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Mind the gap: investigating test literacy and classroom literacy

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the 2006 examination paper on *Richard III*, this article starts by examining the assumptions about reading Shakespeare that inform the Key Stage 3 national tests for fourteen-year-olds in England. It then analyses one student's response to the test, contrasting this performance with evidence drawn from classroom observation and digital video data.

Key words

Literacy/literacies; literature; Shakespeare; multimodality; assessment; examination.

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In July 2001, the President of the United States met a group of children from a primary school in Hackney, East London. Mr Bush listened while his wife read a story. He then commented on the importance of literacy: "You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test" (as reported in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 24 August, 2001). It is intriguing that the leader of the most powerful nation on earth has such a circular view of literacy, what it is and what it is for. Children are taught to read so that they can pass a test which, presumably, is designed to assess whether they can read.

George Bush's model — that learning to read is important because one is thereby enabled to pass a literacy test — would have made perfect sense to felons in medieval and early modern England, when a member of the clergy could not be condemned to death for a first capital offence. Instead, he was branded on the hand or thumb — M for murder, T for theft. He could, however, be executed if convicted of a second offence. This "benefit of clergy" was extended, in certain contexts, to anyone who could read, including, in the eighteenth century, women. The courts determined whether the accused was literate or not by giving him or her a reading test. The test passage was usually the first verse of Psalm 51:

Have mercy upon me, oh God, according to thy loving kindness; according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.

Many people learned the passage, known as the "neck verse," by heart whilst in jail and thus were able to read the passage when on trial. Some references to this practice suggest that the condemned men or women were not actually reading, that the act of

committing the verse to memory was, in effect, cheating. Not having undergone the prescribed course in phonics, they were pretending to read (but not actually reading). But, as George Bush understands, they had indeed learned to read — they were functionally literate. Functional illiteracy, for them, would have had a simple consequence: hanging.

Neck-verse literacy shares three key features with George Bush's literacy: it assumes a simple binary opposition of literacy and illiteracy (pass/fail or hanged/not hanged); it can easily be tested; it is the property of the individual (Bush's "he or her"). Modern literacy tests, of course, are more sophisticated, the assessments more finely calibrated, the outcomes more nuanced; but the underlying assumptions about literacy have more in common with the neck verse than might be imagined.

I want to explore in some detail one such test, the 2006 Key Stage 3 English examination paper on Shakespeare's *Richard III* (QCA 2006a). I will look at how reading and the reader are constructed by the test, before considering one candidate's response to the paper. Using evidence provided by classroom observation of the same student and by his writing outside the exam, I will compare his performance in the test with his reading of *Richard III* in the classroom.[1] What emerges from this comparison is not, however, a story of differential performance in the same kind of literacy so much as a recognition of the chasm that separates test literacy from the literacy practices of the urban English classroom. Jane Coles has argued persuasively that the effect of "the system of national tests [with] Shakespeare at their heart … will be to support and uphold hegemonic practices" (Coles 2004: 57). While I agree with this analysis of the impact of such tests, what my research data suggest is the continuing

possibility of counter-hegemonic practices, the continuing “opportunities to create classrooms where new forms of cultural discourse can be opened up and explored” (Coles 2004: 57).

As part of the assessment regime designed to ensure the accountability of the education service and intended to raise standards, almost all fourteen-year-olds within the English state education sector sit an examination paper on Shakespeare. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the government body with responsibility for overseeing the National Curriculum and its assessment, selects three plays from within the canon: in 2006, *Richard III* was, for the first time, one of the three. Within the examination, candidates are presented with two extracts from the play. They have forty-five minutes to answer a question. As the cover to the examination paper explains, “This booklet contains one task which assesses your reading and understanding of *Richard III*” (QCA 2006a: 1). Where, one might wonder, does reading end and understanding begin? Are reading and understanding envisaged as separate activities? Where and when do they take place – in the classroom, over time, or in the examination hall? There is, nonetheless, a clear commitment to a model of literacy that goes beyond the recitation of the neck verse. The inside cover presents candidates with the task:

