Fred Sedgwick’s new book presents case studies of children in primary schools writing in the grip of studying Shakespeare. It follows his earlier book for Routledge Read my Mind which has a similar focus on creativity, but here Shakespeare is the basis for inspiration.

Teachers will find the book useful in teaching literacy, whether within the confines of current educational policy or in the richer context of understanding the language of poetry and drama. There is ample evidence of children responding to Shakespeare’s ideas and furthering their own perceptions as a result.

Filled with extraordinary children’s writing and practical guidance for teachers, this is a necessary tool for all teachers anxious to improve their practice: to teach literacy well but also to teach humanity.

Fred Sedgwick has many years of experience as a freelance teacher, lecturer and writer. He is the author of Read my Mind (1997) and Thinking about Literacy (1999) for Routledge and is actively involved in all aspects of children’s learning.
You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you…

(Hamlet III:4:19–20)
## Contents

Acknowledgements ix
Dedicator poem xi
A glass where you may see xiii

Introduction 1

1 Mouth full of news: single lines and single speeches 20
2 Now it is the time of night: A Midsummer Night’s Dream 39
3 A local habitation: The Tempest and As You Like It 65
   Interval: Thou drone, thou snail, thou slug, thou sot 77
4 How goes the night, boy? Macbeth 89
5 Bright smoke: Romeo and Juliet 108
6 Furious winter’s rages: King Lear and Cymbeline 114
7 By heart 124
8 Faith, hope, love and teaching 136
   Afterword: the wind and the rain 141

Appendix 143
References 151
Index 157
Thank you to the teachers and children in primary schools where I have been allowed—even, occasionally, encouraged—to teach Shakespeare:

Fairlands Primary, St Nicholas Primary and Peartree Spring Juniors—all Stevenage; Purwell Primary, Hitchin; Ashwell Primary; Parkgate Infant and Parkgate Junior, Watford; Radburn Primary, Letchworth—all Hertfordshire

Bentley, Little Bealings, Tattingstone, Rose Hill, St Helen’s, Clifford Road Primaries—all Ipswich, Suffolk

St George’s Primary, Colchester; Earls Colne Primary; Howe Green House near Bishops Stortford (and Dot Patten especially); Bournes Green Junior, Southend; Ryedene Primary, Basildon—all Essex

Old Catton Middle, Tacolneston Primary, Thorpe St Andrew High and St Williams—all Norwich

Latymer All Saints C of E Primary, Enfield

Milton Road Junior, Cambridge

Ryvers and Foxborough Combined, both Langley; The Hawthorns Primary, Wokingham—all Berkshire

I also worked at Pearse House, Bishop’s Stortford on their Lending Our Minds Out courses, where children spend between one and two days working with writers. Some of the work here comes from them.

Anyone writing about teaching Shakespeare is indebted to Rex Gibson, formerly at the University of Cambridge School of Education. His work on the ‘Shakespeare in Schools Project’ is invaluable, as are the newsletters of that project (now
Acknowledgements

shamefully elusive) and his editions of Shakespeare’s plays and poems (The Cambridge School Shakespeare).

Thank you to Gina Reid, for the vegetarian witches. Thank you to Delphine Ruston and Mary Moore for their helpful comments about teaching Shakespeare to secondary pupils, and to Diane Duncan, Mary Jane Drummond and Dennis Ruston for recollections of their own schooling. Thank you especially to Delphine Ruston again, and John Cotton, who read early drafts of this book and made many suggestions. Thanks, again, to Henry Burns Eliot and Emily Roeves. Thanks, most of all, to Dawn, who pointed out to me what I should have noticed—how child-like Bottom is and how Bottom-like children can be; and for helping to push this further: how much there is of children in Shakespeare and how much of Shakespeare’s passion for humanity in all its forms there is in children.

I am grateful to the following publishers for permission to use short extracts from their editions of Shakespeare. These extracts are quoted by permission of Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press and Thomas Nelson (The Arden Shakespeare). The extracts I have used from each edition are listed on pp. 149–50 and the editions used are listed on pp. 155–6.
Dedicatory poem
for John Cotton
friend, writer, teacher

Student actors 1966

He tucks twenty Players
 in his robes.
His eyelids flicker,
 tension than shells,
as Make-up dabs swan’s—
    egg green on them.

On stage Second Servant
 pops and plasters
 blood in the grizzled beard.
    Cornwall puts
 his foot down. Gloucester’s
    thrust out to ‘smell
His way to Dover’.
    They end each scene,
 like the blinded duke,
    facing ‘knowledge
 of themselves’; and dying
 for a smoke.

(King Lear III:7:55–97; IV:5:272)
The voices of three children begin my book. They had read the two lines from *Hamlet* that I have used as an epigraph: ‘You go not till I set you up a glass/Where you may see the inmost part of you’ (*Hamlet* III:4:19–20). I asked them to write about ‘what they would see if they held a mirror up to the secret places in their hearts and brains…. What animals or landscape would they see? What plants and vegetation? What colours and shapes? What textures? What feelings and emotions, what interests?’ They wrote, guards lower than I’d expected, or they’d dreamt possible:

You’d see my dark side…
Blue and black with a flash of red for life.
…You’d see my fears, life is my biggest fear.
I’m small, the world’s big…

(Daniel, 11)

…In my heart are various libraries for knowledge
As I grow the libraries get bigger…

(Jack, 11)

…you would see a vast never-ending
Desert where nothing lives. All is black like the moon.
You could see the remains of a land once full of life,
Skeletons of a land once full of life but only a small
Fire glows. It is one light in a universe of darkness.
But as the fire grows so does the black get darker and
It seems futile to try to have a fire at all
As something always comes with a blanket
To suffocate my dream.

(Chris, 11)
These are just extreme examples. Throughout this book, we can see evidence of children looking in mirrors, and understanding themselves better because of the extraordinary example of the ‘tolerant humanism’ of Shakespeare (Crick’s phrase 1982, following Orwell). We can see their play with words leading to learning about themselves, their environments, their relationships and their language.
For thirty-four years now—since my first teaching practice in Plymouth—I have been reading and reciting poetry to children. Mostly this has been for the sheer pleasure of it, and someday I would love to write a book about that pleasure: mine for certain, and the children’s I hope. This pleasure is at least twofold: first, it is the music, sound and taste of the words, and second, it is in the understanding the words give us when we read them with care and attention. I read Charles Causley’s *Figgie Hobbin* (1970—but see 1996, where these poems are now collected) to a class in 1973, and a nine-year-old girl, Emma Bittleston, wrote to the poet: ‘Sometimes I copy out your poems and pretend I am you’. I am sure that the poem ‘Mary Mary Magdalene’, from that book, helped her to anticipate love, marriage, child-bearing and widowhood, as much as ‘I saw a jolly hunter’ made her laugh. I wish her well now, wherever she is.

But sometimes I have read poems to children with a more specific purpose: to help them write their own poems. The aims of this writing was to enable them, through play with words, to learn about a curriculum I have already described like this: themselves, the world around them, the relationship between themselves and that world, and their language (Sedgwick 1997). I use the word ‘play’ advisedly for three reasons. First, I am convinced, like Caldwell Cook (1917), that

when work and play are separated, the one becomes mere drudgery, the other mere pastime. Neither is then of any value in life. It is the core of my faith that only work worth doing is really play; for by play we mean the doing anything with one’s heart in it...

Second, as Freud famously writes, ‘The creative writer does the same as the child at play’ (quoted in Vernon (ed.) 1970:127). And finally, I suspect that the double meaning of the word ‘play’—children’s pleasurable imaginative activity, on the one hand, and drama on the other, is more than a coincidence.
Behind this practice has been the certainty that children writing poems without the experience of reading other poems—surprisingly, this is common—means working in a field of ignorance. And, as Nabokov wrote: ‘imagination without knowledge leads no further than the backyard of primitive art’ (quoted in Meyer 1988). Mostly, for the purpose of getting children writing with some knowledge of what poetry can do, I have used the work of modern writers. For examples, see Sedgwick (1997), where children write under the influence of Craig Raine (p. 75), Edwin Morgan (pp. 83–4 and p. 127), John Cotton (p. 134), Adrian Henri (pp. 136–7), Miroslav Holub (pp. 73–4) and Gerda Meyer (p. 30). I have also used poems by Sylvia Plath (see especially her marvellous riddles for, respectively, an embryo (Collected Poems, p. 141) and a pregnancy (Collected Poems, p. 116).

One older example (the results of which, like the results of Plath’s riddles, are not in my earlier book) is Thomas Hood’s famous anthology piece, ‘I remember, I remember’ which my mother used to say to me, with a clip-clopping attention to metre and a midland Irish accent, when I was a boy (‘I remember, I remember,/The house where I was born,/The little window where the sun/Came peeping in at morn…’). Under the influence of this poem, children have written these pieces:

I remember, I remember
When my parents divorced.
I was four.
I got up in the morning as usual.
My Mum told me
My Dad wasn’t coming back.
I remember, I remember
The sharp pain
That hit me all over,
The sour smell
That made me sick.
I felt alone
As if no-one could ever touch me again.

(Jenny, 14)

Another child, who had spent months in hospital, wrote about ‘coming home to a house I could not remember’, and another wrote

I remember
when my mother took me to another house
and I said
why are we going here?
and she said
Don’t you want Peter to be your new Dad?
And I said Yes
so he was.

(Alison, 10)

So I knew from both intensive and extensive experience that children could write vividly and honestly using modern poets as yet unassessed by time, and also relatively minor writers like Hood whose place on Parnassus had been more or less settled. In the above examples, as with others I have collected, the writers seemed to be learning about their own feelings; here, pain and a resigned acceptance.

‘Others’, Matthew Arnold had written to Shakespeare in his sonnet, titled ‘Shakespeare’, ‘abide our question. Thou art free’. I began to wonder what child-writers would achieve when they questioned, and were questioned by, Shakespeare. I’d always taken for granted that Shakespeare is simply ‘too difficult’ for primary children. I now know that I was mistaken. This book is a record of a project which ran alongside others (they were also concerned with children and their writing: see Sedgwick 1999 for one) which involved getting children aged between 6 and 14 composing in many settings—school halls, classrooms, on writing courses in Youth Hostels—with the example of abiding Shakespeare’s freedom and humanity before them. Mostly they wrote poems. But they also wrote prose and, occasionally, dialogue.

