

NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE: ACTIVE STORYTELLING IN SCHOOLS

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How would you tell the story of a Shakespeare play to a ten year old? Would you leave out the casket scenes from *The Merchant of Venice*? The mechanicals from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Jaques and Touchstone from *As You Like It*? The Gloucester subplot from *King Lear*? Autolycus from *The Winter's Tale*? Or Sir Toby, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Feste, together with the gulling of Malvolio from *Twelfth Night*? Would you have Antonio openly repentant, full of shame and remorse, at the end of *The Tempest*, and present the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* in a wholly favourable light?

That's what happens in *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb, still in print after nearly two hundred years.¹ At first hearing, these omissions and emphases seem strange, even risible. But to censure the Lambs is to mistake their endeavour. They intended their *Tales* as an introduction to Shakespeare, and an introduction is just that: something which assumes that further acquaintance will follow which fills in gaps and makes more subtle discriminations.

What more justifiably grates on a modern sensibility are the gender and social class assumptions of the Lambs' conception of that follow-up and their view of the relationship of literature and drama. For their envisaged readers, enlarged experience of Shakespeare would be mainly through their 'fathers' libraries' and 'leave of judicious friends'.² Unsurprisingly, most children's encounter with

Shakespeare in the early nineteenth century was an elitist affair. In the Lambs' eyes it should also be a literary affair, privileging reading over the experience of seeing the plays on stage.

These assumptions, omissions, and interpretations in the Lambs' storytelling demonstrate the need for scrutiny of the nature and function of narrative in young people's experience of Shakespeare. My purpose therefore is to describe methods currently widely used to teach Shakespeare in state (that is, publicly funded) schools in England³ and to identify major issues which arise from that practice. Alert to the theme of this issue of *Shakespeare Survey*, 'Shakespeare and Narrative', my grounded assumption is that in school Shakespeare the two elements of that phrase are not just intertwined, they are inseparable. In schools, narrative is central to Shakespeare pedagogy, and crucial to students' learning. Indeed, for younger school students, Shakespeare *is* narrative.

The attractions of narrative are obvious. Storytelling is a familiar and congenial human activity. Story, with its chaining sequence and central concern for character, is easy to grasp

¹ Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare* (London, 1806). Although originally published as written by Charles Lamb, Mary Lamb wrote fourteen of the twenty tales. Charles wrote only six.

² Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, pp. 2–3.

³ Based on the findings of the Shakespeare and Schools project based at the University of Cambridge Institute of Education from 1986. See Rex Gibson, *Teaching Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1998).

and recall. It does not explicitly impose analytic or evaluative demands (though each subliminally inform every telling). Storytelling is a form of communication that has universal appeal, and the younger the individual, the greater that appeal. But as will shortly become clear, school-teachers' enthusiasm for and commitment to narrative embodies a fundamental ambivalence: storytelling is not enough.

Narrative as storytelling has long been an accepted mode of introduction to Shakespeare for school students. For most younger students, storytelling has traditionally been their major experience of the plays. The Lambs have fallen out of favour, but their modern counterparts enjoy considerable popularity. Every English primary school possesses at least one copy of some version of 'Shakespeare's stories'.⁴ Whatever the version, the illustrations, presentation, language and interpretative disposition declare each to be aimed principally at younger students.

Because my concentration is on what teachers and students do in schools, I shall not address the claim that a young person's best introduction to Shakespeare is to see a production of the play. It is a claim with which Charles Lamb would not have agreed. For him, the theatre provided an all too imperfect rendering of what was on the page. His judgement, as well as his *Tales*, still survive. In 1999 a teacher removed his party of ten-year-old schoolchildren from the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* deeming it unsuitable for their age group.⁵

That incident has greater significance than a modern endorsement of Charles Lamb's anachronistic belief. It is more revealing in what it shows of the radical change from the Lambs' day to our own in the social class composition of young people experiencing Shakespeare and the sites of that experience. The Lambs envisaged that their *Tales* would be read by 'young gentlemen' and 'young ladies' in homes already well stocked with books. In

contrast, in England today there is a legal requirement that all school students between the ages of fourteen and sixteen will study Shakespeare.⁶ Further, a recommendation in the National Literacy Strategy that ten-year-olds study a Shakespeare play 'where appropriate',⁷ has increasingly been interpreted by teachers as a statutory requirement. For the great majority of students, an introduction to Shakespeare and any follow-up will be exclusively through their schools.

