

1 Introduction

Our central aim in this Element is to explore the capacity of drama to activate productive, reader-focused engagement when studying a Shakespeare play in a school classroom. We make no claims to originality in suggesting that drama might profitably be used to teach Shakespeare. What distinguishes our approach from other publications about ‘active Shakespeare’, however, is our particular focus on reading as a sociocultural practice rather than on drama methods per se. The specific type of learner-centred educational drama we have in mind overlaps with and is supportive of classroom reading practices in complex, dynamic ways. In Section 2 we define what we mean by ‘reading through drama’, bringing together theories of reading, learning, drama and play. In subsequent sections we apply the concept to real-world examples of classroom interaction using observational data, video recordings of secondary school English lessons and interviews with learners and their teachers. What does ‘reading Shakespeare through drama’ look like in practice? What are the potential benefits of working in this way, and what are the challenges? While we are mindful that the case studies which provide the empirical data for this Element are situated historically and culturally in specific London classrooms, our belief is that they raise pedagogical questions which will be of interest to teachers of Shakespeare in a far wider range of contexts.

Background: ‘The Autobiography of the Question’

In explaining the background to our research, we adopt Jane Miller’s (1995) methodological invitation to explore ‘the autobiography of the question’, to situate ourselves personally and historically in the complex network of social relations that constitute school classrooms.¹ Consequently we do not pretend to be disinterested, objective observers when offering our analyses of classroom interactions. The assumption we make is that our

¹ Miller (1995) argues that ‘the autobiography of the question’ not only presents a way of ‘historicizing the questions [researchers] are addressing’, but also offers a ‘sense of working consciously within and against accepted [academic] forms’ (p. 26).

own professional and ideological biographies have served to shape the values and beliefs we bring to our work as educators and researchers and these therefore inflect the ways in which we perceive meaning-making practices in classrooms (Doecke, 2015). We (Jane and Maggie) share similar histories of teaching in multi-ethnic, socially mixed London classrooms during the 1980s and 1990s. Our teaching careers span politically turbulent moments in terms of late twentieth-century educational reform in the UK, including the introduction of compulsory Shakespeare in the first National Curriculum (NC) for English (1989) and subsequent – highly contested – assessment impositions. Part of the impetus for this Element arises out of ongoing professional and political conversations that have sustained us both across our long careers in education, including a period of five years when we taught together in the same secondary school English department, and much later when we worked together for a similar period of time in the same university education department.

Our specific interest in the teaching of Shakespeare was originally prompted by a number of pivotal events in the late 1980s: our growing unease with the nationalistic discourses generated by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government (1979–90), particularly from our perspective as teachers working in multi-ethnic urban school environments; the imposition of statutory Shakespeare as part of a new NC (which we say more about later in this section); the launch of Rex Gibson's national Shakespeare in Schools Project (one of us, Jane, was seconded to the Project in 1987); and the publication of Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's groundbreaking *Political Shakespeare* in 1985. Whereas Gibson's project attempted to shake up conventional teaching methods (which we discuss in more detail in Section 2), in effect Dollimore and Sinfield's (1985) unashamedly ideological form of critical practice ripped up the old 'lit crit' certainties that underpinned conventional ways of reading and interpreting Shakespeare. Assessing the thirty-year legacy of *Political Shakespeare*, Graham Holderness (one of the contributors) claims that it has 'irrevocably altered the academic landscape of Shakespeare Studies' (2014, p. 5). It profoundly influenced our thinking at the time, although it posed a challenge to those of us working within the heavily regulated practices of secondary English classrooms. Both of us chose to explore these tensions and possibilities

further, albeit in different ways, for our respective master's dissertations completed part-time at separate points in the early 1990s.

Since then our specialist research and publication interests have diverged, but in complementary ways. 'Reading through drama' as a concept was first developed by Maggie (Pitfield, 2020), who comes to our current project from the direction of research into educational drama, specifically how drama is employed as part of the reading process in the secondary English classroom. Jane's area of research has largely remained focused on the teaching and assessing of Shakespeare, in particular the competing ways in which Shakespeare as a cultural and literary phenomenon has been constructed by and within the school system.