A political perspective

I have to make one point concerned with the politics of the times. If a new humanistic hegemony arises, with people—children, teachers, parents—at its centre, rather than an abstract managerialism based on control, the comments that follow will soon be out of date. To expect that now, though, would be insanely optimistic. Children today (I am writing my final draft of this in September 1998) have to work at any subject for two dominating reasons: to succeed in tests and to help hoist their schools higher up the league tables. The strength of the hegemony that dictates this state of affairs is increased by the children’s unawareness of it: they are innocent foot soldiers in a war in which the enemy has changed the strategic objectives of education from helping children in their learning and feeling to the achievement of satisfactory statistics.

Frequently, children are injured in that war. Here is one of the walking wounded, from an account by a secondary English teacher:

...last year I was supervising some low ability students who were allowed extra time for their SAT. Just after the test began one girl burst into tears. I took her outside the classroom and asked her what was the matter. She said she couldn’t understand the question and was frightened by the whole thing—the exam paper, the silence, the long length of time she had to sit
there. I asked her to tell me what the prescribed scene from *Romeo and Juliet* was all about: she knew it inside-out.... When quizzed about character, dramatic qualities, theme, language, she knew all about that too. I reassured her that she could do the test and she went back in but it struck me how cruel it was to expose this weak, insecure girl to such an unnecessary ordeal, especially when, before that moment, she had obviously loved the play...

(Ruston, private letter, 1998)

What are we to make of this? ‘Low ability students’; a ‘prescribed’ scene; a child ‘loves’ a play but hates the test? It is an interesting trio: Child, Play, Test. For which should we have the most respect? A system in which test results have more impact on the politicians’ assessment of a school than a child’s understanding of a play is, literally, an inhuman one. It neglects the student’s emotional life hinted at in this letter and, despite appearances, it neglects her understanding. Also, it is philistine because it attempts to reduce the play from the complex and exciting artefact that it is to a yardstick by which we can judge children. The child and the play rate way below the test. There is a fourth element I have not mentioned yet—the teacher. In modern Britain the teacher comes beneath, even, the child and the play. As Ruston goes on to say ‘...we don’t have the choice to follow the students’ or our own enthusiasm...’. Another teacher told me that she had ‘four weeks to teach *Macbeth* to her Year-9s.... I showed them the Polanski film in one session, maybe I’ll concentrate on key scenes from now on.’

For me and for Ruston (and for countless other teachers of Shakespeare) children work for nobler motives than those imposed on that girl. D H Lawrence was aware of such motives when he taught *The Tempest*. He was also sensitive to the tension between those motives and his contemporary management:

A curious wailing of distressed voices issued from a far corner.... The words of a familiar song arose from the depths: ‘Full fathom five thy father lies;/Of his bones are coral made...’ Lawrence rushed with outstretched hands to the visitor [an inspector]: ‘Hush! Hush! Don’t you hear? The sea chorus from *The Tempest*.’

(quoted in Worthen 1991:208)

Lawrence may sound a little precious here (though who is to say that a less than respectful and more than ordinarily playful view of the inspector and all that the inspector stands for are not part of a slightly camp pose?). But his instinct is sound: ‘Full fathom five’ will always have more to say to teacher and child in a classroom than any inspector, than any politician, than any OFSTED report.

‘Writing...is practically the only activity a person can do that is not competitive’ wrote Paul Theroux in *Time* in 1978, and, more famously, William Blake said that ‘Real Poets [cannot] have any competition. None are the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven; it is so in Poetry’ (1826). As competition is irrelevant to creative
writing of all kinds, so tests are irrelevant to education; in particular, as far as I am concerned right now, right here, to education about Shakespeare’s words. Young writers should be encouraged to use these words at school in their reading, writing, drama and art for the same broad purpose as they should be encouraged to use any other words: to help them to understand.

This is true of adults in the wider world as well, but in our puritanical and materialistic society the connection between enjoyment (what we hope for when we attend a play by Shakespeare) and learning (what inevitably happens in Shakespeare’s theatre, however dull the production) is broken. Children though, ‘trailing [their] clouds of glory’, (as Wordsworth put it in his ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’) are still active learners, and do not, as a rule, screw their faces up at the thought of connecting entertainment with learning. Watch their eyes as they come into school expectantly at four years old, or nine o’clock every day, expecting to enjoy and to learn. If they learn to hate Shakespeare’s work, or be bored by it, or be indifferent to it (as so many do) it is some adult’s fault, or, more accurately, some system’s; it is simply never theirs.

By responding to Shakespeare’s poetry, children learn (the potential is there for ourselves as adults, too) about themselves: their loves, their horrors, their delights, their dreams, their eventual deaths. They learn about Shakespeare’s language, and some of the reasons why it is held, almost universally, in such high esteem. They learn about language in general. And they learn about the relationship between themselves and all their experiences, and Shakespeare’s language, and language in general. This learning is always active. It is by now a commonplace (except among politicians and their hired hands) that children are never passive receivers of information. In contrast, they are always constructing knowledge out of the interaction between themselves, that information and their teachers, or other adults working with them. Politicians of the entire political spectrum, then, who have conspired over the past twenty years to impose a mechanistic system on schools, with its resulting devaluation of the emotions and the arts, have devalued Shakespeare and education, and sold the children short. This is all part of what I call a cultural definition.

A cultural definition

I mean by ‘cultural definition’ how we, wittingly or unwittingly, define Shakespeare in our times as a society. In one school, three eleven-year-old girls gave me a scrap of paper when I arrived—they knew we were going to work on Shakespeare—that contributed to this definition. It read

Juliet—we shall meet tonight at twelve to be wed for evermore

Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art though Romeo
your eyes are as blue as the sky
your hair is brown as brown can be...

Vaguely recalled quotations usually misapplied and misunderstood, an equally vague romantic ‘feeling’, the clichés of love—these are all part of this cultural definition. But there is almost infinitely more—or so it feels. There has been, of course, much political—and even royal—discussion about Shakespeare and education. In 1989, Prince Charles attacked modern teaching of English and compared the way young people speak now with the glories of Shakespeare’s English. Wheale identifies the politics of this kind of talk as an English ‘nationalist agenda’, and comments, rightly in my view,

The Prince’s summons leads us deep into the million strange shadows of ideology, in these forms: the language represented as an ideal cultural institution; an appeal to religious discourse and mystical categories; a version of national history as visionary national unity. And all of this bears down on the text called Shakespeare in ways in which it is deployed as a national scripture…equivalent to Common Prayer…

(Aers and Wheale 1991:6)

The Prince’s words are shallow, and their unrecognized ideology is, in large part, in that shallowness. His Shakespeare is, in Styles’ phrase (1998), ‘a cliché of everything English’. He castigates modern use of ‘casual obscenity’ as though he had never read Malvolio’s reading of Maria’s letter in Twelfth Night, or the first scene of Romeo and Juliet, or Mercutio’s speech at II:1:7–41. He should have read Eric Partridge’s enlightening Shakespeare’s Bawdy (1948) or chapter 5 of Hughes’ Swearing (1998:35) before he made such pronouncements.

The Prince’s innocent version of Shakespeare is the one we are supposed to take for granted as the only one by those who make remarks like ‘I do not think there is a place for the exposure of children to different critical approaches. That, if it has to be undertaken at all, should be undertaken in the universities’ (Chris Woodhead quoted in Bottoms 1994:25). As Janet Bottoms says, ‘The implication that there is one obvious approach from which university students are lured into the trackless wastes of critical theory is, of course, nonsense’. It is also dangerous: suppose Woodhead had suggested that there was only one ‘critical approach’ to the history of the Russian or the French Revolution, or to the Second World War, or to the Slave Trade. We would see more clearly such thinking for what it is: verging on the totalitarian. And the Prince’s approach, if resurrected in schools, would lead to an emasculated Shakespeare, serving the purposes of a minority, but powerful class.

At the other extreme, there are radical left critical approaches to Shakespeare. Bottoms (1994:25) quotes Coles where ‘she distinguished her own aim from that of those teachers who seek merely to foster…enjoyment’ (Bottoms’ italics). Bottoms
Introduction

(1994:25) also quotes McEvoy, saying that the plays should be a ‘site of conflict…where dominant readings are challenged and the ideological use of these texts is revealed by the production of oppositional readings’. I have been stirred, annoyed, provoked and depressed by many oppositional readings of Shakespeare’s plays—see Hobby and Shepherd, for example in Aers and Wheale (1991). But I will make it implicitly clear throughout this book that I am pre-eminently concerned, alongside learning, with enjoyment. After all, these critics didn’t become knowledgeable about Shakespeare without first enjoying him; and I feel, with Bottoms, that before children learn to ‘read against the grain’, they need to find out through their study in the classroom which way the grain runs.

Anyone concerned with children and books can only applaud the fact that ‘the text we call Shakespeare’ is debated so widely and so fiercely: it is a truism, after all, to say that Shakespeare’s language is woven into almost all our speech and that he abides our question. ‘If music be the food of love…Dying fall…take great exception…mistress mine…sweet and twenty…cakes and ale…some are born great, some achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust upon them…midsummer madness…the whole pack of you…hey, ho, the wind and the rain….’ These phrases from just one play, Twelfth Night, demonstrate that we are often quoting Shakespeare when we don’t know it. Of course, as Cotton has pointed out in a private letter (1998), we cannot be sure that these phrases are his own, and not phrases current at his time that he has incorporated into his plays: he was, after all, a gifted magpie, as we can see from his use of ancient plots from many different sources. This doesn’t invalidate my point: the ubiquity of Shakespeare’s words is a part of our cultural definition of him. We seem to understand implicitly that, if language is what makes us human, Shakespeare is an abiding light in the back of our minds that helps to keep us humane.