> **Richard III**
> Act 1 Scene 1, lines 32 to 96
> Act 3 Scene 7, lines 110 to 172
> **In these extracts, how does Richard use language to deceive others and to hide his plans to become king?**
> *Support your ideas by referring to both of the extracts which are printed on the following pages.*

The claim on the front cover was that the task would assess the candidate’s “reading and understanding of *Richard III*” – that is, the whole play – but what the task insists

on, twice, is a focus on two extracts from the play. At best, then, an assumption is made that candidates' "reading and understanding" of a part of the play will be an accurate proxy indicator of their "reading and understanding" of the whole. In reality, though, because the scenes which will be the focus of the examination question are published in advance, many candidates have an entirely different reading experience of the "SATs scenes," as they are known, than they have of the rest the play. In many of the schools where I visit my PGCE students,[2] school students are presented with photocopies of the SATs scenes, and no other part of the play. At worst, their preparation for the exam consists solely of exercises relating to the set scenes, exercises that are designed to enable the candidate to regurgitate the required gobbets in response to the examination question (see also Barker 2003, Coles 2003). The version of literacy that is being promulgated in such contexts bears a striking resemblance to neck-verse literacy.

According to the italicised rubric, the candidate is meant to have "ideas" – though, to be sure, ones that are rooted in, and hence may be adequately supported by, the extracts. This might suggest scope for personal response, as outlined in the National Curriculum attainment targets for reading:

> Level 7
> Pupils show understanding of the ways in which meaning and information are conveyed in a range of texts. *They articulate personal and critical responses to poems, plays and novels*, showing awareness of their thematic, structural and linguistic features (DfEE 1999, my emphasis).

The concept of personal response has a long history, with roots in I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929) as much as in reader-response criticism (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978), and it is a concept that, given the nexus of power relationships that shape all

encounters between students and canonical texts, has tended to promise more liberality, more openness, than it has delivered. If this is the case in all contexts where texts and readers meet, the scope for personal response in the (literature) examination room is far more circumscribed. As Tony Davies observed in relation to literature examinations in higher education a quarter of a century ago:

> The required 'discussion', seemingly no more than an extension in writing of the friendly open-ended dialogue of the tutorial, is in fact a monologue in which the student, to 'cover the question', is obliged both to reply 'in his or her own words' and to assume the position ('*we* find …') of the absent but watchful questioner. Given the complex intertextualities that have gone to produce a student's 'own words', the writing of a simple examination essay becomes a feat of multiple and simultaneous impersonation beside which *The Waste Land* looks like the performance of an amateur impressionist (Davies 1982: 39).

As Davies also notes, "most examination questions are in fact assertions or commands" (*ibid*.). The question on the *Richard III* paper enforces a series of assumptions about the play and about the candidates' reading(s) of the play. It asserts that "Richard use[s] language to deceive others and to hide his plans to become king." The student's task, then, is merely to explain *how* this happens. The play arrives pre-packaged, the task of understanding what is enacted already accomplished by the examiner. The student is invited to focus on a single character, but even here most of the interpretive work has already been done. Richard is presented as both knowable and known: his motives, his intentions, his ambitions and his methods are all presented as facts. All that remains for the student is to explore language as one of the methods that the character, so we are informed, uses. The focus on language here may be linked to the emphasis on "understanding the author's craft" in the National Curriculum (DfEE 1999: 49) and in the Literacy Strategy (DfEE 2001). If so, what is really quite bizarre is that the question transfers attention from the author's craft to the

character's. Richard, rather than being seen as a product of the author, a character created, at least in part, through and in language, has somehow become an autonomous user of language. There is, thus, no room in the exam question for interrogating the conception of "dramatic characters as recognizably 'real' people, where … characters are not an effect of text but autonomous entities" (Shepherd 1991: 91); no room, either, for a recognition that even the issue of Richard's name is problematic (in the early quarto editions, he appears as "Gloster"; see also Cloud 1991).