In practice then, Shakespeare has become a necessary part of the curriculum for all English school students. Those students typically encounter the plays in classes numbering twenty to thirty-plus, in which, for students and their teachers alike, attitudes to Shakespeare mirror those of the population at large, and notions of 'fathers' libraries' are, at best, unknown, at worst, derided. Such 'Shakespeare for all' has resulted in dramatic changes in the nature of pedagogy, in ways unimagined by the Lambs, and where 'dramatic' has both metaphorical and literal force. Teaching methods have become more active, social and collaborative,⁸ with students taking part physically in some kind of enactment, and sometimes employing a technique the form of which reflects the *imitatio* that Shakespeare himself practised as a school-boy.⁹

Today's active pedagogy is based on principles which have long been known (and urged) but have only recently effectively informed practice for most students. It recognizes that

⁴ The most widely held and popular version is Leon Garfield, *Shakespeare Stories*, 2 vols. (London, 1985, 1994).

⁵ 'Titania and Tubbies get rude awakening', *Times Educational Supplement*, 4321, 23 April 1999, p. 4.

⁶ Department for Education, *The National Curriculum* (London, 1995), p. 20.

⁷ Department for Education and Employment, *The National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* (London, 1998).

⁸ Maurice Gilmour ed., *Shakespeare for All in Secondary Schools* (London, 1997).

⁹ Park Honan, *Shakespeare, A Life* (Oxford, 1998), p. 53.

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students are motivated and learn not only through listening, watching and discussing, but also by speaking and acting out Shakespeare's language. For large classes ranging widely in ability and attitude, that 'speaking and acting out' differs radically from traditional practice in which only a few students took active roles as characters. As teachers use a repertoire of techniques to enable students to take possession of Shakespeare's language, contemporary classroom methods echo the assumptions, and occasionally the rehearsal practices of experimental theatre companies.¹⁰ Here, the play itself is the thing, rather than any prose rendering of it. 'Storytelling' becomes 'dramatic storytelling'. The student's role changes from passive listening to active participation, creating character, mood and interpretative outcome as they construct meaning from events and language.

Understanding recent developments in school Shakespeare is aided by a concept common to all types of narrative theory. Whatever the theory (and there are many), the distinction is invariably made between the events in a story and the fashioning of those events in the storytelling. As in all theoretical worlds, competing labels jostle in their claims for explanatory power, but all, like Juliet's 'rose', describe the same thing. Barthes speaks of *histoire* and *discours*;¹¹ Chatman's terms are story and discourse;¹² the oldest and best-known division is Propp's *fabula* and *sjuzhet*.¹³ *Fabula* is what happens: the events in chronological order. *Sjuzhet* is the artist's method of relating that story: the techniques of storytelling.

Propp's terminology is unfamiliar to most schoolteachers, but their practice demonstrates that some kind of mastery of Shakespeare's *sjuzhet* is a paramount objective in every classroom. Knowledge of *fabula* alone is rarely considered a sufficient goal for any student at any age. The most obvious demonstration of that assertion is the universal injunction of secondary schools teachers to their examination students: it is never sufficient just to tell the

story. With different emphasis that precept holds for all students. For English ten-year-olds, the *sjuzhet* dimension of narrative is made quite explicit. The recommendation in the National Literacy Strategy that they study a Shakespeare play is embedded within very detailed requirements for mastery of an extensive range of language techniques.¹⁴ Such demands for knowledge and acquisition of *sjuzhet* are the source of teachers' ambivalence towards storytelling referred to earlier: the story itself is insufficient; some analysis of its telling is required.

School Shakespeare therefore entails both *fabula* and *sjuzhet*. In practice this means that each teacher takes some account, often intuitively, and in forms deemed appropriate to the age and ability of the students, of Shakespeare's *sjuzhet*: how he tells his story. That 'telling' he intended as stage performance, as dramatic storytelling, and for school purposes it includes most obviously Shakespeare's language techniques and dramatic construction. Schoolteachers endeavour, through active pedagogy, to enable their students to perceive Shakespeare's distinctive styles of dramatic storytelling, to understand them, and to employ them to greatest effect in their own different active forms of presentation. As students grow older, greater account is taken of Shakespeare's irony, ambiguity and moral complexity; of literary and historical references and sources; and of how the plays are rooted in the social and political preoccupations of his own time.

¹⁰ See for example the interview with Simon McBurney in *On Directing*, Gabriella Giannachi and Mary Luckhurst, eds. (London, 1999), pp. 67–77.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the structural analysis of narratives', *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London, 1977).

¹² Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca, 1978).

¹³ Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Austin, 1968, originally published 1928).

¹⁴ Department for Education and Employment, *The National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching*, 1998 pp. 22–55.

But such matters begin with, arise from, and return to the distinctiveness of the language.

Description and analysis of Shakespeare's language take different forms depending on the level at which any enquiry or explanation is conducted. With school students and their teachers in mind it is appropriate to make a Sir Toby-like claim that language consists of five elements: imagery, repetition, antithesis, lists and verse. These few simple and discrete-seeming categories may seem to deny their essential infoldedness, and they appear far distant from the demanding catalogue of language devices that Shakespeare himself learned at school¹⁵ or from modern scholarship on Shakespeare's language.¹⁶ But in an era of 'Shakespeare for all' they have proved a sufficient, comprehensive and comprehensible framework for schoolteachers to devise courses and to assess how well their students have mastered the language component of Shakespeare's *sjuzhet*.