His work provides for us, as it has for our ancestors, benchmarks for our integrity. Emily Dickinson wrote ‘I like a look of Agony/Because I know it’s true’. All poets like that look too, and all humans know it is an honest look. Heaney will serve for an example when he writes about what’s ‘bitter’ being what is also ‘dependable’ (1984:15) and a character in A S Byatt’s (1978:108) novel ‘saw the world in extremis and was right’. Shakespeare offers us hundreds of opportunities to see his characters facing up to the implacable realities of their natures and circumstances, and the relationship between those natures and those circumstances.

The character of Hamlet, for instance, exemplifies (among hundreds of other things) the human instinct for revenge moderated and frustrated by all kinds of moral anxieties. Twelfth Night and Measure for Measure hold mirrors up to our hardly-acknowledged sexual ambivalences, our moral laziness, our cruelty, our shallow puritanism, our self-deception, our vanity, our decadence. Macbeth makes us reflect on power and ambition, and how these things can, in the deepest sense, take away our humanity and send us to Hell: ‘…unsex me here,/And fill me from crown to toe top full/Of direst cruelty’ prays Lady Macbeth as she resolves to become Queen by killing King Duncan. Titus Andronicus, with its sensationalist violence, relates to modern media violence, and teaches us that prurient interest
in such violence is not new. Above all, King Lear demonstrates how all too often we have to become blind to see, have to become insane to understand. All this shows that Shakespeare is a critical part of our moral education—if in no other way, in the manner of his demonstrating the sheer complexity of decisions about right and wrong (in spite of dopey political rhetoric about the simplicity of such decisions).

Most of us accept, in an unreflective way, the cultural definition that insists that no English-speaking person is educated to any degree unless he or she has partial acquaintance with some of these plays. There are problems, though. Conventionally, it is supposed that many of us were bored by inept teaching: that Shakespeare was placed in a hollow, hallowed urn and revered as a great, or even worshipped, human being. It is thought that this prevented him and his work becoming part of the emotional fibre of our being. If this is true, it might be seen as inevitable, but I hope to show that there are better ways of teaching Shakespeare.

But in fact, according to many of my correspondents (I include their ages, in order to place their schooling roughly in the twentieth century) there was very little teaching of Shakespeare going on:

I think I must have gone to Mr Gradgrind's school in Coke Town! We 'did' neither poetry nor Shakespeare at school. I was left to discover them for myself, for which I am grateful!...

(aged 73)

We didn't do any Shakespeare at all until 'O' level, when we did the Merchant and I played Antonio and the teacher had the effrontery to change the language...I didn't say 'In sooth I know not why I am so sad' but 'In truth...’ One good thing he did was, he pointed out that because this was a boys' grammar school we had boys playing Portia and Jessica, and that was how it would have been in Shakespeare's time...

And I remember the boy who played Portia, when he put his make-up on we all fell in love with him, he was gorgeous, we flocked around him...

(aged 57)

Someone who had been taught Shakespeare (or who had 'done' him) recalls 'We had to learn “Once more unto the breach...” on pain of detention' (aged 53). Someone else recalls

We did the Merchant when we were twelve. It seems an odd choice for a play at that age...I remember that it meant nothing to me.... I first enjoyed Shakespeare when we were taken from school to the Vic [The Victoria Theatre in Stoke] to see The Tempest...

(aged 43)
Ruston (1998) wrote to me

I wasn’t taught any Shakespeare…before sixth form…I think my teacher deliberately chose not to expose us to Shakespeare. We read copiously—lots of those 60s northern writers such a Sillitoe, Hines, Barstow, Shelagh Delaney, Arnold Wesker; and a lot of poetry, such as Donne, Wilfred Owen, Stevie Smith, Ted Hughes, Robert Frost, Philip Larkin…. However…I started reading Shakespeare of my own volition… The Dream… Later, in the sixth form, I was overwhelmed by the grandeur and enormity of *King Lear*… There were many, many theatre trips…. Every thing was casual…and I now look on those day as halcyon and wish my own students could enjoy literature in a less rigid, pressurized way…

(aged 39)

So despite any vague belief that Shakespeare is central to our natures, he has usually been kept to sixth forms, or, even, not taught at all. I hesitate to write this, but I think this is the first book written on Shakespeare and primary school children writing.

Depressingly, Shakespeare has often been seen as an elitist icon by progressive teachers. Neill, for example, is scornful and dismissive:

Summerhill children do not like dramatized stories. Nor do they want the usual highbrow stuff so common in other schools. Our crowd never acts Shakespeare; but sometimes I write a Shakespearean skit as, for example, *Julius Caesar* with an American gangster setting—the language a mixture of Shakespeare and a detective story magazine.

(1968:71)

Many questions arise from this quotation, not all of them relevant to this book. One might ask though, about the phrase ‘They do not like’—who asked them? Are Summerhill children really a particular kind of child, or just children who have arrived at the school for one or many of a million different reasons? ‘Highbrow stuff’ is exactly the sort of phrase that encapsulates the reasons for a thousand misinformed decisions about Shakespeare. Are the Porter’s drunken greetings to his imaginary hellhound villains ‘highbrow’? (see pp. 93–7) That word ‘crowd’ speaks volumes: phoney-democratic, unbearably matey; trying to argue a case in one syllable. We are a crowd, they are something less genial. ‘I write’: why didn’t the children write? Didn’t Neill have sufficient faith in the children’s writing? Finally, how wonderfully dated is the phrase ‘detective story magazine’ compared with the word Shakespeare. Nothing, we know, is so out of date as recent fashions.

Among the most depressing stories I found about learning Shakespeare there comes the following from actors in Gilmour (1997:73), who were presenting *Macbeth* to schoolchildren, and probably were not themselves very old. Indeed, as
they refer to comprehensive schools, they were certainly of a generation younger by a few years than most of the correspondents quoted earlier.

One actor (Gilmour writes) described how, in the fourth year at secondary school, her class read *Romeo and Juliet*, their first Shakespeare play. It was a mixed comprehensive, but only the top set had to do Shakespeare. There was one book between three...Shakespeare became something that just had to be got through.

Another student remembered how they ‘had to go through the whole text of a play from beginning to end, making notes and learning quotations for examinations’. Here is that cultural definition summed up. Shakespeare is ‘done’ at a certain stage for examinations. Even worse, he is ‘gone through’. Enjoyment doesn’t come into it. Nor does learning, really.

It is worth saying near the outset of my book that Shakespeare’s greatness is not taken for granted. Shaw quaintly remarked that

> With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare when I measure my mind against his…. It would positively be a relief to me to dig him up and throw stones at him.

(Shaw 1907)

I note, though, that Professor Higgins in *Pygmalion* did not agree with his maker, and that Shaw himself said somewhere that the Countess in *All’s Well That Ends Well* was the finest part for an older actress ever written. In any case, according to George Orwell, Shaw suffered ‘from an inferiority complex towards Shakespeare’ (quoted in Crick 1982). Darwin had no respect, either (1974). He was ‘nauseated’ by his dullness.

> These opinions are not worth much, but Johnson’s opinion is (if only because it discourages us from making a perfect, immaculate mystery of Shakespeare).

Shakespeare never had six lines together without a fault. Perhaps you may find seven, but this does not refute my general assertion.

(Boswell 1906:24)

Such ‘Grecian-urning’ of him does neither him nor his young readers any favours, but fixes a dreadful gulf between them and his work. If there is one certain piece of advice to be given to a young teacher approaching Shakespeare in the primary classroom for the first time, it is this: *never tell the children that Shakespeare is the greatest writer that ever lived*. Never, in other words, make him a quasi-religious figure, an icon, a Grecian urn containing merely the beauty of unheard melodies. This attitude, combined with the fact that most children will inevitably, at first, find him difficult, is the surest of all turn-offs. The half-conscious thought process in the child goes something like this: ‘So this is great? And I am baffled? There must be something wrong with me. I’ll leave it alone’. I am reminded of a cartoon...
I saw once of two teenagers listening to a Beethoven symphony. They wore puzzled expressions, and one was saying ‘I can’t feel anything yet, can you?’ It is the teacher’s task to make sure that part of the cultural definition of Shakespeare—it is great, so therefore it will be a medicine or a drug to our souls—is crossed off the agenda as soon as we meet the children for the first lesson about Romeo and Juliet, or the A Midsummer Night’s Dream, or Macbeth, or whatever play it is. Children should not study Shakespeare because of his greatness, but in spite of it. They should learn to ravish him.

Another equally serious and related problem is that there is in our culture a tendency towards an offensive sentimentalization of Shakespeare which disempowers his work. This is in spite of the way that the plays and poems demonstrate time and again how the sentimental and the vicious are closely linked. For example, Chiron in Titus Andronicus moves from his assertion ‘I love Lavinia more than all the world’ to an agreement to rape her together with his brother within three pages. The Prince of Wales, though, talks about ‘the Bard’ and his ‘heritage’, apparently ignorant of the reality of the moral implications of the plays and poems. To hear him speak, you’d think that the plays were only to do with elegance and nobility and our splendid English language and, by implication of course, a royal continuity. He seems to know nothing of the cowardliness of Sir John Falstaff, of the jealous wickedness of Iago, of the arrogant stupidity of Bottom, of the sexual fickleness of Troilus and Cressida, of what Ted Hughes (1992) calls the ‘seedy philandering’ of Bertram in All’s Well; and is ignorant of the fact that these moral deficiencies are not always condemned by Shakespeare: see, especially, the way Falstaff’s braggartly lying is positively celebrated in Henry IV Part 1 so that we love the man, and we are moved to tears in Henry V when we hear the Hostess describe his death. Cotton says:

Isn’t this because via the plays we can, empathize with the essential humanity of the characters…understand that, indeed, human weakness may well be the essential stuff of our humanity. We are all redeemable…. Our essential humanity redeems our weaknesses…

(1998)

This thinking is a long way from ‘Grecian-urning’. To sum up that cultural definition, we praise Shakespeare inordinately, we ignore him, we sentimentalize him. To re-apply a remark of Scannell’s (1987) the successful teacher must love Shakespeare’s words, but must not be a Shakespeare-lover. The child has to learn that ‘Shakespeare is very good in spite of all the people who say he is very good’ (Graves in Lamb 1992). It is better, I think, to see Shakespeare as ‘that upstart crow’ (his contemporary Robert Greene’s bitter epithet) than as the ‘Swan of Avon’.
Some problems

Preconceptions

This book, then, is based on case material of children aged between 5 and 14 enjoying Shakespeare (indeed, inspired by him) in their experiences as readers, and writers. In a sense, it began thirty-five years ago. Its first problem is that we all come to him, as teachers, with preconceptions. I met Sir John Falstaff some time in 1960 in a dull classroom in a South London grammar school:

FALSTAFF: Now Hal, what time of day is it, lad?
PRINCE: Thou art so fat-witted, with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand what truly thou would'st truly know…

(Henry IV Part I:1:2:1–9)

Then I saw John Stride as Prince Hal at the Old Vic (Tony Britton should have been Hotspur, but he had been injured the night before in a sword fight with Hal, and that heightened my new passion: they actually fought, and got hurt!). I don’t remember who was Falstaff. I watched my little brother, then fourteen years old, play Gertrude at school to Hywel Bennett’s Hamlet, potentially, I now reflect, a Freudian nightmare. Then, through my experiences as an enjoyer of Shakespeare, as an amateur actor, as a playgoer and occasional local radio critic, as a radio-listener, occasionally as a television-watcher, and as a reader, I have developed an enthusiasm that is really a passion.