The test is, thus, predicated on the assumption that the student's "reading and understanding" of the play can be assessed through a task that concentrates on two short extracts from the script, that treats character as stable, unproblematic and known, and that treats the language of these extracts as the property of the character, the means whereby the character achieves planned goals (deceiving others and hiding his plans to become king).

On the remaining pages of the test booklet are printed the two extracts, each of which is prefaced by a piece of explanatory text, contained within a shaded box. The first extract is introduced thus:

> In this extract, Richard tells the audience his plans. He then talks to his brother, Clarence, who is being taken by Brakenbury to be imprisoned in the Tower (QCA 2006a: 3).

The candidate who reads this is entitled to feel somewhat confused. The task question asserts that "Richard use[s] language to deceive others and to hide his plans", yet the very next page announces that "Richard tells the audience his plans." Perhaps one is meant to infer that the audience is not included in the "others" to whom the question

refers. If so, this is not made explicit; moreover, such an inference seems to imply that what Richard says to the audience provides transparent access to his soul. It is hard to maintain this, though, when the speaker reveals that he is "subtle, false and treacherous." Richard's opening soliloquy, the last part of which is included in the extract, sets up a relationship with the audience which does not seem to be characterised by simple plain-dealing. It begins with a statement that simultaneously locates the historical moment (after the battle of Tewkesbury) and announces the speaker's allegiance to the victorious faction: "Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this son of York." Or does it? The first line, seeming to be a semantically and syntactically complete statement, misleads the audience: what it means is utterly transformed by the introduction of the (unexpected) main verb at the start of the second line: the season that is "now" is not winter but summer, brought on by the sun/son of York. The surface meaning, then, is sunny enough. But the reason that the first line of the play is often quoted in isolation is not through ignorance of the second line: it is because the first line allows Richard to reveal his (present) discontent before swiftly concealing it behind the punning mask, the correction offered by the second line. So language is both showing and hiding, and Richard is both telling the truth and lying. Even in his soliloquies – especially in his soliloquies – transparency is not on offer. He is as playful (and as unreliable) as his theatrical ancestor, the Vice of the morality plays. (And here I am, too, entering into the spirit of the exam paper, playing the literary critical game, offering up an interpretation of Richard, a dash of close reading with just a hint of theatrical-historical context. But my words are not an exam rubric: you, dear reader, can reject my reading, or refine it, as you see fit.) What I am suggesting, however, is that, even within the discursive confines of traditional literary criticism, the examination task is

constructed of so crass a series of oversimplifications as to encourage an utterly banal (mis)reading of the text.

The contradiction between the task question and the introduction to the first extract is troubling for a much more fundamental reason than its oversimplification of Richard's character. As I have indicated above, the easiest way of resolving this contradiction is to assume that the question is directing the candidate to consider only the ways in which Richard uses language in relation to other "characters" within the play. So it is not just that Richard, for the purposes of this examination, is to be treated less as a character in a play and more as a (real) person; it is that the kind of play that *Richard III* is has been redefined by the exam paper. To encourage students to write about Richard's use of language while ignoring the ways in which the actor playing Richard uses language to develop a relationship with the audience is to transform the Renaissance drama into a different kind of theatrical animal altogether – less Shakespeare than Shaw, maybe. It puts the play behind a proscenium arch – and it does so because this is the only way that Richard can become domesticated, turned into a realist character, and the whole edgy business of his tricky, unreliable, mediating relationship with the audience ignored.

Matters don't become much more straightforward when we reach the second extract. Its explanatory gloss informs us that:

> In this extract, Buckingham and Richard carry out their plan to trick the Mayor into believing that Richard deserves to be king. The Mayor and citizens are on the stage watching and listening.

Again, one might want to ask, what about the other audience? How does this audience-on-stage alter the way that the wider audience reads what is being enacted?

