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The gappiness of Shakespeare

Performative possibilities

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In this paper I outline a performative approach to working with Shakespeare in a Waldorf school, relating this to Smith's (2019) notion of Shakespeare's 'gappiness'. The paper is based on over 30 years of experience, the most recent being in 2021. It locates this teaching and learning in the context of block teaching, an innovative method used in some Waldorf schools. The paper offers a theoretical account of the performative approach based on the notion of learning in a community of practice and the immersion in unfamiliar landscapes of practice – in this case working with Shakespeare's Macbeth- in relation to the developmental tasks of 17-18-year-old school students. The workshop process in classroom learning is then described. The concept of 'gappiness' is related to reader-response theory and in particular to Iser's (1972) notion of empty spaces.

1 Introduction

Emma Smith (2019), one of the most influential contemporary Shakespearean scholars, discusses why we still read and perform Shakespeare and highlights what she calls his gappiness. The primary reasons why Shakespeare is still around in our consciousness and why we work with his texts she argues, are not really his status as world literature, his technical brilliance, his ability to encapsulate the human condition, his vast vocabulary etc., but actually because of

> Shakespeare's silences, inconsistencies and, above all, the sheer and permissive gappiness of his drama...Shakespeare's plays are incomplete, woven of what's said and what's unsaid, with holes in between. This is true at the most mundane level: what do Hamlet, or Viola, or Brutus look like? A novelist would probably tell us; Shakespeare the dramatist does not…Gappiness is Shakespeare's dominant and defining characteristic" (2019, p. 2).

As the theatre director Iqbal Khan (2019) explains in a podcast, it is not just the gaps and but the absence of a definitive authorial voice to signal to the reader what she should imagine, but rather a multiplicity of voices:

> Actually, which is why it's so important to do plays like Shakespeare's, that—I mean the glory of Shakespeare is the absence of Shakespeare in his plays. That there is no authoritative perception, that there is this multitude of voices vying for authority and it's a very complex experience […] And what Shakespeare does is he selects fragments that suggest the complexity of a mind or the complexity of human experience. These collections of fragments aren't necessarily consistent. They don't tell the same story. What they do is they enrich the picture, and I think they represent a truer picture of what I see as the experience of living, of being human.

This gappiness prompts the imagination, leaves scope for identification and interpretation, invites us to visualize, frees us to enact, calls us forth to participate, identify and embody. In other words, gappiness is a crucial element in performative approaches. Gappiness is something that Schewe (2020) could add to his characterization of the performative (though he would have to make a gap in his nutshell to allow access, or excess).

In this article I hope to show how Shakespeare's gappiness can enhance performative aspects of the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in a class 12 in a Waldorf school in Germany. Firstly, I locate the idea of gappiness within reader-response theory. Then, in order to understand the full context, I explain the advantages of block teaching as a system that supports performative approaches generally in second language teaching. Then I locate this pedagogy theoretically in a frame of learning community theory. In the final part of the paper, the workshop character of the teaching and learning is explained.

2 Reader-response theory and its gaps

Smith's notion of gappiness has a theoretical heritage, that she does not refer to but is surely aware of, namely reader-response theory, referred to in German as *Rezeptionsästhetik* (Iser, 1994, Warning, 1994) and its postmodern, transactional mode. Within the hermeneutic tradition, reader-response theory basically focuses on understanding the process of interaction between author, text and reader, in which the reader is acknowledged as having more than just the passive task of decoding the author's messages in the text. What is of interest is the reader's response. This is shaped by that reader's individual and culturally specific lifeworld dispositions. Readers can make sense of the text and actively make meaning through engaging with it (Tyson, 2006). As Jauß (1994) puts it, "in the triangle of author, work and public, the latter is not only the passive part … but itself a history-forming energy. The historical life of the literary work is inconceivable without the active participation of its addressee" (p.127).

Post-modern reader-response theory is particularly interested in the concretization of the reader's affective and aesthetic response within the context of the community of readers

he/she belongs to. Rosenblatt (1978 and 1983) distinguishes between efferent and aesthetic reader responses; the former being the semiotic transmission of information and the latter being an emotional and embodied response. Both Rosenblatt (1978) and Fish (1980) have therefore highlighted the aesthetic (i.e. based on sensory and embodied experience) and transactional (Crotty, 1998) responses of the reader to the text. Following Crotty's interpretive hermeneutics, an empathic reception (can I experience what the author is saying?) leads to a dialogic reception (can I relate this to other experiences and contexts?) and can open the reader up to a transactional reception (what does this do to me personally? And what meaning does it give text today?), which can change both reader and the reception of the text.

