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LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public and personal: The *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series and innovations in Shakespeare pedagogy

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Abstract: The third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series draws on over twenty years of research and practice to consolidate an approach to Shakespeare which enlivened the way the plays were taught in secondary school classrooms. The third *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series was released in 2014 and 2015 with new features and a companion website with supplementary resources. A short history of the series, an overview of current research and the new features of the third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series will form the basis of this paper.

Subjects: Language & Literature; Pedagogy; Literature Primary Texts & Anthologies; Shakespeare

Keywords: Shakespeare; pedagogy; professional development; Cambridge University Press; *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series

1. Introduction

The third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series draws on over 20 years of research and practice to consolidate an approach to Shakespeare which enliven the way the plays are taught in secondary school classrooms. The series was introduced in 1990s and nearly two decades later, it maintains a focus on embodiment and contextual experimentation to help students "inhabit Shakespeare's imaginative world". A short history of the series, an overview of current research and the new features of the third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series will form the basis of this paper. I will analyse the way public exploration is balanced with personal investment through the research and pedagogy that underpins the new edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series and from the teaching and learning project *Shakespeare Reloaded* (2008–2012) at the University of Sydney and its most recent development as the *Better Stranger's Project* (2013–2016).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series is in its third edition and the history and current research which has shaped it situate the editions of Shakespeare's plays squarely in the space between public exploration and private interpretation. In this paper, innovations in the way Shakespeare's plays are taught in the secondary school classroom are explored from both teachers' and students' perspectives. The challenges to innovation and impediments to creative exploration in the classroom are also examined and students' examinations and teachers' professional development re-assessed.

2. The Cambridge School Shakespeare series

Prior to the publication of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series, the study of Shakespeare in schools was lagging well behind developments in Shakespeare scholarship. It was most obviously lagging behind the kind of performance-based approach popularised by John Styan in the 1970s. Styan's (1974) study of Shakespeare's plays applied the language and concerns of the theatre to the academic study of Shakespeare and he took his cue from Granville-Barker (1946) whose lively descriptions of Shakespeare productions and interpretations in *Prefaces to Shakespeare* were inherently theatrical. Styan sought to "read the plays imaginatively" and free them from "one-sided interpretations" and "nice definitions" (Styan, 1974, p. 3). He also described his own teaching experiences as a "direct method" which was based on understanding the plays through performance. Although he acknowledged that the classroom was not a theatre and students were not actors, he considered "even the smallest step towards conjuring the play's natural medium is better than damaging the play (and the students) by employing un-Shakespearean methods" (Styan, 1974, p. 199). When he was interviewed for an article in *Shakespeare Quarterly* in 1980, he spoke of the importance of self-discovery that comes through this method: "[...] a student is discovering himself in relation to Shakespeare if he is performing, and it is not quite the same to have somebody else do the work" (Peat, 1980, p. 148).

The kind of approach described by Styan was also employed by Rex Gibson, the first editor-in-chief of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series, who came to it from a different angle. Through his "Shakespeare in Schools" project which developed into the first edition of the series in the 1990s, Gibson pioneered a social, exploratory and imaginative pedagogy to encourage students to "play" with Shakespeare. It was the first large-scale project to disseminate Shakespearean teaching practices and give support for teaching the plays as scripts meant to be spoken, embodied and watched. The project seconded teachers from around the UK and reached thousands of students of all ages in the mid-1980s. His active methods approach dissolved "the traditional oppositions of analysis and imagination, intellect and emotion" and encouraged "responses which are both critical and appreciative" (Gibson, 2016, p. vii). It was the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series which brought the active methods approach directly into classrooms.

The active methods approach valued the social and physical dimensions of learning and used drama to challenge conventional teaching practices. Where many school texts would see the importance of explaining what an oxymoron is and how Shakespeare uses it, Gibson's active pedagogy would provide an activity for students to use mime or tableau to embody the oppositions in, for example, "brawling love" or "loving hate" in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 1 Scene 1). Where other guides might provide information about Lady Macbeth's character or character development, the kind of active methods found in *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series would give students the opportunity to *become* Lady Macbeth. This meant having to make interpretive choices about how best to portray her in different contexts through activities which range from choral speeches and hot seating to writing notes on staging and advice for actors. These activities show there is no one correct interpretation but instead a number of possibilities which students should be able to explore together.

