Children learn to read literature as literature only by reading the literary works which are recognized as outstanding, and talking to those who are already competent readers of literature. The teacher must try to impart his own competence as a reader of literature by example …. He should be sceptical of originality in response to literature because it is most likely to betray a failure of understanding.
  John Marenbon, "English our English: the new orthodoxy examined", Centre for Policy Studies, 1987

"Sir Oracle": *The Merchant of Venice* in the classroom

(1) the choice of text and a touch of autobiography

Even within the clearly circumscribed field of the Shakespeare canon, there are choices to be made. If these relate to the question of which texts exist in the department stock room — and of course they do — there are other, bigger issues of cultural (re-)production here as well. Even with reduced budgets, it is possible to pick up very cheap copies of user-friendly editions such as the Oxford School Shakespeare, provided that one limits oneself (and the students) to those parts of the canon which are commonly done with "children". There are, therefore, canons within canons. *Julius Caesar* is in, *Titus Andronicus*, out.

The material reality — of stock cupboards, SATs texts (the cheapest, because most mass produced) and publishers 'lists — also intersects with my own history as a reader/consumer of Shakespeare. In 1994, bored with a diet of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, I branched out. With one Year 10 group, I read *Henry IV, Part 1*; with another, parallel group, I tried *The Merchant.*

I think I know where the idea of *Henry IV, Part 1* came from. My own secondary schooling, at a deeply unremarkable boys 'grammar school on Merseyside, has gained at this moment of retrospect a curious single streak of boldly progressive practice. The English department determined that no student should have inflicted upon him the deadly discipline of English Literature O level: a literature exam which, in the view of the head of department, had the effect of creating a lifelong aversion to reading was best avoided. Until I started my A level courses, I had therefore had precious little contact with Shakespeare. (I wrote that sentence, then puzzled over the "therefore": why should there be a connection between the school's decision to eschew Eng. Lit. and my innocence of Shakespeare? What is the connection between the literature read by adolescents, the English curriculum and the procedures by which these experience are validated? And does that "therefore" reveal that I still regard Shakespeare — the most authoritative piece and pinnacle of the canon — as primarily such stuff as exams are made on?

I had, however, when I was about thirteen years old, read *Henry IV, Part 1*. It was my introduction to Shakespeare. I cannot recall exactly what we did with it. I know that we had to learn Hal's "I know you all, and will awhile uphold the unyok'd humour of your idleness" soliloquy: it remains one of the very few bits of Shakespeare which I can quote at length. I think that we each took parts in reading

the play in class — and I even have a dim, and quite possibly unreliable, memory of acting out a scene at the front of the classroom. I think I may have been Henry IV.

What I do remember with more confidence is that the experience of reading *Henry IV, Part 1* was validated for me not because of the literary merit of the text but because I could assign the experience to the category of History: that, for me at the time, made the play an object worthy of serious consideration — since I recognised the validity of history as an intellectual pursuit and/or as a school subject. Hopelessly naive as my reading was, I regarded the text as transparent — a dramatic, but essentially trustworthy Tudor contribution to Whig history.   (This reading of *Henry IV, Part 1* was not thrust upon me by the teacher: the unironised, unproblematised reading of the play and its take on fathers, sons and realpolitik, says far more about the bizarre historical and political models which I had brought to bear on the text than about any line that I may have been fed in the classroom.)

When I decided to read *Henry IV, Part 1* with a Year 10 group, I was certainly not attempting to replicate the reading experience of my own adolescence — still less to foster in my students a respect for an anglocentric, monarchist teleology. Somewhere, though, there was an impulse, at the very least to see what this text did for others as innocent of the canon as I had been.

The result was little short of disastrous. A number of factors contributed to the students 'lack of engagement with the text — but it certainly was not through any lack of will on their part. It mattered, I think, that *Henry IV, Part 1* is so unrelentingly male, its feudal assumptions so remote; it did not help that the only production to which the students had access was a faithful but uninspiring, textually accurate but visually unexciting, BBC Shakespeare.[1]

Much, much later — after flirtations with the Roman plays for A level and a post-A-level orgy of Shakespearean tragedy — the latter guided by nothing more contemporary than A. C. Bradley's readings of the texts as novels manqués[2] — I came to the comedies. It was not until university, and possibly not until, I started my postgraduate research on early seventeenth-century drama, that I could see the seriousness of comedy.

It would be convenient if I could identify a clear reason for my choice of *The Merchant* with my other Year 10 group. I simply cannot remember. Was it because it has a plot which reads like several old tales — or was it because of the sense in which it poses in a particularly sharp form the question of interpretation?[3]   The answer is that I do not know; the reason, perhaps, is that my reading of the play prior to teaching it in school has been overlaid, reshaped and perhaps superseded by

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[1] *Henry IV, Part 1*, BBC Shakespeare (1989), produced by Cedric Messina and directed by David Giles.

[2] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1904).

[3] The contest over the interpretation of *The Merchant* has a long history. See, for instance, the account of Edmund Kean's radical 1814 interpretation of Shylock, in *The Flash of Lightning: A Portrait of Edmund Kean*, by Giles Playfair (London, 1983), pp. 47-50.

the readings in the classroom to which I have contributed. The students 'readings have influenced me — have reinflected my own reading. The point is an important one: what has been going on in the classroom has not been the transmission of a canonical reading. (I am aware, though, that there may be an element of circularity in the point, to the extent that my choice of text was inspired precisely by a desire to avoid the pitfalls of an authorised version.) But each time that I have approached *The Merchant* in the past three years, it seems to me that I have been confronted by a question which may be baldly expressed as: "(To what extent) is this text *necessarily* racist?" What happens in the classroom then provides some provisional answers to it.

In the remainder of this essay, I want to try to explain what I think has been going on. I will try to describe my most recent encounter with *The Merchant* in the presence of a Year 10 class, explaining what was done and why, what outcomes I had anticipated and what outcomes were produced.