A significant aspect of reader-response theory is Iser's (1972, 1994) notion of the empty spaces, or the gaps in the text. He refers to these as the hinges or points of articulation in the text because these gaps invite and enable the reader to respond, imagine and relate to the meanings in the text, thus adding a new dimension to their reception. This is akin to Gadamer's (2013) fusion of horizons between reader's horizon of meaning and that of the text. This is exactly the pedagogical significance of Shakespeare's gappiness.

Surkamp (2019) has shown how reader-response theory (Rezeptionsästhetik) has contributed to recent foreign language teaching theory, in particular highlighting that

> This means that not only receptive and cognitive skills play a role in the comprehension of texts, but that the reading process also involves additional skills characterized by productive, affective and imaginative moments (p. 84).

Hunfeld (1996) is one of the authors who have argued that text comprehension is a fusion of the student's horizon of expectations, experiences and opinions and that of the text. In particular he adds a postcolonial perspective by emphasizing the risks in making assumptions about our ability to 'read' and 'know' the otherness of the cultural *Other* and that learning a foreign language using authentic literature helps reduce the colonial tendency of simplifying and thereby reducing the Other to language we can more easily grasp.

3 Block teaching

Unlike the practice in most Waldorf schools, English and Spanish are taught in my school as second languages (here abbreviated to L2) in blocks , rather than in three, 45-minute lessons every week. A block means that the students in classes 1 to 8 (i.e. between the ages of 6-14) have daily lessons in one of the two L2 languages of 45 minutes for four weeks and then swap to the other language. In the upper school, from classes 9 to 12, the time allocation increases to 90 minutes a day for three weeks and there are usually 3 to 4 blocks per school year. This

system allows students to be immersed in the language and, particularly in the middle and upper school and provides a timeframe for focusing on specific topics, themes, and projects, such as work on a Shakespeare play. I have characterized this approach as involving a shift from teaching the language to learning *in* the language (see Rawson in this journal), in which the primary focus is no longer becoming proficient in the target language but is directed towards topics that offer young people opportunities for exploring the themes that interest them. This enables them to address some of their developmental tasks, whilst becoming more proficient at using and understanding the language. It is a shift of focus, rather than a complete change.

If we see L2 teaching and learning in a Waldorf school as a field divided into a vertical continuum between a performative pole and reflective/analytical pole and on a horizontal continuum between a form/rules pole and a content pole (see figure 1 below), then in the first three school years, the focus lies in the segment between performative and content. In the middle school (classes 4 to 8) the focus moves along the continuum between form/rules and content (though many performative elements remain and some reflection is needed to understand the rules and forms). In the upper school, the focus shifts to content, and ranges along the vertical continuum between the performative and reflective poles (with short 'visits' to the rules/form on a 'need-to-know' basis).

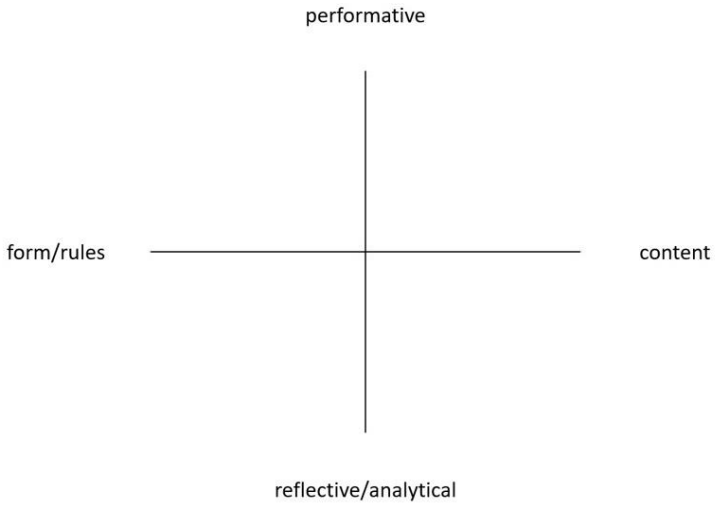

Figure 1: The field of L2 teaching and learning

In the upper school we address a series of themes in these blocks that vary from year to year but have a core that includes, apartheid literature (e.g. *Journey to Jo'Burg* by Beverly Naidoo), Shoa literature (e.g. *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levien), Native Americans (including the play *Toronto at Dreamers' Rock* by Drew Hayden Taylor), African American Experience (including literature such as *Home Going* by Yaa Gyasi), film, newspapers, growing up, gender and identity and Shakespeare. In all these blocks the aim is to awaken interest in a theme, offer

tools (including vocabulary, text-types and access to learning resources) and opportunities for applying what has been learned. This may involve turning a literary text into a radio play and recording it, analysing print newspapers and then producing one, with news and feature articles, interviews, sports, fashion, advertising, political comment, pictures and captions, layout and not least printing and collating up to 16 pages (see Sievers in this journal, and Sievers, 2017). It might mean conducting research and presenting orally or visually (poster), making a short film, creating and curating a collection of short stories, and in the case of Shakespeare, enacting scenes from a play. I will return to how this is done below.

