

1 Why teach Shakespeare?

‘My reasons are most strong, and you shall know them’

All's Well That Ends Well Act 4 Scene 2, line 59

An easy answer to the question ‘Why teach Shakespeare?’ is ‘Why not?’ After all, many teachers can give examples like the ones here of their students’ intense engagement with the plays:

- 1 The class of eleven-year-olds who create a thrilling dance–drama of the episode that Prospero relates in *The Tempest* in which Sycorax and her potent ministers imprison Ariel in a cloven pine.
- 2 The thirteen-year-olds who bring the market square of Verona to bustling life, into which the feud of the Montagues and Capulets then violently erupts.
- 3 The total involvement of the class of fifteen-year-olds who work out their own compelling version of Macbeth’s banquet, in which the witches orchestrate the entries of Banquo’s Ghost, and the guests echo snatches of Macbeth’s words.
- 4 The seventeen-year-olds studying *Measure for Measure* who argue passionately over Isabella’s refusal to trade her chastity for her brother’s life, and who electrifyingly dramatise the Duke’s ‘Be absolute for death ...’ in a chorally spoken version intercut with Claudio’s ‘Ay, but to die ...’.

The co-operation that exists in such classrooms, as students work together on ‘their’ Shakespeare, mirrors the creative, experimental ethos of the theatrical rehearsal room, where individual talents unite in co-operative enterprise. The self-evident commitment of such students,





and the satisfying sense of pleasure in group and individual achievement, are usually experienced directly only by those who share them.

The more public responses to the question of why to teach Shakespeare can be organised under four headings:

- abiding and familiar concerns
- student development
- language
- otherness.

1.1 Abiding and familiar concerns

Shakespeare's characters, stories and themes have been, and still are, a source of meaning and significance for every generation. Their relevance lies in the virtually endless opportunities they offer for reinterpretation and local application of familiar human relationships and passions. The plays are peopled with fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, wives, husbands, brothers and sisters. Capulet, raging at his daughter Juliet, is just one of many Shakespearean fathers who fiercely seek to control their daughters' lives (Polonius and Ophelia, Lear and Cordelia, Cymbeline and Imogen, Prospero and Miranda, Duke Frederick and Celia, Egeus and Hermia, the Duke of Milan and Silvia).

Students find the Capulet and Juliet episode in Act 3 Scene 5 exciting to enact. It is recognisable and familiar; if not in every student's real-life experience, then in 'felt' knowledge. Students relish the opportunity to speak Capulet's lines beginning 'Hang thee, young baggage, disobedient wretch!' The scene is an excellent spur to discussion of the nature of parent-child relationships. So, too, is the ambiguous relationship of Hamlet and Gertrude. Even the few lines of Siward on the death of his son, killed by Macbeth, can stimulate discussion of contemporary comparisons and contrasts.

Students of all ages can recognise and identify with such relationships. Similarly, they can explore other relationships of lovers, friends and enemies, masters and servants. All are widely available in the plays: the quarrelling of Hermia and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the dialogues of Romeo and Juliet, Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Katherina and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* and the harsh exchanges between Prospero and Caliban in *The Tempest*. As students transpose these relationships into their own experience, they engage personally and directly with abiding issues of morality, of gender, of control over one's life.

In empathetic enactments and discussion, students gain access to the feelings of Shakespeare's characters caught up in their particular predicaments. The emotions expressed reach across the centuries: love, hate, awe, tenderness, anger, despair, jealousy, contempt, fear, courage, wonder. The settings of the plays may be remote: Caesar's Rome, medieval Scotland, an imaginary island. The dilemmas may be extreme: Juliet fearful of drinking a 'poisoned' potion, a Scottish warlord about to kill his king, an Athenian workman magically transformed into a donkey. But students



make immediate connection with emotions and motivations that link with their own feelings and experience. Shakespeare's times were very different from our own, but human emotions are common to all ages.

'O, she's warm,' exclaims Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, as the statue of his long-thought-dead wife Hermione comes to life. The joy of unexpected reunion, of hope that what was lost can be recovered, of the prospect of happiness after sorrow, touches emotional capacities that every student possesses.