The mention of the stage is, nonetheless, the most explicit acknowledgement in the examination paper that *Richard III* is a play. The problem is that this gesture sits uneasily, particularly in this scene, with the instruction to focus on language. Words, in *Richard III*, are part of embodied action. Richard's act, here, does not start when he opens his mouth; it starts when he appears:

> *Enter RICHARD aloft, between two Bishops*
> *Mayor*. See where his Grace stands, 'tween two clergymen;
> *Buck*. Two props of virtue for a Christian Prince,
> To stay him from the fall of vanity;
> And see, a book of prayer in his hand
> (III.vii.93ff., Arden edition, ed. Antony Hammond, 1981, London: Methuen).

The decision not to start the extract from this point but from fifteen lines later in the scene would seem perverse if the intention were to enable students to write about Richard's performance, about the act that he and Buckingham put on for the benefit of the Mayor and citizens. The scene has been stage-managed: where Richard stands (between two bishops) and the prop he holds (the prayerbook) are as much a part of the designed effect as are the words he speaks. When, a few lines into the extract, Richard asks "Else wherefore breathe I in a Christian land?" the impact of the rhetorical question depends on the iconography of his appearance. The insistence of the examination paper that students write about Richard's use of language amounts to a denial of the multimodal semiotic resources of drama. There is a kind of absurd Platonism at work here. Examiners tend to complain grumpily about candidates who write about Shakespeare plays as if they were films – about *Romeo and Juliet* as if Tybalt shot Mercutio on Verona Beach and the lovers' eyes met across a crowded fishtank, and so on. But at least such candidates approach the plays as drama, as texts instantiated in performance. Might this not be preferable to an approach that neglects entirely the materiality of the drama?

Those responsible for the examination paper are quite explicit about their approach to task-setting:

> The reading task on the Shakespeare paper is a test of prepared reading via a single task. It tests the same set of skills as are assessed on the unseen texts on the Reading paper. The emphasis is on pupils' ability to orchestrate those skills and demonstrate their understanding of, and response to, the Shakespeare text they have studied, and so the assessment focuses are not separately identified.
> Each task targets one of the following areas related to the study of a Shakespeare play:
> ■ character and motivation;
> ■ ideas, themes and issues;
> ■ the language of the text;
> ■ the text in performance.
> In 2006, the areas targeted for assessment are:
> *Macbeth* character and motivation;
> *Much Ado About Nothing* ideas, themes and issues;
> *Richard III* the language of the text (QCA 2006b: 29).

The assumption, then, is that it is both possible and desirable to target separate areas for assessment – that to set a single task on the play will enable all candidates to demonstrate "their understanding of, and response to, the Shakespeare text they have studied." There is, I think, a further assumption in the use of the word "text" here. It is that the object of study is, in effect, the words on the page. The script is seen as primary, its instantiation in performance as merely secondary. The "text in performance" thus becomes one of four possible areas of assessment – the one area that was not assessed in any of the tasks set in 2006. Shouldn't all students be encouraged – expected, even – to make sense of any Shakespeare play primarily as a text in performance?

I want to turn now to consider how the examination question was answered by one candidate. This is what he wrote:

> In the opening Richard mention how he going to set his two brothers Clarence and King Edward in deadly hate one against the other. But then Clarence enters guarded by Brakenbry, soon to be sent to the tower. When then Richard ask the question "Brother good day what means this armed gard that waits upon your grace" when he knows why those guard are there and where his going to. Richard know this because Clarence was not the one that was going to kill the king. It was Richard York or GLOUCESTER.
>
> In Act 3 scene 7 Buckingham say to Richard that you should take the trone that It in his blood to becom King But Richard dicives [deceives] the mayor by re[fu]sing and it is his fault. This makes the mayor think that Richard shold have the throne and Richard being King will not bee a bad thing but a good thing

The script was awarded two out of a possible eighteen marks. This placed it in the middle of the lowest band, which the published mark scheme characterises in this way:

> A few simple facts and opinions about what Richard says or does in these extracts, eg in the first, *he tells lies*, and in the second, *he is acting*, though some misunderstanding may be evident. Parts of the extracts are retold or copied and answers may be only partly relevant (QCA 2006b: 56).

