



AUTUMN 2005

THE USE OF ENGLISH

VOLUME 57.1



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Not of an age, but for all time?

The Changing Face of Shakespeare in School

Jenny Stevens

The arrival through the post of L. G. Salingar's article on teaching Shakespeare to a post-war generation of Grammar School boys coincided with my reading of a book published fifty years later: Bethan Marshall's *English Teachers – The Unofficial Guide*. The most compelling part of Marshall's thought-provoking study is that entitled 'A Rough Guide to English Teachers'. Forming the basis of the author's research, this section offers five broad views of the teaching of English with which those taking part in the project were asked to align themselves. The juxtaposition of the writings of Salingar and Marshall raised the inevitable question: would a Grammar School master of the late-1940s still find a place in the modern-day educationalist's classifications of the English teacher? The question seemed to find an answer with surprising speed, as Salingar fitted, without too much forcing, into the profile of Group A:

This group are Arnoldian in their view of the subject. They believe in the improving and civilising qualities of literature...And perhaps most importantly they are about developing an aesthetic sensibility.¹

Viewed in this light, Salingar's article appeared to be more than an historical document, offering a tantalisingly brief view of the English teacher of the past. Rather, it conveyed attitudes and beliefs which still inhere in a substantial proportion of the profession, a continuity of teacher-type which could either be regarded as evidence of unhealthy ossification, or as confirming a certain 'essence' of English teaching which is destined to endure.

Even the most cursory reading of Salingar's piece reveals certain values and priorities with which the vast majority of English teachers would feel an affinity: the study of Shakespeare should result in 'immediate

enjoyment', as well as contributing to a more long-term development of mature understanding; it should promote in the student 'not a passive but an active process of the mind'; it should involve a variety of media, with students leaving school having 'read, taken part in, or watched on a stage or screen anything from two or three of the plays to ten'. While we may reel at the idea of our current students clocking up ten plays in an increasingly crowded school curriculum, there is nothing here which seems outmoded or, indeed, undesirable. Moreover, if we follow the critical practice of today and place Salingar in his historical, social, and cultural contexts, he moves at once from Bethan Marshall's old-school Group A to the much more exciting Group E: the rebel. In dismissing rote-learning for the purposes of recitation as pointless, extolling the virtues of digression – albeit 'judicious' digression – for the learning process, and stressing the importance of the students' direct engagement with the text, Salingar may well have been one of the 'trendy' English teachers of his day. Indeed, it is a telling coincidence that both Salingar and Rex Gibson, the director of the 'Shakespeare and Schools Project' of the 1980s, though writing decades apart, employ the same quotation from *Hamlet* to encapsulate their approach to teaching the Bard: 'The play's the thing'.² Salingar's insistence on an intrinsic textual methodology is, for its time, a 'modern' critical standpoint. His assertion that 'the fundamental fact about Shakespeare's works is that they consist of dramatic poetry' chimes with the literary standpoint of critics such as L. C. Knights, whose commitment to treating the Shakespeare text as 'a dramatic poem', would no doubt have been familiar to the well-read teacher of the 1940s.³ Keeping securely in line with Knights, Salingar rejects the early twentieth-century critical school of A. C. Bradley, averring that characters 'are not historical personages, but stage figures, creatures of the play'. After all, each era of English studies needs its *bête noire*: if Bradley fulfilled that function for Salingar's generation, F. R. Leavis would fall from grace and take on the burden some years later.

Much of Salingar's article argues strongly in favour of applying the Shakespearian criticism of the 1930s and 1940s to classroom practice. The author is clear about the literary emphasis of his teaching: plot, theme and character take a back seat to dramatic language, and 'external information' is to be kept to a minimum. He is equally certain about what he hopes his students will acquire from their study of Shakespeare, valuing their ability to understand drama through an appreciation of the rhythms, energy and power of poetic language above all else. We can presume that his schemes of work would start from 'the single scene as the natural unit of study', taken from texts judged suitable for specific years and which, when placed in sequence, would build up the students' knowledge and expertise in the

Shakespearean canon. The edition of the play chosen for study would be carefully selected and, ideally, would include a simple introduction, the briefest of notes, and photographs in place of line-drawings. Concerning the actual nuts and bolts of classroom activity, however, the article renders little illumination.