It is not only in personal experience, in family relationships and individual emotions that students find relevance. Shakespeare's plays also explore issues which beset every society: abiding questions of how people should live together; of justice, politics, wealth, war. What kind of places are Hamlet's Denmark, Macbeth's Scotland, Capulet's Verona, Lear's Britain that they contain such individuals, evoke such behaviour, dispense such kinds of justice?

Students who study *Measure for Measure* are never slow in finding contemporary parallels to Angelo's hypocrisy and Vienna's corruption. The gap that the play reveals between public appearance and private practice prompts students to identify similar disjunctions today. The



slaeze and injustice that hide behind the facade of a seemingly ordered society easily find modern reflections.

In Shakespeare, the private and the public, the individual character and the social world they inhabit, are organically interconnected. Students who explore the question of why Romeo and Juliet died gain a deeper understanding of the interrelation of individual and society. Their inquiries increase their comprehension of how morality is the product of individual character, and cultural and historical context. Responsibility cannot be placed solely upon the lovers, or their parents, or Friar Lawrence, or the patriarchal and violent society of Verona, or even on chance or fate; it is influenced in some way by many such factors. And so with the students' own lives – Shakespeare's concerns are abiding concerns.

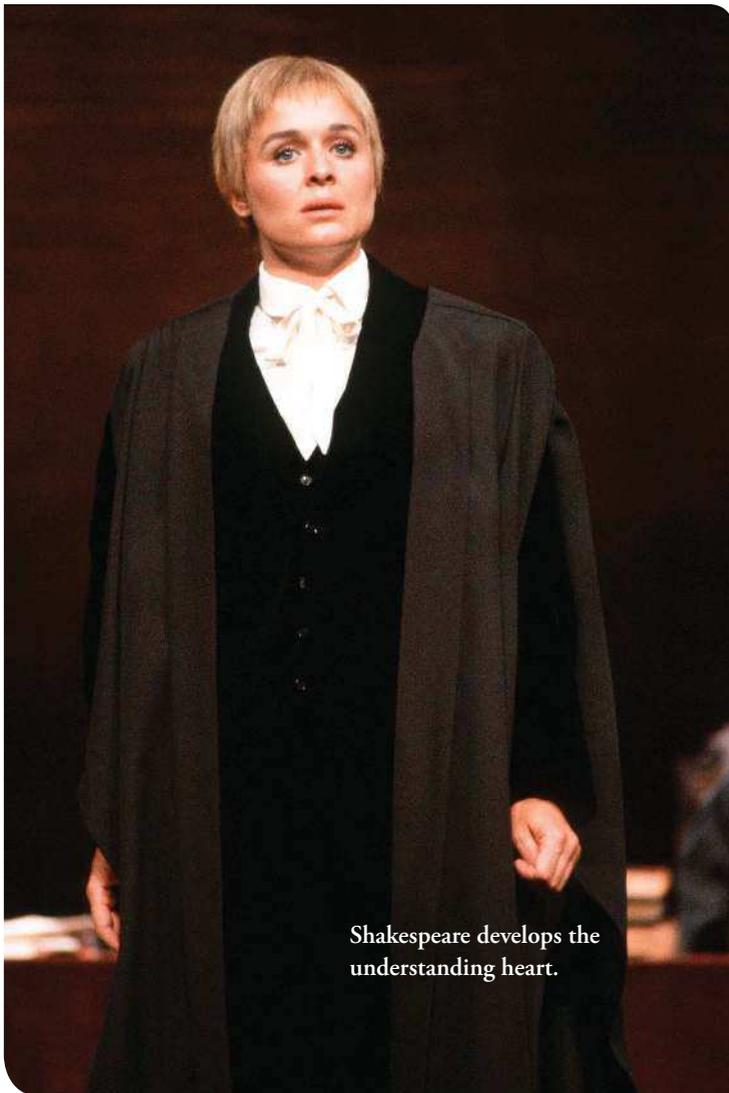
1.2 Student development

To study Shakespeare is to acquire all kinds of knowledge. It might be increased vocabulary, or an understanding of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, or of Shakespeare's life and times. It might be knowledge special to each play. *The Tempest* can motivate students to research the colonisation of the Americas, or the growth of Renaissance science and literature. The history and Roman plays offer opportunities for developing different kinds of historical understanding.

Beyond such new knowledge, the active study of Shakespeare generates more personal development. Many teachers have seen the growth of confidence and self-esteem that comes from learning a role, however small, and taking part in a performance or some other enactment before an audience.