(2) "To bait fish withal": DevTray[4]
Before starting on a sequential reading of the whole text, the class was confronted with one speech from the play, Shylock's answer to Salerio's question about the uses to which Antonio's flesh might be put.   What the students saw as they clustered around the computer screen was:

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H= h==h ======c== m=, === h======= m=
h=lf = m=ll=== — l=u=h== == my l=====,
m=ck== == my =====, =c===== my ======,
=hw===== my b=======, c==l== my
f======, h===== m=== ===m=== — ===
wh=='= h== ======?  = =m = ***.  H==h
=== = *** =y==?  h==h === = *** h====,
======, ==m=======, ======,
=ff=c=====, p=======? f== w==h =h=
==m= f===, hu== w==h =h= ==m= w==p===,
=ubj=c= == =h= ==m= ========, h==l==
by =h= ==m= m====, w==m== === c==l==
by =h= ==m= w===== ==== =umm== == =
Ch======= ==?  =f y=u p==ck u=, == w=
=== bl===? =f y=u ==ckl= u=, == w= ===
l=u=h? =f y=u p===== u=,== w= ===
===?  === =f y=u w==== u=, =h=ll w=
=== ==v====?
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I had set up the program so that the text would be displayed to the students with the ten most frequently occurring letters "hidden": each equals sign (=)

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[4] *Developing Tray* is a piece of software developed by Chris Hawkins at the Inner London Educational Computing Centre. I use it in the classroom on an old RM Nimbus 186.

announces the presence of a hidden letter. When the students 'predictions are checked, those letters which coincide with the original text are preserved; where the prediction is at variance with the original, it is deleted. The program also allows for selected words or phrases to be "hidden" more deeply. The letters of these words are represented by asterisks; when the prediction is checked, these letters will only be revealed if the entire word coincides with the original. (In this passage, I had thus masked — and therefore drawn attention to — the word "Jew".)[5]

"Let's start at the very beginning" may, in many circumstances, be sound advice. In the classroom, to start reading a Shakespeare play at the beginning seems to me to be fraught with difficulty, because it encourages a view of the reading process as unproblematic. Here is *Macbeth*, or *Romeo and Juliet*, or *The Merchant of Venice*, and now we're going to read it. Such an approach seems to be rational — to abide by common sense notions of the linearity of the text and to conform to John Marenbon's paradigm of the induction of pupils into the canon. Such common sense is questionable on at least three different grounds.

Firstly, it glides over the difference between the play — a collaborative, dramatic performance — and the text — one (important) constituent in the performance. The performance, particularly if it is live — in the theatre — is, in important ways, irreducibly linear: it exists in time; the text, on the other hand, may look as if it exists outside time, beyond the specificity of any single performance. There is a big leap, though, between such a conception of the text and the notion that the text has priority, that all performances are but flawed representations of the (Platonic) idea of the play which the text embodies. This idealist elevation of the text sits uneasily with the fact that (almost) all playscripts are intended to be realised in performance — even when the text (as, for instance, in the case of Samuel Beckett) is minutely prescriptive about many of the non-verbal aspects of the performance. In the case of Shakespeare, of course, the directorial facets of the texts are almost entirely editorial interpolations.

This leads on to the second point. Much of the serious textual scholarship of the past two decades has emphasised the extent to which Shakespearean texts are fraught with instability. We simply do not know, for instance, what the relationship

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[5] The version which the students eventually read is:

> He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies — and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (III.i.50-63).

All quotations from *The Merchant* are from the Oxford School Shakespeare edition, ed. Roma Gill (Oxford: O.U.P., 1979, revised 1992).

is between the Quarto and Folio versions of *King Lear* and the intentions of the author; what has become clearer, though is the distinct possibility that the Folio version of *Lear* represents revisions made in the light of performance — on the basis of what worked and what did not work in the theatre.[6] It is becoming ever more difficult to escape the fact that there is not one canonical text for any Shakespeare play, but rather a plurality of texts. And where the text is itself unstable, plural, provisional, which version can be held up as the canonical one? A canon made up of such uncertain constituent parts is likely to prove a petard, on which those who make grandiose claims may well be hoisted.

The third problem with the Marenbon model of reading is much less textually specific: it simply does not match up to what we know about how readers behave. The model of active and reflective reading developed by Lunzer and Gardiner (amongst others) proposes that such dislocations of the text as are engineered by teachers mimic the strategies adopted by effective readers.[7] The dislocations force all readers to interrogate the text, to consider what they already know that might possibly have a bearing on the text with which they are confronted. For all sorts of text, then, there are real gains in disrupting the smooth linearity of the reading process. Hence, in clear contradistinction to the Marenbon model, DARTs (directed activities related to texts) procedures categorised by Lunzer and Gardiner have been fairly well-rehearsed. (The extent to which such procedures figure prominently in the classroom today is not at all clear, though: one of the effects of the imposition of a content-heavy national curriculum has been to divert attention away from the processes of learning towards an exclusive the transmission of knowledge.)

DevTray, in any case, is less a DART proper than an absurdist version of such procedures. Bob Moy has described it as a FART — a *free* activity related to texts.[8] The students are presented with a version of the text so radically incomplete that the wildest speculations — readings — are invited. The effect is to tilt the balance between reader and text crazily in the direction of the reader, thereby opening up a space in which the reader(s) can construct the text. At best, what happens is that a number of different texts are created, in the process of which the readers move closer

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[6] See, for instance, *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of 'King Lear'*, ed. Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (1983), and Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: a cultural history from the Restoration to the present* (London, 1990), ch. 6. The shift in emphasis towards a more production-orientated editorial approach is evident in, for example, Jonathan Bate's introduction to the New Arden *Titus Andronicus* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[7] Eric Lunzer and Keith Gardner, *The Effective Use of Reading* (London: Heinemann/School Council, 1979) and *Learning from the Written Word* (London: Oliver & Boyd/Schools Council, 1984). See also "Comprehension: bringing it back alive," by Bob Moy and Mike Raleigh, in *Eccentric Propositions: Essays on literature and the curriculum*, ed. Jane Miller (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp.148-192.