While Salingar provides several examples of the extracts he would be likely to use with his boys, and refers to the necessity of having a 'method of classroom study', we can only guess at what this method involved. The sole pedagogical technique mentioned explicitly is that of reading aloud and acting out individual scenes, but what takes place before and after these readings can only be surmised. It would be reasonable to assume that Salingar's lessons are teacher-centred and that whole-class teaching is the norm. Students are referred to throughout as an homogenous group: the 'form', the 'boys', the 'class'. And though Salingar points out in his opening paragraph that 'the impressions taken from their Shakespeare reading...are likely to be extremely miscellaneous', we are given no specific examples of individual responses. The reader forms an impression of a collection of extremely biddable boys, listening attentively to the master and enunciating Shakespeare on demand; they have the grammatical skills to enable them to analyse the 'balance of clauses' in what they read, and a glossary of literary terminology to help them define the poetic language they are encouraged to appreciate. In the course of Salingar's article, the distinction between the boy and the adult is forcefully underscored: certain aspects of Shakespeare's writing are assumed to be beyond the reach of young adolescents and any 'generalizations about character and motive' are discouraged on account of their originating 'at best...from the experience of adults.' While today's English teacher might rack her brains to find ways of making Shakespeare 'relevant' for her students, Salingar is hampered by no such anxiety. The Shakespeare canon might well provide a 'Map of Life', but Salingar's boys are expected to wait some years before they can read it with any assurance. The relationship between master and pupil, boy and man, appears to be a straightforward one in this 1940s' classroom: youth listens and learns, age talks and educates. And the authority of the text is equally assured; the beauty and wisdom of Shakespeare's work is fixed and unalterable, and the teacher must prepare the student to receive it and not, as is more the case in our post-Barthesian climate, to reproduce it with each individual reading.

What emerges clearly from a comparison between Salingar's article, and those which appear in today's educational journals, is that English teachers are now a great deal more reflective and experimental in their pedagogy than they were in the 1940s. Of course, Salingar's failure to outline his

classroom methods could be put down to contemporary perceptions of what it meant to be a competent teacher, rather than to a lack of teaching strategies. Subject knowledge was clearly paramount in the Grammar Schools of the 1940s, with teaching skills coming a poor second. Indeed, my experience of training teachers of A-Level English Literature has shown that there is still some reluctance, among a small minority of them, to probe too deeply or critically into *how* they deliver their courses. Generally speaking, though, twenty-first-century English teachers think long and hard about how they arrange their classrooms, how they pace their lessons, how they meet the needs of the individual learner, and how they assess learning outcomes. Salingar's teaching strategies may well have stretched further than reading aloud, but it's unlikely that his 'boys' would have had the variety of learning styles offered to students today. One reason that such a diverse range of classroom practices and literary approaches are now practised is that Shakespeare is offered to *all* pupils, regardless of ability, class or gender, and a one-size-fits-all approach just won't do. The pedagogical exigencies created by this democratization of Shakespeare are ably demonstrated in Robert Jeffcoate's article 'Introducing Children to Shakespeare: some conclusions', published in the Spring 1997 edition of *The Use of English*. Salingar and Jeffcoate have much in common: both ally themselves to an Arnoldian model of literature teaching, both are firm believers in students experiencing the plays first-hand and, at least in years seven to nine, in studying them in extract, and both discuss working in detail on the Pyramus and Thisbe scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, unlike Salingar, Jeffcoate eschews the practice of simply reading aloud, considering it 'a sedentary approach which requires sophisticated sight readers...quite inappropriate for mixed ability classes' and, inspired by the work of Rex Gibson, ranges much wider in his teaching practice to serve the needs of his diverse student body.⁴

Classroom practice aside, what can we deduce from Salingar's relatively brief article about the development of English as a school subject in the last half-century? Some of today's academics would no doubt argue that Salingar's perspective on Shakespeare in the classroom is not appreciably different from that of current English teachers. For them, the article would stand as confirmation that English as a school subject is stuck in a time warp, with examining boards and teachers alike unwilling to wake up to the radical changes brought about by the rise of literary theory, not least in the redefinition of the canonical field. One year before the introduction of Curriculum 2000, Robert Eaglestone argued in an article written for the *Guardian* that 'A levels in English are exactly the same as they were in the 1950s'⁵; one year later, in his full-length study *Doing English*, he paints an

even more alarmist picture, asserting that ‘the subject is not very different from how it was in the 1930s and 1940s.’⁶ With regard to the status of Shakespeare in the English curriculum, such an assertion would seem to carry some weight. In the twenty-first century Shakespeare still holds the key position in English education in schools, being the sole compulsory named author at examined Key Stages, unchallenged now by his erstwhile rival, Chaucer and, while there may no longer be common acknowledgement of his ‘universality’, his cultural significance remains as strong as it did in the 1940s. Salingar’s placing of Shakespeare’s name in quotation marks draws the reader’s attention to the fact that it functions grammatically as a common noun, suggesting that the debate about the iconic nature of the national playwright was already underway, long before cultural materialists brought it into the critical arena. But Eaglestone is quite wrong in suggesting that, prior to Curriculum 2000, the subject was ‘pickled in educational aspic’.⁷ Having taught in a variety of schools in both the maintained and independent sectors since the early 1980s, I would argue that English as a school subject has undergone sustained and, in some respects, radical development, since the late 1970s, and the teaching of Shakespeare has been transformed accordingly.