It is not my intention here to mount a defence of Billy's examination script. It may well be that the marker was correct to judge his answer as a Band 1 response. What is it, though, about Billy's answer that is deficient? Is it his reading and understanding of the play? Or is it his ability to write a literary critical essay in examination conditions? When, for example, he quotes Richard's faux-naif question to Clarence, he is doing considerably more than mentioning a "few simple facts about what Richard says or does"; but what he cannot yet do is to achieve a level of explicitness about what is going on in this exchange. Likewise, when he capitalises "Gloucester" in the final sentence of his first paragraph, he is, I think, attempting to draw attention to the layers of irony in the trap that Richard has set: King Edward, as both Richard and the audience know, is imprisoning the wrong "G." But the way that Billy has

attempted to communicate this – through typography – will not do in an essay where the expectation is that knowledge will be rendered explicit in well-formed sentences. He both knows a great deal more than he says, and also has problems finding an appropriate way of saying what he knows within the discursive constraints of the examination essay.

I make these claims partly on the internal evidence of Billy's examination essay, but chiefly on the basis of what I observed of Billy in the year preceding his *Richard III* exam. Billy is a student at Wharfside School, an inner-city, coeducational, multicultural comprehensive school in East London. Between April 2005 and May 2006, I spent time observing and video-recording Billy's class in their English lessons. I want to move on now to some of the data collected during that period. Using these data, I want to make two linked but nonetheless separable arguments: first, that what Billy wrote in his exam essay cannot be taken as an accurate gauge of his "understanding of, and response to, the Shakespeare text [he has]studied," as is proposed in the QCA's *English test mark scheme* (QCA 2006b); second, that an adequate account of Billy's reading and understanding of the play must attend to the different literacy practices of the urban English classroom.

In January 2006, as Billy's class was nearing the end of their work on the play, students were asked to write a series of entries in Richard's diary. The assignment was intended to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on the main events of the play and on how these events might be represented in Richard's consciousness. Billy made the decision to word-process his "Richard III Diary," as he called it,

choosing a font that looked more like cursive handwriting. His second entry covers the wooing of Anne:

> **Dear Diary**
> Arr I love you I feel so sorry for you blah de blah de blah, whatever. At last my persuasive words have got Anne in the deep palms of my hands. I feel great everything is going just as I planned. Will I keep her? … For the moment I will because she helps me become more powerful more powerful than I fought.

What Billy wrote in his exam essay might have appeared to be not much more than narrative, a not very skilful retelling of what happens in the extracts; what Billy writes here reveals much more of his reading of the play. He understands that the simple dichotomy of war and peace, battle and courtship, which Richard presented in the soliloquy with which the play begins, is an illusion: both offer paths to power. He remembers the cool cynicism of Richard's "I will have her but I will not keep her long," echoed here in his question, "Will I keep her?" He has a sense of Richard's ability to manipulate others, largely through his "persuasive words." And the diary form enables Billy to communicate something of Richard's self-awareness, his relishing of his own bravura performance. But it is the first sentence of this entry that I find compelling. Billy's use of direct speech, as his Richard records his wooing voice, dissolves in the mockery of "blah de blah de blah, whatever." The effect, the jolting, shocking transition in mid-sentence, mirrors Richard's "Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?/Was ever woman in this humour won?" (I.ii.233-4): as soon as Anne has left the stage, he steps outside his role as lover, revelling in his power, inviting the audience to join him in admiring his performance and in the calculating misogyny of his attitude to Anne.