I acted Second Servant at college in King Lear, watching Cornwall gouge out Gloucester’s eyes. I had to pop little round capsules of red stuff against Gloucester’s cheeks. My friend Richard (First Servant) had died in rehearsal like a starfish, flat on his back, horribly comic, until the director, the head of the English Department, showed him how stabbed people die (‘Like this! They crumple!’) He gripped his belly and twisted and squirmed to the ground. He lay there for a few seconds and looked up. ‘Like that!’ I have collected Hamlets (Olivier, of course, with his page boy hair-do); some bloke at OUDS seriously upstaged by Jonathan James-Moore as a Fascist Claudius; Ian McKellen, Michael Pennington, Martin Marquez (from The Bill). I have regretted missing others (especially Jonathan Pryce). I have, probably most importantly, puzzled over those love affairs in the Sonnets: that beautiful young man, that lady whose eyes ‘are nothing like the sun’. I have laughed with and at Falstaff, recognizing, sometimes, elements of myself in him: ‘I would it were bed-time, Hal, and all well’.

I include this account here to mirror whatever are my readers’ preconceptions, and to emphasize that we have to recognize that the children we teach will bring different baggage to Shakespeare. They may open A Midsummer Night’s Dream, for example, with a view of fairies that is quite at variance with the nature of
Puck; culled, if they have been unlucky, from the appalling poems of Rose Fyleman as selected by the Opies (1973:337) (‘A fairy went a-marketing/She bought a little fish…’)

**Difficulty**

A more serious problem than my preconceptions (I’ll have to live with those, and try to change some of the prejudices they have led to) is the matter of the perceived difficulty of Shakespeare’s work. This is, in large part, another preconception. I have been asked, while I’ve been writing this book, if I am using Shakespeare’s language ‘simplified’. When Rex Gibson asked primary school teachers if they had taught Shakespeare, one ‘expressed surprise at my not realizing that “the language is right off the end of any known reading scale”’ (Shakespeare in Schools no. 4, Autumn 1987). I have lost count of the times when teachers have said to me, ‘I wrote a simplified version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream (usually) or Macbeth (often) for the children and we produced it for the parents’. I have not found a polite way of asking, What’s the point of this? Shakespeare is essentially his language. By comparison, his plots are almost incidental.

The language is often difficult, there can be no doubt. Coleridge wrote that he ‘was not a whit more intelligible in his own day, except for a few local allusions of no consequence’ (letter 1834). But this difficulty, as Gibson (1990) has put it, is ‘an enabling difficulty…enjoyment increases with the sense of difficulties overcome’. And Shakespeare is also accessible because he is concerned with the human emotions and moral problems that we all share: importantly, his moral values reach us without the tiresome intrusion of moralizing. Of course, I have used his language as it has come to us in the Folio. I am stubborn in my insistence that the problem about the language is not essentially in that language, but in our preconceptions and expectations of it and in the children’s reactions to it. Our own early difficulties, however many years ago, have bred prejudices in our practice with today’s children. This is connected to two further points. First, if we must limit our children’s experiences of language, are we going to choose ‘reading scales’ or are we going to choose Shakespeare? And second, this book is not just for teachers who are experts in Shakespeare’s language, or in drama. I want to emphasize here that this book is for all primary teachers who are interested in education, whatever the experience of and prejudices about Shakespeare.

Yeats has a line about ‘the fascination with what’s difficult’. The fruit of that fascination may be there in our reading of a text, or in our writing one; or it may be in our immediate reflection on that text. But, in contrast, it may not appear and take hold of us for a long time. What is certain is that attention to the difficult will pay us back one day. Simone Weil writes: ‘Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is exact proportion to them will flood the soul’ (Panichas 1977:29). Because of the certainty of that light, the difficulty of Shakespeare is part of the case for teaching it, not against.
And attention to the perceived problems will make us readier to face other problems later on. For example, a study of *Romeo and Juliet* will help young people to face up to the imminent problems of love and sexuality. A reading of *King Lear* (with a reflection on the nothingness that is threaded throughout this play) will help us reflect on age and, more importantly, that great nil, that great emptiness that faces us from time to time like the stage in a play by Beckett, and the ripeness that is finally all. Gloucester makes explicit the educational function of literature and experience: these characters and readers 'learn about themselves', much as Heaney’s school pupils write in order to ‘fall into themselves unknowingly’ (‘The Play Way’ in Heaney 1966:56).

A common objection to Shakespeare in the primary school is that, because of its difficulty, it’s best left to secondary years. I will leave the rebuttal of this confidently to the children and their poems. It is enough to quote here two of those children, one writing an over-the-top love poem in the light of Demetrius’ lines in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (III:2:137–144), and the other writing in terms of a lament from *Cymbeline* (IV:2:258–281). It’s about time we heard the voices of children again, so I’ll trail two of their poems here:

Oh dear beloved, your hair is darker
Than the night sky. Your lips are redder than
Blood. Let it touch my lips so to give life.
Your face is so beautiful and bright it
Makes the sun look black and flowers look ugly.
Your cheeks are redder than the reddest strawberry.
Your eyes are so golden and delightful
They make gold itself look cheap…

(Anon)

Fear no more the aiming from an arrow.
Fear no more the collar round your neck.
Fear no more the feeling of following humans.
Fear no more the rain and no shelter.

(Anon)

There are two problems that are particular to the project described in this book, both of which teachers can avoid. Gibson (1998) says that commitment to Shakespeare should be such that a class will be involved in a play for a significant period of time—say a term, or at least half a term. But, because of the nature of my work, this has never been possible for me. I travel from school to school, and it isn’t unusual for me to be in Peterlee, Durham, on a Monday and a Tuesday, and in Ipswich, Suffolk, or Stevenage, Hertfordshire on the same week’s Thursday or Friday. Therefore, any long term commitment depends on the teachers in the school: I am not personally committed to any one play with any one group of children. There is a second problem connected with this and, because my concern
is with children writing, it is more important. Almost all the poems and other writings given in this book are either first or second drafts: there was only rarely a chance to give children time and teaching to enable them to see how much further work would improve their writing. These occasions were when I was a resident in a school for a longer period.

The improper

Shakespeare’s plays are riddled throughout, like life for most of us—the lucky ones anyway—with the unrespectable, the questionable, the improper. Sometimes in the plays we stand in the palace, but often we loiter in the street, the tavern or even the brothel. The first scene of Romeo and Juliet is practically based on what used to be called indecency. ‘To be valiant is to stand’, of course, but not only in one sense of the word ‘stand’. The weak ‘go to the wall’, but for more than one reason. Heads are heads, but also maidenheads. Sampson is ‘a pretty piece of flesh’, and when Gregory cries ‘Draw thy tool’, we know which piece of his flesh Sampson thinks is the prettiest. Indeed, Sampson’s weapon is ‘naked’ and ‘fear me not’ he will not ‘turn [his] back and run’. Later, Mercutio teases Romeo with what Amis called, in a different context (1954), a ‘brief manic flurry of obscenity (II:1:17–38). As Partridge (1948:45) says, ‘Mercutio and the Nurse sex-spatter the most lyrically tragic of the plays’.

And yet this is the pretty piece deemed proper by prissy politicians to be taught first, in contrast to modern plays with all their sex and violence. One wonders, with Seymour-Smith (1975:373) ‘what the intellectually hapless Mrs Whitehouse would have to say about Measure for Measure’, with Othello, the ‘most sexual, most bawdy play’ (Partridge); or Henry V:455–8, where Shakespeare slyly uses what Hughes (1998:107) calls ‘the ultimate taboos in French’. Anyone wanting to take on more of the fascinating subject of Shakespeare’s obscenity is directed to Hughes and, of course, Partridge (1948).

I spoke to one teacher who had taught Romeo and Juliet to her class, and she made a face when I told her about how ‘rude’ much of Shakespeare’s dialogue was. She didn’t believe me, and hadn’t read the play recently, merely a version of the plot. Another teacher, Ruston, told me:

I was teaching this to a C stream, and when I read ‘Draw thy tool’ a boy sniggered and I said to him, that’s right, every time you hear the word ‘tool’ in Shakespeare you should look for dirty meaning…. You can use Shakespeare to subvert the Government’s thinking here…the children got to the point where they loved Shakespeare…

(1998)

This vulgarity is so evident to even a casual reader that a sound and potentially very successful way to introduce Shakespeare’s plays and poems to younger readers
would be to compile an anthology of all his most disreputable bits. My next project is *Shakespeare’s Filth for Schools*, a sort of Bowdler in reverse. It will begin with Malvolio reading the letter that Maria has sent to him (*Twelfth Night* II:5:72–79). An early introduction to Shakespeare’s bawdy would lead to a greater commitment to and enjoyment of the work in adult life. Even in many of the parts of Shakespeare’s plays that are most accessible to younger students, the songs, we have ribaldry. An apparently innocent number in *The Winter’s Tale*, for example, goes:

When daffodils begin to peer,
   With heigh! the doxy, over the dale,
Why, then comes in the sweet o’ the year;
   For the red blood reigns in the winter’s pale.