Shakespeare in schools is a much more complex matter now than in it was in the 1940s when, if we are to take Salingar as our guide, it was intended primarily for clever boys. Governmental policy, comprehensive education, and developments in university English studies are some of the most significant factors which have helped to shape the teaching of Shakespeare in the last two decades. None of these, though, had made much of an impact by the time I had completed my secondary education in a Grammar School in the mid-1970s. Indeed, Salingar’s Shakespeare struck me as entirely compatible with the Shakespeare of my own English teachers all those years back. Like Salingar’s boys, we girls – or (girls) as Salingar would have us – read aloud a good deal, looked closely at language and listened attentively to our teachers. Those of us who aspired to the universities of Oxford or Cambridge were handed reading lists closely resembling Salingar’s bibliography and left to fight over the local library’s one available copy of *The Wheel of Fire*. But the last two decades have moved us on from this, with English teachers being required to communicate Shakespeare to a wider audience, and for an ever-increasing number of statutorily prescribed examinations. There is no doubt that teachers nowadays feel more pressure to ‘market’ Shakespeare to their students in a climate where the written word, though still ranked highly as a cultural form, has been overtaken by the visual appeal of the screen in the majority of young people’s lives. And there is much on offer to encourage this commodification of the Bard. Funds permitting,

Shakespeare can enter our classrooms through a dizzying array of technological wizardry, making those of us still struggling to tame the interactive whiteboard, yearn nostalgically for the minimalist classroom of the 1940s where Mr Salingar and his attentive boys worked solely with a school edition of the text, albeit an inadequate one.

The influence of critical theory – *pace* Eaglestone – has also had considerable impact on how Shakespeare is taught in schools, and not only since QCA formulated some rather ill-conceived Assessment Objectives to drag the traditionalists kicking and screaming into the here and now of English studies. The critical fashion for extrinsic approaches to the text, and in particular those of the new historicists, has influenced the way we present Shakespeare to our classes at all levels, especially since the introduction of Curriculum 2000. For teachers within a comfortable distance of London, the reconstruction of the Globe theatre and the excellent work of its education team, with both primary and secondary school students, have offered an invaluable resource for exploring the historical, social and cultural specificity of a given text and Shakespeare's work as a whole. A single workshop with one of the Globe's Education team would, I have no doubt, persuade Salingar to change his view that 'enthusiasm for Shakespearean staging' results in 'a good deal of irrelevance'. Just two hours spent looking at the theatre, and working on a few textual extracts with one of its actors, can afford students at all Key Stages invaluable insights into aspects of Shakespeare's use of language, the audience for which it was written, and the crucial cultural, social and political role played by theatre in Elizabethan England.

Of course, some current English teachers continue to uphold Salingar's insistence on foregrounding Shakespeare's dramatic language and pushing its contemporary contexts into the background. Few, however, would ignore the issues of race, class and gender which are bound to arise in the modern classroom, where students expect to be allowed to express their points of view freely and to relate their own experiences of the world to the text in front of them. And it is here that drawing on well-established critical approaches, such as those of feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic theory, can help to inform and structure a student's personal response to a play, especially at Key Stage 5. Furthermore, the way we teach certain plays, or certain elements of them, has been strongly influenced by the more recent developments of post-colonialist theory, gender studies and genre criticism. Such shifts in interpretation can often throw light on works which have suffered from critical neglect, thus widening the range of texts we choose for study. If, back in the 1940s, Salingar wasn't persuaded to add *Cymbeline* to his teaching repertoire by G. Wilson Knight's spirited defence of the play in *The Crown of Life*, some of the

excellent late twentieth-century readings might have been more successful in convincing him that there was more to the work than what Samuel Johnson called 'unresisting imbecility'.