The first four components reveal a gradient of increasing potential for student enactment. Verse presents special problems for students as will be shown below. Study of imagery and repetition tends to be desk-bound, more literary than dramatic, and students' imaginative and intellectual responses yield less to physical expression. For antithesis and lists, teaching methods and students' responses become increasingly more physically active. Here I must at once disclaim any implied opposition between active and intellectual responses to Shakespeare. A fundamental assumption of active pedagogy is that it harnesses thought and action. In school classrooms, as on stage, all human faculties are in symbiotic relation.

Drawing upon Shakespeare's unrivalled richness of linguistic resource, teachers typically use short extracts to teach language skills and to develop students' imaginative writing. Shakespeare's language becomes a springboard or spur for students' creativity. For example, a single line from *The Winter's Tale* proves remarkably effective for teaching metaphor and

serves as a model for students to generate their own imagery of impossibility:

The stars, I see, will kiss the valleys first (5.1.205)

Rosalind's reply to Celia's 'Here comes Monsieur Le Beau' is the half line 'With his mouth full of news'. Celia's similarly structured description of her father 'With his eyes full of anger', enables students, by imitation of form, to produce their own metaphors to create character: 'With her eyes full of night'.¹⁷ The imaginative promptings of 'bearded like the pard' and 'This fell sergeant Death is strict in his arrest' are similarly productive in developing students' grasp and invention of simile and personification as they conjure up mind pictures and invite imaginative substitutions and re-creations. Some images like Viola's 'She sat like Patience on a monument /Smiling at grief' lend themselves equally to physical enactment as well as cerebral imitation and invention.

Shakespeare's frequent repetitions of sound, word, phrase and rhythm similarly lend themselves to student imitation. Characteristic language constructions and devices imitated range from the alliteration of 'Full fathom five', through the parison and isocolon of Henry VI's 'So many hours must I' (where, for teachers, students reproducing the form rather than acquiring the Latin terms is the paramount objective), to Bottom's and Flute's many parody-inviting repetitions as they play out Pyramus and Thisbe from 'O grim-looking night, O night with hue so black' to the final 'Adieu, adieu, adieu'.

¹⁵ The results of that learning are evident in Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (New York, 1947).

¹⁶ N. F. Blake, *Shakespeare's Language: An Introduction* (London, 1983). Even in this introductory text, the key concept of the nominal group is unfamiliar and unused in schools.

¹⁷ School students' responses to these images from *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale* are given in Fred Sedgwick, *Shakespeare and the Young Writer* (London, 1999), pp. 22–4, 27–9.

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The ever-present antithesis, Shakespeare's linguistic embodiment and mirror of his drama's abiding preoccupation with conflict, offers increasing opportunities for physical enactment by students as well as written imitation ('My only love, sprung from my only hate'). Antitheses lend themselves to imaginative active expression in gesture, body posture and movement, as do the oppositions which take even more compressed form in oxymoron, abundantly present in *Romeo and Juliet*: 'loving hate', 'sweet sorrow' etc. Students use a variety of activities from 'hand-weighting' or body-turning as they speak ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair'), to constructing group tableaux or mimes which physically portray the oppositions, as for example in images of deception in *Macbeth*: 'look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't', 'False face must hide what the false heart doth know.'

Students similarly physically portray Shakespeare's many lists and declensions in addition to imitating them in writing. The great number and variety of such lists which occur in every play offer all kinds of classroom opportunities for enactment and creative imitation. Younger students typically begin with the always popular witches' cauldron ingredients and Jaques' 'seven ages' speech, acting and rewriting them (for example, benign ingredients, women's or school students' 'ages'). They progress to differently patterned and emotionally nuanced speeches such as the Duchess of York's sixteen-item description of her son Richard 'Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy . . .' (4.4.169–73), Rosalind's tumbling, breathless questions (3.2.215–19), or Malcolm's characterization of Macbeth: 'bloody, /Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, /Sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin /That hath a name' (4.3.57–60) which affords at least fourteen different 'shows' when students take up the seven deadly sins invitation. Juliet's list of all the things she would rather do than marry Paris, often abridged or even omitted in stage productions, has been enacted in full in many

English classrooms and frequently imitated in similarly constructed 'Things I'd rather do than . . .' inventions.

Such imitations (but not enactments) echo Shakespeare's own school experience. Like his fellow students at Stratford Grammar school, he too used classical models in numerous *imitatio* activities. Now Shakespeare himself has become a model for imitation, but the demands on today's students are very different in range and intensity from those made on him.¹⁸ As an Elizabethan schoolboy, he was expected to learn by heart over one hundred figures of rhetoric and to acquire skill in using them. Nonetheless, for all such qualitative or quantitative differences, modern forms of imitation have enhanced students' insight into and skill in creating imagery, antithesis, repetition and lists.

