

## Bringing Shakespeare to the Child

The following talk was given in 1995 at a teachers' conference at Lund University in Malmö, Sweden. It was based on my experience of introducing primary-school children to some Shakespeare plays by writing and illustrating stories. Published in *Methods of Art as Paths to Knowledge*, ed. Rabert Berg and Martina Campart. Lund University, 1996, pp. 75-84.

What is the point of trying to simplify Shakespeare? Can it ever be other than a foolish or a cynical exercise? - foolish to reduce the complexity of Shakespeare's poetry to banal everyday prose, cynical to profit from the ignorance of those too young to read Shakespeare for themselves? Many retellings of Shakespeare have been made since that of Charles and Mary Lamb, Keats's contemporaries. The spirit of the writer seems frequently to fall into one of two categories - in the past it was often that of 'improving' Shakespeare for the benefit of corruptible minds, expunging his immoralities etc. (such as when the Lambs themselves erased the name 'Bottom' altogether from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*); while other versions give the impression of somehow competing with Shakespeare to recount an exciting tale full of extraneous little clevernesses to capture the attention of wandering minds in a way which even the Master could not do (such seems to be the spirit of the cartoon version of 'Animated Tales' produced by the BBC). Reductive approaches such as these provide a substitute for Shakespeare not an introduction - they replace Shakespeare's poetry with a familiar alternative, implying 'don't worry, there isn't really any difference between *The Winter's Tale* and the Seven Dwarves'.

There have also been retellings for children (school textbooks) which are not really attempting to convey *The Play* itself but rather to inform children about the play - its historical circumstances, means of production, derivation of its characters etc. Sometimes short quotations are included like samples of the cloth, attractively packaged. This is a worthy but also an unproblematic enterprise; it does not confront the issue of how to introduce children to the play as meaningful drama, as an art-symbol. Such books co-exist with the play; they do not undermine the child's relationship with it but neither do they engage the reader emotionally. They do not confront the question, What is the point of reading this play - not just now, but ever? Consequently this approach does not facilitate the child's thinking processes.

For this, surely, must be the ultimate aim of the writer who tries to match a love of Shakespeare with concern for the younger generation. We recognise now that the ability to think is founded on a capacity to organise and develop our emotional experiences. This is something which all art forms can help us to do, the plays of Shakespeare being a prime and supremely rich example. It is what Milton meant when he said that education

was about the 'teaching of virtue', 'whence arises true and internal liberty'; he said that the function of poetry, in particular, was to teach 'things invisible' by means of 'things visible' - 'the substance of good things'. Or in Keats's words, the need is to 'school an intelligence and make it a soul'. 'Virtue' in this context is not morality but a capacity to think, to digest emotional experiences; it is the process of 'becoming a soul'. It is a process which cannot be started too early - though clearly as it is a real thing it can only begin to make use of poetry such as Shakespeare's when the child is ready to 'recognise' the art-symbol, or aspects of it, on the simplest level. As in anything educational it must be a case of matching the opportunity to the readiness: 'the readiness is all'. And though children vary in their speed of development and in their responsiveness to literature, essentially they follow the same pattern; and the relationships, emotional patterns and basic ethical problems of the plays selected are universally relevant.

The plays I chose to present to young children (from the age of about 8 or 9) were *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its discussion of love-as-courtesy, only achievable through imagination; *Macbeth* with the opposite picture - the perversion of femininity and of home life once the 'witches' of ambition have taken control of masculinity; *The Winter's Tale* with its reparative seasonal cycle, the ravages of infantile jealousy (in the context of a new baby) repaired by the good shepherd and Bohemia's Ceres-like dream of 'great creating Nature'; *King Lear* with its discovery of 'philosophy' and the type of suffering which is part of the human condition and is transformed by knowing the meaning; and *The Tempest* which introduces even more abstract questions of value - power versus dependence, possessiveness versus freedom. (With this story in particular it becomes clear that children do not need a happy ending when it would be false to the play; they are fascinated by the characters of Caliban and Ariel and by the questions raised.)

The point of bringing Shakespeare to the child is then to start a process in which Shakespeare offers the child what he offers us - there is no essential difference. The knowledge conveyed will later become more complex - with Shakespeare one can say infinitely complex owing to the neverending ramifications of the poetry - but it is essentially one thing, the 'principle of self-development' (in Coleridge's phrase). It is bound up with the poetry and poetry is, as Milton said, both 'subsequent and precedent' - simple and complex, early and late, easy and difficult. But everything depends on the pattern of the plays, the artistic 'gestalt', being made clear and recognisable; and this is the main problem in telling them as stories for children. The story has to present the play - to be a presentational form in itself, but not one that draws attention to itself ('look what a clever and colourful story I am'); it has to give the impression of the greater depths of the play beyond it.