It is certainly diverting to speculate about what Salingar would make of the critical theory which has emerged over the past thirty years or so. He would not be averse to some of the broader approaches of structuralism, being already used to showing his students how 'the striking pairings or contrasts' in a play create meaning; and his conviction that 'abstracting the events and reconstructing them in a sequence of their own suppresses the real chain of connexions' bears some resemblance to the *fabula / sjuzet* distinction made by some structuralist critics. His use of the Pyramus and Thisbe scene to illustrate 'elements of Shakespeare's stagecraft' suggests that he would approve of the modern critical emphasis on Shakespeare's metadramatic technique which combines the text and its theatrical contexts in a manner conducive to Salingar's way of thinking. More troubling for him, perhaps, would be the new historicists' ongoing demolition of the conservative vision of Shakespeare and his world, fostered in the 1930s and 1940s by critics like John Dover Wilson and E. M. W. Tillyard. Without the security of reading the history plays as 'hymns to Tudor order' to fall back on, Salingar would find teaching *Richard II* to thirteen-year-old boys a great deal more complex. The emergence over the past few decades of a more dominant female critical voice might also cause Salingar some pause for thought. Would he, we wonder, avoid the work of critics such as Jacqueline Rose and Coppélia Kahn in case they forced 'on boys an ethical or psychological judgement beyond their reach'; or would he consider such voices as the ideal means to bring about the 'change of emphasis for classes of girls' which he mentions in his first footnote? And how would he and his boys react to the current critical fashion for highlighting the darker elements of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? If the response to such an approach by my more mature Open University students is anything to judge by, they would find it quite a drastic and unwelcome shift in perspective.

No doubt Salingar would, like the English teacher of today, pick and choose his critical theory to suit his purposes. For example, we are all aware that the deeply entrenched notion of character in a text is questionable, but we are equally aware that reminding school students of any epoch that Hamlet is merely an assemblage of a chain of signifiers, a deferred presence, is unlikely to nurture a passion for the play. On the other hand, the overturning of traditional notions of the printed playtext in the past two decades or so has offered teachers an alternative starting point for their presentation of Shakespeare. Explaining to students that the Shakespearian text in front of them is inherently unfixed, and that we

can never hope to reconstruct a single, authentic manuscript, can be immensely liberating. No longer is it a museum piece set in stone, but evidence of a lively and enterprising theatrical world, where playwrights had to struggle to take control of their own scripts at a time when the text was a fluid and imperfect entity. Modern perceptions of the printed text are, indeed, considerably more sophisticated than they were in the 1940s, and no teacher of today would share Salinger's confident belief in the existence, somewhere, of Shakespeare's 'original' stage directions.

What emerges most strongly from a reading of Salinger's article in the first decade of the twenty-first century is that there have been more gains than losses for teachers and students of Shakespeare over the past fifty years. In some ways, it is tempting to look back to Salinger's era as to a simpler time, uncomplicated by competing theoretical theories, unfettered by state-imposed testing and ubiquitous assessment objectives. And though we might find Salinger's insistence on the primacy of the literary text somewhat limiting, we might prefer it to the view expressed in a recent NATE publication that we should read literary language as just one form of discourse alongside others, to be taught in a course which 'reunite[s] "Language" and "Literature" throughout the pre-university sectors'.⁸ Yet we must surely rejoice that the study of Shakespeare is no longer ring-fenced for those most able to compete in a highly selective educational system, even if it means working a good deal harder to ensure that it is accessible and enjoyable for all our students. Likewise, we should feel heartened that our selection of Shakespearian texts is not circumscribed by preconceived ideas of gender, such as those which kept the romantic comedies from Salinger's class on account of their being 'too sophisticated to hold a boy's interest'.

Finally, Salinger's article opens up some intriguing questions about the impact of the Second World War on the teaching of Shakespeare and literature in general. I couldn't help but wonder what it must have been like to teach English at an Army College in the Central Mediterranean, as Salinger did, and how easy it would have been to settle back down to the relatively sedate routine of an English Grammar School. Doubtless, the prospect of teaching and learning about plays such as *Richard II* and *Henry V* must have been very different for a generation which had just come through a war, from what it is for the teachers and students of today. Furthermore, the article raises the question of how far *The Use of English* as a journal engaged with issues relating to war-time experiences. The English Association certainly considered the impact of the First World War, holding a conference whose aim, according to the *Times Literary Supplement*, was to 'discuss the effect of the war on the production and reading of books.'⁹ In an article reporting on the conference, we find the

following conclusion:

When the war broke out Mr Gosse, and a great many other people thought it would mean an end of literature. It seemed likely that there would be much less reading of any kind and that what there was would be almost entirely of newspapers in all but name and shape. Almost the exact reverse has occurred according to the unimpeachable witnesses of the English Association.¹⁰

There is no reason to doubt that, when the Second World War threatened to push literary innovation and study from Britain's schools and universities, teachers like Salingar did their utmost to keep them alive, and it would be fascinating to research the archives of the English Association with this in mind.