There is a less cheering finding for verse. Imitation and activity seem less successful in developing school students' competence in writing in iambic pentameter. For anyone who has attended a school or college Shakespeare workshop in the last dozen years, that will seem a curious claim. Almost every such workshop includes the familiar and popular 'beat out the rhythm' activity followed by the invitation to 'invent your own line in iambic pentameter': (e.g. 'I'd like to have a plate of fish and chips'). It is often assumed that these customary activities ensure acquisition of the verse form, and successes are recorded in most workshops. But the effects do not persist. In subsequent lessons, students' own verse very rarely displays sustained mastery of iambic pentameter. Similarly, popular beliefs that this metre is the natural rhythm of English and that students 'pick it up' by reading and speaking, prove ill-founded in practice. Immersion is no necessary guarantee of acquiring the skill to write in Shakespearean verse form.

Two modern pedagogical antipathies combine to inhibit students' versifying ability:

¹⁸ T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols. (Urbana, Ill., 1944).

distrust of rote learning and suspicion of poetic form. To develop the capacity to write in iambic pentameter, nearly all students need directive teaching and sustained practice. Time and culture weigh against both. In teaching writing, especially in expressive modes, a majority of teachers feel that the losses imposed by the discipline of form outweigh the freedoms of free expression. For well over three decades in England the prevailing professional credo has been that emotional truth is more fully realized without the constrictions of form. Eleven-year-olds can produce lengthy and impressively empathetic point-of-view prose narratives on a Shakespeare play,¹⁹ but any extended use of iambic pentameter is extremely rare at this age, and indeed at any stage of schooling.

It is hardly necessary to be acquainted with Chomsky's notion of deep structure to observe that even very young children draw upon complex rules of language and genre to make sense out of what they see, hear or speak. The child cannot formulate those rules, and is unaware of their existence, but they palpably govern interpretation and utterance. Such 'innate rules' (for lack of a better term) do not seem to include iambic pentameter. They might well include tetrameter, because few English students have problems with generating verbal or written utterances in that 'four beat' rhythm.

A different explanation is rooted in the ethological concept of critical periods.²⁰ This accepts that all known speech rhythms are in every child's genetic endowment, but which is developed is determined by the culture into which the child is born, because the critical period for learning any form is the first few years of life. After the critical period, the capacity for easy mastery fades. For all speakers of English, tetrameter is the preferred traditional form, embedded in nursery rhymes and in most publicly encountered verse from the very earliest age. In contrast, iambic pentameter is a later learned form. Most students never hear it spoken before they have passed the critical

period for learning it. Just as foreign language learning becomes more difficult with age, so students lose a ready ability to master Shakespeare's distinctive verse pattern. Iambic pentameter is one element of Shakespeare's *sjuzhet* that sets his language off from everyday experience. The iamb may be culturally preferred, but the five-beat rhythm is not.

It is with the *fabula* dimension of narrative that active classroom methods come fully into their own. Traditionally, narratives of the story have been just that: the teacher telling a version of the story, sometimes speaking her own reconstruction, more usually by reading aloud a published version. More active approaches to story telling are now increasingly common in classrooms, and students find that enacting 'events' is simultaneously congenial and contextual, a source of enjoyment and learning. Such enactments afford a sense of a totality, whether of the whole play, or of a story within, tangential to, or 'outside' it.

That sense of totality is evident in the commonplace observation of schoolteachers that students possess narrative drive: telling or acting out stories with a beginning, middle, and end. The younger the student, the greater the compulsion of that narrative trajectory, especially in the desire for the closure of a happy ending. In the three-fold movement of order, disorder, order restored, equilibrium is achieved after the upheavals and turbulence of the play's 'middle'. The resolution is a rightful king for Scotland, the Verona feud genuinely ended, the villains truly repentant at the end of *The Tempest*. Only as students grow older comes irony and the satisfactions of indeterminate or downright unhappy endings in which Malcolm seems likely to prove another tyrant, the Montagues and Capulets will all too evidently soon be at each other's throats again, and Antonio,

¹⁹ Sedgwick, *Shakespeare and the Young Writer*, pp. 99–100.

²⁰ K. Z. Lorenz, *The Foundations of Ethology* (New York, 1981).

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Caliban, or even Ariel, threaten trouble ahead in Milan and on the island. In just the same way that modern theatre directors pay particular attention to the final image their audience will see, so the ending of any story somehow embodies and makes sense of what has gone before. It is the final destination of the narrative's journey.

