a Shakespearean play in Australia is with an analytical text response essay. This consists of the students receiving a prompt about a text to which they must respond. Students do this for most texts and gain a familiarity with this type of assessment. However, this familiarity can also lead to their downfall as they fall into laxity as a routine. Whilst one must teach them to author essays for their studies in future years, Shakespeare can serve as a gateway to having a fundamental understanding of thought.

READING JOURNALS

I have been able to allow students to expand their thoughts by having the students complete a reading journal while they are reading a text. Students reinforce key ideas through reading journals, reflecting on each scene by making personal connections or extracting thematic insights. The contemporary Australian student believes that there must be some sort of link between themselves and the text in order to be engaged. Allowing the students to write constantly after every scene encourages them to create the link between themselves and the text which only grows the more it is done. Following this, the students are given three questions based on the scene at various levels. This allows the students to come to a deeper understanding of the text. The end of the unit is quite interesting, as I often enjoy looking over the journals and seeing how the students have been able to analyse and answer questions on a deeper level as they read the text.

OPEN DISCUSSION

Perception does not necessarily have to be assessed in writing. At the beginning of each class, I would select a student at random who would explain what had occurred in the previous scene and how that links to key ideas or instances in the plot. After this, I would facilitate a discussion between students about the text as a whole. Prompting students with questions such as: 'What do we know so far?', 'What is Shakespeare trying to tell us?', and 'How is this relevant to us today?' allow the students to express their own ideas and further their own agency in their education.

"By engaging with such Indigenous interpretations, the students are able to explore how Shakespeare's themes such as – power, justice, and identity – relate to the Indigenous people's history and customs. Subjecting them to these adaptations inculcates critical thinking by showing the student that literature can both mirror culture and portray history."

WHY USE THESE METHODS?

When the students are expected to author an essay, they ought to be able to construct a goodly contention and thesis. By way of repeated practice with the text – by means of reading journals, class discussions, and oral responses – students have already grown their skill of independent and critical thinking on Shakespeare's plays. The process of building personal connections, analysing major ideas, and having open discussions with prompts over the course of the ensures that they are not simply regurgitating memorised arguments by the time they are sitting down to author the essays but constructing their own rich sense of the text.

By constant engagement with Shakespeare through successive formative tests, students are imbued with a culture of questioning that manifests in more reflective and sophisticated essay responses. Their understanding of the text is not superficial, but an active understanding founded on layers of thinking, discussion, and analysis. In return, they enter their summative assessments with a superior ability to speak for themselves, develop compelling arguments, and reply with more clarity and originality.

ALL'S WELL THAT TEACHES WELL

Teaching Shakespeare is not without difficulties in Australia, but it remains one of the most rewarding experiences. It is a battle with stereotypes, against the idea that his plays are outdated, obsolete or difficult to comprehend. But when students begin to see themselves in the text – to realise that love, ambition, betrayal, and fate are not relics of the past, but persistent human realities – the tide changes. With patience, performance, and a spirit of experimentation, Shakespeare no longer becomes just a name on the syllabus. He becomes an instrument for expanding thought, for challenging students to gaze beyond their world and into the heads of those who came before them. Perhaps most compelling evidence of this came from the aforementioned student, who had no plans to continue in school. He left at the end of the year, as he always intended, already looking forward to working with his hands. But years later, when he returned as a handyman to fix the bathrooms at the school, he smiled and greeted me saying "Good morrow, Sir. How art thou today?"

to decide or not to decide

TEACHING DECISION-MAKING WITH SHAKESPEARE

In 2024, a colleague asked me to contribute to a new interdisciplinary module called Effective Decision Making. It would be open to *all* undergraduates and approach the topic from a broad range of disciplinary perspectives. As a former English teacher, I knew that Shakespeare would be rich with possibility. His plays eloquently give voice to doubt and dilemma, they convey both agency and powerlessness, and they demonstrate the intended and unintended outcomes of good and bad decision making.