[8] At a lecture at the ILEA Centre for Urban Educational Studies (1987) for teachers on the RSA Diploma course in Teaching English Across the Curriculum in Multilingual Schools.

to the original. The analogy with photography — the text as image, gradually gaining definition as it emerges from the developing tray — from which the software derives its title encourages its users to focus on the process of reading, and to acknowledge the non-linearity of the reading process it entails: the collaborative reading of texts through DevTray involves an unpredictable mixture of sustained, more or less linear predictions — of words, phrases, lines, sentences or even of whole paragraphs or verses — together with rapid jumps around the screen and between the pages of a text. I am, nonetheless, not entirely convinced about the title because I feel that it understates the extent to which the readers are agents in the process — creating a text that does not exist — both literally, on the screen, and psycholinguistically — until they have produced it.

    The freedom which DevTray provides is a freedom to make daft predictions, impossible readings. This may seem a superficial thing — or even a downright disadvantage, encouraging students to trivialise the Bard. The immense gain, however, is that it holds in suspension the usual classroom hierarchies of predetermined, perceived and neatly labelled ability — and hence of participation in the reading process. If all readings, all prediction, are permissible, all equally frivolous, all equally serious, the consequence is not some postmodernist hell of unmeaning but rather the freedom to make meanings.

    This freedom is an asset in the reading — and particularly in the initial exploration — of any text, but it becomes invaluable in the case of a text such as a Shakespeare play, where for many of the readers the real areas of difficulty — of lexis, of syntax, of culture, of dramatic convention, of sheer social and historical and intellectual distance — are overlaid and intensified by a prior assumption of that difficulty — of, in fact, the impenetrability of the text. When Students are lacking in confidence about their ability to read a particular text (or, indeed, their ability to read any text) tend to have a common sense notion of the problem. It is the area of lexis, from my list of obstacles, which dominates their perception of difficulty. What DevTray does is to remove such difficulty at a stroke: since there are no words, there can be no "hard" words. The trouble, furthermore, with the idea of wading straight into the reading of a Shakespeare play is not that the students are inadequately prepared to meet its linguistic demands but rather that they are already laden down with an excess baggage of knowledge about Shakespeare. They know that "Shakespeare" is old, difficult, remote, and all about men in tights.[9] DevTray allows them to leave this "knowledge" on the riverbank, so to speak.

    At times, the freedom which DevTray offers has startlingly unpredictable results, creating "readings" which lead at a tangent from the text to be revealed. With Shylock's speech, this produced speculations about Christmas turkeys. This prediction originated, I think, in the suggestion of "Christmas" (where Shylock says

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[9] The comment about men in tights was made a couple of years ago when I asked a Year 9 group, about to embark on *Romeo and Juliet,* what they knew about Shakespeare.

"Christian"), and the reading of "if you p==ck us" as "if you pluck us" (rather than "prick"). At first — or indeed second — sight, this was leading the students down a blind alley.

The temptation when this happens is for the teacher to intervene, nipping such wayward blooms in the bud. Left more or less to their own devices, students will themselves work out the inconsistencies, will spot where such a reading becomes untenable, where an unbridgeable hiatus is created. And, given the old saw about the density of literary language, its operation as much through the connotational circles as through the denotational lines of meaning, one never knows what useful insights on the text will be thrown up by these initial predictions. In this case, the turkeys became momentarily supplanted by geese, which allowed one student to muse on the phrase "What's sauce for the goose …" — in itself, a handy peg upon which to hang some of the central rhetorical tropes of Shylock's speech. The argument for so laissez-faire an approach does not depend, however, on such serendipity. On the contrary, I would wish to argue that the freedom provided permits the students to behave like real readers, bringing the whole weight of their prior linguistic and textual experience to bear on the construction of meaning in and from a hitherto unread text. Instead of being aware of their ignorance — of old and hard words or of elite culture — they can make use of their knowledge.[10]

It is also, I think, preferable in terms of the students 'subsequent reading of the whole play that their notion of Shylock's Jewish identity arises out of the reading of this speech — in comparison, say, with their sense of his character being prematurely fixed by the collection of visual and linguistic stereotypes which greets the viewer on Warren Mitchell's first entrance in the Jonathan Miller/BBC Shakespeare production.

What often happens — as it did this with the Year 10 group who speculated so happily of turkeys — is that the identification of the speaker as a Jew is swiftly followed by the assumption that the text deals in some way with the experiences of the Holocaust. Whether or not this anachronistic reading can be written off as simply wrong is, I think, extremely dubious. And this, of course, leads the readers straight into the terms of the debate which continues with them throughout their reading of *The Merchant*, culminating in the very different perspectives offered by John Barton and David Thacker.[11] (In essence, Barton's position is that a twentieth-century audience has to adopt the values of Shakespeare's contemporaries, for whom anti-semitism, he maintains, was an unproblematic given; for Thacker, on the

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[10] The other aspect of the procedures which I am associating with the use of DevTray is that they render such readerly behaviour transparent: in the act of collaborative reading, the readers ' assumptions are made explicit.

[11] "Exploring a character: Playing Shylock," in Playing *Shakespeare*, by John Barton (London: Methuen, 1984); "The Trial of Shylock," a dialogue between Arnold Wesker and David Thacker, *Guardian*, (13.4.94).

other hand, the last four hundred years are less easily excised from the playgoers' — or the actors' — minds. For the one, Shylock is a villain; for the other, a victim of racism.)