The white sheet bleaching on the hedge,
   With heigh! the sweet birds, O, how they sing!
Does set my pugging tooth on edge;
   For a quart of ale is a dish for king.

The lark, that tirra-lirra chants,
   With heigh, with heigh, the thrush and the jay,
Are summer songs for me and my aunts,
   While we lie tumbling in the hay.

Pafford, in his edition of the play, tells us that ‘doxy’ means ‘beggar’s girl’, and that ‘aunt’ has a similar meaning. But SOED has nothing of this, locating a usage from 1678 as ‘procuress’ or ‘prostitute’, and Partridge tells us that it means ‘a paramour in general, or even a wanton’. In any case, this is not the innocent song of a bard from some sentimentally recalled Merrie England, which is roughly how politicians see Shakespeare. His use of bawdy was (Seymour-Smith 1975:373) ‘considerable, extensive and acceptable to his audience’.

But I cannot pretend that Shakespeare’s bawdy didn’t present me, as I collected children’s writing for this book, with a large difficulty. While I felt I could get away with the Porter’s speech in *Macbeth* (II:3), I was sure that his subsequent

---

1 Certainly, my Latin would be better today had I not been force-fed Caesar’s *Gallic War*, but instead encouraged to read Martial’s scabrous, sexy, lavatorial, insulting epigrams; for example, ‘In the baths’:

That shout from the shallow end:
Big Mac’s exposing (*not* again!)
His bestest, bestest, bestest friend.

(translated by Emily Roeves)
lines about the three things that drink provokes (‘nose-painting, sleep, and urine.
Lechery, sir, it provokes and unprovokes…’) would have got me into trouble in
most schools had I continued that far in the scene. And yet my stance throughout
this book is anti-censorship; positively libertarian, if I’m pushed; certainly in favour
of the thorough teaching of Shakespeare’s lowest scenes. As I write, I am consciously
looking for a school where I feel I might be able to teach lines such as this. The
reader will be able to tell from the main part of the book whether I have found any
such schools. Writers in Gilmour (1997:36) took a different line from mine
[removing] …anything that was coarse or bawdy’ from The Tempest. To me this is
like taking the mustard from a hot dog or the froth from a pint of beer: it removed
a certain element of zest.

Finally, John Cotton tells me a story:

We went to Sam Wannamaker’s Globe… A superb production of As You
Like It…. What was interesting, following our debate on how much we do
leave out, from embarrassment, censorship or whatever, when we present
Shakespeare in school. A large part of the audience was from what you
might call a posh girls’ school—all blue blazers and white blouses…. I
wondered what they made of it, especially the teachers, as the production
provided plenty of bawdy stuff. Emphasis was placed on the ‘country copu-
latives’ …. Did the young ladies expect all that when they read the play in
the classroom? I am sure their education was enhanced by a few notches,
but would everyone agree?

(1998)

Tales: the post-Lamb tradition

Even modern narrative accounts go for the codpiece and flounces view of
Shakespeare, all that ‘Beauty of the Bard’ stuff instead of Shakespeare as Our
Contemporary (title of Jan Kott’s book). I have in front of me some narrative
versions of the plays. Geraldine McCaughrean’s Stories from Shakespeare is an
example. After a sonnet, the real Romeo and Juliet opens with the barrage of double
entendre that I have described above. What does McCaughrean give us in place of
this life, this poetry and this street-ribaldry? It is certainly different: ‘Once, in a
sweltering Italian city named Verona, one man wronged another. It does not matter
who wronged whom or how….’ Thus the focus is taken away from Shakespeare’s
here and now, and placed on prosy family history.

Again, Hamlet famously opens in the middle of the drama:

…Who’s there? … Nay answer me: stand and unfold yourself…. Long live
the king!…. Bernardo?… He…. You come most carefully upon your hour….‘Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco…

(I:1:1–7)
In contrast, McCaughrean writes, ‘There was once a castle full of shadows…’, neutralizing the shock of Shakespeare’s opening, and making her own conventional.

There are versions of Shakespeare’s plays illustrated by Eric Kincaid and published by Brimax, that, wisely, do not offer a story-teller’s name. ‘He immediately felt a great surge of love, and quickly told her so…’ is a typical sentence. The illustrations depict every kind of relevant stereotype: Oberon with a helmet made of fairy’s wings, Titania a sleeping robed beauty, the fairies naughty fellows swinging from willow branches. In Brimax’s account of The Tempest, Miranda wears courtly robes even though she had never seen a court, and the Caliban, mostly ape, would be incapable of any human speech, let alone the lovely lines he does say: ‘I’ll show thee the best springs; I’ll pluck thee berries; I’ll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough…/I prithee let me bring thee where crabs grow;/And I with my long nails will dig thee pignuts…’ (II:2:146–54).

While Shakespeare’s play hits us in the middle of the drama:

**MASTER:** Boatswain!
**BOATSWAIN:** Here, master. What cheer?
**MASTER:** Good; speak to th’mariners. Fall to’t yarely, or we run ourselves aground. Bestir, bestir!

(I:1:1–4)

Brimax gives us dull prose. These books are offered to us as ways of introducing children to Shakespeare’s work. Even Leon Garfield’s muscular versions, with Michael Foreman’s excellent illustrations, miss the point. Being in prose, they’ve (obviously) lost the poetry. Surprisingly, the otherwise excellent Peel (1971:132) shoves Shakespeare’s language to the side in favour of the plots (though Shakespeare merely stole other men’s plots and Holinshed’s Chronicles—and made them live) and a study of the history of Elizabethan theatre. This latter approach has become common with the arrival of the national curriculum, which, as I write, includes Shakespeare’s theatre in Key Stage 2 in History, but ignores him in English. When Peel does suggest the examination of a play, The Merchant of Venice, she suggests ‘not starting from the original but from a good retelling such as Ian Serraillier…or Charles and Mary Lamb…’ which is missing the whole point.

These ways of sticking Shakespeare to a moment in our history, to a role as literary representative to a royal dynasty, or to a set of values that is now out of date, belie the fact that every generation has to reinvent Shakespeare for itself. To take the most dramatic example: Michael Billington tells us that

*modern scholarship and theatrical practice see Bassanio [in The Merchant of Venice] as either a fortune-hunting opportunist or a man agonizingly torn*
between his new wife and his old male lover. We live in a post-Freudian, post-Holocaust world; you cannot turn the clock back and present [this play] as a play untouched by history'.

(1998)

Exactly. You cannot teach it outside that history either. Shylock the Jew in the Lambs’ account is a stereotype that has taken on much greater offensiveness in our century. While the Lambs see the play as an account of Good (the merchant and his friends) versus Evil (Shylock the Jew) we know now as well as we know anything that this will not do. Other casual references to the Jews mean something profoundly different to us compared with what they meant to Shakepeare and his contemporaries. In The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Launce, describing his hard-hearted dog, Crab, says that ‘a Jew would have wept’ at something that left Crab unmoved, hinting at a stereotype of Jews now largely forgotten in favour of other stereotypes. This is all to show, once again, that Shakespeare’s work is not the simple matter of ‘great language’ and ‘our heritage’ that politicians take it for, and that we must not rely on narrative accounts of the stories.

Dover Wilson (1949:xiii) tells a tale that those of us who sum Shakespeare up entirely in terms of his plots should note well. There is a story called Amleth written by Saxo Grammaticus. It dates from the end of the twelfth century. In this story we have a wicked uncle who has killed his brother-king, and married his widow, and a threatened nephew who plays the fool while seeking revenge; we have a girl to whom the hero is attracted but does not marry, and who is used as a bait by the King and his friend to lure Amleth from his disguised madness. Amleth kills the King’s friend (‘he drove his sword into the spot and impaled him who lay hid’) …. The reader can guess the rest. Only the Ghost and the travelling players are missing from Amleth. The plot of Hamlet is practically irrelevant to Shakespeare’s genius and our teaching of his works to children.

To sum up: this book is about children’s and Shakespeare’s words, and the effect those words can have on children’s writing. It has an emphasis on the text that necessarily rejects any sentimentalization of the bard. It sees children as active learners—‘players’ is the happy word that comes to mind with all its punning possibilities—who will learn through their enjoyment of Shakespeare, and their responding to his work mostly, though not entirely, through their own writing; who will look into the glass he has set up for them, and therein see their inmost parts, and the inmost parts of the world they live in, with its grandeur and its squalor, with its palaces and its taverns, with its boudoirs and its brothels.
I am concerned in this book first, with children learning about Shakespeare’s poetry and prose. Second, it is concerned with children using that poetry and prose to learn about the world they live in. Third, it is concerned with children learning about their own natures via the technique of writing in the grip of Shakespeare’s words.

There is one point I would like to have developed further. I mention it here briefly, and hope to return to it at another time and in another place. As adults — teachers, parents, grandparents, governors, classroom assistants—we can all learn in that exhilarating, uncomfortable grip, and I think adult learning is implicit in everything I am saying; that it can, therefore, be inferred from every exercise in the book. Some of the best sessions with children happened when their teacher spent some of the time writing. Such an activity implicitly taught the children something about writing—its importance, the fact that it goes on beyond childhood, that it is not a matter of words coming by magic after we’ve said ‘Shazam!’ (Graves 1983:43) —that no amount of preaching could teach. But I have neither the space nor the remit to present and discuss case studies on the adult learning that has taken place on courses, the poems that have been written by teachers.

Certainly I have learned more and more about Shakespeare myself and language as I have studied the plays and poems again, cheating occasionally with a vibrant, surprising anthology (Hughes 1998) and even a dictionary of quotations that, at times, feels like an anthology (Lamb 1992). The most intensive learning for me has come from re-reading the Sonnets with the help of Helen Vendler’s extraordinary new edition (1997).

But I return to my current priority, the child/Shakespeare relationship. In a sense, this book is also about enabling children to produce parts of the plays in their own heads. When, for example, we read Puck’s words in A Midsummer Night’s Dream with anything like due attention, we can sense his physical movement in, or through, them, and we should be able to help children to sense those movements—though
differently. (See p. 46 for an example of a speech through which Puck moves.)