The notion of narrative drive underpins active storytelling in schools. It can be seen in a typical contemporary classroom introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The teacher selects ten episodes which represent important moments in the play and which convey an outline of the narrative sequence. Language, rarely more than a single line, is identified to express each moment:

- 1 Either prepare to die, [. . .] Or else to wed Demetrius.
- 2 The course of true love never did run smooth.
- 3 Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.
- 4 Wake when some vile thing is near.
- 5 What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?
- 6 How low am I, thou painted maypole?
- 7 My legs are longer, though, to run away.
- 8 Now die, die, die, die, die.
- 9 And farewell friends,
Thus Thisbe ends.
Adieu, adieu, adieu!
- 10 Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.

The teacher narrates a brief introduction to each episode, usually accompanying her words with actions that serve as model or inspiration for students' own actions. The students, working in pairs, speak and act out the lines, available to them on their own copy of the script or from an enlarged display on a board or screen. The first few teacher narratives convey a sense of how the lesson develops:

1 Teacher: 'All is not well in Athens. Hermia refuses to marry Demetrius, the man her father has chosen for her. Duke Theseus passes a

terrible judgement on Hermia: "Either prepare to die [. . .] Or else to wed Demetrius"'. As she speaks the teacher acts both roles: a 'sentencing' Theseus, a responding Hermia. Each pair of students then steps into role to speak and show this particular moment of action. All students in the class are simultaneously actively engaged.

2 Teacher: 'Hermia decides to run away to a wood near Athens with her true love, Lysander, who tells the weeping Hermia "The course of true love never did run smooth"'. Here, the teacher's facial expression and hand gestures help to convey meaning, signalling each element in ways which have more in common with sign language for the hearing-impaired than with the conventions of the professional stage. In pairs all students again step into role and speak and act.

3 Teacher: 'Meanwhile, in the wood, Oberon, king of the fairies, angrily greets Titania, his queen: "Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania."' Once again each pair of students simultaneously strikes a pose and speak the words.

The lesson continues in similar fashion through the magic potion squeezing, Titania's awaking, Hermia and Helena's quarrel, the 'deaths' of Pyramus and Thisbe, to the final 'take a bow' moment of Puck's final appeal to the audience for applause: 'Give me your hands, if we be friends,/ And Robin shall restore amends'. In practice students experience little or no difficulty in switching between roles.

After several teacher-led rehearsals, the students work independently. They speak and act the lines using a range of techniques: performing at their own pace, promenading (each action shown in a different location), acting 'fast forwards' and slow motion versions, constructing tableaux of one or more lines. Within a one-hour lesson most students will have learned the lines, can present them in order, and can construct their own accompanying narrative.

There are obvious issues that arise from this introductory ‘whole story’ activity, but they are accorded different priority by teachers and by most professional Shakespearians. For teachers the very practical problem of space looms larger than the more cerebral question of which ten events and lines to select. Teachers know the activity works best in an open space with students moving freely. Where that is not possible, they adapt to classroom conditions with students seated and with suitable movements and gestures. For Shakespearians, selection of episodes and language are crucial. Teachers take comfort from knowing that any selection is contestable, that later lessons will enlarge this initial active narrative, and that the method provides a first experience of Shakespeare’s dramatic construction, juxtaposing the serious and the comic, creating and resolving tension, and maintaining narrative drive to a satisfying conclusion.

Within every play are all kinds of action-filled ‘self-contained’ narratives which variously function to help create character, atmosphere and context, fill gaps and move the play’s action forward. Such stories have become a vital part of the repertoire of teachers using an active pedagogy because they offer opportunities for groups of students to act out each event described.

Some stories tell of events that happened before the play opens. Frequently classroom-enacted examples include Hamlet’s father’s ghost’s narration of his death, the bleeding captain’s tale in *Macbeth*, Prospero’s account of deposition and exile, Egeus’ ‘Full of vexation’ complaint of how Lysander stole the love of Hermia, and Orlando’s remembrance of how his brother Oliver grossly abused the terms of their father’s will. Such narratives relate events that happen off stage, and are rarely enacted in professional productions.²¹

Other stories tell of events that occur within the play’s own time span, as, perhaps most memorably, in the three Gentlemen’s accumulating relation of how Leontes is reunited with

Perdita and all the reconciliations that follow (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.2.1–89). On the infrequent occasions when professional productions enact these off-stage actions, the effect is to increase students’ motivation to construct their own performed versions.

Two examples illustrate the practice, one from a film extensively used in schools in video form, the second from an influential stage production much visited by organized parties of older school students. On the page, Duncan is only told of the execution of the Thane of Cawdor for treason, and how he embraced his death with impressive dignity (1.4.1–11). Roman Polanski’s film portrays Cawdor throwing away his life with studied indifference. Many students have acted and written Cawdor’s story: his treasons, confessions, begging pardon, repentance and stoicism in the face of death. Some students display a depressingly gruesome inventiveness in different forms of dispatching the thane. Similarly, Shakespeare does not show the scene in Alexandria of the coronation of Antony and Cleopatra, and Antony’s gifts of kingdoms, provinces and islands to their children and to Cesarion (3.6.1–19). But in 1992 the Royal Shakespeare Company memorably acted out Octavius’ story of the event. As Caesar described the legendary ‘donations’ ceremony, a dumbshow behind him portrayed just that: the two lovers enthroned in gold and surrounded by their children. The inserted mime was not critically applauded, but it was a narrative enactment that greatly appealed to students who had themselves acted out a presentation of the story.