Notes

1. Bethan Marshall, *English Teachers – The Unofficial Guide: Researching the Philosophies of English Teachers*, London: Routledge Falmer, 2000, p. 5. of 'A Rough Guide to English Teachers' booklet.
2. The quotation stands as an epigraph to the Introduction of Rex Gibson's *Teaching Shakespeare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
3. L. C. Knights, 'How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?', *Hamlet and Other Shakespearian Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 270.
4. Robert Jeffcoate, 'Introducing Children to Shakespeare: some conclusions', *The Use of English*, Spring 1997, 48, 122-133, p. 124.
5. Robert Eaglestone, 'A critical time for English', the *Guardian*, 30 November 1999.
6. Robert Eaglestone, *Doing English*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 37.
7. Robert Eaglestone, 'A critical time for English', the *Guardian*, 30 November 1999.
8. **text: message** *The Future of A level English*, ed. John Hodgson, National Association for the Teaching of English, 2005, p. 43.
9. 'Literature and the War', *Times Literary Supplement*, June 1916, 253-254.
10. *Ibid*, p. 253.

Shakespeare in School

L.G. Salingar

For the average schoolboy (or girl), especially at a Grammar School, the study of Shakespeare occupies a large part of his experience.¹ By the time he leaves school he has either read, taken part in, or watched on stage or screen anything from two or three of the plays to ten, or even more; and proportionately this counts for more of his mental life, in new interests or in boredom, than would the same amount of reading and playgoing on the part of an adult. Judging from the timetable, he is better acquainted with Shakespeare than with any other writer, or dramatist, or artist in any medium; and the associations of 'Shakespeare' are likely to colour his attitude to literature and art in general. It seems reasonable to go further: not only his attitude towards the arts, but much of his attitude towards adult experience, its range and possibilities, may well be coloured in the same way. No doubt there is rhetorical exaggeration in Johnson's claim for the dramatist that 'his Works may be considered as a Map of Life, a faithful miniature of human Transactions', so that 'he that has read *Shakespeare* with Attention will perhaps find little new in the crowded World'; but at least it would be dangerous to estimate too narrowly a boy's impressions of human nature and history as derived from Shakespeare's plays. Vague or precise, the impressions taken from their Shakespeare reading by a class as a whole are likely to be extremely miscellaneous; and some of them will be lasting.

What is needed for school work is an approach, free of unnecessary obstacles, what will give a boy both the chance of immediate enjoyment and some of his principal bearings for a more mature understanding later. In view of some of its inherent difficulties, Shakespeare work has to be graded; and it should be planned as a whole throughout the school, in method of classroom study as well as in choice of plays, so that full advantage can be gained from continuity. There is a legitimate place in 'Shakespeare' lessons for the judicious digression – often the best-remembered part of them – which arises naturally from the strangeness of the plays to the mind of a modern boy. But spontaneous digressions are one thing, and irrelevant 'Additional Notes' another. Some aspects of Shakespeare study are essential, others are merely trimmings; and it is

important that the distinction should be kept as clear as possible.

Unfortunately the school editions available are often more hindrance than help. Besides being sightly and durable, the ideal school edition should have the negative virtue of confining itself to the minimum of explanatory comment: stage directions as brief as the original (what is the point, for example, of introducing *Julius Caesar* in 'a street in Rome, a narrow winding street between houses of rough brick, three or four stories high?'); an economical glossary and a simple factual introduction, in the manner of the Penguin series; and if illustrations, which can be helpful, are to be included, then full-page photographs of contemporary material or of good modern stage settings rather than line-drawings, which are neither attractive nor informative. What is essential is that the plays should be left to be treated as plays. There is good reason to believe that the positive dislike of Shakespeare has diminished as classroom study has been freed of Notes in the manner of Verity.

This formula, however – the play's the thing – is too loose to have much practical value; something more definite is needed. There are many kinds of play-making, not all of them Shakespeare's; and the fundamental fact about Shakespeare's works is that they consist of dramatic poetry. Neither story nor character by itself has the same cardinal importance as passages of spoken poetry, or of wit or rhetoric akin to poetry, in their immediate dramatic setting. Poetic rhetoric, poetry for stage declamation, is the basis of a Shakespeare play, not an additional beauty.² It is an art where immediate effect counts for more than logical inference, and where mastery of the language counts for most of the effect.