Active methods of teaching Shakespeare are particularly powerful in aiding student development because they accord a greater degree of responsibility to them than traditional ways of teaching. They are rooted in co-operation with others to make some form of presentation. Active approaches to Shakespeare satisfy the creative impulse (How can we stage the shipwreck that opens *The Tempest*?) and offer free play to the imagination (How should *our* Ariel appear, move, speak, vanish?). Such methods are vocally and personally demanding because they involve students in making presentations of many kinds. They are a source of deepening self-awareness as students find ways to express their understandings and feelings in physical action (How can I overcome my inhibitions about acting in front of others?).

Studying Shakespeare allows exploration of human feelings in ways that give mental, physical and emotional release, but in the safe conditions of classroom and drama studio. Enacting Shakespeare can help students to confront and control their own emotions. The resultant understanding of others can lead to greater empathy. Practical activities involve students' sympathies very directly. What does it feel like to be Ophelia, on the receiving end of Hamlet's verbal onslaughts?



The dilemmas that beset so many of Shakespeare's characters offer students opportunities to argue the moral issues, and to exercise judgement and choices. Such arguments do not have to be conducted through traditional essays or class discussion; they can be undertaken in role-play. Students' moral understanding can increase as they explore the ethical perplexities of individual, social and political life embodied in the plays. For example, students in role as Capulet and his wife can describe their feelings and hopes for Juliet, their only daughter, and try to make sense of her death.



In such activities, the development of critical thinking accompanies imaginative and emotional growth as students speculate, reason, predict and hypothesise about the actions, motivations, relationships and contexts of characters and communities. To use the language of developmental psychology, Shakespeare can increase students' competence and confidence across the widest range of developmental possibilities. To express it less prosaically, Shakespeare develops the understanding heart.

1.3 Language

Shakespeare's language is both a model and a resource for students. In its blend of formality and flexibility it offers unlimited opportunities for students' own linguistic growth. Variety abounds: in *Hamlet*, the immediacy of the opening words 'Who's there?' contrasts with the deeply reflective tone of 'To be or not to be . . .'. Shakespeare uses many different styles of language, and plays all kinds of language games. His language provides students with rich models for study, imitation and expressive personal re-creation.

Shakespeare was clearly fascinated by language. He was acutely conscious of its use, power and limitations; every play displays that awareness. Language is action, and Shakespeare's characters reveal themselves through it. Antony uses language to persuade the citizens of Rome against the conspirators. Iago uses it to deceive and destroy Othello. Juliet uses it to express her love; Macbeth to voice his tortured conscience.

The language of the plays is energetic, vivid and sensuous. Its difficulties are enabling difficulties. Students gain a sense of achievement and satisfaction as they respond to its challenge. For example, by understanding Shakespeare's craftsmanship and using it to assist their own writing, they can develop their own voices in writing. As students come to grips with the language in active explorations, they gain insight into the power of language and become enfranchised as readers, writers, speakers, listeners and actors.

1.4 Otherness

A powerful argument for studying Shakespeare exists in his extraordinariness, his strangeness, his unfamiliarity. His appeal lies in a unique blend of the familiar and the strange, his relevance and his remoteness. All education is about 'opening doors', extending opportunities and experience. It is concerned that individuals should not be imprisoned in a single point of view, confined solely to local knowledge and beliefs. Education shows that 'there is a world elsewhere' beyond the familiar and everyday.



The study of Shakespeare allows students to think beyond the here and now; to theorise about imagined worlds that are both like, and unlike, our own.

These educational characteristics are abundantly displayed in the characters, language, settings and issues of Shakespeare's plays. His work acquaints students with different ways of living, different values and beliefs. His characters are simultaneously familiar and exotic. They often live at the extremes, caught in agonising dilemmas. They express themselves in heightened language, and live in worlds that are clearly not those of today. Shakespeare invites students to develop a deep acquaintance with those characters, to experience their extremes of emotion, to imaginatively inhabit their remote worlds and to learn from those close encounters with otherness.

Every student is entitled to make the acquaintance of genius. Shakespeare remains one of outstanding significance in the development of English language, literature and drama. All students should have opportunities through practical experience to make up their own minds about what Shakespeare might hold for them.