Of enduring significance to us both, and of direct relevance to our current approach to teaching Shakespeare, is our very deeply held commitment to a comprehensive (non-selective) system of schooling which caters for the needs and interests of all learners. In our teaching careers and latterly in our university-based work with postgraduate trainee and experienced English teachers, we have continued to develop an inclusive pedagogy that is attentive to the social and cultural lives of students and that regards classrooms as social, dialogic spaces where meanings are made rather than merely transmitted. These principles have increasingly positioned us at odds with the direction of educational reform introduced by successive governments in the UK since the 1990s. Indeed, when Brenton Doecke and Douglas McClenaghan (2011) describe schooling in Australia as progressively marked by curricular imposition, standardised testing and constricting accountability procedures, they could just as easily be describing current educational systems in Britain and the USA. But Doecke and McClenaghan remind us that the relationship between teachers, their students and the system of schooling in which they find themselves is both complex and often contradictory. It is crucial to recognise that even in unpromising circumstances, teachers (and their students) time and time again exhibit agency and that schools remain sites of cultural production and contestation. So, while in Section 3 we consider the very real ways in which secondary English teachers may come to feel pedagogically constrained by working in highly regulated, outcomes-focused environments, in Section 4 we provide countervailing evidence of teachers and students prising open productive spaces

within which they engage collectively with Shakespeare, and we explore the conditions and teacher dispositions that might have enabled these different ways of working.

First, however, we contextualise our examples of classroom practice by examining versions of curricular Shakespeare produced by British policy-makers over the past thirty years.

Shakespeare in the British National Curriculum (1989–Present)

In his analysis of neoliberalism, David Harvey (2005) notes how successive governments in the UK and the USA from the 1980s onwards have mobilised traditional forms of culture in an attempt to disguise the inevitable social fragmentation wrought by increased marketisation. British politicians' obsession with Shakespeare has had a long and colonially tainted history (see, e.g., Trivedi, 2011), but it reached fresh levels of fervour towards the end of the past century and has enjoyed something of a resurgence in the past decade. In the late 1980s alarmist discourses about the dilution of national identity and falling literacy standards formed the mood music against which the first NC in England and Wales was formulated in 1989.² As a key part of what Stephen Ball (1993, p. 195) characterises as an ideological project of 'cultural restoration', the Conservative government privileged English within the whole NC as a designated 'core' subject and by statute installed Shakespeare and Standard English at its heart. Although the original government-appointed subject working group for English, the Cox Committee, resisted strong political pressure to prescribe a list of canonical 'set texts' (see Cox, 1991), they were happy to enforce Shakespeare as the sole representative of the canon, justifying the move with references to 'universal truths' and

² At the time NC legislation applied to England and Wales. In 1998 Wales along with Scotland and Northern Ireland gained further devolved powers, including greater autonomy over education policy. In choosing the appropriate national descriptor, we follow Jones (2016) by using England (or England and Wales where relevant) in reference to specific aspects of education policy authorised by the national government in Westminster, but Britain (or UK) when referring to broader, more general political/cultural issues.

'language [which] expresses rich and subtle meanings beyond that of any other English writer' (DES/Welsh Office, 1989, paragraph 7.16). In the intervening thirty years the NC for English has undergone four further government-authorised revisions throughout which Shakespeare has retained his prominence. Regardless of the particular political party in office, each curricular iteration makes explicit reference to Shakespeare's central place within the 'English literary heritage', consistently constructing his plays as *literary* texts to be taught within the Programme of Study for Reading at both Key Stage 3 (KS3 11–14 years) and Key Stage 4 (KS4 14–16 years). The most recent version (DfE, 2014), couched in explicitly Arnoldian terms of cultural elitism (Coles, 2013; Elliott, 2014), actually increases the number of Shakespeare plays to be consumed across the five years of secondary schooling (from two to three). Any sense that young readers might take an active role in making meaning out of their textual encounters is all but eliminated by policymakers' deathly instruction that students should be 'taught' to 'appreciate' the English literary canon (DfE, 2014). This directive encapsulates the narrow, unambitious nature of the reading aims for the whole of KS4. Nowhere is it suggested that the point of this literary education might be to encourage students to enjoy reading for its own sake, or that students should interrogate and interpret Shakespeare and other literary works or, indeed, become producers of literary texts themselves.