3. Challenges to active approaches and performance-based approaches to teaching Shakespeare

A similar kind of active approach was also developing elsewhere in the world: Ken Watson developed a "workshop" approach to teaching Shakespeare in New South Wales and the St Clair Press series was published there in the 1990s, while the Folger library published similar titles and ran workshops for teachers at the same time in the US. Theatre companies such as Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (Globe) and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) developed strong educational programmes with performances for schools, professional development for teachers and workshops for students. As a result, teachers and practitioners all over the world increasingly experiment with many variations of drama in the classroom. With the focus on the exploration of the script rather than on final performances, aspects of the theatre have been brought into the classroom to engage students as directors, as well as actors. Such approaches are not only for students who like acting before an audience, they offer a way to embody Shakespeare's script and allow students to explore it imaginatively and socially.

Two issues of the *Shakespeare Quarterly* subtitled “Teaching Shakespeare” in 1984 and 1990 highlighted debates about theory and practice in the late-twentieth century that developed alongside, and were influenced by, Gibson’s approach. The 1984 issue focused on “performance pedagogy” with thirteen out of eighteen articles relating on teaching through performance and the editor, John Andrews, wrote that it was “difficult to find a dissenting voice: virtually everybody acknowledges the need to approach Shakespeare’s plays as dramatic rather than literary works” (Andrews, 1984, pp. 515–516). In contrast the 1990 issue registered the impact of new critical interpretations and methodologies and had few articles on teaching through performance. Editor Ralph Cohen wrote that the “thinking of semioticians, deconstructionists, feminists, Lacanians, or new historicists” had an impact on pedagogy and the teachers represented in that issue tended to “problematise” Shakespeare and “de-authorize their position as instructor” (Cohen, 1990, p. iv). He concluded with the statement that referred back to the performance-based approaches which were enthusiastically explored in the 1984 issue: “whether or not teachers use performance in class, the argument for its benefits has won the field” (Cohen, 1990, p. iii).

Cohen had interestingly laid a finger on the pulse when he hinted at the gap between published research and classroom practice. The second issue of the *Shakespeare Quarterly* based on teaching Shakespeare had, in 1990, identified some of the key challenges which, rather than contesting the benefits of a performance-based approach to studying Shakespeare, did challenge its use in many classrooms. These challenges included the rise of new critical and theoretical approaches, the number of key examinations, the lack of training and professional development for English teachers, and a range of institutional pressures which somehow stopped the research in journals and books from reaching the classroom. Teachers’ experiences confirmed these observations and show that time constraints, exam pressures and institutional restraints also impinge on creative approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom.

Findings from recent research on Shakespeare in the classroom show that language is still an obstacle for many students and the unfamiliar vocabulary and dense imagery is a barrier to understanding the plays. Editions of Shakespeare’s texts that assist students by translating Elizabethan English into Modern English, explaining or minimising classical references, and decoding metaphorical and poetic language into basic literal sentences are increasingly popular. However, a recent study using cognitive load theory has warned of an overreliance on explanatory notes while reading a Shakespeare text based on a study that demonstrated that the effectiveness of Modern English explanatory interpretations depended on learner levels of expertise. When experienced learners are presented with reading that integrates “basic explanations and modern modifications of the text” a redundancy effect occurs which results in what the authors call an “expertise reversal effect” (Okša, Kalyuga, & Chandler, 2010, p. 219). Such research echoes the instinctive responses of many teachers who feel that books shaped by commercial imperatives to make Shakespeare accessible too often lead to simplistic and reductive translations.

4. The third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series

The third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series also explored some of these challenges as it drew on recent research from teachers using the books with students in secondary school classrooms. The third *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series was released in 2014 and 2015 with new features and a companion website with supplementary resources. The books in the new series are larger and have a flexible spine which is easily opened whether held while exploring the play on one’s feet or at one’s desk. They feature the distinctive format of the first series, with the script on the right page of each opening and all editorial apparatus, including a running head, glosses and activities, on the left page. The implicit draw of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series away from private study of the plays to public exploration has carried through into the third series. As Gibson would have it, Shakespeare’s plays are not private property, accessible only to the highly educated or purveyors of high culture, they are for everyone and are best understood through dialogue and experimentation.