Behind the words of Billy's diary entry lies a history of his – and his class's – engagement with this moment in the play. Two months earlier, as preparation for their

first reading of the scene between Richard and Anne (Act 1, scene 2), students were asked to participate in group improvisations. The brief presented to them by Maeve, their English teacher, was straightforward:

> Teacher: OK, we can do this quite quickly, all right, and you can be in a three and you can be in a three, what I want you to do, just very quickly, I want you to do a very quick role play
> Billy: Yes!
> Teacher: I want one person, listen, one person has to persuade the other person to do something that they really, really, really, really don't want to do, OK, so I want you think about, you can be anything, anything at all, not want to do whatever it is you decide and I don't want it to end up with punching somebody and forcing them to do something [Nazrul throws punch and makes appropriate sound effect] you have to do it with words … (lesson transcript, 22 November 2005).

The activity, involving rehearsal time and group presentations, occupied the final twenty minutes or so of the lesson. As break-time neared, Billy volunteered, with a little prompting from Jo, to perform a second improvisation:

> Jo: Billy, come on, do your other one then
> Billy: Come on, then. We need some glue, or sellotape
> Teacher: No, no, I think that sounds too complicated
> Kemi: It's about drugs, it's about drugs
> [Billy is already moving around the room, as is Jo, who is moving chairs to establish the set. Billy is using a piece of file paper to construct a gigantic spliff as he moves]
> Billy: it's about persuading someone to take it … miss, we got blu-tak
> Teacher: OK. Come on then hurry up
> [Lucy gets out of her seat and joins Billy]
> Teacher: We've only got four minutes and I'm on duty and we have to put the tables back
> Billy [throwing the spliff to Lucy]: You can persuade me to
> [Billy and Lucy take up their positions, sitting at right angles to one another, Lucy holding the spliff]
> ?Ali: 3, 2, 1
> Teacher: Go!
> Lucy [thrusting the spliff towards Billy]: You wanna take it
> Billy: Nah, nah, look, no
> Lucy: Just take it
> Billy: No
> Lucy: It's not gonna kill you, just take it
> Billy: No, man
> Lucy: Take it

Billy: What, what will my par–
Lucy: Your parents!
Billy: What would they think if--
Lucy: Your parents are on holiday
[As the conversation continues, Lucy turns to face Billy more directly. Her eye contact is hard to evade.]
Billy: Yeah …
Lucy: They're in another country, just take it
[Billy shakes his head]
Lucy: Take it
[Billy shakes his head, but his hand is reaching out towards the spliff]
Lucy: Now!
[Billy takes the spliff]
Billy: If I pass out or something ..
Lucy [turns her head away, rolling her eyes upwards]: I'll run you to the hospital, la la la, whatever. Just take it.
[Billy draws on the spliff, coughs, stands up]
Billy: Man, that shit's strong!
[General laughter] (*ibid.)*.

There is an unmistakeable playfulness about this moment. It is the end of the lesson, and the teacher allows the students to push boundaries. The focus of the improvisation – the consumption of illegal substances – is not the usual stuff of school learning; Billy and Lucy have grabbed the attention of their audience before they even begin, and they maintain it thereafter. At best, though, this belongs in a box labelled citizenship, or personal, social and health education, doesn't it? What does it have to do with Shakespeare?

At the risk of stating the obvious, there is a fair amount of playfulness about *Richard III*, too. By this I mean more than the fact – largely ignored in the examination paper which confronted Billy later in the year – that it is a play, that language is embodied in action, that actors take on roles; I also want to draw attention to Richard's playfulness, to the way in which he adopts roles – the soldier, the lover, the reluctant king, the victim of disability – and presents these roles to us, the audience, demanding that we admire him for his skill as a performer and for the power of his performance, that is, for the power that is both demonstrated in and created through the performance. Like the Cat in the Hat (and the mediaeval Vice), Richard is constantly saying:

> Look at me!
> Look at me!
> Look at me NOW!
> It is fun to have fun
> But you have to know how (Seuss 1957: 18).