I began with an etymology. The suffix "-cide" can be traced back to Latin, meaning cutter, killer, or slayer (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). This suffix is relevant when exploring Shakespeare's tragedies. In *Hamlet,* a treacherous act of fratri*cide* sets in motion ghostly apparitions, introspection, psychological intrigue and revenge. In *Macbeth*, a carefully planned regi*cide* is a foretaste of the infanti*cide*, sui*cide* and tyranni*cide* to come. The fili*cide* of a ravaged and tongue-less Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* is framed as a moment of catharsis. Iago's callous and relentless dishonesty precipitates the uxori*cide* of Desdemona, at the hands of her once-loving husband, Othello. The lives of Romeo and Juliet spiral out of control following the homi*cides* of Mercutio and Tybalt. But there is another word with a -cide suffix that is fundamental in Shakespeare's plays, even though its linguistic connection to the act of killing is often overlooked: "Decide". A word the very same derivation as the grisly, archaic terms referenced above.

When you "decide," you are metaphorically "cutting away" or "killing" the choices that you choose not to take. Decision-making can be a thoughtful and positive act, but it also involves the figurative "death" of alternative possibilities or paths. This somewhat grandiose sentiment does not apply to trivialities. However, it is pertinent when considering matters that Aristotle described as "serious… and of a certain magnitude" (*Poetics*, trans. Butcher 1997, sec. 6).

The students began by discussing a play that is dominated by *in*decision. Specifically, we looked at Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, in which he wrestles with life and death. For Wolfgang Clemen, there are three types of soliloquy: expositional, self-characterising, and reflective

"decision-making can be a thoughtful and positive act, but it also involves the figurative "death" of alternative possibilities or paths."

(Clemen, 1987, p. 2). In Shakespeare, the latter often serves as a vehicle for decision-making. Though it is fundamentally a theatrical convention, it closely mirrors a common human experience: articulating thoughts or doubts aloud to better organise one's thinking.

In part, Hamlet's soliloquy is a demonstration of metaphor and analogy: expressions of thought that seek to change the content of a dilemma whilst retaining its meaning. "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and "a sea of troubles" evoke both a barrage of projectiles as well as the murky depths of the ocean. In doing so, they express the possible risks and miseries that can befall human experience. On the other hand, Shakespeare cites "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns", framing death as an unknowable void.

A 2005 article in the Harvard Business Review also endorsed the power of analogies, arguing that they can be an effective way of making sense of strategic decisions. However, the authors caution that superficial analogies without "deep causal traits" (Gavetti & Rivkin, 2005, p. 57) can prove perilously misleading. This created an opportunity to mention *King Lear*, in which the title character learns, at great cost, that verbal flattery is not analogous to love and loyalty.

We also considered the extent to which Hamlet demonstrates the perils of "thinking too precisely on the event". For much of the play, the impact of a single word, "Remember…", uttered to him by the ghost of his father in Act 1, Scene 5, is a source of emotional paralysis. By Act 4, Hamlet, despite having "a father killed" and "a mother stained", contrasts his inaction with the twenty thousand Norwegian soldiers marching towards Denmark who "for a fantasy and trick of fame, Go to their graves like beds". He resolves to stop ruminating and become a man of action. "From this time forth…", he declares, "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!".

I made it clear to the students that Shakespeare, although

"I made it clear to the students that Shakespeare, although a moral playwright, did not write plays with simplistic moral messages."

a moral playwright, did not write plays with simplistic moral messages. As Emma Smith puts, "He asks questions rather than answers them" (Smith, cited in Preston, 2019). Nevertheless, given the focus on this module, identifying some salutary lessons about effective decision making was an enticing challenge. It resulted in the emergence of the following four assertions:

FLATTERY AND PERSUASION CAN DISTORT RATIONAL JUDGMENT

King Lear is seduced by Goneril and Regan's sycophantic and hyperbolic declarations of love, prompting him to reject Cordelia's honest, unembellished affection. Similarly, in *Julius Caesar*, the power of persuasion is on full display when Decius Brutus reinterprets Calpurnia's foreboding dream, transforming a clear warning into a "vision fair and fortunate"about Caesar's greatness, thereby convincing him to suspend caution and meet his doom. In both plays, Shakespeare portrays the peril that arises when reason is overruled by the seductive force of rhetoric and false praise. We connected this to real-world scenarios, such as a political leader surrounded by flattering advisers becoming oblivious to criticism and enacting misguided policies, or an influencer, showered with compliments by a company, providing biased product endorsements.