'The Truth is', as Johnson³ declared, 'that a very small part of the Reputation of this mighty Genius depends upon the naked Plot, or Story of his Plays. He lived in an Age when the Books of Chivalry were yet popular and when therefore the Minds of his Auditors were not accustomed to balance Probabilities, or to examine nicely the Proportion between Causes and Effects.' One need not share Johnson's patronising attitude towards the Elizabethans to agree with the substance of this comment, particularly in its application to work in schools. Obviously, a reader must grasp the main sequence of events; and many boys will do well, when it comes to written answers, if they can set down accurately what is done, by whom, and in what order. But that is no justification for the emphasis sometimes laid on 'the naked Plot'. At best it can only merge Shakespeare's story in Holinshed's or Plutarch's; more often, it will only draw attention to its nakedness. Boys are suspicious of any attempt by adults to treat make-believe with the seriousness of reality; and they are unlikely to be much impressed by a detailed study of the plot of *The*

Merchant of Venice or by what Johnson elsewhere calls the ‘unresisting imbecility’ of the fable in *Cymbeline*. The business of abstracting the events and reconstructing them in a sequence of their own suppresses the real chain of connexions, which is theatrical and imaginative, and substitutes another, that of some improbable detective story.

On the other hand, the time factor and the other conditions of classroom study and acting suggest the single scene as the natural unit of study, particularly with junior forms;⁴ and concentration on scenes and their sequence, rather than events, is in keeping with Shakespeare’s methods of construction. Perhaps the best introduction to Shakespeare, for boys about twelve, is by way of the Bottom scenes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – with the other scenes cut and the connecting links briefly summarized. Here the farce and artificiality are frank and unmistakable, and the production of ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ affords a convenient opportunity to bring out the elements of Shakespeare’s stagecraft. Discussion of Wall and the courtiers’ comments, for example, can lead on to the consideration of what can be shown on the stage and what Shakespeare tries to show; Thisbe’s last speech and the Prologue (with Lysander’s obliging ‘moral’ – ‘it is not enough to speak, but to speak true’) lend themselves to a contrast, in poetic effectiveness, with Puck’s ‘Now the hungry lion roars’; and the end of the play illustrates how Shakespeare carries a scene through a succession of moods, partly by means of stage business, dancing and music, but chiefly by means of the poetry. In their second or third year of Shakespeare study it is useful for a form to dwell on the sequence and tempo of events in a single scene and the way the points of main significance are made by Shakespeare’s choice of language; for example, such a scene as that in *Richard II* (II. i), where the news of Bolingbroke’s return to England is given some hundred and twenty lines after the news of his father’s death, and less than fifty lines after the King leaves for Ireland. The sudden changes of fortune are stressed by the wording; in Richard’s speech, for instance –

Come on, our queen; to-morrow must we part;
Be merry, for our time of stay is short:-

or in the preface to the news of Bolingbroke’s return-

even through the hollow eyes of death
I see life peering.

After it has considered the sequence of stage events and the use of poetry for stage effect in scenes like this, a form is better placed to take in a more complex movement, like that of the middle scenes of *Julius Caesar*, or to see how main plot and sub-plot hold together in such a play as *Henry IV*.

References to Shakespeare's theatre and background may be very helpful in discussing questions of this sort; but the broad effects of his dramatic construction can be deduced from the text, without much need to rely on external information.⁵

As with the plot, taken by itself, so with the characters: they are not historical personages, but stage figures, creatures of the play, often no more lifelike in scale and portrayal than good caricatures or monumental effigies; or, from another point of view, they may be compared with the instruments in an orchestra, each with its separate contribution to make to the total effect. Their stage presence is more important than any motives or biography that can be imputed to them by inference; and, for class study especially, it is their stage presence, the surface impression of the text, that matters most; broad outlines are sufficient, and the more striking pairings or contrasts of role. Here, too, the farcical scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provide a good starting-point, with their contrasts between Bottom and Titania, Bottom and Puck, and so on; or, again, Shakespeare's methods are readily to be seen in such contrasting figures as Williams, Pistol, and the King in *Henry V*. On the other hand, the attempt to work out character-studies in detail, with consistent and neatly tabulated characteristics, is liable either to distort the acted play, or to force on boys an ethical or psychological judgment beyond their reach; or both. It can lead only too promptly to the absurd, as in one set of school Notes on Brutus and Cassius – 'Stoic, abhorring suicide' and 'Epicurean, welcoming it'; or to the meaningless tags and false sentiment of an adult writing down to the level of a quite imaginary school-boy. In another set of school Notes, for example, Brutus is said to be 'a man doomed to failure from the start, by reason of his idealizing nature'; and, as for Antony, 'you should find in the play the indication of those traits which so quickly led him to degeneration and ruin'. The most dreary feature of this last note, leading outside the play altogether, is that it is not even necessary for examination purposes; but it would not be hard to multiply examples.