These mental productions cannot be mounted without the words, so they present a contrast to practice in one school I visited. The ‘brightest’ group in Year-6 had (I was told) studied A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the middle group Romeo and Juliet and the least able Macbeth. How this decision was made is not recorded. Why Puck, Bottom, Titania and friends are deemed more appropriate to clever children, and Lady Macbeth (‘Unsex me here’) more appropriate to the…shall we say, least clever, is hard to see. Perhaps the brightest are the most fanciful, the middle groups most likely to fall in love tragically, and the dimmest (the word has been hovering for ages, I might as well use it, it is what’s in the minds of the teachers and managers concerned) most likely to murder people and become kings and queens.

Also, the children had studied the plays with no copies of the texts. As one teacher said, without irony, ‘It wasn’t easy’. The children had merely been taught the stories in the plays, looked at some of the characters as mediated through the teachers’ accounts, and written prose descriptions of those characters, and little narratives of events. There was no evident faith and hope in the children on the part of the teachers that would have allowed the children to play with Shakespeare’s words. There was no evident love of those words.

**Reader, actor, critic, writer**

The first way of learning about these words is to read them and think about them. This is the way of the private reader. He or she may, in his or her mind, concentrate on the poetry, or may emphasize moving the characters around the stage in terms of a perfect production. His or her method may be a combination of these two. The second way is to read them and then act them. This is the way of the amateur actor, in school, or college or in the dramatic society; or (rarely, of course, in the experience of the children we teach) professionally. Obviously, this way involves learning the words by heart, or, more accurately, by rote learning, which we will discuss in Chapter 7. The third way of learning about the words is to think about them, or see them acted, and then write about them. This is the way of the critic. The fourth way is to write in imitation of them. That is what the children represented in this book have done. A study of Shakespeare’s words, leading to a lifelong engagement with them can, I suggest, be at least in part achieved by writing in homage to those words. A child who has written down four or five times in her own poem Puck’s line ‘Now it is the time of night’ will probably never forget that line.

Before going on to the examples that I have collected, I would like to draw the reader’s attention to the work of Cathy Carter and Ian Douglas (Carter 1997:70–6). The insights their ten and eleven-year-olds achieved after an intensive study of Hamlet are enough to knock aside any argument about suitability for primary children, or simplified language. One child said about Polonius’s relationship to his children ‘He has brought them up not to behave badly, but he puts them in awkward positions, like when he tells Ophelia she
couldn’t see Hamlet again’. The next stage in perception will probably be when this child notices the even worse position Ophelia is put in by the King and her father, when she ‘loosed’ to Hamlet, and is foully insulted by him. Other children in the Clwyd Project that generated this work reflected on Gertrude’s line ‘Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off’ and one child wrote, as Hamlet, ‘…there’s a trumpet playing a hard/and dark song in my mind’. Another child, ‘preoccupied with that idea of “the undiscover’d country” [wrote] “I may be in that lost bit of the world”’. The children also made paintings inspired by Hamlet: ‘Ophelia drowning in Hamlet’s sea of troubles and King Hamlet [sitting] against a tree in a garden that is already unweeded [while] his brother Claudius is one of the things “rank and gross in nature” sweeping down from a tree as a serpent’. Readers are directed toward Carter’s book for a fuller account of this project, and colour reproductions of the dramatic paintings.

**Single lines**

*With his mouth full of news*

This section really belongs with other writing developed from *As You Like It* (see Chapter 3), but I have put it here because it represents a toe-wetting, utterly painless experience in beginning Shakespeare: early play. Children, far from needing to study the whole text, can study single scenes or speeches. Indeed, one might profitably take this a stage or two further. To look at one vivid line has two happy effects: first, it takes much of the perceived threat out of Shakespeare (both for the children and, I found in the early days of this project, for me), and second, it concentrates the mind on the matter in hand: the words and their relationships to one another. Here are some young writers studying one such short line—indeed, it is only a half line—and in doing so learning more about Shakespeare’s methods than they would learn by trying to swallow merely the plot through a whole scene, let alone a whole act, or a whole play.

Celia says in *As You Like It*: ‘Here comes Monsieur Le Beau’ and Rosalind replies ‘With his mouth full of news’ (I:2:85–6). Later, Celia describes Duke Frederick coming ‘with his eyes full of anger’ (I:3:36). And hurriedly a class of children write, at first rather literally, and with no deeper knowledge of the play (that will come later):

- With his mouth full of tongue
- with his mouth full of teeth
- with his ears full of wax
- with his eyes full of eyeballs
But soon they loosen up:

With his ears full of lies
with his eyes full of tears
with his brain full of stupidity
with his heart full of love…
with her mouth full of songs
with his mouth full of gossip
with his eye full of fire
with her hands full of gold

Later, the teacher asked them to do the same exercise with an animal:

with her eyes full of night
with his nose full of another dog
with his heart full of rage
with his belly full of hunger…

One writer composed this impressive list on her own:

With his ears full of gossip
With his eyes full of love
With his heart full of sorrow
With her lips full of treasure (teeth)
With her smile full of wickedness
With his knuckles red with anger
With his body full of excitement
With her face full of merriment
With her cheeks rosy with laughter
With his lips full of hate
With his heart full of sorrow

(Natasha, 11)

I read to Natasha and her friends the lines that surround the anger reference:
ROSALIND: Look, here comes the Duke.

CELIA: With his eyes full of anger.

DUKE: Mistress, dispatch you with your safest haste

                      And get you from our court.

ROSALIND: Me uncle?

DUKE: You cousin…

(I:2:35–41)

We acted these lines in various characterizations. Rosalind was, by turns, fearful, cheeky and insolent; Celia was satirical, anxious and neutral. Then I asked the children to choose one of their lines, and continue the dialogue. Natasha wrote:

He said, with his eyes full of sorrow,
I will be executed the day after next
& lie without my head at the Tower of London

To write in this formula is to be set free to write in a fresh way, and to learn something about Shakespeare’s method—in particular the way a character says something about another character coming on stage, and the way Shakespeare mixes the abstract (anger and news) with the concrete (mouth and eyes). Shakespeare here is the teacher; the children, too, mix the abstract and the concrete. Also, the fact that these two similar half-lines occur so close together in the play tells us as readers of the play something about the nature of the relationship between Celia and Rosalind: they are so close that there are habits in their speech that are common to each other, and they have elements of the same sense of humour.

As You Like It is dotted with little lines that get children going: Orlando talks about going ‘from the smoke into the smother’ (I:2:227) —clearly an extinct version of our frying pan/fire saying, and when Celia asks Rosalind if she has ‘not a word’, Rosalind replies ‘Not one to throw at a dog’ (I:3:3). The children quoted next have listened to several sayings like this, and then written their own. In doing so, they are playing at the heart of demotic English, partly because (once again) they are mixing concrete and abstract, and partly because such sayings, while rooted in experience, are not clichés:

From my garden to my neighbour’s
From the wheelie-bin to the dustbin lorry
From the teacher to the headmaster

These examples might seem ordinary. Then the same children offered:

From life to death
Can you add to those words? I said to the child who’d written that line, and he wrote:

From my life to my death

Then

From Heaven into Hell
From meat into salad
From God into the Devil

Other lines written were:

I haven’t a thought to fly in the sky
...a dream to call my own
...a draft to work on

* * *

I wrote a line from *Antony and Cleopatra* (III:13:20–1) on the board, and we said it a few times: ‘He wears the rose/Of youth upon him’

She wears a bud of babyhood on her
He wears the dead daffodil of age upon him

Those two were mine, as I was playing with the idea the night before. I didn’t read them to the children. I’m glad to say they did far better:

He wipes the dust of innocence off his shirt.
(Sarelle, 10)

She dries the wet peachy face of eighteen births off her.
(Nikki, 9)

She lets out the glow of human sunshine around her.
(Lizbeth, 11)

He carries the tattered robe of earth with him.
(Adam, 11)
He carries the oaktree of age in his mind.  
(Daniel, 10)

I carry the golden hour upon my back.  
(Melissa, 9)

He drags the thorny bush of spite behind him.  
(Anna, 10)

Half way through the lesson, I reminded the children about alliteration. They hit a new note in their writing almost effortlessly:

He wears the weed of weakness about him.  
He flies the flag of fame in his hand.  
(Douglas, 9)

He wears the red rose of romance at his daughter's wedding.  
(Daniel, 9)

The dust of innocence'; ‘the wet peachy face of eighteen births'; ‘the tattered robe of earth'; ‘the oaktree of age'; ‘the thorny bush of spite'; ‘the weed of weakness': some of these phrases, among other more conventional ones, had a startling ring to them, a genuine freshness. We played with another line, this time prose, where Falstaff, exhausted in the battle at Shrewsbury, says: ‘I am as hot as molten lead, and as heavy too' ([I Henry IV](Henry%20IV)%3A V:3:32).

I am as cold as glass, and as breakable.  
I am bright as a streetlamp, but less useful.

Again, the first two were mine. And again, the children did better. I suspect that our insultingly low expectations of what children can achieve (made solid, as those dreary expectations are in statutory levels, targets, objectives and the like) are really expectations of our own potential. We are subconsciously envious of what children can do, and therefore in our minds, we drag them down to our own level, the level of those who are no longer trailing clouds of glory, and certain of nothing except the holiness of the heart’s affection and the truth of the imagination, but numbed into cliché and predictability.

I am as silent and slender as sunshine and as lovely too.  
(Anna, 10)

I am as hot as glass against the sun and as bright too.  
(Sarah, 10)
I am as ticklish as a feather and as light too.

(Emily, 9)

I am as dry as a funeral drum but not as dark.

(Daniel, 10)

We played with Prospero’s promise to Ariel: ‘Thou shalt be free/As mountain winds’ (The Tempest I:2:498–9). One boy wrote ‘Thou shalt be trapped as dreams waiting to be told’. Throughout this lesson, we had the company of a sixteen-year-old girl from a comprehensive school, there on work experience, and she showed us that she was still trailing those clouds of Wordsworth’s: ‘It was as lost as yesterday, and as forgotten too…. She was as alone as the world, and as empty, too….’