Important key features of the new edition build on the successful features of the previous editions: activities are colour-code; there is a greater focus on stagecraft, language and writing; the end notes are extended and include issues of production and reception, literary theory and critical analysis; full colour photographs of a range of performances from around the world; extended glossary on each page. The activities still invite students to experience the play and explore plot, character and language socially and experimentally. They are active and exploratory still, but also linked to considerations of social and political contexts, issues of production and reception and the tangle of themes with which Shakespeare worked.

This series is designed to be used throughout all stages of secondary school, from the start of Key Stage 3 to A Level in the UK and the equivalent school years in Australia and America. More photographs and extended glossary reflect the needs of younger students and more supporting material and commentary on stagecraft and writing reflect the needs of older students. The difficulties many students have with Shakespeare's language is acknowledged, but while many books that claim to help students provide a modern English translation, this is not the aim of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series. Instead, activities provide students with the experience of working out what the language means by embodying it and exploring it together. The third edition also maintains a commitment to encourage students to understand unfamiliar words in context and to find meaning through exploration. There are an increased number of activities focused on experiencing and exploring language and they are clearly marked in blue boxes.

A new focus on Shakespeare's literary and dramatic afterlives is an opportunity for students to use different interpretations of the plays to make up their own mind about them. The new books include colour photographs from past performances and extended end pages to focus on production and reception since Shakespeare's day. There are also activities on stagecraft in green boxes and the companion website has galleries of photos from performances—with a broad range of ethnicities represented by the actors. Alongside a focus on stagecraft and the plays in performance is a focus on writing. In the study of Shakespeare, as in so much of speech and writing outside the classroom, *what* is said is as important as *how* it is said. The third series has coloured boxes throughout the book which focus attention on writing as a means not only of distilling students' own interpretations and responses but also, in the very process of thinking, developing those interpretations. There are also extended endnotes on writing about the plays in a variety of forms, from essays to stage reviews, with a focus on writing sensitively about the play and providing evidence from the script as understood and experienced through performance.

5. Experiencing Shakespeare's plays through the third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series

Maintaining its equality of vision that Shakespeare is for all ages and stages, the new CSS has a range of new activities. I have chosen a couple of large group activities and some individual activities from *Macbeth* as examples of ways students can experiment with the script.

One activity involves large groups of students who memorise the line "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife" in Act 3 Scene 2 of *Macbeth*. One student is chosen to be Lady Macbeth and she stands in the middle of a circle made by the rest of the group. As she walks up to the students standing around her and says the preceding line "You must leave this", each student is to give Macbeth's reply with their own choice of intonation, emotion, volume and gesture. The same activity can be repeated with different pairs of lines and with different students taking the centre-role. This activity helps with embodying the script and exploring language and the range of meanings it could convey on stage. It also helps to further the process of moving from a private response to public exploration and can be followed-up with a similar activity which focuses on Macbeth's guilt and tortured conscience, based on Macbeth's line "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife". Still in large groups, students memorise a couple of lines from Lady Macbeth's conversations with her guilt-ridden husband:

Are you a man? (Act 3 Scene 4)
This is the very painting of your fear (Act 3 Scene 4)
What? Quite unmanned in folly? (Act 3 Scene 4)
Shame itself!
Why do you make such faces? (Act 3 Scene 4)
Infirm of purpose (Act 3 Scene 4)

Students take turns being Macbeth and stand in the middle of the circle as everyone says their lines the way they think Lady Macbeth would have said them and treats him the way Lady Macbeth would have treated him. The focus here is not on acting but on exploring how the meaning of a particular line changes when it is said differently and accompanied with different gestures. This activity leads easily into discussion and writing about Macbeth, their relationship with his wife and, of course, to Lady Macbeth's advice to get more sleep, her own descent into madness and the imagery surrounding sleep, children and innocence.

Another activity which helps students explore the possible meanings of the script is based on experimenting with short extracts of dialogue. In pairs, students read through dialogue taken from Act 2 Scene 2 in *Macbeth* after Macbeth has killed Duncan. The aim is to read through the script together and on their feet, ready to use the space around them and to employ gestures or use their voice differently. They read through the scene with the following rules:

- Macbeth stands still.
- Lady Macbeth stands still.
- Lady Macbeth maintains eye contact and Macbeth does not and vice versa.
- Both characters avoid eye contact.

