

RESTORING SHAKESPEARE STUDIES TO THE EFL SYLLABUS

IAN V. CULL

カ ル イ アン

INTRODUCTION

The study of canonical texts as part of a literature syllabus has been the subject of heated debate in Britain in recent years, culminating, at a legislative level, in the statutory obligation on English teachers to include "some of the works of Shakespeare" at key stages 3 and 4 of the National Curriculum (Department of Education and Science: 1990). Although detailed study of Shakespeare is now reserved for those aspiring to level 7, no other representative of what were once called the traditional literary texts is included in the revised curriculum. However, the new guidelines to local education authorities (LEA) refrain from insisting on any statutory approach to the teaching of the texts, the selection and presentation of which "should be entirely at the discretion of the teacher" (DES:Ibid). This seachange in the approach to the teaching of literature in Britain, involving a move away from the secure compartmentalization of texts towards the active encouragement of individual responses to literature has brought about a parallel reconsideration of the aims of literature study in the EFL classroom. The retention of Shakespeare in the National Curriculum is a measure of both the seminal importance attached to classical literature in general and the continuing belief that the study of a Shakespeare play is relevant to the educational development of young learners in particular.

In this essay, I shall attempt to explore the relevance of teaching Shakespeare in an EFL environment and consider whether the justification for retaining his works in British schools can be upheld in the foreign language school. Furthermore, classical literature is generally invested with iconic significance when determining the value of a nation's cultural achievement, standing as a testament to literary accomplishment and as a defining characteristic of national identity. Implicit in this perception of valued literature is the notion that teaching CULTURE and teaching LITERATURE are concomitant pedagogic objectives. In an EFL context, on the other hand, Shakespeare studies must be undertaken in as culturally "fluid" a manner as possible in order to exploit the universality of the texts. Indeed it may never be possible to rid certain authors and texts of their somewhat intimidating classic status in the canon and it is beyond the scope of this essay to tackle the question of what actually constitutes great literature. I shall suggest a language based approach to Shakespeare's text in connection with learner centred oral and written exercises as the one most suited to a study of Shakespeare, illustrated by reference to "Julius Caesar".

CULTURE AND MYTH

Culture, as T.S. Eliot pointed out (1948), is the one area of human activity that cannot be deliberately aimed at or attained. The aspirations of each age affect and transform perceptions of "civilization" and "the civilizing effects of culture" (ibid). This view convincingly stresses the difficulty of establishing any permanent cultural criteria by which culture can be measured but highlights Eliot's firm conviction that the European tradition of Christian faith and classical humanist enquiry are the appropriate intellectual tools to aid us in the definition of culture. Karl

Mannheim in "Man and Society" (1944) went further, arguing that only the intelligentsia could bring about cultural change in a developing society. Culture, appropriated in such a way was thus regarded as both the product and preserve of a governing elite. It was against such a background that traditional approaches to teaching Shakespeare helped reinforce the association of "great literature" with power and privilege. Consequently, Shakespeare is often perceived as a cornerstone of Britain's national heritage as defined by those who see "culture" conforming to and reflecting the requirements of privilege and power.

However, culture, perceived not as a collection of national artifacts and unassailable notions of "value" should instead be regarded as a collective pool of ideas, knowledge and experience. In seeing culture as organic and therefore mutable, one can begin to appreciate other cultures in the light of inter-cultural diversity; an approach that is less circumscribed by social or national boundaries. Recontextualizing canonical literature involves making a determined effort to release it from the iron embrace of literary critical judgement while simultaneously chipping away at its encrusted cultural associations.