The essential indications of role and motive are contained in the direct poetic impression made by the speeches. When Antony, for example, speaks his prophecy over the body of Caesar-

And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry *Havoc*, and let slip the dogs of war,-

it is not his attachment to a dead friend that we notice first, but the horror and power of the imagery. And this is what matters. It repeats a principal

theme of the play; and, for Antony's part in it, prepares both for the next episode, with the Servant,⁶ and for the crucial scene of mob-oratory that follows.

It is necessary from the start, then, that boys should have plenty of practice in reading aloud, and reading aloud with an ear for the rhythmic beat and pause of a blank verse line and for the run and balance of a sentence. Distinctness and stress matter more than 'expression' or gesture or stage position; and, especially at first, declamation is more of a merit than a fault. Many boys, confronted by a succession of unfamiliar words, are carried forward, as many of the first audiences themselves may have been, by the general run and sonority of the lines; and they can be helped in this by some attention to the formal structure of their lines, to the relations of pause and stress, and to those devices of repetition, antithesis, balance of clauses, and so on, that Shakespeare uses constantly to reinforce the sense-structure of his periods. In Antony's lines, for instance, boys can appreciate the value of the alliteration and the prolongation of the third line quoted to the climax in the fourth. With prose as well as verse, some sense of formal rhythm is needed.

The study of imagery is naturally linked with these rhetorical and rhythmical devices. The imagery, with its extraordinary vigour and concreteness, is the chief source of vitality in a Shakespeare play; it is his command of the language of things, acts, sensations, that makes his lines not only great poetry, but great poetry for the theatre. And to approach a difficult or an important passage by way of the physical qualities of its main images is probably the best way to gain something from it, whether for general literary appreciation, or for the study of the play as such. Acquaintance with the technical names of the principal figures of speech, which is indispensable, should first come, of course, from the discussion of the content of selected passages; later, attention to the formal structure can often help to bring the content into stronger relief. The learning of a passage by heart can be a valuable exercise if it is accompanied by some study of the main images in it and their contribution to the dramatic effect; otherwise, there is not much point in learning 'Friends, Romans, countrymen' or 'The quality of mercy' as recitation pieces.

It may be objected that the approach to Shakespeare's verse suggested here means a return to the out-of-date study of rhetoric, or at least to an undue emphasis on rhetoric, to the detriment of studying a play's content and action. There are two answers to this objection: first, that some attention to the formalities of verse is appropriate in view of the manner in which Shakespeare and his audience were themselves trained to write or listen;⁷ and, second, that looking at the poetic effect of the verse is really a

more direct way of finding what a Shakespearean character is doing than attempting to deal with his speeches by way of paraphrase or summary. No doubt a master must continue to give paraphrases and summaries again and again where he does not wish the class to be held up by minor difficulties of language; but at the critical points where closer examination seems called for, it is usually the poetry that matters first to the understanding of the drama. In Macbeth's soliloquies, for example, the prose meaning is extremely involved; but something of his state of mind can be gathered directly from the sound and the build of the sentence in lines like these:

It were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
 It were done quickly: if th' assassination
 Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
 With his surcease, success; that but this blow
 Might be the be-all land the end-all here,
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
 We'd jump the life to come.

And the conflict of his feelings is sufficiently conveyed by the conflicting physical associations of the images, such as 'trammel up' and jump, or the image of Pity-

like a naked new-born babe,
 Striding the blast.

With lines such as these it becomes quite artificial to say that the dramatic character is 'expressed' in the imagery; if it is not created by the imagery it is nowhere at all. The materials which make up our spontaneous impression of the character are the feelings aroused directly by the spoken word; and any insight the schoolboy can gain into human nature as a result of his Shakespeare reading is to be gained by considering Shakespeare's poetic language, and not from generalizations about character and motive, which are likely, at best, to come from the experience of adults.

The guiding aim of a Shakespeare syllabus should be, then to prepare a boy for receptive attention – not a passive but an active process of the mind - to the power of Shakespeare's language; to Shakespeare's language as a language of the theatre, used in situations belonging first to the theatre, and only by implication, though by constant implication, to the sphere of actual life. The first steps of introduction to his plays, for boys of twelve or so should seek to make familiar some of the main conventions of drama, and to show them that reading verse aloud can be

enjoyable and that each passage of verse may have its own colour and feeling; and this can best be done by concentrating on the pattern of speech and action, the contrasts of mood and character, within selected scenes. Plays of well-marked external action provide the best material for the first two or three years of Shakespeare work: the Histories, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, and the farcical parts of the comedies – among which *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Comedy of Errors* ought not to be forgotten; on the other hand, the romantic comedies with their transitions to and fro between humour and lyrical fantasy, are far too sophisticated to hold a boy's interest.