UNCHECKED AMBITION LEADS TO SELF-DESTRUCTION

Initially a loyal Thane and a celebrated soldier, Macbeth is overcome with ambition, paranoia and delusion after becoming "rapt" with the witches' prophecies. In *Richard III*, the Duke of Gloucester manipulates, deceives, and murders his way to the throne, orchestrating the deaths of rivals, including his nephews in the Tower. However, this process strips him of loyalty, love and friendship. The desperate final image of him, searching in vain for a horse, is an apt expression of his isolation.

One of the real-world scenarios we explored was the rise and fall of Lance Armstrong. Celebrated for his seven consecutive Tour de France wins, from 1999 to 2005, the American cyclist was a hero. Yet his success was underpinned by a cocktail of performance enhancing-drugs. Once this systemic cheating had been exposed, he was stripped of titles and saw his reputation (and fortune) disintegrate overnight. The students identified parallels between the extent of his doping and Macbeth's bleak assertion that "I am in blood stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er."

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Of course, criticality is always needed, and students were encouraged to distinguish between ruthless ambition for personal gain versus ruthless ambition for a project rooted in societal progress, such as the Apollo Programme, culminating in the 1969 Moon Landings.

Emotionally driven decisions often end in disaster

King Lear's cravings for public declarations of love cause him to conflate empty flattery with true devotion. Romeo's rash killing of Tybalt in the heat of grief, propels him towards tragic consequences. In *Othello*, the Moor's mounting jealousy, expertly manipulated by Iago, clouds his judgment and dictates a series of fateful choices. Across these plays, Shakespeare reveals how surrendering entirely to powerful emotions can cloud reason and unleash destruction. However, this perspective can also be problematic. History is littered with terrifying, unemotional decisions made without regard to compassion or empathy. We determined that a balance of emotion and rationality represented the most nuanced approach.

PROPHECIES AND FATE ONLY HOLD POWER IF WE ALLOW THEM TO SHAPE OUR CHOICES

The witches greet Macbeth with titles he does not yet hold: Thane of Cawdor and "King hereafter". His ascendance to Thane of Cawdor is based entirely on merit. However, he actively *pursues* the throne by murdering Duncan. The prophecy spurs him to act rashly, rather than adopting a more cautious, incremental approach. In *Othello*, Iago, whilst not a prophet, plants ideas about Desdemona's infidelity in Othello's mind. His downfall is not a matter of fate, but somebody else's words shape his own sense of reality. Our discussions then evolved into reflections on contemporary notions of 'fate'. We discussed economic forecasts, and the idea that when investors believe a recession is inevitable, their cautious behavior can itself trigger a downturn. Another self-fulfilling prophecy might relate to matters of personal health: if a person is convinced that illness is inevitable, they might fail to access preventive care, inadvertently worsening their condition.

The primary reason I chose to explore effective decision making through Shakespeare's plays (rather than his poetry) is that they are polyphonic, giving voice to multiple characters, perspectives, and conflicting motivations. As Jonathan Bate suggests, "Shakespeare's dramatic form means that there is no single authorial voice" (Bate, 1998, p. 143). A play text, with its many characters, overlapping voices, conspiracies, subplots, and even its use of props, can portray the complexity of human choices and human actions.

In light of this, I introduced the idea of Actor-Network Theatre (ANT), a methodological approach that can help explain how and why events play out as they do. Originally developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law, ANT argues that outcomes are subject to a range of human and non-human inputs. ANT challenges the idea that a decision, and the consequences it triggers, are the reserve of an individual. Instead, agency is viewed as distributed, the messiness of decision-making networks is recognised, and outcomes are unpredictable. (Callon 1986; Latour 1987; Law 1992)

In *Romeo and* Juliet, Friar Lawrence epitomises the idea that good intentions do not always result in good decisions. He oversees the wedding of the titular characters and later devises a high-risk plan that involves Juliet feigning her own death. However, a breakdown in communication (a single undelivered letter) sets off a tragic chain of events. We conducted an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) analysis of this sequence, identifying the interplay between human and nonhuman inputs, including Friar Lawrence, his plan, Juliet, the potion, the letter, the messenger, and Romeo. To deepen their understanding, students applied ANT to a variety of real-world scenarios, including the various components of a teenage girl's Instagram experience: from peers to algorithms, from celebrities to hardware.