The pedagogic importance of this view (as opposed to definition) of culture will be considered later but it ought to underpin the approach to the teaching of Shakespeare in the EFL classroom. Wheale (1991) identified Shakespeare as the great shibboleth of English Literature and his plays as the rites of passage that had to be negotiated in the English syllabus. Despite the partiality of this observation, it highlights the fear and trepidation with which learners have traditionally approached the texts. The "quasi-religious" adoration of Shakespeare has helped to sustain the spiritual heart of both the Shakespeare myth and attendant heritage industry (Holderness: 1988). This, in turn has generated the intellectual struggle between those who strive to maintain the concept of individual authorship on which most Shakespeare criticism rests and those who wish to deconstruct the myth by analyzing the plays as products of a collaborative cultural process (Hawkes: 1986). Culturally, Shakespeare crosses class boundaries, having been absorbed into marketing strategies, commercials and tourist itineraries but paradoxically the plays remain (with a few notable exceptions in performance) embedded in the soil of "highbrow" literature. Even as far back as 1936, G. Wilson Knight, writing on Shakespeare, regarded 'great' literature as "one of the great needs of man as a spiritual being", in a valiant attempt to reconsider canonical literature at a time of European crisis. Great literature has been reappraised in this way, inviting new readers to observe its "timeless" values but Wilson Knight was infinitely less influential in that troubled time than Olivier's unashamedly patriotic version of "Henry V"; an audacious affirmation of national pride that reinforced the notion of Shakespeare as the consummate national poet.

Demystification of Shakespeare is an essential prerequisite for worthwhile classroom based study of the plays but the EFL environment is not necessarily as encumbered by inherited cultural prejudices. What essentially distinguishes the L1 from the L2 speaker of English in this context is the latter's comparatively unprejudiced approach to the text. Admittedly, the name Shakespeare may be familiar to all or some (or none) of a class of advanced learners of English and it may even evoke images of England that correspond quite closely to those being promoted by the custodians of the Shakespeare myth. Yet the absence of culture specific associations that can impede learning makes exploration of the texts as imaginatively broad as possible. Moreover, the texts can be seen to possess universal significance and relevance, even in those situations where the learners of English are not grounded in the Eurocentric historical-cultural tradition.

Although there is an abundance of Shakespeare criticism and extensive research has been undertaken to recontextualize the plays since the implementation of the National Curriculum (Aers & Wheale: 1991), comparatively little attention has been paid to the study of Shakespeare in the EFL classroom. The Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate has included at least one

Shakespeare play in its Proficiency Optional paper since 1984 and Shakespeare studies form a part of most overseas undergraduate degree courses in English but the cultural, linguistic and pedagogical issues inevitably raised by their inclusion have been either lightly touched on or avoided altogether in the debate on teaching literature. Carter and Long (1991) devote a mere three paragraphs to Shakespeare, Brumfit (1993) makes no mention of the plays at all while Widdowson (1975) is concerned primarily with poetry but not Shakespeare's poetry or blank verse. Only Collie and Slater (*Literature in the Language Classroom*: 1988) have tackled Shakespeare directly but it should be noted that they were primarily interested in the question of "getting classes to feel the immediacy and the pathos of the central theme". Despite the practical suggestions made on HOW to teach the plays, they do not address the question of WHY the plays are taught.

Shakespeare's relative neglect in this respect can be partly explained by the pedagogical difficulties presented by the language, idiom and imagery in the texts. When one considers the wealth of literature available in English to non native speakers, it can be argued that it is more profitable to devote what limited time is available for the study of literature to modern novels or plays where the language approximates the linguistic competence and experience of the learners. In addition to this the wide range of periodicals, newspapers and magazines an EFL class may have access to enables a mixed group of learners with varying interests to read what coincides with those interests.

However, this does not account for the consternation Shakespeare often arouses in teachers and students alike. Although the plays are in the international domain, either in their original form or in translation, they are still widely perceived to be the "cultural property" of an Anglo-centric elite. The Shakespeare industry has flourished largely because so relatively little is known about the man who created the plays. This has resulted in the cultural exaggeration of what is known about him on the one hand and the carefully constructed myth to account for what is not on the other. The cultural materialist analysis of "Texts...inseparable from the conditions of their production and reception in history"(Holderness: 1989) has a particular resonance in this context because Shakespeare occupies a totemic position in both the English literary canon and in a highly marketable version of what constitutes representative British culture. Shakespeare, annexed in this way, lends support (if not justification) to the politicization of culture, as it is defined by and associated with those who have assumed a proprietorial interest in their nation's heritage.