In the second or third year of Shakespeare work it is desirable to begin discussing a play as a whole, referring from one scene to another to build up the outlines of theme, plot and character, and considering what the main scenes and persons of the play contribute to the general impression. But this is chiefly a matter for stocktaking and revision; the main emphasis should still fall on selected scenes, on the stage situation within these scenes, and on the nature and effect of particular speeches.

Some sense of the elements of Shakespeare's drama as poetic drama is an attainable goal for the study of his plays in school and one well worth attaining; all that is wished for boys later, in recognition of the psychological depth of the plays, can thus have the ground prepared for it. Perhaps they may find in them something that could be compared to 'a Map of Life'; but before they can make any use of it they will need to become accustomed to the conventional signs.

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† Reprinting

Notes

1. This article has been written with the work of a boys' Grammar School mainly in view. The methods of study suggested would no doubt need considerable modification for Modern Schools and probably some change of emphasis for classes of girls. But I believe that the same general principles should apply in each case.
2. This holds good even of the most convincingly lifelike of the tragedies; cf. F.R. Leavis's article on *Othello* (*Scrutiny*, Dec. 1917).
3. In an early essay (D. Nichol Smith, *Shakespeare Criticism*, World's Classics, pp. 87-88).
4. Cf. F. Whitehead's article *Drama in the Classroom* in *The Use of English*, Vol. I, No. 1.
5. An enthusiasm for Shakespearean staging as such, away from the poetic text, can produce a good deal of irrelevance; e.g. one school edition comments on the scene mentioned in *Richard II* that 'an interval of five months is suppressed' after Richard leaves the stage, with the explanation that 'a separate short scene for the conspirators would have broken the alternate order of full-stage and front-stage'. Perhaps; but a more interesting explanation arises directly from Shakespeare's text.
6. Cf. H. Granville-Barker, *Preface to Shakespeare*, I, 74.
Cf. M.C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, chaps. iv-v.

Reproduced from *The Use of English*, Volume 1.2, Winter 1949, pp. 64-71

Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith. Sometime between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part-owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. A now-famous quote as "not of an age, but for all time".[13]. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Shakespeare's works have been continually adapted and rediscovered by new movements in scholarship and performance. His plays remain popular and are studied, performed, and reinterpreted through various cultural and political contexts around the world. "He was not of an age, but for all time!" exclaimed Ben Jonson in his poem "To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare," one of several dedicatory poems prefacing the great 1623 Folio of Comedies, Histories & Tragedies, the first collected volume of Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare's use of this hyperbolic image of a murderer's bloody hand staining the ocean is not new; there are numerous Classical antecedents. What is new in Shakespeare is his use of a massively polysyllabic monologue using two new Latinate words—"multitudinous and incarnadine"—that he may well have invented. (School records for this period are lost, but it is very likely that the son of a prosperous citizen like John Shakespeare would have been enrolled there.) Shakespeare's dramas were said to be not for the age but for all time. This was penned by Ben Johnson at his eulogy. The drama's would last longer than age of their creation, they would remain relevant in all times. Asked in Books and Literature. He was not of age but for all time means? He was not of an age, but for all time, is a quote written about William Shakespeare. It is said to mean that you can not put a date or time to Shakespeare, his work, or his influence. Asked in William Shakespeare. What are famous words said of Shakespeare that are still famous today? Ben Johnson loved Shakespeare and had great respect for him as a poet unmatched in history. Famously he said that Shakespeare was "not for an age, but for all time". Trending Questions.

Shakespeare's plays are written in poetic language. Many of the plays are set in strange, distant places and times. They are still popular today. The stories are often exciting, very funny (in the comedies), or very sad (in the tragedies) and make people want to know what happens to his characters. "He was not of an age, but for all time!" He was involved in the building of the Globe Theatre in 1599. It burned down a few years later. His plays are performed at a new Globe built nearby in 1997. List of Shakespeare's plays[change | change source]. Timon of Athens. Postumus and Imogen. Hamlet is Shakespeare's most popular play in modern times, but how did Shakespeare's contemporaries rate his works? Professor Laura Estill looks at how attitudes to Shakespeare have changed. Shakespeare, in the words of Ben Jonson, is "not of an age, but for all time." Image ©. tonynetone, licensed under CC-BY-2.0 and adapted from the original. Hamlet is Shakespeare's most popular play in modern times, but how did Shakespeare's contemporaries rate his works? Professor Laura Estill of the World Shakespeare Bibliography looks at how attitudes to Shakespeare have changed over time. Nearly 400 years after his death, the best-known of all Shakespeare's lines is "To be or not to be" from Hamlet, his most popular play in modern times.