If one believes in reading Shakespeare as an exercise in literary/theatrical archaeology, then the use of DevTray is clearly a distraction. If, alternatively, all readers really were the same — or to be distinguished merely by the possession of differing degrees of readerly competence — then the space which DevTray provides would be unnecessary. Those who might most closely associate themselves with such positions are frequently those who are also most eager to assert the virtues of a circumscribed canon — to make claims, in other words, for the importance of some texts rather than others and to assume that it is the texts which make the readers, not the readers who (re--)construct the texts. The virtues of such canonical texts ought, by this logic, to be intrinsic, and therefore there should be some consensus about what those virtues might be. Why is it, then, that such competent readers as John Barton and David Thacker disagree so fundamentally on what is entailed in a reading of *The Merchant* — not merely on the question of what the play means, but also on the issue of what is germane to the construction of its meaning?

To what extent, indeed, is it either possible or desirable to exclude our own identities and perspectives from the act of making sense of *The Merchant*?

In his *New Readings vs. Old Plays*, Richard Levin tried to stem the tide of reinterpretation. As a bulwark against the flood of new readings of Renaissance plays, he sought to erect a simple, positivist defence: the play as a "literal representation of particular human actions (and hence … the dramatic experience this produces)."[12] The idea may be an attractive one, but the case of Shylock suggests something of its limitations. Such an account of the play would reduce it to mere plot. It would be able to communicate what happened next, but not to address questions of motive. It would explain the terms of the bond, but not the reasons for Shylock proposing it. It would ignore the extent to which Shylock's actions are overdetermined, and the fact that any actor playing Shylock must make fundamental choices about where the emphasis should be placed, what the lines *mean*. And it would have to preserve a somewhat awkward silence in relation to the the frequency with which other characters in the play seem to have the greatest difficulty in seeing Shylock as an "individual" — given how often he is addressed as "Jew."

When starting to read *Romeo and Juliet* with a Year 9 class, I begin by getting them to read Juliet's "What's in a name?" speech using DevTray. This approach takes the readers straight into the dilemma/contradiction at the centre of the play; it provokes the students into asking questions such as "Who is talking?", "Who is s/he

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12 Richard Levin, *New Readings vs. Old Plays: Recent Trends in the Reinterpretation of English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago, 1979), p. 202.

talking to?" and "Who else might be listening in?" — questions which are useful ones to ask of any text but particularly of playscripts, and of direct relevance to the understanding of the specific conventions of soliloquy in the theatre of late sixteenth-century London; through the focus on and revelation of one short piece of text it also enables students to realise that the language which Juliet speaks is not at all incomprehensible. As a tactic in persuading students that the language of the play is much more accessible than they might have feared, it is worth asking students to count up the number of words which seem strange to them, and expressing this as a percentage of the total words which they have read; similarly, the passage provides a convenient starting point for an exploration of the syntactical differences between the sixteenth-century English and the varieties of contemporary English of which the students will have experience — not as an arid exercise in grammar, but because it can be helpful (confidence-building) to have recognised explicitly that "'tis" and "it's" are different contractions of the same phrase, or that much of the strangeness of the language of a Shakespeare play is simply a product of the differences in the ways negatives were formed: students generally have little difficulty in reproducing phrases such as "I brought not my homework today."

Juliet's speech, like the "To bait fish withal" speech in *The Merchant* which provided the starting point for the Year 10 students, was not, of course, chosen at random. Both speeches take the readers straight to what could be construed as the heart of the matter — to Juliet confronting the clash between her love for Romeo and his identity as a Montague, and hence the contradiction between sexual and filial relationships; to Shylock naming his vendetta against Antonio as revenge for the anti-semitism which the Jewish people whom he seeks to represent have suffered.

Both speeches use, for the most part, very simple language — coincidentally making use of parts of the body; both present the speakers in situations which are not entirely remote from the experiences of the readers in the classroom — the lived reality of racist abuse just as much as the difficulties of negotiating a way between parental expectations and the demands of peers and in particular of adolescent sexual relationships.

(There is a contrast here, it seems to me, with *Henry IV, Part 1* in the classroom. I had also used DevTray as a launch pad into the text, choosing Hal's "I know you all" soliloquy. This worked, up to a point: the software encourages interest in and close reading of almost any text. It is fairly clear to me — in retrospect, at any rate — that neither the language nor the conceptual framework of the speech, nor the situation in which Hal is placed, is as accessible to late-twentieth-century adolescents as is the case in the passages which I have chosen from other Shakespearean texts.[13])

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[13] That, at any rate, is one interpretation of one class's reading of *Henry IV, Part 1*. There are others. The group had been enlarged, as a couple of boys who had been getting into trouble in other English groups had been transferred into my class; a couple of very articulate girls — very keen to "do"

In the lesson after the Year 10 students had read Shylock's speech, I gave them a photocopy of the speech, together with the question which Salerio asks and the first line of Shylock's response, omitted from the DevTray version:

Salerio Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh.
What's that good for?
Shylock To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge [*Merchant*, III.1].

It was unnecessary, almost, to ask them how this changed their view of the speaker and the speech, since there was an almost immediate — though not universal — tide of revulsion. Some rendered the reasons for this explicit. Revenge, it would appear, had been justifiable if it had taken the form a financial or economic trickery — paying Antonio back, so to speak; blood revenge was not. It seemed to me that what had happened here was that the students had already begun, in an utterly serious, considered way, to confront the complexity of the representation of Shylock in the play, and the difficulty of interpretation. There was an understanding of what the speech said about the racism which Shylock had experienced, as well as the beginnings of a sober debate about the validity of the ways in which he was prepared to fight back.