The cultural materialist argument is not without its critics but it does help to focus attention on the significant issue of "teaching culture" as an integral part of teaching literature, in this case Shakespeare, to non-native learners of English. It is here that the underlying cause of Shakespeare's neglect in the EFL setting is to be found because traditionally, the teaching of these canonical texts has implied an endorsement of the cultural values propagated by the Shakespeare industry, both directly and indirectly. Consequently, non-native learners of English who are either cognizant of the ways in which Shakespeare has been promoted in order to typify the very quintessence of English literature or have been unconsciously influenced by it, may despite their cultural differences, stereotype Shakespeare in a similar way to those who consciously promote the mythical image. David Gless (1991) has argued that unexamined assumptions about Shakespeare enable his interpreters to render him an agent of their own ideological commitments. Teachers, in turn, run the same risk when they assume that Shakespeare merits unqualified respect in the classroom. As a result foreign learners of Shakespeare may learn little except the reasons why their English teachers hold the plays in such high esteem.

IDEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE

It would be erroneous to approach Shakespeare's plays as ideologically neutral or as the distinguished critic, Levin, has consistently maintained, above ideological classification (1990). Levin's argument is not so much wrong as meaningless because ideology can seldom be reduced to a single substantive element or system as evidenced by the wide range of interpretations placed on the Shakespeare canon. His attempt to articulate a set of norms that enable Shakespeare to transcend ideology is intended to show that objective meaning does not vary, that received interpretations of the texts can be equated with the goals of objective analysis. A detailed study of Shakespeare's latent racism, sexism or anti-Semitism is unlikely to be within the remit of an EFL teacher or his students but consideration of them forms an essential part of the ideological apparatus that needs to be kept firmly in place in any literature class. Ideology should not be viewed as something to overcome in the interests of producing consensus but as a set of interpretative variants that honour "the plurality of human centres that any classroom holds" (Gless:1991).

Therefore, ideology and ideological readings of Shakespeare should be openly discussed and promoted in order to free the texts from the cultural chains they have been imprisoned in for so long. Introduced into the classroom arena, the texts can be approached in less authoritarian ways regardless of how "authoritarian" the interpretation may actually be. The plurality of this approach enables learners to create cultural maps of literary comparison and coincidence with their own iconic literature and its relationship to the broader issues of 'national' heritage and identity.

'JULIUS CAESAR': PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEMS AND A TENTATIVE SOLUTION

I should now like to turn to Julius Caesar, a play usually identified as being central to the Shakespeare canon and regularly included in the Composition and Optional papers of the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency Examination. Hitherto, it has often been wrongly assumed that the "story" of Caesar's assassination is familiar to advanced learners of English, resulting in a treatment of Shakespeare's text that has been based on assumption and presumption. This can be traced back to the generations of received wisdom that influenced the teaching of the traditional canon to native English speakers and which failed to align methods of literature teaching with the changing order of a multicultural and socially diverse nation.

Richards, Empson and Leavis, the "founding fathers" of Practical Criticism profoundly affected literature teaching through their critical focus on the need to dissociate text (especially poetic text) from its context, thereby establishing the autonomy of the text as a basis for scrutiny (Widdowson: Practical Stylistics). In a culturally heterogeneous society, literature pedagogy, based on Leavisite principles can alienate learners seeking relevance to their own experiences in the texts they read and study. Students who are "taken through" a Shakespeare play and whose responses are judged to be either appropriate or inappropriate are left with an authoritative, 'non-negotiable' interpretation locked away in their minds. Pragmatic though this may be for an impending exam, any further interest in the texts is invariably stymied.