As a final task, students were given a series of quotations from different Shakespeare plays, each one linked to decision making. The two most popular sentiments both related to agency: the idea that it is better to act than assume that we are powerless. Many were drawn to Lucio's words from *Measure for Measure*, in which he declares that "Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt." Equally popular was Helen's line from *All's Well That Ends Well*, in which she argues that "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, which we ascribe to heaven."

"examining shakespeare through the lens of decision making is a refreshing way of making sense of his plays, particularly when characters, for understandable reasons, make choices that have grave consequences."

Examining Shakespeare through the lens of decision making is a refreshing way of making sense of his plays, particularly when characters, for understandable reasons, make choices that have grave consequences. However, it is also evident that the outcomes of these plays often emerge from a tangled web of motivations, voices, influences, and circumstances – a complexity that play texts are well-placed to convey. Shakespeare, even for those not studying English Literature or Theatre Studies, is a powerful vehicle

"shakespeare, even for those not studying english literature or theatre studies, is a powerful vehicle for interdisciplinary exploration, illuminating the intricate processes that shape our dilemmas."

for interdisciplinary exploration, illuminating the intricate processes that shape our dilemmas. Indeed, as Harold Bloom asserts, "Shakespeare will not make us better, and he will not make us worse, but he may teach us how to overhear ourselves when we talk to ourselves" (Bloom, 1994, p. 31).

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out of the mouths of babes

SHAKESPEARE IN 3RD GRADE

"This is like Israel and Gaza."
"No! Don't tell me they both died!"
"Couldn't they just have talked it out?"
"Violence never solves anything."

Out of the mouths of babes . . . The eight- and nine-year old students in Chris Cormier's third grade class ("3C") at the Edison School in Bridgeport, Connecticut made these comments during and after I shared the story of *Romeo and Juliet* with them.

Serendipity landed me in Cormier's classroom seven years ago as a literacy volunteer. For the first two years, I visited his classroom monthly to read from a chapter book that we would theoretically finish by year's end, like *Frindle* (Andrew Clements) or *About Winn Dixie* (Kate DiCamillo). The students seemed to look forward to the visits and unfolding stories, but Cormier and I felt we could do more to motivate and engage them.

He knew of my Shakespeare obsession, and I of his with Medieval history. Teaching Shakespeare felt like a natural and obvious way to take our relationship to the next level. But Cormier was an admitted Bardophobe; the complex language and plots made the work feel impenetrable and irrelevant to him.

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The year I spent earning my MA in Shakespeare Studies at the Shakespeare Institute (University of Birmingham) dispelled this myth for me, and made me more determined than ever to crusade on a platform of Shakespeare's relevance and accessibility.

"Let's do it," Cormier said, and so we joined hands, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*-style, and took the plunge. We agreed on a few tenets for our experiment, which continued through and despite Covid (remotely):

ACCESSIBILITY

We agreed that we could/would not read the plays in the original language. I chose Marcia Williams's volumes, *Mr. William Shakespeare's Plays* and *Bravo, Mr. William Shakeskpeare!*, for several reasons: She illustrated her faithful retellings in an elevated comic book style; she peppered the tales' borders on each page with snippets of Shakespeare's own language; she asks readers to engage more deeply with the plays by hiding relevant historical figures, Where's Waldo-style, in the borders. The scavenger hunt for Queen Elizabeth I, the Master of the Revels, food and drink vendors, and the author himself provide historical and literary context. Williams turns what might be a chore into a fun adventure.