The stars, I see, will kiss the valleys first: Two examples from The Winter’s Tale

In this play there are many lines that serve the purpose of demonstrating elements of Shakespeare’s method. The plot hardly touches children’s experience in any way that makes telling the story worthwhile. Leontes has what appears to be a nervous breakdown in the first act, and accuses his innocent best friend and his innocent wife of adultery. There is a wonderful resolution in forgiveness and repentance. But children do appreciate the powerful, hyperbolic rhetorical device used by Camillo when he expresses his belief that something is unlikely to happen; that, in fact, the ‘fabric’ of Leontes jealous ‘folly’ about his wife and Polixenes will be ‘shaken’: ‘…you may as well’ he says ‘Forbid the sea for to obey the moon…’ (I:2:426–7). And later, expressing disbelief that he and Perdita will ever marry (a result, years later, of Leontes’ folly) Florizel says: ‘The stars, I see, will kiss the valleys first’ (V:1:205).

Children in a forty-strong group in a small village school divided themselves, with the teacher’s help, into pairs composed of one older child (nine years and above) and one younger one (nine and below) and we talked about impossible things that, however impossible they were, were, in fact, more likely than something else. ‘I’m more likely to fly’ I said, lamely ‘than find a school cloakroom without coats all over the floor’. Then, warming to my theme (if not improving much) ‘Those freckles will move from Alison’s face/To John’s before the world is fair and true…’ I wrote the lines from The Winter’s Tale at the front of the classroom, and we counted syllables—first in the children’s names (‘Kath—er—in— a Lear… Mal-colm Mac-beth…Ro-sa-lind La-few’) and then in the lines. We spoke the words several times to get the feel of two things: first, the length of an iambic pentameter, and second its rhythm. The children wrote their own lines, working in their twosomes:
The ivy will grow up to the sky and
grow round the sun.

This one resulted from an older child complaining that she and her partner
couldn’t get her line into one pentameter: we simply made it one and a half. This
came in handy with this example:

Fish will lose their scales and get tangled in
Fisherman’s nets and seaweed.

The dictionary will turn into nonsense.

Then I talked about alliteration, and the lines came again, with a renewed vigour
and, one more, a little extra music:

Rain will wreck the rotation of the earth.

The great great giants will pull the great sun down.

The sun will swim backstrokes in the sea.

Mountains will migrate to Jamaica
for the winter.

Metre sticks will measure the years.

The last one (two syllables short, of course) reminded me of a line of Eliot’s
‘Prufrock’: ‘I have measured out my life with coffee spoons’. I have noticed
before how an element of luck informs children’s writing, and their teachers’
reaction to it.

The fluffy fluffy clouds turn into thunder.

This one demonstrates an easy way of getting the right number of syllables: repeat
a word until all is as you want it.

Computers will cry over the Crimean war.
Lions will lose their manes and sink into the sunset.
The windy weather will fall into the water.

I don’t want to give the wrong impression that iambic pentameters are merely a
matter of counting syllables. As Stillman (1966) explains, ‘pent’ means five
[feet] and the ‘iamb’ means a two-syllable foot with the accent on the second
syllable. Thus
The stars, I see, will kiss the valleys first

is a near-perfect example. But it is possible to use counting syllables to make children aware of line lengths; and then to help them go on to subtler work. And indeed, the children in this short session began, after an hour, to use accurate iambic pentameters. It is certainly more effective to teach this by saying the Shakespeare lines aloud with feeling and sensitivity to the meaning several times, thus allowing the iambic beat to sink into the brain, than to count drably: ‘te-tum te-tum te-tum te-tum te-tum’.

In *The Winter's Tale* there is a sad character, a little boy, the son of Leontes and Hermione. Mamillius is praised by everyone who meets him, and he is much loved by his parents. We learn, however, as the tragedy takes hold, that Mamillius has died in childhood. At one point his mother asks him to tell her a story, and he begins:

> There was a man [he is interrupted by his mother] dwelt by a churchyard...

(II:1:28–30)

and that is as far as his story goes. I asked a class of nine to eleven-year-olds to complete the story, using exactly fifty words, and not worrying about bringing the story to a conclusion. In other words, it should leave some questions unanswered.

> There was a man dwelt by a churchyard. He was sad. He slept on graves. He didn’t have a name. He could only read the Bible and say prayers. The townspeople thought he was weird but saw him everyday. Sunday morning he was found crying and trying to bury himself.

(Anna, 10)

> There was a man dwelt by a churchyard who lived hundreds of years ago and lived a good life like a king but one day he heard people plotting against him so he jumped out of the window and fled to a shady place under a willow.

(Melissa, 10)

Other stories produced lines that were part of what Larkin once called the ‘myth kitty’ of our thinking, as though the line from *The Winter's Tale* was somehow basic to us all: ‘he had all the things in the world but no friends’; ‘he had everything, gold, silver, wine, long purple robes’. Other stories produced oddities—lines that I felt sure had never been written before: ‘In his house he had some long curly steps’ was one example.
Other single lines

Other lines that children could use from plays by Shakespeare include the following. If we have faith in them—both the children and the lines—the writers will surprise us.

Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety

(\textit{I Henry IV:II:3:8})

A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!

(\textit{Richard III:V:4:7})

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown

(\textit{I Henry IV:III:1:31})

Single speeches

\textit{A structure from A Comedy of Errors}

We can, of course, look beyond the individual line to the structure of a speech, or a part of one. In \textit{A Comedy of Errors} Dromio of Ephesus tells his master that he is late for dinner:

\ldots the meat is cold.
The meat is cold because you come not home.
You come not home because you have no stomach.
You have no stomach, having broke your fast…

(I:2:47–52)

This is a comic structure that Shakespeare found useful in this early play. He was still playing with his craft, and children, writing their own early works, and, of course playing with them, find it useful too. Children readily act this little speech, repeating each phrase and then adding their own. One boy had been making cakes in an earlier lesson, and wrote this:

When I mixed the flour and butter I added the salt.
When I added the salt I added the eggs.
When I added the eggs, I got a mixture.
When I got a mixture, I added the sugar.
When I added the sugar, I poured it in the moulds.
When I poured it in the moulds, I put it in the oven.
When I put it in the oven, it started to bake.
The stars, I see, will kiss the valleys
First, I see, will kiss the valleys. 

Peter (7)
When it started to bake, I mixed water and colouring.
When I mixed water and colouring, I mixed in icing sugar.
When I mixed in icing sugar, the mixture had baked.
When the mixture had baked, I took them out.
When I took them out, I put on the icing.
When I put on the icing, I left them to cool.
When I left them to cool, I got out the sprinkles.
When I got out the sprinkles, the cakes had cooled.
When the cakes had cooled, I poured on the sprinkles.
When I poured on the sprinkles, the cakes were ready.
When the cakes were ready, I ate them for tea.

(Richard, 10)

Children report events using this technique:

When the alarm clock didn’t go off my father didn’t wake up
when my father didn’t wake up he went on snoring
when he went on snoring he woke me up
when I woke up it was very very late
when it was very very late I didn’t bother with breakfast
when I didn’t bother with breakfast I starved at school…

(Henry, 8)

and explore the emotional causes of their actions, and the active causes of emotions:

I sulked because she’d gone off on her own.
She’d gone off on her own because I had told her she wasn’t my best friend any more.
I had told her she wasn’t my best friend any more because she didn’t phone last night
She didn’t phone last night…

(Ameline, 10)

These pieces are less dramatic than the ones quoted earlier which were derived from single lines; but they are valuable because they show children playing with a technique that is new to them, and which sets them free.

**Once more unto the breach dear friends**

Another better known speech is one that a correspondent of mine remembers learning by heart on pain of detention: ‘Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more….’. It continues
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there’s nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility;
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood…

(Henry V III:1:1–7)

I said these famous words to a small group of children on a Pearse House course, and asked them how they might rouse an army for victory. I asked them about the images that Henry uses, and they quickly identified the animals, the eyes and the face in general. We discussed the strange pictures here: the eyes peering through portholes, the eyebrows like an outcrop of rock over a cliff. We talked about what Henry is trying to do in order to rouse his troops.

Some of the children drew the image in these lines

Then lend the eye a terrible aspect.
Let it pry through them portage of the head
Like the brass cannon; let the brow o’erwhelm it
As fearfully as doth a galled rock
O’erhang and jutty his confounded base…

(Henry V III:1:9–13)

And then wrote their own militaristic speeches

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more…
Don’t be like a mouse and hold back in fear.
Pierce their evils hearts using your piercing eyes.
Go forward and fight them, do not be shy.
If you have courage, if you have wit,
Show off to the world and fight for us now.
Do you care for us? Show it now.
Save us from death, hurt and destruction.
Be like a volcano, explode and bury them.
Show us what you are made of, and fight for us now.

(Rosie, 10)

I did not feel that this work was very successful. Indeed, Rosie’s is the only vital piece that was written in this session, and I didn’t try the idea again. I had taught this lesson very early in the research for this book, and reflected later that the children (or I) may perhaps have had less empathy with the military triumphalism of the speech than we might have with other kingly words in Shakespeare. Another session from another history play suggests I may be right.
Richard II has powerful speeches that stimulate children to write, and I wondered what I might find here to help children.