The likelihood of such an outcome is proportionately greater in the EFL setting where exposure to English of any variety is limited. Therefore, before Shakespeare (and arguably any other writer)

can be introduced, the text used must be seen to be relevant to the awareness, if not the actual experiences, of the learners. In a class, isolated from the community of native speakers, an authentic situation for language has to be created and especially when that language deviates from the norms of more conventional discourse. It can no longer be taken for granted that learners of English (and this includes L1 and L2 learners alike) are familiar with the life and death of Caesar. The virtual disappearance of the Classics (i.e Latin and Greek) from the curriculum in Britain means that teachers who may once have relied on students' elementary understanding of Plutarch and Cicero in providing a background to plays like Julius Caesar can no longer presuppose knowledge of Caesar's conquests, the magnitude of his achievements and the enormity of Cassius and Brutus' "crime". In an EFL context, the problem may be compounded by the fact that the learners have little or no grounding in or contact with the European and Eurocentric historical-cultural tradition. The cultural and ideological approach to the texts that I have proposed so far is designed to alleviate this problem although literature teaching, derived from the assumption of "shared" knowledge is still very much in evidence.

Even in countries like Greece and Italy, where the study and translation of classical texts are compulsory components of the secondary school curriculum, advanced learners of English may be well acquainted with the historical background of Julius Caesar but disinclined to study the play. The manner in which the classical Greek canon is taught and learnt for example, involving endless translation and paraphrase can act as a disincentive to the study of Shakespeare because the texts are perceived to be further exercises in "translating" weighty, core literature. Although Shakespeare teaching has been quite effective in parts of Africa, where the strong tradition of oral rhetoric is amenable to the Shakespearean dramatic model (Brumfit & Carter: 1991), the study of a play like Julius Caesar should not be based on the assumption of familiarity with the historical background. Indeed, such a path into the text could bring into question study of the play itself as opposed to an historical account in modern English (Widdowson: 1975). Similarly, an ostensibly simple question such as, "What do you think the play is about?" might well prove counterproductive in that the learner feels compelled to offer an opinion that is both premature and restricting.

Readers of a play contribute extensively to the creation of meaning (Gless: 1990) and they either seek or require demonstration of it as work on the text progresses. In view of this, initial access to the play should be through a series of broad discussion questions although it must be noted that the choice of questions may betray the teacher's own set of interpretive priorities. This does not invalidate the approach however, because, as has already been argued, the plurality of any classroom ought to be able to accommodate any number of varying interpretations and the more confident the learners feel when freely discussing the text, the more they will come to see the teacher's suggested interpretation as one they can agree or disagree with.

In order to contextualize Julius Caesar, the students could be asked to think about political rivalry in any context they had some knowledge of, its causes and its manifestations and then to consider how that rivalry could lead to assassination and murder. Comparison and definition of democracies and dictatorships, laws and edicts and the roles played by elected assemblies and armies would be a logical development of the discussion, involving analysis of the ways in which order and obedience are maintained.

It is essential to exploit the learners' comprehension of contemporary issues to assist in their overcoming apprehension of the text and more importantly, to enable them to make connections between their experience of the world and understanding of the text. Discursive treatment of the nature of public image and reputation can be framed around individually prepared critical

assessments of well known public figures before discussion of the ways in which reputations are made or destroyed by the media, propaganda and even the individuals themselves. Selected passages from one or two historical accounts of Caesar's life would enable students to consider Shakespeare as "biographer-historian" with the objective of comparing the various accounts of his achievements, reputation and treatment of the conspirators. The play can thus be approached as one possible version of events historically, and dramatically, as a version that will probably emphasize certain aspects of the story and its participants.

A LANGUAGE-BASED APPROACH TO THE TEXT

A Shakespeare play, incorporated in a true literature course, should be studied primarily to develop literary competence and secondly for language purposes. Reading at this level presupposes a high level of linguistic proficiency (Rodger: 1983) but literary language consciousness and literary communication awareness are skills that can be developed through comparison and contrast of literary texts. Learners need to be able to see where and in what ways literary discourse deviates from more conventional forms of discourse. Not only does this assist in comprehension of the text but also justifies the study of the text because learners need to consider why the writer adopted an unconventional mode of expression, its effect on the reader and its effectiveness within its chosen context boundaries. Although literature seldom forms the core of an advanced EFL syllabus, it nevertheless has more than an ancillary role to play. Communicative competence in the target language is one of the principal objectives of language teaching and literary texts, exploited as a means of nurturing literary competence and discrimination, can assist in the development of reading and communicative abilities. Moreover, as proposed by Brumfit and Culler (1991), the motivated language study that literary texts can provide can help learners overcome the difficulties of "face validity" or classic status texts.