AGE-APPROPRIATENESS

We aimed to neither condescend to nor to upset these eight-year-olds. We avoided ultra-sanitized versions like the Lambs' Tales from Shakespeare, but nor would we show clips from Julie Taymor's film version of Titus Andronicus. My mother, a preschool teacher (Miss Barbara) counseled me on discussing difficult topics with children based on her experience with both her students and grandchildren: be honest, be direct, be succinct, and use them as teachable moments/launchpads for more involved discussions.

CONTEXT

While we had given scant background on Clements or DiCamillo, I spent the first session of each new year discussing Shakespeare's life, career, and times. Chris shared relevant historical background.

VISUALS

No one wants to listen to anyone drone on about anything for an hour – particularly a classroom full of youngsters to an old lady talking about an even older man. As Ms. Williams does so deftly in her books, we aimed to provide multiple levels of access to the subject, by pointing out locations from Shakespeare's life and the plays' plots on a globe, showing still clips of related material such as Shakespeare's Birthplace or the Romeo and Juliet balcony in Verona, and screening clips of key scenes, such as Kenneth Branagh addressing the troops as King Henry V on St. Crispian's Day. Also, I gave the students small tokens from my frequent trips to Stratford Upon Avon, such as character postcards, buttons/badges, bookmarks, and erasers to foster and maintain interest.

CONNECTIONS

Perhaps most importantly, we hoped to encourage the class to see how they could personally relate to the work.

After each reading I asked students for their impressions of the plays' most important messages. Their insights amazed us. After *Richard III* they talked about how it might feel to be bullied for physical or other differences. After *Macbeth* they questioned whether violence ever provided the best path to success. After *Romeo and Juliet* they emphasized the value of clear communication in conflict resolution. And following *Twelfth Night*, they reflected on the implications of subterfuge and trickery.

These youngsters' ability to recall plots, characters, and themes over the year (I visit once a month during the school term) – and their facility with connecting them to their own situations – exceeded our expectations: Caesar reminded them of Trump. Caliban evoked Shrek. Those in class who had lost parents empathized with orphans in the plays.

FIELD TRIP!

Whenever I teach Shakespeare from text I remind students of all ages that he intended for these plays to be seen and not read. While we often included film clips, Chris and I really hoped to let them experience live actors performing the Bard's words. Enter David Roth (Theatre Teacher and Co-Director of Staples Players) and Kerry Long (Co-Director of Staples Players) from Westport, Connecticut's Staples High School (from which both of my own sons graduated). They, along with students from Roth's Theatre III Advanced Acting class helped us to realize our dream by graciously agreeing to host 3C for a morning of live theatre.

The high schoolers dazzled their elementary school counterparts by donning capes and enacting scenes with the Witches, Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth. As if to prove the adage "the show must go on," Roth had to understudy Lady M as the student meant to play her felt ill that morning. This "problem," and its resolution delighted everyone.

Afterwards, the teens and Roth and Long answered questions from the 3C kids, and then sat in small groups and enjoyed plain and pepperoni pizza while discussing the experience.

This event enriched both groups in myriad ways: Junior Graham Griffin said, "Acting for the third graders was such a special experience. They were well-educated on Shakespeare, meaning they actually knew the context of the scenes we were performing which made it that much more enjoyable. They paid very close attention,

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and that made it easier to act as best as possible. They were not afraid to ask questions; I got to know a lot of them afterwards, and they all had such interesting views on the acting and the scenes, and overall it was such a delight to meet them!" Junior Ellis Maroney noted, "I had a wonderful time playing games and performing with these children. They were so sweet and we watched them start off shy and then completely come out of their shells as they got comfortable with us. The most rewarding aspect for me was at the end when the teacher came up to me and a few of my friends and told us that we had changed these children's lives. That really struck me and made me realize how formative and valuable role models are; I was honored to be part of it."

From a pedagogical perspective, the educators saw value in the experiment. Roth commented, "I love introducing high school students to Shakespeare and seeing how their understanding and appreciation grows the deeper we get into it. Especially when they get really jazzed about it. To see similar appreciation from third graders and then to see high schoolers and younger kids share that appreciation and actively discuss it was wonderful. I think both groups were truly impressed by the other." And Long said, "I got to be a fly on the wall while Diane engaged with the third grade students. Some kids recalled details from plays that they had studied for just an hour – and months ago at that! They were making connections between the plays they had studied and making remarkably insightful observations. To me, this indicated that their brains craved (and thrived on) this challenging material. The way Diane presented the material showed them that Shakespeare was far from something to be scared of, but rather something that could be quite relevant and enriching to their young lives!"

