

Should children study Shakespeare?

Yes, says **Janita Clamp**. The Bard's themes and characters, from kings to clowns, embody the best and worst aspects of humanity and still resonate today

If Shakespeare were to return today, he would probably be astonished to know that, 400 years after his death, the words he wrote are part of the fabric of spoken English and a non-negotiable part of the school curriculum. And not just in the UK – research carried out by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the British Council for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad revealed that every year over 50 per cent of the world's children are studying his works – either in the original or their own language.

But why does Shakespeare, above all his literary contemporaries and successors, have eternal tenure at the centre of cultural capital? Why do most parents believe that it's a good thing for their child to "do Shakespeare", even if they themselves didn't enjoy studying him?

The Bard himself has the answer: "The play's the thing." What Shakespeare wrote had to appeal to theatre-goers of all types, from royalty to the "groundlings" who paid a penny to stand in the open-air pit at the front of the Elizabethan stage. His dramas are protean, readily adaptable to every age and situation because his themes and characters, from kings to clowns, embody all the best and worst aspects of humanity.

Older theatre goers may sympathise with King Lear's dilemma and younger people may find their own relevance in Hamlet's existential crisis or the doomed love of Romeo and Juliet – but where's the route into Shakespeare for school children? Jacqui O'Hanlon, director of

education at the RSC, believes it's never too early to start. "No one has told primary school children that Shakespeare is difficult," she says. "They are learning new words every day and have a natural curiosity about language. I've seen brilliant work done with three- or four-year-olds."

Dr Matthew Jenkinson is deputy head (academic) and head of senior English and history at New College School in Oxford, a prep school for boys aged 4 to 13 that puts on two Shakespeare plays a year. He admits that even though there had always been a strong tradition of drama at the school, he was initially unsure about whether Shakespeare would work. "Shakespeare has been fetishised as uber-worthy," he says. "There's an idea that his plays are difficult and unapproachable."

It was a production of TS Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (in the glorious setting of New College Chapel) that inspired Dr Jenkinson to adapt Shakespeare for his pupils. In his verse play about the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket, Eliot uses a chorus of townspeople to comment on the action. "I saw how well the chorus worked and realised the potential it could have for staging Shakespeare," he says.

Dr Jenkinson has since adapted nine plays for his pupils, now published in a series called *Hour-Long Shakespeare*. The versions are faithful to Shakespeare's original

"As soon as pupils read the text out loud, a light bulb comes on and they get very enthusiastic"



New College School in Oxford has a strong tradition of drama

EXAMINING SHAKESPEARE

One of the changes to the National Curriculum, implemented by Michael Gove in 2014, was that all children must study at least two Shakespeare plays in full at key stage 3. Previously only one play (or extracts from one play) was required.

GCSE English and maths are compulsory parts of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) but English GCSE is focused on literacy skills and there are no prescribed texts or authors. However, although not a

component part of the EBacc, the English literature GCSE is still taken by most pupils.

Shakespeare plays on the syllabus for GCSE and IGCSE English literature include *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry V* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

plots, keeping the main characters but redistributing lines from some speeches to an onstage chorus so that everybody can be involved. His first adaptation was *Henry V*. "History plays don't require complex staging and some, such as *Henry IV part 1*, contain lots of insults, which are fun to do and get everybody engaged," he says.

John Johnson is director of drama at Christ's Hospital, a co-ed senior school in West Sussex where many of the pupils are supported by bursaries. "Our pupils are from a wide range of cultural and social backgrounds," he says. "The key is to convince them that Shakespeare's plays have universal and relevant themes. They think they will struggle with the language and that makes them apprehensive, but as soon as they read the text

out loud, a light bulb comes on and they get very enthusiastic."

At Christ's Hospital pupils are introduced to Shakespeare in the classroom and, more importantly, on the stage, with workshops, visits to the Globe Theatre in London and productions by local and national companies. Mr Johnson says that his A level drama students bring their own, very different experiences to Shakespeare's plays. "Shakespeare opens up unexpected seams and issues for them. For instance, to pupils of Afro-Caribbean heritage critiques of the colonial themes of *The Tempest* and the character of Caliban are particularly compelling. Ours is a very politically aware school and pupils will really engage with interpretations that have a modern-day context."