The language-based approach to Julius Caesar in the EFL classroom is not dissimilar to the objectives of the RSA Shakespeare in Schools Project in Britain (ed. Rex Gibson). Apart from stressing that not all the text needed to be studied the report went on to say that although initial contact with the play might be via the story or characters, "pupils must come into contact with the language and acquire some sense of the meaning of the text, the imagery and rhythms" and that this should apply across the age range. Advanced EFL learners are not significantly any more disadvantaged than their native speaking counterparts when confronted by Shakespearean English and a good edition of the play (The Oxford Shakespeare: ed. Stanley Wells) contains modern explanations of difficult and archaic lexical items.

The purpose of teaching Shakespeare is to elicit individual interpretations of the play and this can be approached through an analysis of how linguistic items take on particular meanings to create literary discourse; the fusion of text and context. Widdowson makes the crucial distinction (1975) between the meaning of linguistic items as elements in the grammar code and their meaning within the contextual code. The value attributed to linguistic items inherent in literary discourse, forms the core of one's appreciation of the metaphorical use of language and interpretation of it. Interpretation however should be based on an understanding of how linguistic items assume a particular VALUE in discourse and MEANING has to be viewed as intrinsic to the way the language has been used in this particular discourse. The dramatic poetry of Shakespeare is well suited to the methods Widdowson advocates because the temptation to "translate" Shakespeare is seldom far below the surface but to succumb to it is ultimately self defeating. Recasting his words" into the definite shape of 'conventional statement' weakens their value but if one considers what

Shakespeare communicated and how it was done by "relating" it to more conventional forms of discourse, the important question of why it was done leads inevitably to an evaluation of its effect and effectiveness. This should help facilitate interpretation of the text.

In conclusion, I would say that the ostensibly numerous drawbacks to the teaching of Shakespeare in the EFL classroom, which have led to the virtual eradication of the study of the plays, contain in theory the strongest arguments for recontextualization of these works. A play that contains only spoken exchanges and minimal locational and directional information presents learners with a whole range of descriptive, predictive and analytical opportunities.

Sections of the play can be studied using the language-based approach suggested here, accompanied by audio and video tape recordings of individual scenes or acts. A variety of written exercises including cloze tests, prediction and synopsis assignments and essays interpreting character, events and Shakespeare's treatment of both all contribute to the communicative development of the learners while emphasizing the discernible nature of literary language. Above all, the culturally fluid distinction of truly universal literature needs to be taught in an equally distinctive way, open to but not shackled by any number of diverse, ideological interpretations.

REFERENCES

- Aers & Wheale (1991): *Shakespeare in the Changing Curriculum* (Routledge)
 Brumfit & Benton (1993): *Teaching Literature: A World Perspective* (Macmillan)
 Brumfit & Carter (1991): *Literature and Language Teaching* (Oxford)
 Carter & Long (1991): *Teaching Literature* (Longman)
 Collie & Slater (1987): *Literature in the Language Classroom* (Longman)
 Dollimore & Sinfield (1989): *Political Shakespeare* (Routledge)
 Eliot T.S. (1948): *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (Faber)
 Gibson Rex (Ed.) (1994): *RSA Shakespeare in Schools Project* (HMSO)
 Holderness (Ed.) (1989): *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester University Press)
 Humphreys R.K. (1994): *Shakespeare's Julius Caesar* (Oxford)
 Kamps Ivo (1991): *Shakespeare Left and Right* (Routledge)
 Mannheim Karl (1944): *Man and Society* (Gollancz)
 Pennycook A. (1994): *The Cultural Politics of English as a Foreign Language* (Longman)
 Rodger J. (1982): *Language For Literature* (Pergamon Press)
 Widdowson H.G. (1975): *Stylistics and The Teaching of Literature* (Longman)