Yet other stories recapitulate the major events of a play or an episode within it. Puck’s tale of the mechanicals’ reaction to the sight of the transformed Bottom begins and ends with

²¹ An entertaining exception was ‘The Ballad of Sir Roland de Boys’ that began the 1998 production of *As You Like It* at the reconstructed Globe on Bankside. As the ballad was sung, stage action portrayed Sir Roland declaring his will and Oliver’s ill treatment of Orlando.

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Titania's bewitchment: 'My mistress with a monster is in love', 'Titania waked and straightway loved an ass' (3.2.6 and 34). It contains over two dozen events that groups of students present, action by action (and *pace* the comments on verse above, it is in perfectly regular iambic pentameter).

The evident fun in Puck's tale explains why his narrative is frequently enacted by younger students. A much longer story, popular with older classes, is straightforwardly told by Friar Lawrence, Balthasar and Paris' page as they recapitulate well over forty events in *Romeo and Juliet* (5.3.231–85). Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking language recalling earlier happenings is often acted out by students of all ages who possess little knowledge of its context. It is full of opportunities for imaginative inference and action: just what does she do to accompany 'O, O, O'?

A majority of students find that narratives are often more accessible and easier to enact than dialogue. Many teachers, especially of younger students, give the stories priority because they offer many 'active' roles in which all students can participate as actors, narrators, choral speakers, mimes, providers of sound effects and so on. But less dramatic, more 'poetic' speeches pose problems. For example, Titania's 'forgeries of jealousy' (2.1.81–117) has its own narrative drive, and is a popular teachers' choice for students' performance. However, because the speech is so rich in imagery, and because imagery is more difficult than action for students physically to portray, the performance becomes more an activity in choral speaking. Students usually act out only small parts of the speech, toiling as ploughmen, hopping with increasing difficulty through the nine-men's-morris, freezing and shivering.

The level of intellectual demand is raised and narrative enactment becomes more appropriate for older adolescents when students are required to incorporate language and action from earlier scenes into their presentations. For example in the Lady Macbeth sleepwalking scene students

are required to show the events, characters and language to which her nightmare language refers. Horatio's highly condensed summary of Hamlet's story makes similar demands on students when they attempt to enact each of the seven 'events' using language and action from earlier scenes:

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause;
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th'inventors' heads. (5.2.334–8)

Horatio's promise of a more extended tale later is also a reminder that many plays end with a 'narrative injunction': an invitation to a character or characters to relate their stories.²² Increasingly, school students respond to that request, stepping into role to tell the character's tale. Teachers use their acted or written accounts to judge both the students' knowledge of the whole play and their awareness of what can be called point-of-view issues: for example how much might a character legitimately know of scenes in which he or she has not appeared?

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, even though the mechanicals' motivation throughout is the preparation of a play for the Duke, the worlds of court and mechanicals intersect only in the final Act. Both Theseus and Demetrius promise storytelling of the lovers' adventures: 'we will hear more anon', 'let us recount our dreams' (and these injunctions are fulfilled off-stage between Acts 4 and 5). But the stories will be necessarily limited, unaware of the supernatural or mechanical worlds of the play. The story that any character tells is partial, giving that character's experience, unaware of certain characters, or of episodes in which they have not been involved.

This 'point of view' challenge for the student arises from the nature of a Shakespeare play: it is

²² Barbara Hardy, *Shakespeare's Storytellers: Dramatic Narration* (London, 1997), pp. 72–90.

not a story told from a single point of view, but through a series of voices. Unlike most novels, there is no omniscient narrator or single storyteller. Shakespeare does not impose his perspective or interpretation, but presents a series of differing viewpoints which shift as each character speaks, expressing his or her thoughts and feelings.

Or at least, that is the play as it lies on the page. When it is enacted or read, interpretation inevitably comes into play. Just as a director presents his or her own version of the script (even when expressing the desire to let the play 'speak for itself'), so too any telling of the story is a personal and particular view, informed and directed by conscious and unacknowledged preconceptions, values and experience. That inevitable bias has long been part of actors' folklore and anecdote, most recently displayed in *Shakespeare in Love* when the actor playing the Nurse, asked 'What's the play about?' replies 'Well, there was this Nurse . . .'

That comic moment serves to show how teachers further heighten intellectual demand by asking students to consider the truthfulness of any Shakespeare storyteller. Iago is patently untrustworthy, but students also explore the veracity of the narratives of less questioned reporters: does Benvolio give an accurate account of the initial brawl, or of Tybalt's death? Is Friar Lawrence's recapitulation of events entirely transparent? And just how accurate an account is given in that universally popular speech for school enactments, Jaques' pessimistic story of human life? The older the student, the more accuracy or justification for a character's story is required by the teacher.