Billy and Lucy are having fun, too. What licenses their improvisation is not merely the indulgence of the teacher at the end of the lesson but the fact of the role play, the fact that they are thus enabled to play with other identities, to experience the power and the pleasure of being someone else. At the same time, they are learning about persuasion. They have understood, too, that the teacher's instruction to "do it with words" meant simply that physical coercion is not allowed: Lucy's performance is one in which she draws on resources of language but also, simultaneously, on gesture, gaze, posture. What she achieves with language, too, is not merely through the words she chooses but also through tone and inflection. Thus, for example, she crushes Billy's final objection ("If I pass out or something …") with the withering, casual superiority of "I'll run you to the hospital, la la la, whatever." It seems plausible to me that two months later, when Billy was thinking how to represent in diary form

Richard's seduction of Anne, he was able to draw on Lucy's line to help him shape the sneering, searing mockery of "I love you I feel so sorry for you blah de blah de blah, whatever."

Test literacy, as George Bush knows, is justified in functional terms. Quite different claims can be made for the literacy practices outlined above – claims that, I think, are central to the justification for English as a school subject. The act of improvisation, like the literary text they are reading, enables students to imagine and inhabit other possible selves, other possible worlds. Billy, Lucy and their peers are exploiting the doubleness of the fictive, of play, where simultaneously things are and are not, to engage in the serious work of cultural making, work that is semiotically rich and ethically important.

But did the improvisation help Billy to read (and understand) *Richard III*? The problem with the question is that it might depend on what one meant by reading, how one thought that understanding might be demonstrated, and what one understood by "*Richard III.*" The testing regime assumes that *Richard III* is, in essence, language-as-print, the words on the page; it treats performance as accidental. Moreover, it assumes that a student's reading (and understanding) can be assessed on the basis of the student's ability to produce a particular kind of written text. The good reader, the one who would be awarded full marks, would produce a piece of writing that looked like this:

> Coherent analysis of how Richard deceives others and hides his plans to become king, eg in the first extract, *to make himself appear innocent, almost naïve, he pretends to really believe the king is having Clarence imprisoned because his name is George*, and in the second, *Richard gives the impression that being king would be a*

> *great hardship by using words like 'impose' and 'yoke'*. Appreciation of the effects of features of language, eg in the first extract, *he is sarcastic when he describes the Queen as 'fair, and not jealous' as previously he had said the opposite*, and in the second, *Richard plays with words when he says 'I do suspect I have done some offence', because the audience are fully aware of his real offences, but he knows the mayor isn't and is going to offer him the throne*. Comments and precisely selected references to the text integrated into well-developed argument (QCA 2006b: 56).

The description of a band 6 answer certainly looks very different from the exam paper handed in by Billy. And there are – as indicated in this descriptor – things that Billy needs to learn about forms of discursive writing if he is to prosper within the education system, if he is to acquire the capital of qualifications. But to admit that what Billy lacks is skill in producing in writing "coherent analysis" and "well-developed argument" is not at all the same as to concede that it is his *reading* that is deficient, nor that he has failed to grasp the *ideas* that are outlined above.

Whereas reading and writing in the examination are resolutely individual and monomodal pursuits, in Maeve's classroom texts are explored collectively, over time, in and through an ensemble of multimodal resources. Something of this has already been suggested by the glimpse into the class's involvement in the production of improvised scenarii. Students talked about, analysed and annotated still images derived from a wide range of productions of the play; they watched, discussed and compared two film versions, starring Olivier (1955) and McKellen (1995); they recapped and predicted and argued and questioned; they read the script – and they talked about it. Their experience of reading *Richard III* involved the reading of still and moving images, DVDs and the Cambridge School Shakespeare edition of the play, unrehearsed readings and rehearsed improvisations.