This kind of activity helps students to ground the script in reality and they have to understand the characters and their words in a different way to merely reading it because they have to embody the words. They think about character and motivation in a different way and experience what it is like to be spoken to in different ways while in role as that character. Cecily Berry, the speech coach at the RSC, used similar techniques in her workshops when she gave actors a simple task to do, such as stacking chairs, while speaking the lines. This helped to take the pressure off people who were nervous or self-conscious or wanted to give a particularly "Shakespearean" Shakespeare performance.

As these examples show, it is important that students "talk back" to the plays and respond from their own journey of discovery and the focus should be on students' own interpretations of the plays. In "talking back" to the plays and to other interpretations, students engage in continual negotiation of meaning. And of course, this kind of dialogue is not only verbal or embodied. It is also written, exploring the plays as literary constructs as well and crafting their own response, using a range of genres, including stage reviews and extended essays. Obviously this is highly significant to older students where high-stakes exams are the end result of their study.

The approaches and editions of CCS can work very well with different age groups because the active approaches underpinning the series are not a product but a process. They are designed to be used—adapted, modified, re-created—to fit with the needs of teachers and students. Not so much an educational *product* to be conveyed into every classroom, as an approach designed to facilitate a *process* of personal engagement and public exploration. Nevertheless, there are limitations to how far this process can go in many classrooms and the predominant use of this series with younger

students highlights this. The different challenges facing older students are also reflected in the challenges facing teachers and might best be explored with some reference to teachers' perspectives.

6. The challenge to innovative Shakespearean pedagogy

The third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series is keeping alive the tradition of using and developing active methods approaches but it is not the only means of supporting teachers to introduce an embodied pedagogy into their classrooms. Rex Gibson's original "Shakespeare in Schools" project may have been the first long-term teaching and research project for Shakespeare in the classroom, but the closed door of the classroom has long since opened up. A range of influences and support from actors, arts practitioners and academics is easily available to teachers all over the world. In England, teaching workshops and research degrees are run in partnerships between Kings College London and the Globe and also between Warwick University and the RSC. These partnerships have also maintained a focus on creative approaches to experiencing the plays as performances. In Australia, teaching and research projects such as the Shakespeare Reloaded project (2008–2012) at the University of Sydney brought to the study of Shakespeare at school a new model of complexity which valued learning as unpredictable and emergent, working against predictability and predetermined outcomes. Similar principles within the current Better Strangers project (2013–2016) also work to promote fresh thinking and imagination in teachers who work with and against professional constraints imposed by curricula, syllabi and set texts. These partnerships and collaborations have great potential to continue the exploration of Shakespeare in school and they also highlight some of the binaries that complicate the teaching and learning of Shakespeare today.¹

6.1. Active/performance approaches vs. traditional/text-based approaches

I started this chapter with an introduction to the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series and a brief survey of developments in approaches to teaching Shakespeare. An early response to these approaches was a comparison between active or performance approaches and traditional or text-based work and a description of the move from boring desk work to exciting active work. This proved to be a superficial and ultimately self-defeating distinction. A simplistic advocacy of performance approaches can marginalise other approaches to experiencing the plays by creating an unhelpful division between literary and performance study. It is important to teach Shakespeare's plays as performance texts, giving students the experience of live performances and opportunities to embody the script, as well as using teaching methods that are active, social and exploratory. However, it is also important for them to enjoy the intellectual pleasures of studying the plays as literary works as well. How can activities that are active, social, exploratory and taken from rehearsal processes in the theatre link to solid language analysis, considerations of social and political contexts, issues of production and reception? A way to overcome this binary is to encourage new and unexpected educational goals through learning processes that integrate both and a sensitivity that avoids simply harnessing these active, actor-based approaches to more academic educational goals. The experimental exploration of rehearsal should be part of analytical processes not factored into predetermined learning outcomes.

6.2. Free-wheeling student exploration vs. pre-developed avenues of learning

Examinations, school traditions and conservative schooling in the past can all serve to enforce pre-developed avenues of learning. A common plight for students and teachers is the limited time available to explore the plays, experiment with them and examine them in secondary school classrooms. Shakespeare can often be marginalised or used by examination or assessment rubrics or by particular pedagogic approaches. The safeties of closure are preferred to experimental and analytical processes of rehearsal and this curtails free-ranging, curiosity-led investigation. Students are often regulated by an internal intellectual self-protection and avoid risk by minimising failure.