Such judgement is fraught with problems because the very act of narrative provokes students into motive clarification. Shakespeare's characters do not always reveal their motivation, but in various student activities Juliet confides in her diary what she thinks of her parents, Caliban expands on his conviction that 'This island's mine', and even Coriolanus, that least inward of men, in a much favoured class-

room activity reveals his private thoughts on the student psychiatrist's couch.

These written or enacted narratives reveal that students of all ages possess some purchase on different modes of understanding and interpretation that elsewhere emerge in highly refined form as critical or literary theory. For most students these complexly fashioned analyses of the relationships of Shakespeare with feminism, psychoanalysis, neo-marxism or any other type of critical theory, are neither known nor acknowledged. But these perspectives are certainly in students' minds, albeit in untheorized form. Psychologists' reports, women's accounts, the viewpoints of the subservient or oppressed, are common elements of school Shakespeare. In blissful ignorance of theories of marginality or *aporia*, students put minor characters at the centre of their involvement with the play. Unaware of new historicism or cultural materialism, they give a voice to Caliban and other low-status characters who comment on the injustices and tyranny of their society and masters or mistresses.

The epistolary mode is a huge sub-genre of narrative form in schools. Many thousands of 'letters home' have been written by 'present' but non-speaking characters. Students choose to become one of that host of attendant lords, servants or soldiers who people so many plays. They tell of their experience as gang members or bystanders at a Verona brawl, as sailors on Alonso's ship, as soldiers in Macbeth's or Malcolm's armies, or as servants at that ghost-haunted banquet. Lady Macbeth's gentlewoman often assumes a greater presence in students' classroom work than she ever does on stage.

The exploration of silences, gaps and absences is as inventively undertaken in imaginative freewheeling school Shakespeare as by any postmodern critic. *Jouissance* is very evident as students create their own 'absent characters'. Mrs Bottom and other mechanicals' wives discuss their husbands. Juliet shares her thoughts with a teenage confidante. Fourteen-

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year-olds tell each other the stories that made Macbeth's hair stand on end, or write memorably as 'an evilly-disposed bat' who lives in the rafters of Inverness castle:

I watched. As Duncan was quietly eating his last supper, Macbeth quietly slipped out. He began to doubt all things that we have sorted out, the poor bugger! To think that he thought he could get out of it! It makes me sick to think of all the religious slobes there are in the world . . .²³

Other student-invented narratives give glimpses of named characters who never appear but whose actions and personalities help to create the imaginative world of the play: Jane Shore, Cawdor, Lamord, Rosaline, the Indian boy. 'The lively Helena' tells what she knows of the Montagues and Capulets and what she saw at the party. But it is Sycorax, whose presence broods over *The Tempest*, who is the absent character most frequently acted out by students. The appeal of 'this damned witch' is obvious, and Shakespeare's *sjuzhet* provides invitations to imaginative enactment that have been readily seized in classrooms as groups of students portray her 'mischief's manifold' and 'sorceries terrible to enter human hearing'.

Most striking is the readiness with which students take up Shakespeare's invitation to resolve what was 'the one thing she did' for which the citizens of Algiers spared her life (1.2.267–8). In the theatre the line passes quickly, unremarked by most members of the audience. In the classroom it becomes the central focus of attention, as groups discuss, rehearse and then act out what the single thing was that resulted in her reprieve.

Students' enactments of Sycorax' 'one thing' demonstrate the structural imperatives that so strongly influence human imagination and thought. The detail, the particularity, of each student portrayal has its own uniqueness (and is 'new' to the students themselves), but the generalities are limited and prespecifiable: the danger averted, the lost found, the need fulfilled. Sycorax slays the monster threatening the city, stills the storm, brings the king's daughter

back to life. This structure-revealing activity parallels that other staple of contemporary school Shakespeare in which students act out the incident that set the Montagues and Capulets at each others' throats. Here every invented story's particularities of portrayal reduce to the imperatives of sex, wealth, territory and honour.²⁴

Both in these invented stories and in rewritings of speeches or scenes for active presentation, students very often create narrators quite unlike Shakespeare's few examples of the role: Rumour, Chorus, a Prologue armed, Gower. School narrators arise from the common condition of most classroom 'performances': short, for an audience of peers, abridged to fit time, space, resources and the students themselves. In these brief presentations, narrators speak invented introductions, interlinking commentary and epilogues. They put into question Barbara Hardy's claim that 'The presence of a narrator in drama is specious or misleading, deliberated to create an undramatic weight before we are released into dramatic freedom.' For Hardy, narrative, unlike drama, 'tends to be inactive, introvert, single-voiced, quiet, retrospective or prospective'.²⁵

Hardy has in mind Shakespeare's and other playwrights' narrators. In contrast school narrators possess the same qualities she detects in dramatic action itself: mobile, active, extrovert, multi-voiced. They take part in the action as they invent a few sentences of introduction to a scene or episode that is about to be staged:

King Alonso's ship is sailing on the calm waters of the Mediterranean. Everyone aboard has just been a guest at the wedding of the king's daughter, Claribel, to the King of Tunis. The sailors are working at

²³ Peter Cochran, 'Third Year Macbeth Lessons', in Rex Gibson, *Secondary School Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 46–9.