Here they are, a little over a week after the lesson in which they had improvised the role plays, reading Act 1, scene 2. Anne's long opening speech is read by Jenny, and then Maeve interrupts:

> Teacher: OK, who's she cursing? She's cursing several people – hands up .. Billy
> Billy: {Richard
> Kemi: {his wife
> Teacher: yes, why is she cursing him?
> Billy: because he's the one that killed him her husband
> Teacher: right, good, so she starts off by cursing Richard, then who else does she curse?
> Billy: his wife
> Teacher: she curses his wife and?
> Billy: his family – baby
> Teacher: his child, yeah, she says that the child's going to be, she cursing the child,
> Billy: she says she'll make it be born early, so that it's deformed
> Teacher: yeah, she says the mother will take fright when she sees it, so she's cursing Richard and the wife that he's going to marry, which is interesting, because who's he planning to marry?
> (lesson observation, 1 December 2005).

Billy's eagerness to offer answers to Maeve's questions, like his vocal enthusiasm for role play in the earlier lesson, is entirely characteristic. Other students sometimes make more considered contributions, but Billy can be relied upon to keep the conversation going. Because of this, he has an important effect on the dynamic of the classroom, on the learning that happens in the group. But what should not be overlooked is the evidence that his responses provide for his understanding of the speech that Jenny has just read. There is a pause after Maeve's last question; once again, it is Billy who responds, though what he has to say does not at first glance seem to be an answer:

> Billy: Shakespeare, Shakespeare's a good writer, isn't he?
> Teacher: he is good [laughs, then pauses] tell me why you think that?
> Billy: because his play's <u>awesome</u>
> Teacher: awesome [pause]

Teacher: when Anne says, 'If ever he have a wife', why does she put it like that?
Billy: {because she might be his wife
Kemi: {because he's bare butters
Billy: because he's ugly, ugly {deformity
Teacher: {so what does she think?
Foyzur: nobody's ever going to marry him
Teacher: nobody's ever going to marry him – she curses his wife if he ever has one but he never will because he's so ugly … why's that significant in terms of what's about to happen?
Kemi: because she falls in love with his personality
Teacher: yeah …
Kemi: even though the personality's butters as well
Teacher: yeah
Billy: butters, man
Teacher: excellent, OK (*ibid.*).

Billy is, I think, in a fairly self-conscious way, playing the role of the good student here. He offers a scholarly translation of Kemi's description of Richard's appearance – so "bare butters" is glossed by him first as "ugly", then as "deformity." (Kemi, by the way, is the class's conspicuous high achiever: her use of urban slang is equally self-conscious, her way of asserting a "street" identity at the same time as demonstrating her grasp of the play. One can see, too, in this exchange, how Kemi and Billy are both competing for the floor, for the right to speak, at the same time as supporting – and supplementing – each others' reading of the play.) But Billy's appraisal of Shakespeare as a good writer is not just part of his act; it is a touchingly direct, honest – and thoughtful – response to *Richard III*. It is also a deep answer to Maeve's question, which, though ostensibly about Richard's intention to marry Anne, is encouraging her students to think about the construction of the scene, to consider how Shakespeare heightens the drama of the confrontation between Anne and Richard.

If we consider Billy's contributions to this lesson in the light of the National Curriculum attainment target for reading, quoted above, we might conclude that Billy

"show[s] understanding of the ways in which meaning and information are conveyed" in the play, and that he can "articulate personal and critical responses" to it, "showing awareness of [some of its] thematic, structural and linguistic features" (DfEE 1999).

One last thought. The dominance of the assessment regime reinforces the assumption that learning happens in the individual, the test subject. Is it, then, that Billy is able to achieve these things in the context of the activity, the literacy practices, of the English classroom? Or is it that these things are achieved by the class, in activities to which Billy has contributed? And what would be the consequences for our thinking about assessment if we were able to conceptualise learning as a fully social, distributed activity?

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1 The research data on which I draw are derived from a longer-term research project, focusing on the ways that literature is read in English classrooms in an inner London secondary comprehensive school. Names of students, the teacher and the school have been pseudonymised.

2 The PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) is a one-year course of initial teacher education, leading to the award of qualified teacher status and entry into the teaching profession.