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Roth and Long both expressed interest in making this an annual event. Field trips are commonplace in more affluent communities; Cormier barely had enough funds to cover the bus from a meagre budget; they sold $1 ice cream in the cafeteria at lunch to supplement that, and had ultimately to make up the difference *and* pay for our pizza lunch. Once again, Roth and Long stepped up to help by posting a description of our endeavour, and letting the local "town crier" know about it. He kindly posted on his local blog, https://06880danwoog.com/tag/shakespeare/ and now through the kindness of friends, family, and complete strangers, 3C has enough funding to do this outing for the foreseeable future. Including pizza.

"Did you know him?"

"Was he nice?"

"Maybe he died in a drunk driving accident."

"What did he think of the movie version of Henry V?"

"I didn't know about Shakespeare before, but now I do, and I'm gonna tell my mom."

"Can you tell me the name of the book that has all his stories in it? I want to ask my mom to get it so I can read them to him before he gets to third grade."

Every year the young students pepper me with relevant questions about Shakespeare and his plays. The depth and breadth of these questions tell me that they truly engaged with the material. They also confirm that these students are neither too young, nor intellectually unprepared to appreciate and digest the material.

"i find joy in sharing him with others, and dispelling the misguided notions that his work is exclusionary or meant only for stodgy academics in ivory towers."

I have felt deeply – some would say obsessively – connected to and inspired by Shakespeare for as long as I can remember. I find joy in sharing him with others, and dispelling the misguided notions that his work is exclusionary or meant only for stodgy academics in ivory towers. Our experience in 3C has proven that he, indeed, has the power to reach and positively impact a broad, diverse audience.

Much Ado About Numbers

HOW SHAKESPEARE AND MATHS CAN ENRICH EACH OTHER

MY DAUGHTER is a year away from her GCSEs, and it's clear that her school life is now focused on those looming exams. Like most of her peers, at the end of Year 9 she was able to drop some subjects that she didn't enjoy and choose others that she did enjoy. But there were of course two subjects for which she had no choice: Shakespeare (as a part of English Literature) and Maths. Perhaps it is partly because they are compulsory up to GCSE that both of these subjects can cause angst and resentment among many teenagers. Teachers of both will be familiar with complaints such as "this is boring" and "when will I ever need this?"

There is, however, a more positive connection between Shakespeare and Maths, one that can enrich both subjects, and add to the enjoyment too. For the last couple of years, I've been visiting schools to give a talk entitled 'Much Ado About Numbers' about the surprising links between Shakespeare, Maths and Elizabethan History (another GCSE topic). I've reached over 10,000 Year 9s and 10s with this talk, and it's been heartening to see teenagers

"It's been heartening to see teenagers who thought they hated maths or Shakespeare – or both – leaving the talk buzzing with ideas and fun facts that they'd never considered before."

who thought they hated Maths or Shakespeare – or both – leaving the talk buzzing with ideas and fun facts that they'd never considered before.