(3) reading the text, taking part(s)

It is hard to stress too much the gain in confidence, the sheer difference that beginning the reading of a Shakespeare play through the prism of DevTray can make to the whole reading. Clearly, though, in exploring the theoretical basis for this way into the text and its practical consequences for a group of students, I am to some extent using a particular piece of software as representative of a wide range of tactics in some ways equivalent to DARTs.

Now is the time to leave these initial lessons behind, and reflect on what happens when we — the Year 10 students and I — sit round in a circle to read the play from beginning to end.

Three years ago, Michael Billington wrote a couple of polemical pieces in *The Guardian* about how to teach Shakespeare.[14] While acknowledging that

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Shakespeare — took against the play early on, and their disaffection had a marked effect on the rest of the class. Whether this response was because of some or all of the features which I have identified, or for other reasons entirely — to do with their contradictory and complex responses to Shakespeare, to do with their interactions with me or with the rest of the class, or to do with factors which had their origins far beyond the English classroom, would have been pretty difficult to determine at the time; at this distance, I have no way of knowing. It is always risky to generalise from one class's interaction with a text to a larger statement about what "works" and what doesn't.

[14] Michael Billington, "To be or not to be, if you know what I mean," *The Guardian*, 8.5.93 and "To understand, perchance to enjoy," *The Guardian*, 29.5.93. All subsequent quotations are from the earlier article.

"Shakespeare's plays are obviously pluralistic texts that change their meaning according to time,place and circumstance," his argument was that students need to understand the language before they can hope to get anything from the plays: "unless we grapple with the language, we shall end up with nothing more than fuzzy incomprehension. … the whole Shakespearean tradition will eventually wither in Britain unless we accept that full appreciation is impossible without a bedrock understanding of the language."

The trouble with this approach is that it's like the old story of the elephant. It is both a theoretical problem — that this isn't how readers read any text, that the meaning of a text — and even more so a text written to be realised in performance — is not reducible to, nor apprehensible through, an understanding of all its constituent parts in isolation — and a practical one — that the method Billington proposes is a sure-fire way of encouraging students to lose all interest in making sense of the text. I am not for a moment arguing that what students ought to do is dispense with language difficulty altogether – for instance, by reading a modern "translation" of Shakespeare. Rather, I am suggesting that the best way of enabling students — all students — to cope with the complexities of the language is by locating this language firmly within an idea of the story as something unfolding in performance.

Michael Billington's argument is not, of course, that perfomrance is peripheral to the experience of Shakespeare. His notion of linguistic understanding providing a "bedrock" leads him to claim that "The consquences of bypassing the basics at school-level are visible for all to see." He thus places himself, in pedagogical terms, within the camp of those who want us to go "back to basics." There is an assumtion here that "basics" are somehow separable from other levels of comprehension, and that this spearation indicates an epistemological (and hence an educational) priority.

A suitable moment for a personal anecdote. Early on in my A level course, I was given a copy of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Together with the rest of my class, I was expected to go away and read the play (or was it just the first act?) during a holiday. I tried to read it, but I could make nothing of it. This was not a problem of language. It was, quite simply, that I had no clue about the kind of text this was, no clue about how to position myself, no clue about the conventions that operated in the text, about the relationship between the world of the play and any other world whatsoever — whether of the Jacobean court, early-seventeenth-century English ideas about Italy, about Machiavelli, or about the debate which had rumbled on throughout the Elizabethan reign, more or less, concerning women and power. The ways in which I have just suggested that *The Duchess of Malfi* could be located — could be read — were of course not all supplied by or within the duration of my A level course. I have become, as John Marenbon might reasonably argue, a more competent reader of Webster in the intervening years. (What stuns me now about *Malfi* is how uniquely daring it was in its gender and class politics: nowhere in

Shakespeare, nor in any other English drama contemporary with Webster, does a female character flout convention in the way that the Duchess does when she takes a husband — a second husband — who is clearly from a "lower" class, and who is chosen quite explicitly on the basis of her sexual desire for him. My sense of the play clearly depends on a greater awareness of other seventeenth-century plays; equally clearly, my reading owes something to quite different texts — and even to aspects of my extra-textual experience, my social sexual and political identity and orientation: I am not sure if Dr Marenbon would be quite so happy with these facets of my competence.)

To return to my sixteen-year-old self: it was only after I had read the play in class, talking and thinking it through in collaboration with others, gaining a sense of the movement of the whole play, that I could begin to make sense of its opening. To extrapolate wildly, perhaps, from this experience: we worry too much, sometimes, about the local difficulties of Shakespearean language and consider too little the other obstacles to making sense of four-hundred-year-old plays. My panic on first reading *The Duchess of Malfi* was not induced by difficult words or by unfamiliar syntax but by the meaninglessness of the whole: no communication was going on, because I had found no way in to the text. Once I knew where the story was going, I could begin to make sense of where it had come from. As Keith Gardner noted: "the quality of reflection rests on our existing knowledge and the nature of our existing concepts relative to what we are reading."[15]

When I read a play like *The Merchant of Venice* with a class, I am aware of an urge to explain everything, to make sure that every allusion is followed up, every complex clausal arrangement unpicked, every ambiguity unravelled. I am also aware of the anxiety of some colleagues — perhaps particularly of student teachers — that is they cannot perform this feat of absolute explication, then they are somehow not properly prepared to teach Shakespeare. The trouble with such an approach, in practice, is that the play would disappear out of sight entirely — rather like those pages in scholarly editions where the notes occupy the whole page, to the exclusion of any text whatsoever. In the opening scene of *The Merchant*, the folly of providing a gloss for everything that Gratiano says to cheer Antonio up is underscored by Bassanio's comment:

> Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all
> Venice. His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of
> chaff: you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when you have them
> they are not worth the search [*Merchant*, I.i].