What is needed is the intellectual energy that can come from an exploration of Shakespeare allows students to "talk back" to the plays and respond with originality coming from having created their own pathway of discovery. Although this can be messy and may not fit neatly into examination or assessment rubrics, it can sustain the kind of thinking about texts that is valued in the world

outside the constraints of educational systems and specific examinations. Perhaps we need more of a focus on making Shakespeare strange and on keeping the plays alive in that space between private understanding and public exploration. Shakespeare's prominent place in contemporary culture and educational curricula has made Shakespeare friendly and packaged the plays so that they are managed and manageable. As a result students can be led to think they are safe or known and they could potentially miss out on the intellectual risks and the new journeys of exploration if they settle with second-hand experiences (from actors, academics or their teachers).

6.3. Rich, explorative pedagogy vs. pressures of outcomes-based teaching

The pressure of impending examination and assessment deadlines, especially given the short amount of time in which to cover the large amount of content in an already overcrowded curriculum can far too easily impinge on creative practice. This is further complicated by other pressures: an emphasis on teacher accountability; the undervaluing and over working of teachers; less time for them to keep up with developments in their field; and increasing specification descriptions and pre-determined learning outcomes. It seems that innovations in teaching Shakespeare from the past few decades are increasingly marginalised by other modes of teaching made necessary by these professional and local contingencies. There are times when teachers respond to this pressure by reverting to conventional teaching that is times indicative of Douglas Barnes' transmission model of teaching rather than an interpretation model. A transmission model places an emphasis on students to acquire knowledge from the teacher in order to assimilate and re-tell it for tests, whereas the interpretation of knowledge involves students in hypothesising, analysing, synthesising and creating knowledge (Barnes, 1992). When a transmission model is in place, an authentic experience of Shakespeare's plays is diminished and teachers themselves feel the tension of curtailing their own creative teaching as well.

6.4. School Shakespeare vs. Shakespeare in higher education

There is often little communication between universities and schools, and increasingly for students little evidence that English is a common subject that progresses from one institution to the next. University level study of literature not only assumes that students have exposure to the nature of criticism and the work of a critic, but immerses them in theory when they don't have the necessary frameworks to engage with it. School students' self-motivation, their ability to cope with a broader range of texts and contexts and the standard of their writing skills seems to fall apart under the pressure of such unfamiliar territory. Some of the solutions to this problem can come from schools, where relaxing the connection between classroom exploration and examinations could give students confidence to experiment with new ideas, make mistakes they can learn from in the future and take interpretive risks. Other solutions could come from universities, where academics could learn a lot from the range of pedagogy and teaching techniques used by secondary school teachers. More of a focus on joint communication to increase understanding and innovation within this space of transition could potentially be highly significant and productive in the long term.

7. Conclusion

The binaries that have featured in the second half of this paper result from complex factors and have built up over years of policy, research and practice. In dismantling these binaries a healthy tension is needed to empower teachers to push against restrictive boundaries and work out creative and sustainable methods of resistance. The ways in which these binaries are negotiated and dismantled will look different in different contexts and in different classrooms. Continual recalibration and resistance is more healthy and productive than attempting any one-fit solution, not least because every teacher is dealing with very different students in very different classrooms subject to very different contingencies. One of the most important solutions is to encourage conversations between educators from different disciplines, institutions, backgrounds, while addressing the binaries that fracture the field. The third edition of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare Series* and projects such as *Shakespeare Reloaded* and *Better Strangers* can also contribute to these conversations by keeping alive the approaches which encourage the most important kind of dialogue in the classroom: that between teachers, their students and Shakespeare's plays. Free movement in the space between

personal investment and public exploration, promoted through creative pedagogies, is what can challenge both students and teachers to take intellectual risks and sustain healthy resistance to forces that restrict innovation.

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Note

1. The following discussion of the binaries that complicate innovations to teaching Shakespeare is based on PhD research undertaken with the Shakespeare Reloaded project. Between 2009 and 2012 I was a research assistant with the project headed up by Associate Professor Liam Semler at the University of Sydney.

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