Political decisions about curriculum content are always likely to be contested, particularly when they legitimise specific types of cultural knowledge and specific ways in which readers are represented (Coles, 2020); indeed, right from the moment of inception the NC for English has provoked critical debate (e.g., Jones, 1992). What triggered outright rebellion, however, was the accompanying framework of assessment which formed a cornerstone of Conservative education reforms. Perhaps the most controversial aspect was the launch of KS3 national Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) for fourteen-year-olds as part of the 1993 curriculum revision (DfE, 1993), designed in effect to ensure professional compliance with specified curriculum requirements.³ In addition, SAT

³ The SATs applied to designated 'core' subjects: English, maths and science.

results were to be used as a performance measure, setting school against school in competitive league tables. The whole initiative was met by implacable professional resistance spearheaded by English teachers who were, in part, objecting to the misappropriation of Shakespeare as the main subject of one of these tests. The reductive style of questioning in the Shakespeare test was perfectly satirised by a contemporary cartoon in the *Times Educational Supplement* which portrayed a fretful pupil poring over an exam desk confronted by a manic robot demanding, 'Why did Romeo fall in love with Juliet? GIVE THREE REASONS!' (cited in Coles, 1994, p. 27). The national anti-SATs campaign, in which we were both actively involved as trade unionists and English specialists, brought together an unprecedented coalition of teaching unions, subject associations and parents' groups. Although the ensuing boycott of the tests in 1993 successfully forced a government retreat, KS3 SATs were resumed in modified form in 1995 and remained in place until 2008, despite continuing criticism by English teachers and their main subject association, the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE).⁴

Over time the Shakespeare test requirements evolved into a formulaic 'lit crit' essay question on a set play, covering one of four possible areas of focus: character; ideas, themes and issues; the language of the text; and the text in performance (QCA, 2002). Teachers were expected to focus their students' attention on certain key scenes identified in advance by the government's examination authority (in Section 4 we include data collected from a Year 9 class operating under this tightly prescribed system). The published mark schemes made clear that, whatever the precise test question,

⁴ Rex Gibson, founder of the national Shakespeare in Schools Project (see Section 2), argued passionately against the 'trivialising experience of reducing Shakespeare's imagination and intellectual richness to a 30 minute written test' (Gibson, 1993, p. 79). In a survey he conducted of more than six hundred English teachers, 92 per cent expressed concern about the Shakespeare SATs. Periodic surveys carried out by subject associations and teachers' unions indicated a persistently similar level of discontent (e.g., ATL, ATM and NATE, 1998); also see NATE position statements in various issues of *NATE News* – for example, Summer 1993, Summer 1995, September 2004.

successful answers required memorisation of key quotations and commentary on language features, even if the question ostensibly focused on ‘the text in performance’ (Coles, 2003). Consequently managerially expedient decisions in some schools resulted in specialist drama departments being co-opted into servicing the SATs apparatus by taking responsibility for performance aspects of the set Shakespeare play with Year 9 classes (Pitfield, 2006). The resulting artificial separation of Shakespeare in performance from other forms of interpretation represented the antithesis of the ‘active Shakespeare’ movement (discussed in more detail in Section 2) and threatened to turn the clock back in terms of literary critical approaches.⁵

Changes to assessment regimes at the end of KS4, although at times controversial, have been less explosively contentious in comparison with those at KS3 (perhaps because some kind of national examination system has marked the end of compulsory schooling throughout the post-war period). Remodified certification for sixteen-year-olds introduced in 1986 (the General Certificate of Secondary Education or GCSE) offered coursework options in most subjects, including English. Assessing Shakespeare through teacher-assessed, externally moderated coursework was extremely popular with English teachers, offering a degree of professional autonomy and pedagogical flexibility. For a short period of time, teachers could even opt to assess students’ response to Shakespeare orally. However, with each NC revision over the past thirty years, teacher-controlled elements of assessment have been steadily eroded by government edict, eventually eradicated completely by the Conservative-led coalition government in 2014. At the time of writing, Shakespeare at GCSE is assessed solely by means of terminal written examination, whereas at the time of the research we describe in Sections 3 and 4, Year 10 and Year 11 classes (KS4) were still enjoying the relative freedom offered by Shakespeare coursework.

The Research

The school-based evidence cited in Sections 3 and 4 is drawn from two separate but complementary case studies we conducted sequentially

⁵ There is evidence that this situation did not significantly change even following the government’s abandonment of the tests in 2008 (Pitfield, 2013).

between 2006 and 2016. This period encompasses national assessment of Shakespeare by terminal exam (KS3 SATs) and through residual forms of coursework (GCSE). While there are differences in the precise research focus of each case study, a common feature is the close attention paid to the teaching of Shakespeare in everyday secondary school classrooms. For the purposes of this current project, we have selected ‘significant moments’ (Yandell, 2016, p. 64) from this wider data set, as far as the limited space of this Element will allow. Analysis of these moments (taken from transcripts of videoed lessons, recorded interviews conducted with teachers and with focus groups of students) exemplifies our arguments about Shakespeare pedagogy and reading practices.