It would be convenient if at this moment I could say precisely what does happen when I read with the play with a class. I can't, largely because it is a matter of judgement (intuition?) as to when is the right time to intervene, when the lack of a

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[15] Lunzer and Gardner (1979), p. 301.

word of explanation will prove more of an obstacle to understanding than the break in continuity which such an intervention represents. Generally speaking, though, I think that I am more likely to dwell on the situation, to encourage students to think about the characters who are going to be involved and what their immediate motives and moods might be, at the start of a scene.

This also provides an opportunity to remind us all that what we are reading is a script. There are moments in all plays when the merest suggestion of physical space can overcome all kinds of barriers to comprehension. Two specific examples that spring to mind are the fight scene in *Romeo and Juliet* — where the physical positions taken by Tybalt, Mercutio and Romeo give meaning to the language that the characters use — and the succession of casket scenes in *The Merchant*: however longwinded Portia's suitors may be, the point is pretty clear if they are seen to linger in front of three boxes. In *The Merchant* there is also an important structural point about the two settings, Venice and Belmont.   it does seem helpful to suggest to students some of the ways in which the two milieux are contrasted, and pointing out the way the play cuts from one setting to the other.

Once students have a fairly clear idea of who is speaking, what the situation is and who is being addressed, the astonishing thing is how well they can read aloud — if they are not weighed down with worry about every last maritime metaphor and if they have some expectation that the words really should make sense.

(There is a difference between the language and organisation in very early Shakespeare plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* and in more "mature" works such as *The Merchant*: the former tend to have much more formal verse structures, more end-stopped lines, more rhyme, more self-consciously poetic diction; the latter, with its more flexible use of the iambic pentameter —for instance in the division of lines between speakers as well as in a greater frequency of enjambement— and its higher proportion of prose, is significantly more readable — closer, in fact, to the rhythms of everyday speech. It's hard, though to develop this point very far in terms of classroom practice. It could be argued that students who have read *Romeo and Juliet* in Year 9 are in any case more experienced readers of Shakespeare by the time they come to deal with *The Merchant*, and that this greater competence/confidence is more significant in explaining any perceived difference in the fluency of the reading. In any case, the stylistic differences between Shakespeare plays are fairly minor when compared with the differences which separate the language of any Shakespeare play from the language of everyday speech in 1996. The most important precondition, I believe, for successful participation in reading the play in class, is that students should feel that what they are reading is meaningful: for most of use, reading nonsense fluently is a tricky business. The point is analogous to that made by actors, when they explain that they prefer to learn their lines after they know who they are — when they have "got inside" their characters.)

The stress which I have placed on students 'sense of the characters who are speaking the lines, and the situation in which the lines are delivered, is also reflected in another feature of this stage in the exploration of the play — the extempore "hot seating" of one or more characters (that is, of the students who are reading the parts). This helps to encourage a form of engagement with what is going on; at the start of a new lesson it is a convenient way of providing a reminder as to the point we have reached in the play.

(4) realisations of the text

Films and videotapes of productions of Shakespeare plays are a rich and important resource. They give a sense of place — whether that is the theatrical space of a studio production or the location on which a more fully filmic treatment has been shot. They serve to bring the text to life, they provide a sense of how the lines can be spoken, of the movements and gestures which accompany and interpret the words. *Romeo and Juliet* would be a much drier, less passionate affair for many Year 9 students were it not for the Franco Zeffirelli film.

The problem, though, is that if students only see one production, it is that one production which becomes the thing itself, the authorised version. The extent to which any production is created through a set of choices, of interpretations, re-shapings and exclusions, becomes submerged by the power of the performance which the students experience. (The Zeffirelli *Romeo and Juliet* frequently has this effect; so does the Polanski *Macbeth*.) In the past I have tried to address this question of interpretation by focusing on a particular scene —such as the scene in which Mercutio and Tybalt are killed — asking students to walk and through the lines, to direct each other, to consider different possibilities. This approach works, up to a point. Students become more aware of the specific characteristics of the interpretation of Mercutio in the Zeffirelli version, for instance. To a large extent, though, this sense is marginal to their apprehension of the play through the medium of a single production: it remains theoretical, abstract knowledge.

I have indicated that one of my reasons for choosing to read *The Merchant of Venice* with Year 10 students was that it seemed to me to pose direct and inescapable questions about interpretation. It therefore seemed particularly important to provide students with different realisations of the text.

Until this year, however, the only complete production to which students have had immediate access was the BBC Shakespeare, produced by Jonathan Miller, with Warren Mitchell as Shylock and Gemma Jones as Portia. I attempted to supplement this experience by talking to students about other productions which I had seen in the theatre (such as the David Thacker/RSC production of 1994), and by reproducing a variety of modern perspectives on the play (such as the debate between Thacker

and Wesker and the ensuing correspondence in *The Guardian* as well as the chapter in John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare*).[16]

This year saw the broadcast of a Channel 4/Middle English production, which provided a sharp contrast to the Miller version. Where the BBC opted for a studio production with minimal sets, Channel 4 also used scenes shot on location in Venice. Where Warren Mitchell talks and dresses in such a way as to recall and reinforce a set of stereotypes, as he wheedles and cringes his way through the early encounters with Antonio, Bassanio and their sidekicks, Bob Peck's Shylock is a much more powerful figure, whose distance from the gentile Venetians seems to be as much a product of his aloofness as of an enforced ostracism. The Miller production is uncut; the Middle English version shapes and condenses the play, making it more accessible, more fast moving — but also, finally, too smooth and unproblematic a version, too wary of giving offence.