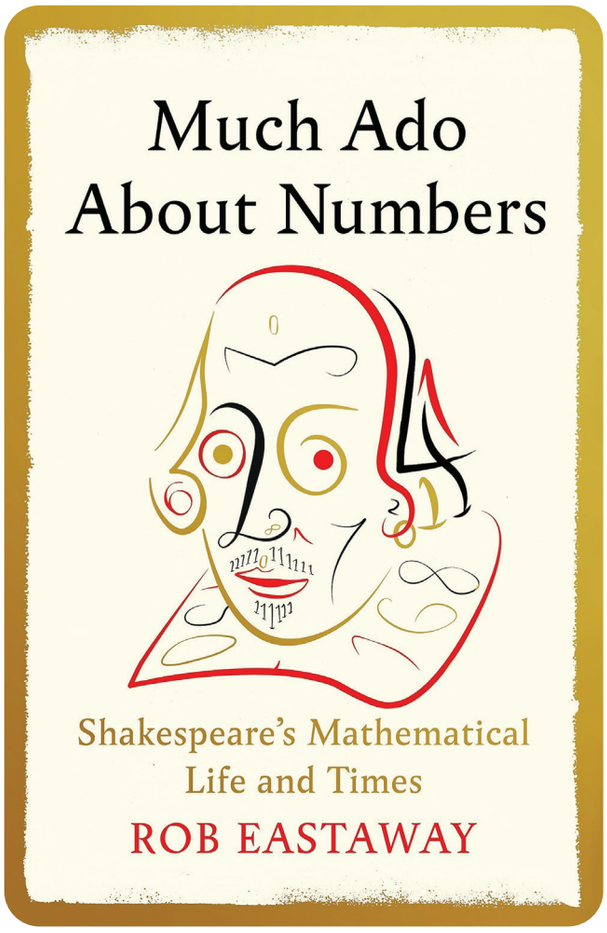
It was in 2022 that I first stumbled upon the fascinating links between Shakespeare and Maths. It happened serendipitously. I was invited to give a talk at a maths teacher conference in Stratford-upon-Avon. The location intrigued me, and I playfully wondered whether there's any maths in Shakespeare. I started with a simple search for the word "mathematics". And there it was (twice!) in *The Taming of The Shrew*. Hortensio, looking for a way to set up a private date with Bianca, decides to disguise himself as a tutor "of music and the mathematics". I soon learned that in Shakespeare's time, music was regarded as one of the four mathematical subjects, the other three being arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, and there are hints of this in, for example, *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet talks about the lark singing "sweet division".

Other discoveries followed quickly. Most remarkable of all was finding that Shakespeare's was the first generation in England to learn our modern 'Indo-Arabic' numerals, 1,2,3,4 . . . His father John would have been taught only Roman numerals.

The 'new' methods of arithmetic had been known in the Arab world and Southern Europe, especially Italy, for hundreds of years. It's astonishing that the concept of what we now call zero (but in Shakespeare's day was known as 'the cipher') was an exciting novelty in late Elizabethan England. More interesting still, Shakespeare was clearly intrigued by this symbol that represented nothing and yet could be used to make vast numbers.

Shakespeare toys with the mathematical notion of 'nothing' throughout his work – he even included it in the title of one of his greatest plays, of course. One of my favourite examples comes in the opening scene of *Henry V*, where the character Chorus asks the audience to think of him as a 'crooked figure' (1) and his fellow actors as ciphers (0) and put them together to make an army of one million (1,000,000). If you are wondering why 1 is called a crooked figure, by the way, take a look at how the digit was typically written in 1599, the year the play was first performed. The image shows 1599 written in the hand of Philip Henslowe, manager of The Rose theatre that neighboured the Globe. Notice how crooked the 1 is.

When I'm visiting schools, I reveal how Shakespeare not only loved playing with numbers, but was also aware of the rapid advances in mathematics that were happening in his world. During Shakespeare's lifetime, Galileo confirmed that the sun and not the earth was the centre of our universe, Mercator revolutionised the reliability of maps, music began to shift from modal to the modern major-minor form, length and weight measurements were standardised, clocks acquired an additional (minute) hand, and the English mathematician Thomas Harriot figured out how rainbows work. It was an astonishing period, when arts and sciences merged together, and it was not unusual for a leading figure such as Walter Raleigh to be an applied mathematician and a poet.



All of this has reinforced my belief that we should do more to find connections across the curriculum. Too often children encounter subjects like maths and Shakespeare and Elizabethan History in isolation, without any hint that they overlap. It's encouraging that the English Association and the Maths Association are now working closely together to explore ways in which they can collaborate, and I'm pleased that in some schools, English, History and Maths departments are beginning to join forces. Maths and the Humanities were once deeply intertwined, and perhaps that bond can be restored in future. With a bit of imagination, every school subject can intersect with every other subject. And that includes Shakespeare and maths.

Rob Eastaway is the author of 'Much Ado About Numbers', Atlantic Books, published in paperback April 2025, £10.99

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