Shakespeare has an obsession with the results of disorder, especially in this play and also in Troilus and Cressida: ‘The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre/Observe degree, priority, and place…’ (I:3:85–6). In Richard II, a Welsh soldier describes the results of the chaos caused by the people’s assumption that the King is dead

'Tis thought the King is dead; we will not stay.
The bay trees in our country are all withered,
And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven,
The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth,
And lean-looked prophets whisper fearful change;
Rich men look sad, and ruffians dance and leap…

(II:4:7–12)

I read the children these lines, and also Adrian Henri’s famous poem, ‘Tonight at Noon’ (in Patten (ed.) 1991:106), and they wrote lines describing things that might happen when ‘the times are out of joint’:

The teachers know nothing. Vicars preach evil
From their pulpits…

(Jasmine, 10)

Skinny men run restaurants and say, Come in and eat.
Get fat like me…

(Rahima, 10)

The sun rains storms. The moon burns people.
The rainbow means another storm, another cloud opening.
The snow scalds my skin. The wind will settle
on my rabbit’s fur and it will lie still…

(Maria, 10)

I did this activity again, with more time, in a class of nine- and ten-year olds. They were ‘not very bright’, I was told. Nervously I began with a more straightforward and familiar (to me, anyway) activity, The Box, from Sedgwick (1997: 44). Then, once the children had limbered up mentally and emotionally, I told them about the withered bay trees, the meteors, the bloody moon, the lean-looked prophets, the sad rich men and the dancing ruffians. When they began to write, I noticed many spelling problems, but few problems, if any, with grasping the essence of the message. I print some of the work here as it was written, so that the gap between mechanical correctness (important, no doubt to a society training hired hands to work its systems) and imaginative flexibility (important to a different kind of society) can be seen.
All bildings turn to water.
Peoples souls [souls] fly about in the dark black sky.
all the rich and famous people turn poor and lay on the streets for years to diy.
evry one turns angry and all over the world people fight and steele
all over the world people turn nasty and bad and even from space you can see the nastyness.
prinsess diana comes out of her grave
and honrts the peple that hav been nasty to her in the past
posters come alive.
dung betels rule the world.
The powet and teacher disaper from my classroom in the middle of a leson
doors get stuck and the world stops sining.  
(Joyce, 10)

mony turns to dust as you try to pay.
books turn to slime as you pick one up.
clothes turn to hair as you put them on.
your hair turns to rock as you brush it.
your blood turn to milk as you do a oporation.
clocks stop as you look at the time.
your walls begin to leak with blood.
people begin to eat their tungs.
as you get married goasts return…

(Kylie, 10)

The sand will come up
over the water.

At noon in the night
mice will hunt owls.

Tomorrow come yesterday
gravity will expel planets
deeper into space.

Tomorrow come yesterday
God will dissolve us
into the sky.

Yesterday come tomorrow
the clock in the hall
will read
half-past twenty

and in the evening of tomorrow morning
reality will be
woken up by the dead.

Tomorrow come yesterday
elephants will be stamped down
by the jungle.

Tomorrow come yesterday
hatred will be loved by love.
Yesterday come tomorrow
the sea will dry up the sun

and in the dawn of tomorrow evening
elephants will erode away
and cliffs will be fat and grey.

Tomorrow come yesterday
cats will talk to us
and we will be sitting helplessly
listening.

(Amy, 10)

‘Even from space you can see the nastyness…mony turns to dust as you try to
pay…as you get married goasts return….’ To appreciate the nervy acuity of these
lines, and to show that appreciation, is more important educationally than to
bemoan the unconventional spelling and punctuation. As Harold Rosen once
said to Donald Graves ‘Any idiot can tell a genius he’s made a spelling mistake’
(Graves 1983:188). Anyone intent on marking rather than appreciation will miss
the learning going on in these poems. In the third example, the child passes the
conventional spelling test and writes with vigour and originality as well.

Later, the King describes the lack of order from his point of view as he prepares
to hand over kingship to Henry Bolingbroke. These must be some of the saddest
lines in any of the plays.

I’ll give my jewels/for a set of beads;
My gorgeous palace/for a hermitage;
My gay apparel/for an almsman’s gown;
My figured goblets/for a dish of wood;
My sceptre/for a palmer’s walking-staff;
My subjects/for a pair of carved saints;
And my large kingdom/for a little grave
A little, little grave,/an obscure grave...

(III:3:146–53)

Case studies later in this book will make clear how opposites are typical of Shakespeare’s work: Romeo and Juliet especially is rich in oxymorons, and Macbeth too uses paradox: ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’. More generally, if we teach a child to write, after hearing lines like ‘jewels for a set of beads…gorgeous palace for a hermitage’ that are composed of contrasts—and contrasts in particular that are about downfall—he or she is learning much about one of Shakespeare’s many methods. Also the children who studied these lines learned about the caesura in the iambic pentameter (the ‘break in the flow of sound within a line caused by a break in meaning’ according to Stillman 1966:24) because it is especially clear in these lines—I have marked it with obliques in the quotation above. As the children learned the speech, I taught them to change their way of speaking at each caesura. For example, they said the first halves of the lines strongly, the second halves weakly; or the first halves in a high register, the second halves in a low one. They also shared each line between two voices.

I asked them to imagine being brought low, and losing all kinds of riches—not just pecuniary ones. Then they wrote

I’ll give my tennis court up for a broken racket.
my black Mercedes for a broken bicycle.
I swap my four poster bed for a tiny sack,
my large typewriter for a small notepad.
I’ll give my golden bath for a little water jug,
my clothes for a tiny ripped dress.
I’ll swap my orchestra for an untuned piano.

(Naomi, 10)

I’ll give my lunch for a grain of wheat
I’ll give my light for a candle
I’ll exchange my bedroom for a no-star flat
my whole wood for a dead sycamore
and even my whole range of books
for a small black leather-bound Bible.

(Douglas, 10)

Douglas has imitated Shakespeare’s dying fall: compare ‘A little, little grave, an obscure grave…’ with his final lines. The next writer has picked up ‘obscure’ usefully from Shakespeare

I’ll give my house up for a tiny shed.
I’ll give my friends up for an obscure photo
I’ll exchange my computer for a piece of paper and a pencil.
I’ll give up playing to sit in a dark room everyday.
I’ll lend my bed for a centimetre of wood
my life for the strength of an ant.
I’ll swap my mind for an ant’s brain and my toys for dust.

(Nichaesha, 10)

I felt, as I hinted above, that the children were more at home with the personality in these lines than they were with the personality in ‘Once more unto the breach’. Richard’s lines are intensely and sadly human and of course sincere; Henry’s lines are political in the sense that they are designed to whip up feeling. The images in Richard’s lines are relatively simple, as well: there is no difficulty visualizing the jewels and the beads, the gorgeous palace and the hermitage, the gay apparel and the almsman’s gown. I, for one, cannot say the same for ‘the portage of the head’ and ‘the brow o’erwhelm[ing] it’. The clarity of much of Shakespeare’s imagery became a touchstone for many of the examples I chose in writing this book. First of all, A Midsummer Night’s Dream is full of clear pictures that children respond to.
References


Michael Billington (1998) ‘Exit, pursued by boos’ in *Guardian*, 1 June
Janet Bottoms (1994) ‘Playing with Shakespeare: or “Where there’s a will there’s a way” ’ in *English in Education*, vol. 28, no. 3
Sandy Brownjohn (1980) *Does it Have to Rhyme?: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*, London, Hodder & Stoughton

H Caldwell Cook (1917) *The Play Way*, London, Heinemann
Roy Campbell (1930) *Adamastor*, London, Faber & Faber
Dennis Carter (1997) *The Power to Overwhelm: Comprehensive Approaches to Poetry in the Primary School*, Clwyd Poetry Project
Alec Clegg (1964) *The Excitement of Writing*, London, Chatto & Windus
John Cotton (1992) *Here’s Looking at You Kid*, North Wales and Wirral, Headland
John Cotton (1998) private letter
References

Charles Darwin in G F Lamb's *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Shakespeare Quotations*, Ware, Wordsworth, 1992


Rex Gibson (1993) ‘A black day will it be to somebody’ in Morag Styles and Mary Jane Drummond *The Politics of Reading*, Cambridge, University of Cambridge and Homerton College

Seamus Heaney (1966) *Death of a Naturalist*, London, Faber & Faber


References


John Mole and Mary Norman (1979) *Once There were Dragon: A Book of Riddles in Words and Pictures*, London, Deutsch


Marie Peel (1971) *Seeing to the Heart*: *English and Imagination in the Junior School*, London, Chatto & Windus

Emily Roeves (unpublished) versions of the epigrams of Martial
Delphine Ruston (1998) private letter

Martin Seymour-Smith (1975) *Sex and Society*, London, Hodder & Stoughton
*Shakespeare in Schools* (1987) no. 4, Cambridge, Cambridge University Institute of Education
*Shakespeare in Schools* (1993) no. 21, Cambridge, Cambridge University Institute of Education
Paul Theroux (1978) article in *Time*

**Two compact discs**

The soundtrack of the film *Twelfth Night*, directed by Trevor Nunn, track 19: Ben Kingsley singing Shaun Davey’s setting of ‘The Wind and the Rain’. Silva Screen records Film CD 186
Bryn Terfel: *The Vagabond*, track 12: ‘Fear no more the heat o’ the sun’. Deutsche Grammophon 445 946 2

**Editions of Shakespeare’s plays and poems used**

I recommend the Cambridge school editions of the plays—both for initial study and preparation, and for the pupils. The volumes are attractive, relatively cheap, and the assistance provided by the notes is tactful and handily placed
opposite each side of the text. These notes contain helpful exercises which, if I were a teacher coming to the plays for the first time, I would find enlightening. The books are intended mostly for secondary schools, but any primary school serious about bringing Shakespeare into the ken of its children should have at least some copies of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Macbeth, The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet and The Comedy of Errors. The Oxford School Shakespeare also provides useful options. Unless otherwise stated, all editions are in the Cambridge School Shakespeare, General Editor Rex Gibson.

All’s Well That Ends Well (Huddleston and Innes 1993)
A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Buckle and Kelley 1992)
Macbeth (Gibson 1993)
The Tempest (Gibson 1995)
Romeo and Juliet (Gibson 1992)
The Comedy of Errors (Andrews 1992)
King Lear (Bain, Morris and Smith 1996)
Antony and Cleopatra (Berry and Clamp 1990)
Hamlet (Gibson 1994)

I have also used:

As You Like It edited by Agnes Latham (1975) London, Methuen (The Arden Shakespeare)

I have not used Shakespeare’s sonnets with children, but these poems are central for any teacher interested in getting close to the essence of Shakespeare’s writing. I have used in my personal study the following editions of the sonnets:

The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets edited by Helen Vendler (1997), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press
The Sonnets and a Lover’s Complaint edited by John Kerrigan (1986), London, Penguin
Shakespeare’s Sonnets edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones (1997), Walton-on-Thames, Nelson
Shakespeare’s Sonnets edited by Martin Seymour-Smith (1963), Portsmouth NH, Heinemann