Access to both versions meant that when the Year 10 students were considering the scene in which the bond is agreed (I.iii), their sense of the different possible interpretations could be developed by careful, sometimes frame-by-frame analysis of the decisions made in each production.[17] Bob Peck's Shylock is clearly in control, playing with Bassanio. The desk at which he is seated, the ledger through which he leafs both confirm the sense of his position. This is his office, this is the business which he knows: he may be a outsider in the wider society of Venice, but here he is on home ground. The idea of the pound of flesh comes to him, it would appear, on the spur of the moment, in the pause he has himself created to keep his debtor in suspense. When the students switched from this reading to the Miller/Mitchell version of the same scene, they were confronted with an entirely different encounter. The camera angles and the framing of the shots confirm Shylock's lowly status; the meeting with Bassanio takes place, so far as one can tell from a production in which the sets do not function as clues to location so much as backdrops to the camera's painterly studies in group portraiture, in the open air; Shylock has no props, none of the trappings of his business to lend him support. The text, meanwhile, is uncut — so here the announcement of the bond is preceded by Shylock's killing aside — "If I can catch him once upon the hip …".

Having seen both versions, the students 'preference was clear. While they were ready to accept Peck's interpretation, they read the lack of established, realistic locations in the Miller version as evidence of derisorily low production values, and were repulsed by Mitchell's Shylock.

The students paid similarly close attention to Shylock's other two pivotal scenes. Act three scene one, which includes the "To bait fish withal" speech that had been the students 'point of entry into the play, marks the moment when, irrespective

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[16] See note 10.

[17] Credit for developing this aspect of the work on *The Merchant* must be given to Bronwen Evans, a beginning teacher whose second teaching practice (Spring Term, 1996) was at Kingsland School.

of Shylock's original intentions in relation to the bond, it becomes absolutely clear that he now really does intend to have his pound of flesh. The trial scene (IV.i) enacts the climax of the Venetian part of the play — and the utter humiliation of Shylock. As the students continued to compare the two realisations, they began to qualify their initial tendency to dismiss the Miller/Mitchell reading of Shylock. They noted how the coolness of Bob Peck's playing of Shylock, which had at first seemed to work so well, made it increasingly hard to understand — or believe in — Shylock's monstrous, all-consuming passion for revenge — and how the highly mannered use of big close ups in the Miller production, which had been an irritation, became in itself a means of communicating both the claustrophobic insanity of Shylock's world and also the constant physical harassment which he suffers. The representation of Shylock's pain, at the moment in the trial scene when the crucifix is placed around his neck, made many of the Year 10 students flinch in their seats: a gasp of shock went round the classroom.

There is, of course, much to be said for providing students with the experience of watching powerful performances of Shakespeare. Given the current state of most school budgets, the chances are that such experiences are more likely to be provided by a video than by a live performance. I would wish to emphasise, though, that what the Year 10 students gained here was not simply exposure to the dramatic potential of the script but rather the increasingly meaningful — powerful — readings of the script and its realisations.

(5) empathetic encounters: Shylock's diary
By the time the Year 10 students came to produce a written assignment on *The Merchant of Venice* — an assignment which would form an essential component in their GCSE coursework folders — I hoped that they had developed a sense of the meaning of the play as something to be contested, and, in relation to any actual or hypothetical performance, the product of a set of conscious decisions by actors and directors, costume and set designers. How, then, should such perceptions be reflected in the students 'writing?

There has been a tendency, most explicit in recent controversies over the teaching and assessment of History, to disparage the notion of empathetic responses, to question whether such approaches could sustain the application of the rigorous criteria of knowledge and understanding. In English studies, the critique of empathetic or "imaginative" responses has been reflected in a variety of developments at GCSE. I am thinking particularly of the resurgence of something close to old-style comprehension questions in the ULEAC English GCSE examination papers and in the implicit privileging of discursive forms of writing on the ULEAC unseen poetry paper for English Literature. The assumption seems to be that empathetic responses are too easy, that because they involve "creative"

responses to the text they are incapable of providing a reliable indication of the student's comprehension of what has been read.

I believe that there is a problem with this trajectory, in that it fundamentally underestimates what students can achieve through forms of empathetic writing. I want to examine in some detail one of the assignments produced by a Year 10 student after the class had finished reading *The Merchant*. It is written in the form of a diary; it seems to me to demonstrate a sustained engagement with the text, an understanding of its complexity and a subtlety and power of interpretation which cannot lightly be dismissed.

Here is Hong Hai, a young Vietnamese woman, writing as Shylock, reflecting on the bond which he has just signed:

> Every time I think about it I just laugh. That fool Antonio, asking — no, begging for money. It probably made me too happy, I wasn't thinking straight. How else could I have thought of such a stupid bond? But I did scare him, I know I saw a hint of doubt in his eyes, maybe only for a second, but it was there and that was good enough for me. But being Antonio he remembered what an egotistical fool he is and that he should make nine times the amount owed, in two months.

> Who cares? I hope his ships crash, but what about this bond? I must be going soft in the head to lend three thousand ducats, for three months — interest free. But I guess this could be a good thing, another pathetic Christian stopped from lending money gratis. My revenue is sure to be up for the next three months.

> But was the bond worth it? I'm not so sure now. There's no doubt that his ships will come in and I'll get my money Why did I choose a pound of flesh? I could have asked for a hundred other things.

> That idiot drives me insane, that's why I chose the bond, because whenever I'm near him I go mad. But I made him sweat. Him and his puppet Bassanio. That's who the money's for — just to spend, spend, spend. Or to pay off his debts. How close is Bassanio with that pork-eating Christian? I mean, why would he put his name to a bond for him? There must be something more than Christian friendship between them. but I don't care, this bond favours me — but I was an idiot for not using the bond more to my advantage. Well, it's too late now.

> But if the bond actually came true — Antonio would probably wet himself because he would remember every single time he spat on me, and ruined my business negotiations — he would remember every time and he would believe I would actually do it. Cut a pound of flesh from his body!

> But I wouldn't sink to his level, I wouldn't string him up as they string up pigs. I would make him sweat.

> But all of this is probably a dream, since he is right: his ships will come in and I was a fool.