This type of qualitative research, which borrows from ethnographic approaches, consciously blurs the lines between ‘insider’/‘outsider’ researcher positions (Swain, 2006). Countering those who would question the validity of such research, such as Sarah Olive (2015), we seek to reassert the value of fine-grained, qualitative investigations that are attentive to classrooms as socially and culturally complex sites. It is important to note that our research was not set up as a scientifically measurable intervention. On the contrary, our interest lies in *processes* rather than outcomes. Based on our own experiences over many years of live classroom observations and subsequent, repeated viewing of video footage, like Doecke (2015) and John Yandell (2016) we have become increasingly interested in meanings that are made in small, salient moments of learner interaction. Our professional closeness to these classroom environments not only increases our sensitivity as readers of the research data, but also enhances our awareness of the ways in which both teachers and students are differentially situated. From an ethical perspective a heightening of our understanding of the local contexts increases our respect for the participants. We make no claims as to the generalisability of our case study findings; rather, we draw attention to the particularities of local circumstances (Yandell, 2019). By asking specific questions we seek to offer analytical insights into the processes involved in reading a Shakespeare play in these classrooms, insights that we hope readers may find of relevance in considering other contexts with which they are familiar.

The Schools and the Teachers

Our four case study schools are all secondary comprehensives based in London with which we have a professional familiarity. For ethical reasons, names of schools, teachers and students have been appropriately anonymised throughout. Permissions were sought and consent obtained from all participants in accordance with British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines current at the time of conducting the research. These are the schools and teachers who are referenced in later sections:

- Eastgate (mixed gender) – Marie (Year 9: *Macbeth*. Data collected in 2006 covering preparation for externally assessed written SATs examination); Beth (Year 10: *Henry V*. Data collected in 2009 when Shakespeare was assessed by coursework essay).
- Parkside (mixed gender) – Pip (Year 10: *Romeo and Juliet*. Data collected in 2008 when Shakespeare was assessed by coursework essay).
- Downham Fields (mixed gender) – interviews with Paul, Chloe, Emmanuel, Claire and Jamie undertaken throughout the academic year 2009/10 following the abandonment of SATs.
- Woodside (boys) – Shona (Year 7 class: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Data collected across the academic year 2011/12).
- Interviews with Woodside students conducted in 2012 and again with the same students shortly prior to their GCSE examinations in 2016, the final year in which an element of coursework was allowed (albeit highly constrained, time-limited and written under 'controlled' classroom conditions).

Each of the schools is socially and ethnically mixed, reflecting the diverse populations that make up many areas of London. For the purposes of our current enquiry, we have selected relevant examples from a larger data set of teachers and classes, and these form the basis of our analysis in Sections 3 and 4.

2 Frameworks: Learning, Reading and Playing

Any exploration of classroom pedagogy must inevitably draw attention to what is meant by 'learning' and should consequently raise questions about the nature of disciplinary knowledge as produced within curricular systems.

Both issues become more pressing when the subject of enquiry concerns a body of canonical texts prescribed by politicians for compulsory study in schools. Current debates around ‘powerful knowledge’ (e.g., Young, 2008) and the ‘knowledge-rich curriculum’ (e.g., Gibb, 2017) have been prompted in part by the work of US educationalist E. D. Hirsch (1987, 2007), who proposes what amounts to an inverted form of Bourdieusian cultural capital. According to Hirsch, there exist universally agreed sets of canonical knowledge, acquaintance with which all young people are entitled in the name of empowerment and social justice. Nick Gibb, British Schools Minister and self-confessed Hirsch enthusiast (see Gibb, 2017), expresses his version of this educational philosophy thus:

Education is about the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next ... The rich language of Shakespeare should be the common property of us all. The great figures of literature that still populate the conversations of all those who regard themselves as well-educated should be known to all ... And they must be taught to everyone.
(Gibb, 2010)

Knowledge is conceived of as reified, stable and self-explanatory, a commodity that can be exchanged in a straightforward, one-way classroom transaction between the knowledgeable and the knowledge-less. We think it is important to explain in some detail why we unequivocally reject this monologic transmission model of teaching and learning and why, when it comes to Shakespeare in particular, we believe the development of literary knowledge involves a much more complex process of engagement than is implied by Hirsch or current policymakers in Britain.⁶

⁶ As from September 2021 Gibb’s concept of ‘cultural capital’ is officially enshrined in the government’s school inspection framework: ‘As part of making the judgement about the quality of education, inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life’. See www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook.