Reading Shakespeare, or Ways with Will

In the previous issue of *Changing English*, I wrote about reading *The Merchant of Venice* with a Year 10 mixed ability class in a Hackney coeducational 11-16 comprehensive school (Yandell, 1997). The work which the Year 10 class did, and my reflections on it, served as a starting point for a small research project, funded by the Teacher Training Agency. The research was intended as a school-based enquiry into the strengths and weaknesses of different methods of teaching pre-twentieth century literature, with specific reference to Shakespeare. It involved: surveying students, through questionnaires and interviews; interviews which I conducted with the other five members of the English department at Kingsland School in July, 1996; and lesson observation.

The research had other origins than the award of a Teacher Research Grant from the TTA or the specific experiences of one group of school students in reading *The Merchant of Venice* . It grew out of the close relationship between the English department in which I work and the University of London Institute of Education — a relationship which has been developed over a number of years, principally through the placement of beginning teachers from the Institute in the school.

I am aware, though, of another motive which lay behind my readiness to become involved in the research project. The school had undergone an Ofsted

inspection in the Autumn Term, 1995. It had not been a particularly bruising experience, but it brought home to me the limitations of the kind of account which such an inspection gives of a school. I hoped that it might be possible to use the research project to tell a less end-determined story, to go beyond the snapshot view which Ofsted inspectors receive (and transmit) and to attempt a long tracking shot, in which might be represented something of the histories which underlie current practices. This notion owes much, of course, to a much longer tradition of school evaluation and enquiry, a tradition embodied by *Becoming our own Experts* (Eyers & Richmond, 1982).

What follows is the product of the research at Kingsland School. It seems to me that thinking about teaching approaches entails some consideration of the power relationships embedded in teaching and learning, in the increasingly difficult question of authority of the canon and its determining presence in the English curriculum, and in the models of reading which we bring to bear on what we do in classrooms. Part of what is suggested is that it is possible to see in a set of practices around the teaching of Shakespeare a (largely implicit) alternative paradigm of reading, a notion of collaborative, negotiated making of meaning which does not sit easily with the notion of a linear development of competence in reading, a steady (or unsteady) ascent towards the dizzy heights of "independent", private reading.

Shakespeare in the classroom leads somewhere, and represents an important form of reading competence, but it is not that of the solitary, bourgeois consumer who is, in the National Curriculum as elsewhere, assumed as the reader of the classic novel.

The National Curriculum for English has, as one might expect, quite a lot to say about reading. For younger children, particularly at key stage one, the latest version of the national curriculum renders explicit some of the "key skills" which it associates with the ability to read, and ordains that these are things which children should be "taught to use": "phonic knowledge", "graphic knowledge", "word recognition", "grammatical knowledge" and even "contextual understanding". For older children, those at key stages three and four, there is also an attempt to provide guidance on a range of appropriate skills ("extract meaning beyond the literal … analyse and discuss alternative interpretations" and so on). For these students, though, the emphasis has shifted. Reading becomes defined as much in terms of what is to be read as by a set of practices associated with readers: non-fiction and media texts are included, but pride of place is given to the canon: "Pupils should be introduced to major works of literature from the English literary heritage in previous centuries" (Department for Education/Welsh Office, 1995).

But what do school students make of this?

School students, like the rest of us, tend to react in a complicated way to the canon of English literature. There is a sense in which, though Shakespeare may not have quite the same allure as sex, drugs or rock and roll, students 'encounters with the bard in the classroom mark a kind of initiation, a movement away from the pieties of "teenage" fiction (class-reader style) and towards reading matter which is adult — because of its "difficulty", because of the seriousness with which it is treated in the wider society as well as because it is now once more quite clearly associated with the dominant school pursuits of exams and qualifications.

My school has a long history of attachment to Shakespeare as an element in the English curriculum for all students. It did not take the imposition of the national curriculum , nor the creation of a KS3 inner canon, to persuade the department in which I work of the value of teaching Shakespeare. This is Mike, talking about the length of his acquaintance with the Zeffirelli film of *Romeo and Juliet*:

> I suppose I liked it in '69 when I first saw it and then we used to take entire year groups —the whole fourth year or whole third year — I remember going to Piccadilly Circus to one of the cinemas that isn't there any more now, or the King's Road, and we'd take entire years, and there would be cheering and there'd be shouting at the fighting scenes and there'd be crying at the end — a million sobs — and I used to think "My god! this is

> terrific! this is really getting to these kids" and year after year therefore I've used it and done it — and suppose I like it as well because it works with the kids …

It was not until we became involved in the SATs boycott, however, that the department formally instituted the policy that all Year 9 students would read a Shakespeare play.

At the end of the summer term, 1996, I interviewed a small group of Year 8 students about Shakespeare. The group was not representative: it consisted of those Year 8 students who, for reasons which encompassed disaffection, bad behaviour, poor attendance and family poverty, had not gone on the end-of year trip with the majority of their peers. Most knew that they would be doing Shakespeare in year 9. When I asked them why, they were able to produce a wide variety of compelling answers:

- "it's part of our education";
- "because he was the best";
- "you don't hear of no other people that do plays like him";
- "when his plays came out, the first people who saw it thought it was really good, but it's hard for us to understand it because times have changed";
- "we've got to because of the exam";
- "because the play is written in English".

Also in July, 1996, I asked a much larger group of Year 9 students (53) to complete a questionnaire on their experiences of *Romeo and Juliet*. Asked what they had already known about Shakespeare before they had started on the play, a few answers suggested something of what's in a name:

- "I knew that Shakespeare was a great writer of his time and that his plays, stories and poems still influence the world today."
- "I knew … that Shakespeare wrote plays, he lived a long time ago, he was a very good play writer and what he looked like."
- "I knew that Shakespeare was very well known as a great writer of well-known stories."

Most students, however, felt that they had known nothing about Shakespeare before they started work on the play — but that they had already known something about *Romeo and Juliet*. The play's the thing, it appeared:

- "I didn't know … about the man himself. I did however know a bit about the play *Romeo and Juliet*, I knew that it started with an argument/fight and that it ended with dead."
- "I knew that *Romeo and Juliet* was a love story about two people who fall in love with their enemy."

- "I did not know anything about Shakespeare. I did know the story *Romeo and Juliet*, well not know it but I knew there was this young girl who fancied this boy but they could not go out with each other and that they killed theirself."

Such comments are, of course, far from transparent. It is hard for any of us to remember what we knew before we discovered what we know now. These responses do reflect, nonetheless, something which has repeatedly struck me in students 'responses to their initial explorations of *Romeo and Juliet* in particular. When I have introduced *Romeo and Juliet* to Year 9 classes using DevTray, it has astonished me that so many students already know so much about the play. For many, this knowledge consists mainly of an awareness of the story, often including some sense of one or more of the main scenes — the balcony scene, the final scene in the graveyard. With increasing frequency, it seems, one also comes across students who already know some of the lines. In November, 1996, my Year 9 group had spent the best part of an hour teasing out as much as they could of Juliet's "What's in a name?" soliloquy when, quite suddenly, Chiquita announced that her friend had taught her this bit. She proceeded to quote, flawlessly:

What's Montague? It is nor hand nor foot
Nor arm nor face nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!

In the Autumn Term, 1996, before starting *The Merchant of Venice* with a Year 10 group, I surveyed their attitudes to Shakespeare. What they had to say about Shakespeare and Shakespeare's plays was not markedly different from the comments made by the Year 8 and Year 9 students before the summer holiday. When asked what they expected to get out of "doing Shakespeare", a fairly uniform response was made. The Year 10 students were asked to rank seven possible responses in order of importance. Almost all gave weight to a functionalist view of the engagement with Shakespeare, placing "a unit of coursework for my GCSE folder" as one of the two most important outcomes. Slightly less predictable is the fact that three-quarters of the students also placed "knowledge of a Shakespeare play" as one of the two most important outcomes. This does, however, accord with the perceptions of some members of the department, at any rate, that students at Kingsland tend to be favourably disposed towards the notion of Shakespeare — and studying Shakespeare — from the word go:

> My experience over the last few years in *this* school is that you don't have to do very much about that – I think that Shakespeare's actually got quite a good press in this school and the kids are usually absolutely dead keen to get going on it anyway … it is passed down — a reflection on good teaching practice — the students who have gone before

have said that Shakespeare is something enjoyable — part of it may be from their parents — the idea that if you're studying Shakespeare that's being a real student.

… students in this school do come to it prepared to be very receptive — teaching here I think we've got to do far less to prepare children to read, watch and be involved in Shakespeare than I think I would have to do if I taught in one of the outer London boroughs …

You have got a positive buzz on your side and it's happened for a number of years now [Mary].

They're always dead keen to do Shakespeare … I don't know if it's a kind of status thing — "Oh, yeah, we can get on with this" — and so you don't have a barrier there to start with [Dorothy].

Students are quite clear on where the difficulty lies. The Year 8 students told me that they expected that it would be hard to understand because of their not knowing the meaning of the words: English, they informed me, was "different in the olden days — they used different words". Older students made the same point:

- "*Romeo and Juliet* was hard to understand because of the way they speak";
- "it was easier to understand than I expected the only thing that I did not understand was the old English language";
- "the way they spoke is very different from the way we speak today";
- "I didn't expect to enjoy it because it was a different language";

- "before I started *Romeo and Juliet* I thought it would be boring and hard to understand."

Even for Year 10 students, all of whom had already experienced a Shakespeare play in the classroom, the anxieties about language remained – though some students had the confidence that they would be able to cope with the problems posed by the strangeness of the language:

- "understanding the language will be very hard (but I will enjoy it)".[1]

For the teachers confronted with this perceived problem — Shakespeare as a foreign language — there are two possible approaches. On the one hand there are strategies to cope with the language demands that do actually exist, by addressing the concerns with language head-on; on the other, there are those strategies which "bypass" linguistic difficulty by locating language in a variety of other aspects of the texts/the plays: story, character, action, performance….

[1] For some students, however, there was the possibility of another way in to Shakespeare, a way which focussed not on language or historical or cultural distance, but on the assumption of generic familiarity and preference:

- "Before I started the play I knew that I would enjoy it because I like love stories and because people have told me that Shakespeare is a good writer."
- "I knew that *Romeo and Juliet* was a love story before I read it."
- "the way they got married undercover, and all their secrets they kept — it was wicked!"

I want to move on to what teachers do, or say they do, in the classroom. Before doing this directly, though, I want to have a look at the formation of a group of teachers as readers of Shakespeare. What emerges from the five interviews which I conducted, I think, is that a quite disparate group of people have reached a measure of consensus in their approach to Shakespeare in the classroom through processes of engagement with Shakespearean texts which take account of their own earlier experiences, as students, of Shakespeare. The approaches which are adopted are by no means uniform. They do, nonetheless, reflect a coherent response to the perceived problem of linguistic difficulty — a response which refuses to view the language of the plays as an aspect neatly separable from the plays themselves.

There are six specialist teachers of English in the department. Their experiences of formal schooling are diverse, to say the least — from comprehensive to grammar to secondary modern, rural and urban, secular and church schools. There is no common pattern to our experience of literature as part of the school curriculum: for Dorothy, there was no experience of "literature" at school at all:

> I didn't have any [Shakespeare] at school because I went to a secondary modern and left at 15, so forget it. This was 1961 or something like that and so my first experience of Shakespeare was when I went to do O level at Kingsway College when I was 23 …

For others, the experience was often far from positive. As a corrective to any simplistic notions of the irresistible rise of progressive education, it is interesting to note that Lisa, who attended a London comprehensive in the 1980s, had the most banally traditional introduction to Shakespeare of any of us:

> I was in the third year. I had this monstrous English teacher who was also my Head of Year. She said "Here's Shakespeare. Learn the first twelve lines" — I think it was *Twelfth Night* — "If music be the fruit-food of love, play on…"
>
> So we had to learn that, not knowing anything about what it meant. I learnt the first twelve lines, came in on Friday, had a test. Had to write the twelve lines. If you didn't, you had a detention. That's my first experience.
>
> My first introduction to Shakespeare. "Here's twelve lines of something that you know nothing about. Learn it. Recite it under fear of detention and sarcasm and general class humiliation" — and that's it.
>
> I can't even remember how we read it.
>
> In the fourth year we did … it must have been *Macbeth* — "Glamis thou art and Cawdor" — because we had to learn those twelve lines as well.

The conflation of the authority of the teacher and the authority of the canon could scarcely have been more absolute. There are analogous, if less threatening, experiences in other schooldays, though. Chris, Mary and Mike all went to grammar schools in different parts of the country; their first brushes with

Shakespeare in secondary school classrooms were unnervingly similar. These were Chris's schooldays in Hampshire:

> Mr Brown teaching us *Julius Caesar*, forcing us to read it in the third year — completely and utterly negative because I had an accent, a strange accent and I was in a posh grammar school — most of the kids were middle class, without a regional accent … I hated speaking aloud and he forced me to do it — just forcing me to do the speeches and what's weird is that I met him at the reunion last year and reminded him of this and he couldn't remember it.
>
> You sat in your seats and you were allocated a part, it was like dead and boring — I can't remember what part I had, just the excruciating embarrassment, the double desks with the horrible bit you always banged your knee on, the hole for the ink, rows of two, boys on one side, girls on the other, alphabetical order.
>
> I loved reading I read all the time.
>
> I can't remember anything about the play, just the embarrassment.
>
> We did *Julius Caesar* again for Eng Lit O level. All I remember is "the owl hoots"!

Mary's encounter, in her Midlands grammar school, was less traumatic but not significantly different:

> I can remember that everyone in the class had a part, and I remember being fairly bored but fairly amenable to it. I've just got this vision of the class and the book in front of me with the printed pages … it isn't very exciting — and just waiting for my turn to read — not with dread …

although I think the English teaching at my school was absolutely awful because it was incredibly boring and unimaginative.

And this was Mike's experience in North Yorkshire:

Reading *Hamlet* round the class in the fourth year — for O level … I understood it, didn't particularly enjoy it

… in the classroom it was basically read round the class then the essays, get on and do it …I can can't remember much about it, it wasn't one of those experiences that said "My god, I've got to teach Shakespeare, Shakespeare's wonderful."

Other ways into the canon did exist, however — ways which started off away from the classroom and its obsession with the orderly consumption of a class reader:

I can remember seeing *Richard II* — they showed a lot of classic films at the end of terms and I can remember seeing *Richard II* and being bowled over by that and *Henry V* — the Olivier in both cases …

I didn't get into Shakespeare until later on after I'd left school and I started reading — to be honest, they gave me a *Complete Works* when I left as something to say thanks for doing the school plays — I did *Hamlet* and *King Lear* — and that's when I started to read the plays, when I started to realise they were interesting, they were good … so I was self-taught really … it's not the teachers, I was inspired—if you want to use that word— by being in the plays —it was hedonistic but to be able to play Hamlet and then King Lear,

both of them in 1964 — the quadcentenary was it? — I know we did them both in the same year and that inspired me to go on from there, thinking "My god, there is something about Shakespeare, it is fun" — and then started to read the complete works and read the whole lot, reading it from A to Z became a challenge — so my inspiration came from the plays, being in the plays — certainly not from the teaching [Mike].

I was always quite keen on Shakespeare. At our school they had a dramatic society … nearly everything the dramatic society did was Shakespeare plays and you weren't allowed to join until you were fifteen or sixteen — I suppose that was one way I got to know a couple of plays — we did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* … I can remember doing that in the summer, sort of feeling that I knew the play quite well, which was nice, it was a different way of getting to know the play — it was an active way … I can also remember prancing around in costume outside on a very nice summer's evening — I think we were getting photographs done — because we did do it indoors on a stage …and also where I lived was fairly near to Stratford-on-Avon and we quite frequently had trips to Stratford… the bad bit was that we used to be way up in the gods … it was difficult to see … there was a production of *Hamlet* with David Warner in it — it was supposed to be quite controversial — I remember quite a few of us hanging down from the gods, absolutely mesmerised, hanging onto every word — that more active experience [Mary].

I did for my sixteenth birthday beg my mum to buy me *Macbeth*, I don't know why and I actually read it myself because of some friends I had in the sixth form who for various other experiences of theirs, had been talking and talking about *Macbeth* — I think they were out of their heads when they read it, and I thought "Cor! that sounds good" — the

> reading of *Macbeth* — and so I asked mum to buy it, so she did and I read it by myself … I really enjoyed reading it — I've still got that copy, browned pages…I was a pretty odd sixteen-year-old … it was a pivotal experience in terms of my reading because I got really involved with older kids and went on to A levels and read everything I was told to read like the good little girl I could be in the classroom but I also read, in translation, Hesse and Camus and André Gide and I read freaky things — the school texts were very separate — I really enjoyed them, most of them, but they were very separate.
> By the time I was in the sixth form my accent had gone — I lost the accent and then got into acting: I forced myself to speak like the young people I was at school with — because my life was so miserable … [Chris].

These recollections belong to a group of people the clear majority of whom are, in different ways and doubtless for different reasons, passionately committed to Shakespeare, and to the teaching of Shakespeare. Yet in talking of their experiences of Shakespeare, these same people would appear to make a simple binary opposition: for them, Shakespeare in the classroom was dry, passionless — lifeless: a transmission process to be undergone because the teacher said so and because the examination system said so; outside the classroom, Shakespeare was dangerous, fun, larger than life, adult and glamorous.

I have already suggested that the students whom we now teach tend to have a complicated response to the idea of doing Shakespeare. For them, as for their teachers, there are many Shakespeares. It really would not be hugely surprising if the encounters with Shakespeare which were enacted in places and under

conditions which permitted some recognition of drama, of performance — of spectacle and audience, even — were more likely to leave a pleasurable impression.

It would be misleading, however, to leave it at that. The picture which emerges form the teachers 'reminiscences in not as simple as classroom bad, theatre good. For some, at least, there were experiences within the English curriculum which suggested other ways with texts.

Dorothy recalls the transforming influence of her night school teacher in London in the early 1970s:

> I can remember the teacher, I found her very dynamic … it was like my first experience of literature teaching … I'd never had it before, not in the secondary modern school — and Paddy — I still remember her name — I just thought she was wonderful and when I look back on it it was very traditionally done — we read through the text, she would stop every so often, talk about it, explain what it meant, I worked very hard on it myself, trying to understand it, did a lot of extra work at home … we didn't see a film of it or anything like that — just reading the text in that way with her explaining things — a bit like I teach it now [wry laugh].
>
> I went back to do O levels … I was really intimidated by the system, couldn't write an essay to save my life — very hard for me — although I had been in the top stream of the secondary modern school and had only just missed the 11 plus — but I just came from that kind of background — you just felt you weren't very good academically.

It was like a liberation for me. I just loved it … and went back because I've always read a lot, from when I was really young — I just got hold of any book that I could— that was the reason that took me back for further study … for A level I did *Anthony and Cleopatra* — I loved it, even more than *Twelfth Night* — I related to the story much more — maybe because it was two older characters and although I was only in my twenties then I could kind of make sense of it much more — I loved the character of Anthony, he really appealed to me, still does actually — he had that craziness to him, the way he would give up things — I can still remember speeches from it — I thought — I think — it's a lovely play.

Anthony and Cleopatra just made a lot of sense to me — I was so intimidated by it at first … I came to Shakespeare really late

Paddy was so enthusiastic — she just loved literature

Chris contrasts dull Mr Brown with the quite different approach of another English teacher at her school in Hampshire, also in the 'seventies:

that was a much better English teacher, much better … I do a lot about putting Shakespeare into context and particularly into social context and I can remember having long conversations with Sian who was my English teacher about Shakespeare and social context — as far as she was concerned he wasn't a dead playwright and he didn't jump off the shelves as the English playwright that he was part of a whole history — the theatre as an entertainment industry in the late sixteenth century in London and Shakespeare as part of a community of writers and actors and so on —

And Lisa, scared off Shakespeare, encountered a more sympathetic reader of Harper Lee:

> At the stage when we read *To Kill a Mocking Bird* we had temporarily a different teacher and just that whole experience was completely different. I absolutely loved *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, to the extent of being able to read it endlessly over the years … even at the time I was struck by how different it was in the approach, to the point where she would say, "This is what this means, and this is what is going on here." It was kind of annoying at first, because she stopped quite regularly through the reading of it, but then because you had a greater understanding of it and got really into it — as opposed to with Shakespeare, you would learn it.

The force of these anecdotes may well also sound a note of caution about any idea that there is a methodological key to success in teaching texts. The interactions are idiosyncratic: the way they are remembered seems to demand a more limited reading — that these encounters worked for these students. But maybe it is also useful to consider these tales as a defence against the siren calls of teacher-proof approaches, for in all these histories there is a sense that the teachers made a difference.

What happens, then, when these teachers read Shakespeare in classrooms today?

What I have done in the past is more interesting than what I do now … I used to religiously take groups down to Southwark and wander around and end up at what was the Bear Gardens Museum … I was very influenced by the way Sian got me really interested in the tradition of drama and I do still start with going back to mediaeval plays and giving kids bits of that — the *Second Shepherds' Play* [Wakefield/Towneley Mystery Cycle] … looking a bit at the history of drama — getting them to understand that there were plays written before Shakespeare that they can understand and that Shakespeare isn't something that's really difficult …

I get kids to look at the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* and they say "don't understand that" and get them to underline all the words that they're certain of the meaning of — I'm doing what Sian used to do to me, just demystifying …

Writing the story using the elements —"You're going to write a story where there is the possibility of an arranged marriage, where there is a party that's gatecrashed by some youths, a sixteen-year-old boy falls in love with…" but I don't tell them it's *Romeo and Juliet* … this year it was interesting because they didn't twig that it was *Romeo and Juliet* but there were whole groups of them talking — Shahida and Jubheda talking about it was very much like Indian films — this is what would happen — they wrote some pretty naff stories but the nicest thing that came out of it was that they were aware at the end that it is a universal story and it is in lots of different literature … and then we got onto reading the play …

Not one but four quite different ways into the play. What Chris suggests in this is, in part, an appreciation of the diversity of contexts all of which are directly relevant to students 'involvement in making sense of the play. Wandering

around Southwark and looking at the *Second Shepherds' Play* both seek to place Shakespeare within a historical, geographical, cultural and theatrical context, to demystify Shakespeare by placing "him." Looking at the language of the prologue, establishing the sense of lexical continuity, helps to break down the sense that Shakespeare is written (wrote) in a foreign language: if here language is the direct focus, the starting point is students 'existing linguistic knowledge — not the strangeness, the odd pronouns, inflections and negative forms — still less the poetry.

It seems to me that all of these are useful strategies, all relevant to the business of reading the play in class. The fourth means of introducing *Romeo and Juliet* seems to entail something more central to the experience of the play and the experiences represented in the play. It is noteworthy that Chris's Year 9 students responded not simply by drawing on their own experience as teenagers in London in 1996 (whatever that means) but also by making connections with other stories, other traditions of telling. The approach is not one which denies the particularity of *Romeo and Juliet*: on the contrary, how can it be read if not by reference to other texts, other experiences? The students 'construction of a story from the plot outline makes that useful connection between writers and readers. It allows for questions about the way Shakespeare made decisions about his storyline, about the handling of the action, about the points of view adopted,

which are questions which are almost inescapable in the act of creating such a story for oneself.

Several members of the department have tended to ask students to write a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet* after they have read the play. From the interviews I conducted emerged a sense of dissatisfaction with this approach. The modern version comes at a time when students have had enough of the story; what the students produce can often seem rather formulaic and tired, a retelling too solidly and circumstantially grounded in the details of the play to say much about the students 'response to it. I wonder, also, to what extent the task is actually asking students to do something which they have already accomplished, if the play has meant anything to them, since the act of reading — of making sense of— *Romeo and Juliet* is in itself an act of making connections between text and reader. The reading of the text in the classroom is itself a way of making it modern, of making connections between the world of the book and the world of its readers. The modern version is, therefore, no longer a thing apart — *West Side Story* after *Romeo and Juliet*, so to speak — but rather is integrated into the text itself. (A specific example of this integration is provided, below, in Lisa's account of the use she made of modern analogies to elucidate the issue of Macbeth's ambition.)

The interviews also suggested to me the extent to which as teachers we chose to introduce a Shakespearean text to a class in ways that make sense to us: from the start we inflect the text with our own meanings. Dorothy explained how she introduces *Romeo and Juliet* to Year 9 students:

> I usually talk a bit about Shakespeare and talk about the relevance of his plays for today, because I do think that a lot of the issues that he took up are very relevant and universal — two young people falling in love, the hatred between their families, what this can do to people, how this can affect their lives, talk about what it meant falling in love — that it would be much more normal in those days getting together with someone that young — still is in a lot of cultures now — those sorts of things
> … and I've also talked quite a lot about the language … because I think they're intimidated by it and I always say it's like coming on to a foreign language — you have to crack it and once you have you'll understand the story very well and I also look at the books that we have and show them how to use the books — like "Act one, scene one" at the top of the page — we do have to spell this out for a lot of our kids, and that you can go to the left all the time and it will explain certain words and how the lines are numbered — very basic but I'm taking them through that to start with.

The introduction addresses both the question of *why* the play should be read and also the *how* of reading. There is an urge to soothe the students 'fears of linguistic difficulty and to help them to come to grips with the conventions of typography and layout which they meet in the book. There may also be an implication here

of an epistemological model— first the language, then the story — though I think that this is to miss the rhetorical significance of Dorothy's advice: the main message is not to panic, that the meaning will not be offered up all at once, and may require some effort.

In some way, the why of reading a Shakespeare play is inescapable. The cultural significance of Shakespeare looms over any particular textual encounter in the classroom for all of us — though the ways in which we seek to address this are as various as our earlier experiences. If Dorothy offers a validation in terms of relevance, Lisa confronts and accepts the reality of alienation:

> … when kids go "I hate Shakespeare" I can honestly say, "I really understand that, I'm not telling you that it's brilliant." And sometimes they ask "Why have we got to study this?" and the personal side of me thinks "I haven't got an answer for that — I had to, you have to." … it's never very satisfactory.
>
> "I hated Shakespeare, you probably will, because it's like learning a different language, but once you get into the story, there's something to be gained there." You can take the story and you can put it into the '90s — it's a story, but it's the language which is a problem.
>
> I still don't feel very confident about teaching it, because I feel what I have managed to do between finishing my O levels and becoming a teacher is avoid Shakespeare.

The content of the messages could hardly be more different; their effect, in terms of acknowledging the difficulties of the text and of the students 'expectations of

it, is actually not so dissimilar. The significant point about Lisa's stance is not, I would argue, its apparent negativity, but rather the approach which it renders possible. In ceding authority, in so conspicuously refusing to play the role of "Sir Oracle", she encourages students to participate in a reading of the play which is genuinely exploratory, a reading which has renounced all threat of premature closure.

A central part of the activity of reading a Shakespeare play in class is the reading of the play: well, of course it is — what else? Everything which has preceded this section should, however, have suggested something of the overlapping contexts which act as the (pre-) conditions of this reading, contexts which are themselves intrinsic to the reading process.

When the students whom I surveyed commented on what the experience of reading Shakespeare had been like, and what factors had been most influential in helping them to make sense of the text, a common observation was along the following lines:

- "It was easier to understand because we had a good teacher";
- "the teacher's explanations helped me to understand it";
- "I thought *The Merchant of Venice* was easier to understand than I expected it to be. This was because sir would stop and explain certain important things."

Precisely what these "important things" might have been was not revealed. I think that my interventions were often intended to focus attention on structural contrasts (the locations of Venice and Belmont) or on aspects of the text which relate to stagecraft (how the tension is built up when the suitors are about to undergo the casket test, or the relationship between theatrical and real-life time) or to characterisation (the impact that Jessica's view of her father might have on our own reading of Shylock).[2]

For us as teachers, there is an awareness of the need to balance two contradictory imperatives: on the one hand, the duty to interpret, to explicate, to help students make sense of what is going on and what is being said; on the other hand, the requirement that the pace of reading must be maintained, if the students 'sense of the meaning of the whole is not to be placed under the intolerable pressure of too many interruptions, too many interpolations, too much exegesis.

> What influences my own approach with literature, and it's probably not always the best way to teach it, but that when I'm reading — and you know that I read a great deal — I like to just *read* it — I don't like to take ages reading something, it drives me up the wall. I read quickly if I'm really into a story and I always assume, I suppose, that a lot of readers feel that way about literature — a lot of people who are really into books — and

[2] Jane Miller, of the University of London Institute of Education, observed a number of lessons in which my Year 10 group were reading *The Merchant of Venice*. I am grateful to her for reminding me of several specific interventions which I made.

so I tend to teach like that … I tend to get through it quite quickly, not to get through it but just because that's the experience of reading that I like and I'm sure I do it with Shakespeare.
We do stop and we do do written assignments but I tend to get through the text quite quickly I don't like it broken up too much for myself and I'm sure that's a big influence on the way I teach it. [Dorothy]

I am quite against continually stopping and explaining stuff because that does kill anything that you're reading really … [at my own school] I remember the reading but also yawningly boringly going off as various words were gone over, and switching my brain off … [Mary]

I can never ever work out where I draw the line at explaining what's going on, and just getting on with reading — with 9F this year there were confused faces … it's something I've never resolved and it's pathetic after twenty years— how much do I step in and say "this is going on and this means this"? [Chris]

The problem of when to intervene and what to explain, as Chris suggests, is one which doesn't disappear with experience. For Lisa, teaching *Macbeth* for the first time, it was particularly acute:

One of the things that I ended up doing with *Macbeth* was comparing Macbeth to a potential lottery winner. Would you do the things that he did? — and it immediately

becomes accessible — it's the same story, but it's breaking down this barrier of "This is this elite story which we'll never understand because we don't speak like that."

The thing about the lottery came up in a fairly informal, "let's have a chat about what's going on" – and thinking about Macbeth not being as this elusive Shakespearean character but an ambitious man … what people will do for ambition … for example, if you were standing in a queue behind a man who had a ticket worth £6 million, would you actually attack him and take that ticket … there were some who said "yeah, I'd do it for a tenner …"

It wasn't just around money it was also if you had a chance to rule England, would you kill for it — would you go to somebody's house to find them in their bed and kill them? Would you kill so that you could be manager of the England football squad? — well, maybe, if it was a real chance …

What I was trying to do was to … think about ambition and about what ambition does to people … it's not just something that happened hundreds of years ago — at first they couldn't understand why someone would kill his friend … some thought he was psychotic and some thought he was an ordinary man who had been completely corrupted by a need to get on in life

… one of the things I was trying to do with the lottery analogy was not about whether someone is inherently evil, but take an ordinary man, ordinary woman, put them in a situation to dangle a carrot in front of them, wouldn't that happen to all of us? Wouldn't you actually — if you were offered something which you really, really, *really* wanted, would you do it?

This is, clearly, no mere matter of textual clarification, of the teacher as handy translator between the characters who speak seventeenth-century English and

the students who don't. What provides the focus for the class's deliberations reinforces my earlier point about the centrality of performance in reading the text. Lisa's assumption is that the first priority is for her students to make sense of the play in terms of who does what to whom, and why — and until these questions are satisfactorily addressed, there is no point worrying too much about the finer points of Jacobean lexis, grammar or imagery.

When it comes to reading the play, Mike's approach differs from that adopted by the rest of us. A very talented actor himself, who regularly takes the lead roles in one of London's most prestigious amateur companies, he becomes the touring player, his class the appreciative audience.

> Now, in the classroom, I put on a show — again I enjoy it — it's fun: I put on a dramatised monologue … I'll read it out and put on different voices and do the whole works, but in doing it I'll … get them to write down what I know they're going to need to use — but basically it's a one-man show … they love it — that sounds arrogant, doesn't it — but you can tell — I forgot to say, I don't just dramatise it, I paraphrase it, so I'll read half a page or a sentence or a speech, and then I'll paraphrase it — this is what they're saying, or I'll say it in modern English — it must drive them up the wall but it seems to work …
>
> With *R&J*, I bring out the filth — you know, at the beginning, I find myself standing there doing the old V signs and middle finger and [makes a gesture with his forearm] this is the equivalent of the Capulets and Montagues starting the argument and biting the

> thumb and all that, so that comes out — and as you know there's a hell of a lot of filth and doubles entendres and sexual references and stuff like that, I'm afraid to say that I bring it out — and they love it, because the idea is to get them to realise that it might be four hundred years ago but there are still gangs doing basically the same things now — so that's how I start, by being risqué.
>
> I launch into it, straight off — we'll spend the whole lesson doing the chorus, to get it sorted, so that they know the basic … before reading, most kids know that they both die in the end, they know that the families hate each other, but it's not detailed — that's why I cling on to *Romeo and Juliet* — it's not only something that's accessible to them but it's something that they've picked up on somewhere along the line …
>
> I'm not too concerned about them understanding the text of the play — it's a bulldozer approach — here's the story, you're going to understand who's what and what's going on, it doesn't matter if you don't understand words and stuff like that …why climb the stairs when there's a lift? Everyone has a right to know what the plays are about — and I always feel that the kids come away with a sense of satisfaction — "I now know the story of *Romeo and Juliet*," or whatever — they've broken this barrier — it's so important that you stop them growing up thinking "I can't do Shakespeare, don't understand Shakespeare…"

The sense of enjoyment here is unmistakable — as it is in the responses of Mike's students.

Lisa also recounted a less thoroughly prepared occasion on which the theatrical nature of Shakespearean texts came to prominence. Her Year 9 class had finished reading *Romeo and Juliet*:

> … right at the end they decided to act out the last few scenes just as a lighthearted bit — and they really got into it — they put a table out as the tomb, got Makeida to play Juliet lying there, they'd throw themselves on the floor – and I kinda got into it as well — ended up on my knees at one point — they were reading it, and I'd say "no — don't do it like that — put a bit of feeling into it" — and they really got into it
>
> … I think that's to do with their age — in another year, you couldn't get them to do that, they wouldn't be as unselfconscious as to chuck themselves on the floor and pretend to kiss each other … but it helped because they felt involved in it and because it was funny — lighthearted – it wasn't planned.

Everyone uses videos in teaching Shakespeare. I have already suggested that it is possible to read my colleagues 'formative experiences of Shakespeare as tending towards a simple binary opposition: Shakespeare in the classroom was tedious, Shakespeare in performance was fun. The introduction of the videocassette into the classroom fractures this dichotomy — which was already looking a bit shaky when Mike's method is to teach through performance, and when the students themselves turn Lisa's classroom into an impromptu stage. Fully-fledged performance now enters through the classroom door on a large black television trolley. After all, as Mary observes,

> You've got to remember that it is a play and kids should see it as a play — we see one of the videos fairly soon after reading the whole play — read through it as a whole and then watch the video as a whole.

This practice is fairly common in the department: a complete reading of the play text, followed by a complete showing of one realisation of the play on video. Mary also pointed out that deferring the video until after the reading of the play made it easier for classes to enjoy the reading itself — increasing the pace of reading in the second half of the play as students 'sense of what was going on became more secure, and their interest became more aroused. This approach has the additional advantage of creating, as closely as is possible in the context of the normal school timetable and the classroom, a full performance of the play. If there is the risk that this approach will lead students to privilege the one interpretation of a text which they have seen, to confer undue authority on it, we should not exaggerate the significance of this:

> If you show them the film of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* the same thing happens —the video becomes the version that is remembered most vividly. With a Shakespeare play, what's so wrong with that? Because every production is a representation — surely that is what Shakespeare wanted — it wouldn't have been the same every time, so why worry?

I shall return to this point later.

Other colleagues, however, tend to show parts of a film in the course of reading a Shakespeare play. Though this tends to reduce the sense of coherent performance, it may well be that it is a practice which is of particular benefit to those students most in need of support. Many of the Year 9 students I surveyed who had read *Romeo and Juliet* with Lisa commented on the extent to which watching the film had enabled them to develop their confidence in coping with the demands of the play:

- "Just being able to see the characters and watch them move and speak helped me to understand it better";
- "I did enjoy the film because I could understand a bit more of the words they were speaking more clearly";
- "The film helped me to understand the play better by the way the actors acted and the scenes … made you think that is how they lived".

Opinions on the videos varied. I referred earlier to Mike's long acquaintance with the Zeffirelli *Romeo and Juliet* , of which he remains an ardent champion:

> I show the video at the very end … I used to try showing it in bits, but they wanted to get on with it, and it was slowing things down, so I show it at the end, as a summary … I show it non-stop, do little talk-over reminders, point out who's who — because the Zeffirelli film is good in lots of ways, it's colour-coded for a start — the Capulets are fiery

> red and orange, the Montagues are calm browns and blues, so once you get that established you just need to keep reminding them who they're looking at …

The other main video resource, Polanski's *Macbeth*, has its devoted adherents. What begins to be fleshed out in Chris's description of her use of the Polanski film is the extent to which a single interpretation can itself be held up to critical scrutiny, its realisation of the text an object of discussion and attention:

> almost without thinking I show them after we've finished reading, I don't think of things like "shall I show the video first or shall we read a bit and watch a bit?" … I haven't thought about it — it reinforces the play with some of them … I really like the Polanski *Macbeth* because of the gloom, and I like it because I like to point out what a nutter Polanski was in changing things — it's really bizarre, and the connections with things like the murder of Sharon Tate, him making the film not too long after the murder and the whole thing about the baby that figures really strongly in the film — but that's only for my more intellectual students— the ending of it annoys me, it's nice for the kids to pick up on that as well —he gets Donalbain going back to witches and that really annoys me because I don't think Donalbain would've done and … the wheel has come full circle and there is no point in Donalbain going back because there is no longer chaos — though there obviously was in Polanski's mind …

Dorothy suggests the scope for a personal/critical reading of the films as realisations of Shakespeare, in her less enthusiastic response to both these videos:

> I'd like a different version to Polanski's *Macbeth* because it's so much blood everywhere — he always has to have somebody nude, if it's not Lady Macbeth it's the witches, he's so predictable really. I find Lady Macbeth too RSC English — a kind of stereotype — I think she's much more powerful than she comes across in the Polanski version of it
> I don't like [the Zeffirelli *Romeo and Juliet*] very much either — because I've seen it too many times — they're just so wet aren't they, Romeo and Juliet? — I know they're meant to be young and all those sorts of things; I like Mercutio in that version, but it doesn't feel raw enough to me — which is how I see Shakespeare too — too polished and pretty-pretty — and I think Polanski's *Macbeth* is too, despite the blood, you know, it doesn't quite get to the guts of Shakespeare.

Mike also suggests that students become aware of at least some of the directorial decisions which underpin a film, and of the extent to which this awareness can assist in developing an understanding of, for example, the problem of time in *Romeo and Juliet*:

> We talk about what gets put in and left out — there's no donkey in Shakespeare — I'm always telling them there's no donkey in Shakespeare — but don't put that in your essays — and to suggest reasons why Zeffirelli chose to have the donkey versus the horse — the two speeds — because it's a bit messy isn't it anyway — the reason why the Friar never gets that letter to Romeo — yeah, you've got to point out the differences, and remind them that Paris is gone, and he's not killed, and things get cut out …

In beginning to discuss in relation to *The Merchant of Venice*, what I take to be the advantages in presenting students with more than one realisation of a play, I argued that one of the dangers of exposure to a single interpretation might be that students took this to be the authorised version (Yandell, 1997). This is likely to happen, to some extent: year after year, students who see the Zeffirelli film are liable to regard Olivia Hussey as Juliet, not merely as one possible form that Juliet's character might take. And yet it would be a mistake to overstate the danger that this poses.

When Hong Hai, the Year 10 student from whose Shylock's Diary I quoted (Yandell, 1997), talked of her reactions to the two versions of *The Merchant* which she had seen, it was clear that she was judging both realisations of the text by reference to a third, antecedent realisation: the internal performance which she had staged in her imagination, with the aid of the reading of the text in class:

> I didn't like watching the films although it was good to see the play from another point of view. I had my own images and ideas of [how] the people looked and acted … Seeing the films just ruined the image. Sometimes the films cut out important parts that I thought were relevant, so then I thought the film was silly.

When I asked Hong Hai about this observation, she said that she had in mind the Channel 4 production's omission of many of Shylock's lines in the bond scene (Act I, scene iii): she felt that these cuts tended to trivialise Shylock's character.

More generally, she expressed dissatisfaction with the character of Bassanio in both this version and in the BBC/Jonathan Miller production. This point has been made by a number of other students, often in the context of noting their incredulity that Portia could ever have fallen in love with someone so unprepossessing.

It would be easy enough to read Hong Hai's assured critical comments as further validation of the benefits of the perspective which exposure to two performances allows. There may well be some truth in this, but I have also been struck by the readiness of the Year 9 students whom I surveyed to offer comments on specific roles and their realisations in the film:

[worst characters …]

- "Mercutio because I hated the way he acted"
- "Mercutio, I found his wit annoying"

[best characters …]

- "Mercutio because he is funny"
- "Mercutio because of his dirty jokes and mad behaviour"
- "the Nurse, because she's funny"
- "I liked Mercutio the most because he was so feisty and brave and he liked fighting"

Of those students who identified a favourite, or least favourite character, the very fact that so many focused on Mercutio is itself an indication of the importance of the experience of watching the film. Characters such as those of Mercutio or the

Nurse grab the attention of the audience in a production such as Zeffirelli's in a way that they are most unlikely to do in a read-through, where the lovers themselves and Juliet's parents are more likely to appear central to the action. Such comments, as well as others which revealed students 'awareness of the cuts made to the text and to the action in the Zeffirelli version of *Romeo and Juliet*, offer a validation of the normal departmental practice of showing the film after the text has been read in class. The comments indicate that students are watching from a position of some expertise, able to judge critically a particular realisation of the text which they "know".

In recounting my experiences of *The Merchant*, I began to discuss the importance of students 'empathetic responses to the texts which they have studied. This form of response is not the only one demanded of students: members of the department also ask students to write literary-critical essays — on the role of Lady Macbeth, on Macbeth's ambition, on the concept of fate in *Romeo and Juliet*, on the influence which the Nurse and the Friar have on the protagonists, and so on. I want to dwell for a time, though, on the effects of allowing students other structures within which they may re-present their reading of a text.

When Lisa had read *Macbeth* with a Year 10 group, she asked them to reflect on what they had been doing through two tasks:

There were two main bits of work on it. One was Macbeth's confession — getting him to confess not only to what he has done but also his rationale for doing it, looking at the play — why he did that at that point, why he changed his mind, why he went on to do what he did, and how he felt at the end: did he die as a warrior, did he die as a villain? And the other bit was doing it as a trial — when we actually put Macbeth and Lady Macbeth on trial – as a classroom activity, and that worked really well … they got really into defending Macbeth by saying he wasn't rational, he wasn't sane, and trying to get him a lighter sentence by basically blaming it on everyone else apart from him … and with Lady Macbeth prosecuting her not necessarily for murder but as accomplice to murder, treason — they had a choice of things they could charge her with… once they'd done the trial and they got into the whole drama of "Objection" and "Overruled" or "Sustained", "This is my evidence", "…and I quote" — they probably, like me, realised that they had gained more knowledge than they thought they had — they got really into it. I don't know if they necessarily decided that Shakespeare was fantastic but … it made them see it as more accessible … Sheena Higgins loved it. For her, being able to play the part of a lawyer, get up and stride around and be all dramatic while using knowledge of the play, really worked.

It sounds really cliched but it brought the play alive and got them involved in it and they understood it.

… there was a real sense of "This is what I wanna do, and I can do it" and that was a real high point, especially for some one like Suhelur, because she doesn't like reading. They like reading parts in Shakespeare because it's a notion of achievement "I have read Shakespeare — I can do it". The flip side of "Shakespeare is for posh people" is "I can do it"

> … Suhelur drafted and redrafted her trial stuff on the computer — in Year 9, during my teaching practice, she sat there, cracked her chewing gum, going "I 'ate English. It's shit" — and she really got into it, loved the part of being a trial lawyer, even when she screwed up, got up, went to say something, couldn't remember it, people were going "Get off, you're shite" — "no, no, I'm there, I've got the notes, I'm going to do it" — and that is a kind of bonus of doing Shakespeare.

An activity such as this has the advantage of encouraging the continued development and contestation of shared readings of the play. It draws in a large number of students, whose confidence to perform often seems to be sustained by the artificiality of the role which they assume. (It's not Suhelur standing there, it's a lawyer.) And, as Lisa observes, the assignment continually drives the students back into the text, on which they can ground their arguments, while at the same time allowing considerable freedom in the construction of a reading of character and action.

This look at Shakespeare in the classroom started with, amongst other things, an acknowledgement that students tended to be bothered by what they expected to be the impenetrability of Shakespearean language. As Lisa's Year 10 students neared the end of their work on *Macbeth*, she was struck by the confidence they exhibited in dealing with the text , and their sense of control over it. The point is reinforced by Mary:

> A lot of the best work I have seen in this school is where the students identify with the characters and you find that quite a lot of the children take that as an opportunity to experiment with exploring the language — trying to use the language that they think the characters would have used — or discussing with you about what was meant or they will show their understanding of the language by making good use of quotation.
> It forces them to look at the play … weak students, if you go round the classroom, a lot are thrown back on the text: instead of you telling the student what this or that word means, you find students start asking you — it's directly opposite to my own experience of school — nobody ever waited for me to ask about this language… or kids will come up to you and point something out and say "Isn't this weird?"

The extent to which such a successful experience of reading has happened without an intensive course in language study has been an important underlying paradox in the picture of reading which, I hope, has emerged from this account.

This study started by referring to the prescriptions of the National Curriculum for English in relation to reading. What has followed has been an attempt to suggest some of the ways in which students 'reading of Shakespeare in schools can be supported and encouraged. I wonder, however, if the practices described in this study might not also be construed as a contribution to another debate entirely, a debate about reading itself.

When we read novels or even short stories in class, the experience of shared reading is often a most rewarding one. At best — as, for instance, in nearing the

carnivalesque climax of *Conrad, the factory-made boy* or the terrible last night of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* — the element of performance in the shared reading can exert a powerful hold on all those involved. Nevertheless, it can sometimes feel as if such readings are against the grain — as if the peculiar conditions of the classroom produce ways of reading which sit uncomfortably with the private, solitary ways of reading with which we, as experienced readers, are most familiar. I think that Dorothy was gesturing at this tension in her remarks, which I quoted above, about pace, about wanting to get on with the reading. The novel addresses its reader in the singular, and out of the novel is constructed the isolation (and independence) of the act of reading.

To elaborate from these experiences a fixed hierarchy of readerly behaviours has become so automatic that it seems like common sense. As teachers, we value the developing reader's growth in independence, the diminishing reliance on others and on extra-textual props. Yet we would do well to be wary of the assumption that this model of reading is universally applicable. Shirley Brice Heath has described the existence of different literate traditions:

> For Trackton adults, reading is a social activity; when something is read in Trackton, it almost always provokes narratives, jokes, sidetracking talk, and active negotiation of the meaning of written texts among the listeners. Authority in the written word does not rest in the words themselves, but in the meanings which are negotiated through the experiences of the group (Brice Heath [1983], p. 196).

Brice Heath may have been describing the literacy traditions of a black working-class community in the southeastern United States; much of what she says about Trackton's ways with words might also be taken as a summary of my school students' — and their teachers' — ways with Will. This study has been concerned with reading Shakespeare, yet the model of reading which emerges from it is not that of "independent" reading, as it is normally conceived.

Writing in the *Guardian* two years ago, James Wood took issue with what he regarded as the "dominant force in contemporary criticism" — cultural materialism (Wood, 1994). He quoted Dr Kiernan Ryan with approval:

> Shakespeare is universal in this sense: everybody who can read the plays feels, 'If I were that person in that situation, that time, and that particular dilemma, that's what it would feel like to me.'

It is significant, perhaps, that Ryan talks here of *reading* the plays, not of seeing them: the activity would seem to have become a personal communion with the text, an identification with a particular character, rather than an engagement with a group of characters, themselves (inter-)acting in a given social situation. Ryan's "everybody" is, moreover, a concept which denies the specificity of different readers 'identities, the influences of gender, race, class, of

history and culture (for instance) in shaping the consciousness that readers bring to bear on texts.

As a bulwark against the cultural materialists 'attempt to demystify Shakespeare, Wood seeks to erect a defence based on the beauty of Shakespeare's language:

> … an image such as that produced by King Lear when, at the end of the play, he promises Cordelia that she will hide away and watch the comings and goings of the court, "And take upon us the mystery of things,/ As if we were God's spies" — well, such an image is beautiful and magically enables us to imagine such benign detachment. It is difficult to watch King Lear in a theatre and not hear people crying at this moment in the play (Wood, 1994).

The reality is, though, that it is very easy to find performances of *Lear* at which no-one cries, at this or at any other moment. What Wood's argument represents is an attempt to re-cast Shakespeare, not for the first time, as a great novelist — it isn't Cordelia who springs to mind so much as Little Nell— while at the same time foregrounding the poetry as the repository of a set of Arnoldian touchstones. For Wood, Shakespeare is to be best read and reaffirmed in the splendid isolation of the study: the play is, quite categorically, not the thing.

In clear contrast to Wood's Shakespeare, the Shakespeare who is read in the classroom retains, for all his status as cultural totem, the indeterminacy and

provisionality of a dramatist. His is work in progress, to be realised in each new reading, to be contested and argued over. His authority "does not rest in the words themselves, but in the meanings which are negotiated through the experiences of the group."

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