Through her reading of the script, through thinking and talking over the significance of the bond, through her analysis of the way in which the moment has been interpreted in different productions, Hong Hai has worked towards a conception of Shylock that goes far beyond the simplistic categories of villain or victim, and a understanding of motivation as a shorthand for diverse and contradictory impulses, a snapshot of a consciousness which has its own complex

history. Later in the diary, she captures the moment when Shylock begins to react to Jessica's departure:

> Betrayed, I have been betrayed by my own flesh and blood, my daughter. What did I ever do to her, except to protect her from evil? All I've ever done, and she runs away with a Christian — the slut. Why a Christian?
>
> I'll find this thief who took my daughter and when I do, he'll be sorry. but now, Jessica is no longer my daughter, I disown her. I would never be able to look at her again and feel love. Just hate.I just don't understand why she did it. I gave her everything — clothes, books, jewellery.
>
> There's an emptiness inside me. I felt the same when my Leah died. Maybe because I am grieving once more, My daughter, the Jewish daughter I had, has died too.
>
> They have always laughed at me, but I never felt so stupid as I did today. I searched the streets calling and crying for her. Until they shouted "Jessica ran away with a good Christian." I felt so ashamed. All I ever did was care for her, so she paid me back by taking my money and leaving.

Hong Hai's choice of language suggests the process whereby she has taken all the tired old anti-semitic gags of Solanio's "My daughter! O my ducats!" and transformed them into a vehicle for the expression of Shylock's loss. There's nothing sentimental about her attitude to Shylock: she appreciates the enormity of his revenge, but she produces a reading of him which carries conviction, a reading which draws on, but is not reducible to, the readings embedded in the productions she has seen.

There is another point about Hong Hai's work. While it would be facile in the extreme to seek to read into the diary which she has produced a set of correspondences with her own life, it would be even sillier to suppose that there were no points of contact between her own experiences and those of Shylock and his daughter, or to assume that in writing as Shylock Hong Hai was not in any sense reflecting on the negotiation of her own social position — as a young woman, as someone who was born in Vietnam of Vietnamese parents, but who can speak little Vietnamese, as a person who has been in a long-term relationship with a white boy …. How are such aspects of Hong Hai's identity to be neatly detached from her competence as a reader?

At the very end of the unit of work on *The Merchant*, having read the *Guardian* debate between Arnold Wesker and David Thacker and the chapter from John Barton's book, Hong Hai wrote an essay on Shylock and anti-semitism.   It was fluent, thoughtful and dealt seriously with the subject — making connections between *The Merchant* and more recent representations of the Holocaust such as *Shindler's List*. In comparison with her work on "Shylock's diary," however, it lacked control, perspective, poise. It commented on the play from such a distance that the nuanced sophistication of her reading was invisible, almost as if it had been submerged by the strength of her engagement with the issues under discussion. Writing in role, Hong Hai could represent the complexity and the contradictions of

Shylock's character, the interaction between the individual and the violently intolerant society in which he was located; writing in a more discursive form, she could not.

Hong Hai's strengths and weaknesses are, in this respect, I think, fairly typical of many GCSE students. To make this observation is not, of course, to propose that we should abandon any attachment to the essay as a mode of discourse. Quite the contrary: the disparity between what Hong Hai could produce in the two forms, at that particular stage of her development as a writer, is an indication of a need to intervene in that development so as to assist her in gaining greater control of essay-writing. What this observation does suggest, at the very least, is that it might be unwise to rely exclusively on evidence derived from discursive forms of writing in making judgements about students 'reading — about their ability to comprehend, to reflect upon and to interpret the meanings of complex texts.

When we had read the play in class, we had talked about Antonio's relationship with Bassanio. One of the boys had suggested, in response to the opening scene, that Antonio might be gay. The suggestion was made without any great seriousness — more with a grin, and a look at me to see how I would react. I commented that that was indeed one way of seeing Antonio, and that it would be worth bearing this in mind when we reached the later parts of the play. Every so often, the interpretation surfaced again. It remained tentative, one possibility to be weighed against others.

When the class wrote their diaries, Tamina produced two. The first, written from the point of view of Shylock, was an attempt to write in Shakespearean English. It was an interesting experiment, but the effort of reproducing more-or-less appropriate language had absorbed all her energies. As an interpretation of Shylock, it was disappointing. She then went away and wrote Antonio's diary. The result was stunning — a sustained, sensitive exploration of the character's growing realisation that he was in love with Bassanio. The diary is written in such a way as to suggest that it is the vehicle whereby Antonio is learning more about himself. It also manages, by the merest echo, to gesture at the likeness between Antonio and Shylock:

> No money. I'll have no money to pay back Shylock. Oh my flesh. My ships. My money. My Bassanio ….

It seems to me that what Tamina produced, in both her diaries, serves to indicate additional problems posed by an exclusive attention to discursive forms of writing. Working within the constraints of a formal essay, would Tamina have learnt as much about language as she did in penning Portia's diary — or would she have been able to produce so nuanced, so dynamic an interpretation of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio?

It is tempting to give the last word to Hong Hai and Tamina. Recently, however, reading with my son, I came across a much more unlikely authority to lend his voice to the argument against Dr Marenbon's notion of classroom propriety.

This is C. S. Lewis describing Uncle Andrew's response to the animals, newly endowed by Aslan with the gift of speech:

> We must now go back a bit and explain what the whole scene had looked like from Uncle Andrew's point of view. It had not made at all the same impression on him as on the Cabby and the children. For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of a person you are.
>
> Ever since the animals had first appeared, Uncle Andrew had been shrinking further and further back into the thicket. He watched them very hard, of course; but he wasn't really interested in seeing what they were doing, only in seeing whether they were going to make a rush at him …. All he saw, or thought he saw, was a lot of dangerous wild animals walking vaguely about.
>
> (*The Magician's Nephew*, 1955).