The first step in writing for children, therefore, is to read Shakespeare oneself - in the fullest sense: that is, to prepare oneself to receive the poetic meaning (or constellation of meanings) presented by the poetic drama, the play as art-symbol: to read its expressiveness, which comes mainly in the form of poetic language. To read and experience the play for oneself may sound absurdly obvious but it is a crucial stage which can easily

be skimmed in retelling for children (doesn't everyone assume they have 'read' Shakespeare, or at least 'know' Shakespeare, without ever questioning it?) Moreover in the current critical climate the assumption reigns that creativity consists in jazzing up what everybody 'knows' so has become boring - inventing something Shakespeare didn't manage to think of for himself. In order to retell a play simply, one has to know it in greater depth than when writing some more complicated analysis for adults when more linguistic resources can be used.

It is usually taken for granted that the 'play' to be retold is equivalent to the plot of the play, and that the events of the plot need to be laboriously scanned and compressed into the limited space available, as though understanding the plot were a necessary foundation for appreciating the drama. Then the plot has to be somehow livened up, for Shakespeare's plots are often tortuous or absurd. But of course, the features of the plot are not at all the same thing as the shape of the art-symbol, the deep grammar evoked by the poetry. The poetry is not something added on top of the plot, it is something which utterly transforms the nature of the symbol which the dramatist is creating. Like a spider spinning its web the dramatist establishes points of emotional intensity where the lines of emotion cross - and these points are not necessarily the obvious crises of the plot. In *Julius Caesar* for example it is not the murder of Julius which is the focus for emotional heat, but the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius; in *The Winter's Tale* it is not the verdict of the oracle on Hermione which is instrumental in 'recreating' the mind of Leontes, but the dream-like pastoral pageant which takes place in Bohemia; in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it is not the instructions of Theseus or Oberon which bring about a happy ending but the inspired relationship between Titania and Bottom - and so on.

The point is, what story should the writer for children be telling? The plot, so that they can answer factual questions about the play, or the story of the poetry, so that they can imbibe some of its significance? The writer needs to be very clear about this because it alters the emphasis and the placing of the plot-events in his narrative. It is impossible to convey Shakespeare's deep grammar if one slavishly follows the order of his plot or reproduces proportionately the relative amount of space given to his plot-events. To convey the poetic structure of his plays, it is necessary to rearrange or ignore sometimes quite large tracts in order for the poetic links and echoes to become clear. One cannot reproduce the poetry; but one can draw attention to the features of emotional vibrancy which the poetry has evoked for us.

To give an example: in retelling *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I found it necessary to condense extremely the plot complications which image the confusion of the young lovers and the futility of Oberon's efforts to disentangle them. Partly because it is the kind of comedy which is only entertaining on the stage, and it is hopeless trying to make it sound funny in a story; but also because its contribution to the overall meaning is easily summarised as 'confusion' - we don't need to know the details. What the reader does need to see is how the working men or 'mechanicals' of the state pave the way for the fairies to gain influence in the rule-bound city of Athens and to alter the existing conception of love. This is not the overt logic of the plot (where the mechanicals would

seem to have no influence at all, just a totally subordinate role), but it is the logic of the poetry and the poetic structure. It is what lies behind the dream-marriage of Bottom and Titania at the core of the play (Bottom's Dream which 'hath no bottom'), and the meaning of this radiates outward along other lines of emotional tension, transforming the experience of the other characters - the young lovers, the aristocratic lovers, the fairies themselves. So the plot can be condensed into the main movements of its emotional order: beginning with the Athenian couples' hidebound rules and adolescent confusions; moving to the mechanicals who are the workers of the mind, actively practising their play and trying to create a symbol to contain and reflect these emotional problems. This leads to the Athenian mind's contact with the fairies, whose reparative power eventually becomes organised into an image of love as Courtesy - 'reason and love become friends' as Bottom describes it. This is the central emotional illumination, the knowledge which co-ordinates the lines of tension. The play moves inwards to this dream of knowledge, then outwards to incorporate it in everyday life. We have seen the interaction between egotistical adolescents who need to learn from experience; the workers who can survive their humble position to enable learning from experience; and the deities (figures of internal parents) who are themselves not free from disharmony but who are capable of changing their minds. Then the order of telling the story can convey how this core of knowledge is transmitted outwards to outer levels of consciousness.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play where much of the poetic meaning lies in the structure; the lyricism of its language is more evocative and atmospheric. But in all the plays to be retold, the order of telling - the way the events are juxtaposed - is always crucial. Through this one's own grasp of the play's deep or inner form becomes manifest. In telling Shakespeare for children one cannot avoid relying on one's faith that if only Shakespeare's symbolic structure can be made visible, Shakespeare himself will do the rest. The writer's function is to make the introduction; after that the degree of intimate 'recognition' possible is between Shakespeare and the child (including the development of further forms of knowledge or recognition - playproducing etc.).

It is important that one is bringing Shakespeare to the child, in childish terms. The child is not being brought to worship at the altar of Shakespeare, still less of fame and respectability (which is the impression one often gets from official advocates of Shakespeare as tourist attraction or vestige of the British Empire). The writer for children must be a vehicle through whom Shakespeare may enter the children's world, without drawing attention to himself as facilitator. Without this type of inner digestion on the writer's part the introduction, the link, cannot be made. In essence the writer assimilates his own experience-learned-from-Shakespeare and passes this on to the child-in-himself, after which it is a relatively easy step to modify it for actual present-day children of a certain age-span. (In my stories I was aiming for children of 7+ and worked on many details with 9-10 year olds, reading aloud, while the stories were read to themselves by children of 11+).

For the writer's experience may be subjective but it is not idiosyncratic, not intrusive on the Shakespearian text. It does not proclaim itself as 'creative' (which really means

pseudo-creative, the current unthinking assumption). The writer is always servant of the text. As in any form of literary appreciation he needs to make strenuous efforts to become a receiver of the poetry not an imposer of his own viewpoint. (As for the usual objection that one is not transmitting Shakespeare but only one's own interpretation or ideology, it can only be said that the writer has to constantly review his relation to the text - this is where the psychological perspective in the form of self-analysis comes in). For there is an actual symbolic form which is the Shakespeare play; it really does exist, it is not invented by readers and critics or by actors and producers - all these are (ideally) receivers and then presenters in their turn of the knowledge they have incorporated. And in retelling for children, the two stages of receiving for oneself and presenting for others are perhaps more differentiated than they might be in play production.

The reason I keep stressing the motivation of the writer is that everything else follows from it. All the technical problems of language, style, distribution of plot-events etc. find their solution by referring back to this central relationship between Shakespeare, writer and child. In the case of my own stories, the illustrations form an essential accompaniment, not just a decoration, and they were also an integral part of writing each story. Since the illustrations are organisational, arranging key features of the drama around a central tableau, I found it helpful to do them first. (Then when reading the stories in class, the illustration helped children focus their discussion - there were also copies to colour in.) The illustrations mean that the main motifs of the drama, and the primary mental landscape, are at a glance always before one's eyes - the storm in *King Lear*, the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the claustrum (castle) in *Macbeth*, the island and its gods in *The Tempest*, the winter and summer lands of *The Winter's Tale*; also, the relative significance of the characters and the way they intertwine in the dance of the drama. Having established this I tried to let the story tell itself without embellishment or artificial attempts at exciting emotion (no virtuosities, no purple passages), since these would not be Shakespeare's emotion but a substitute for it. Shakespeare's emotion should be in the process of being translated into another genre via the pattern of the story. Anything else (such as trying to copy the scenes of a stage-production) is a type of genre confusion - imitation of another presentational form, Plato's shadow-reality at second remove.

This translation requires a flat unexaggerated style, which can accommodate otherwise melodramatic events in a matter of fact way, as in fairy tales (the imprisonment of the pregnant queen in *The Winter's Tale*, the putting out of Gloucester's eyes in *King Lear*, the murder of Macduff's family in *Macbeth*, etc). In a fairy-tale context these cruelties are easily metabolised by children, they do not need to be protected from them - they are metaphors for aspects of the human condition. When the main body of the story is told in a 'children's language' - simple, matter of fact and of limited vocabulary - it is then possible to insert occasional short quotations from Shakespeare's own language in a way which does not confuse though it may mystify, in the sense of introducing the aura of mystery which does in any case accompany poetic meaning whatever the lexical accomplishment of the reader. It does not matter that some of the words or grammar may

be unfamiliar to the child, or even incomprehensible. Sometimes it can be a way of introducing new words to their vocabulary, or exploring partly-known words such as perhaps 'philosopher' or 'ambition'. (There is a wellknown story about Beatrix Potter's use of the word 'soporific' in one of her tales for very young children. An A-level teacher was horrified by my quoting the passage with 'unaccommodated man' in *King Lear*, saying that A-level students could not understand it, so how could primary-school children; but they were trying to grasp the concept on a more sophisticated level. I found that provided the quotations do not intimidate, or confuse the rest of the story, they can either be focussed on or passed over. But their most important function is to serve as windows on Shakespeare's actual plays, like the doors which Keats imagines opens out from the 'Chamber of Maiden Thought'. The idea is to give the feel of an existence beyond the story, so the story will not become a substitute for reading the play. The doors are open.