²⁴ Rex Gibson, "'O, what learning is!'" Pedagogy and the afterlife of *Romeo and Juliet*', *Shakespeare Survey* 49 (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 141–52.

²⁵ Hardy, *Shakespeare's Storytellers*, p. 25.

their duties. The wedding guests are relaxing. But something is about to happen that will change all their lives for ever . . .

As they speak, the student-narrators present the ship's crew and the court party, introducing each character. In one school staging of *The Tempest* fifty ten-year-old 'chorus-narrators', sitting in two groups on either side of the stage, spoke in unison, frequently framing the action by other students who spoke Shakespeare's words. The powerful presence of such narrators is also reflected in presentations by older school students who relish inventing self-consciously ironic narration. Their style of delivery makes evident the issues which inhere in any character's narrative, because the narrator becomes in effect a character who is more than a mere describer of the actions of others.

The sonnet-form Prologue that opens *Romeo and Juliet* is a favourite for active storytelling in schools, but the *Sonnets* themselves are used selectively by teachers for acting out. Very obviously, a sonnet is not dramatic in the same way as *Hamlet* or a story within it. There is little or no action or dialogue, and instead of telling a tale, a sonnet attempts to persuade: pleading, warning, reasoning, chiding, or using some other speech mode. But a sonnet's brevity, and the 'drama' of its subject, themes and images have afforded many teachers a ready lesson-sized Shakespeare narrative experience.

Certain sonnets have proved remarkably adaptive to active storytelling by older school students. The task of student groups is to work out a dramatic presentation to accompany and illustrate individual or choral speaking. Sonnet 66 provides large groups with the opportunities to portray the living antitheses 'desert'/'beggar', 'needy nothing'/'jollity' etc. Pairs of students have acted out the implied story of sonnet 57 'Being your slave', and trios have explored the love triangle of Sonnet 42 with its forty-plus deictical referents, and Sonnet 144 'Two loves I have' with its multiple antitheses.

Sonnet 91, 'Some glory in their birth', becomes a group presentation with students

portraying actions to show pride in 'birth', 'skill', 'wealth', 'body's force' etc. The nature of what or who the addressee of lines 8–14 ('one general best'), might be becomes the focus of the students' imaginative representation, producing referents that were certainly not in Shakespeare's consciousness. The traditional loved male or female gives way to an initially surprising other: a cigarette, a packet of drugs, a CD, a can of drink. The sonnet becomes a brief and unusual biography. Similarly Sonnet 29 'When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes' has also yielded its unusual crop of unlikely representations of the 'thee' that brings 'such wealth'.

Sceptics may question the validity of such freewheeling inventions and other aspects of active storytelling described above. But compelling justifications exist for these practices in school Shakespeare. They lie not in the implicit moral agenda of the Lambs (no serious claim is made today that acquaintance with Shakespeare somehow produces better persons), but in the nature of student learning and development, and in the pluralism of Shakespeare.

Students' imaginative habitation of a play, taking parts, speaking the language, and directly experiencing characters' dilemmas, aids empathetic identification, develops awareness of moral, social and political issues, and sharpens insight into the complexity of human relationships. For those students who go on to study Shakespeare in higher education, the narrative coherence that they seek, or import into their own re-creations, prefigure the more structured understandings that later-encountered critical theories will claim to provide. Most demonstrably, the kinds of active storytelling exemplified here develop school students' language skills as they imitate, express and imaginatively extend Shakespeare's *sjuzhet*.

The second set of justifications lies in the rejection of any monolithic conception of Shakespeare. Every Shakespeare narrative takes a form appropriate to its audience and location:

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here, young people and schools. Students' own re-imaginings are legitimized in the history of staging and filming the plays. The controversies which have attended particular productions ('taking liberties with the text'), reflect similar concerns about selection, addition or invention in schools. Perhaps the most striking example (certainly the one most familiar to secondary school students) is Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. Its radical transpositions and language cuts provide an analogue for school Shakespeare,

empowering and giving legitimacy to students' own transformations, abridgements and inventions. It is an extreme example, but its excesses reveal key principles that are instantiated in any production, however 'conventional'. All are products of particular time and place. But in both professional stagings and in school Shakespeare, integrity is guaranteed and the charge of mere relativism avoided by due attention to Shakespeare's *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, the story and the telling.