4 Learning through participation in a learning community

My interpretation of the learning process in general and the language learning process in particular, which I have elaborated elsewhere (Rawson, 2021), is that learning occurs through intentional participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998). A learning community in a school has a specific set of practices, involves many shared experiences, regular routines and rituals, ways of being and working together, long-term relationships (the teacher stays with a class over many years) and has a set of common learning goals, in this case English as a second language. As I have discussed in my other paper in this journal, we can analyse the participation in a learning community using Rogoff's (1995) heuristic of three levels of learning through participation; simple participation in classroom practices (observing and joining in speaking, singing and other activities such as games etc.), guided application, which involves students being instructed and guided in learning to read and write in the language, to use of certain linguistic forms, scaffolded dialogues using given vocabulary, rules of grammar and syntax. Here the learners proceed from peripheral participation and the acquisition of constrained skills (Paris, 2005, Bransby and Rawson, 2020). The third level of participation involves appropriation, in which the involvement is so comprehensive that unconstrained skills, i.e., there is no upper limit as to the level of proficiency, can be learned. Furthermore, appropriation also means learning and embodying certain attitudes and habits of mind associated with the target language and the cultures that use it, thinking in the language and high levels of identification. The unconstrained nature of appropriation means that individual levels of attainment can continue growing lifelong in relation to the learner's interests and opportunities (I have been speaking German for thirty years and continue to increase my proficiency and cultural understanding). The block teaching system affords opportunities for all three modes of participation at different levels and in age-related ways.

Using the concept of learning in landscapes of practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2014), which emphasizes that boundaries and transitions between practices are particularly rich sites of

learning, we can see that the interruption of regular language lessons by project in which a performative approach (students spending most of the lessons in groups working with scenes from the play) can have this effect. As Rawson (2019) has shown, this boundary learning occurs when school students go on 3-week internships outside of school in the workplace, or during longer drama productions, or when teacher education students undertake long-term internships in schools (Rawson 2021).

The notion of sojourning in another community of practice refers to an intensive immersion, during which the learner participates in new practices in unfamiliar sites, thus embodying new bodily activities, language, sets of relationships and meaning and thus to new identities and sense of belonging. For the duration of the immersion, the learner builds a new, temporary identity. On re-entering the familiar learning community in school, this new stance, position and identity offers a new perspective on the stances that pertain in the 'old' learning community, even if this is not permanent, but it sufficient to provide a new perspective. Sojourning is distinguished from being a tourist, which metaphorically refers to a superficial participation, in which the existing identity and position is retained and the new practice remains strange, and little appropriation, in Rogoff's sense, occurs.

I argue that the blocks offer opportunities for immersion in classroom practices conducted in the target language. This applies in the first three classes and again in upper school, when the students immerse in topics, projects and works of literature, though probably not always as profoundly as work experience practicals and drama projects.

5 Developmental tasks

The term developmental tasks was coined by the American sociologist Robert Havighurst (1982), drawing on Erik Erikson's classic work on youth psychology, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968), to refer to the social expectations on youth (in white, middle and working class America in the 50s and 60's – think of James Dean in the film *Rebel Without a Cause*), that mark the transition to adulthood. The German sociologist Klaus Hurrelmann has taken up this notion in his work on socialization theory, modified and applied it to socialization and the development of the person in the youth phase of the life course (Hurrelmann & Quenzel 2012). In his theory of productive reality formation each life phase is characterized by a dynamic engagement with intrinsic developmental needs related to the body's maturation and the psychological processes that accompany these and extrinsic requirements of school, parents, society and so on. The outcome of this ongoing process of 'productive reality formation' is the emergence of an I-identity.

Drawing on social practice theory, Grotlüschen (2004) has developed the notion of expansive learning to describe intrinsically motivated learning that occurs when the learner feels that the educational situation affords opportunities to realize her biographical interests and that afford her own agency in learning. Defensive learning, on the other hand, occurs when students' motivation for learning are extrinsic, when they learn because they have to, to avoid stress, to get the necessary grades, etc.

Bransby and Rawson (2020) have extended the model of developmental tasks to add biographical intentions to the requirements of intrinsic and extrinsic needs and expectations. They add a third source of developmental tasks, the biographical intentions and interests of the individual learner.

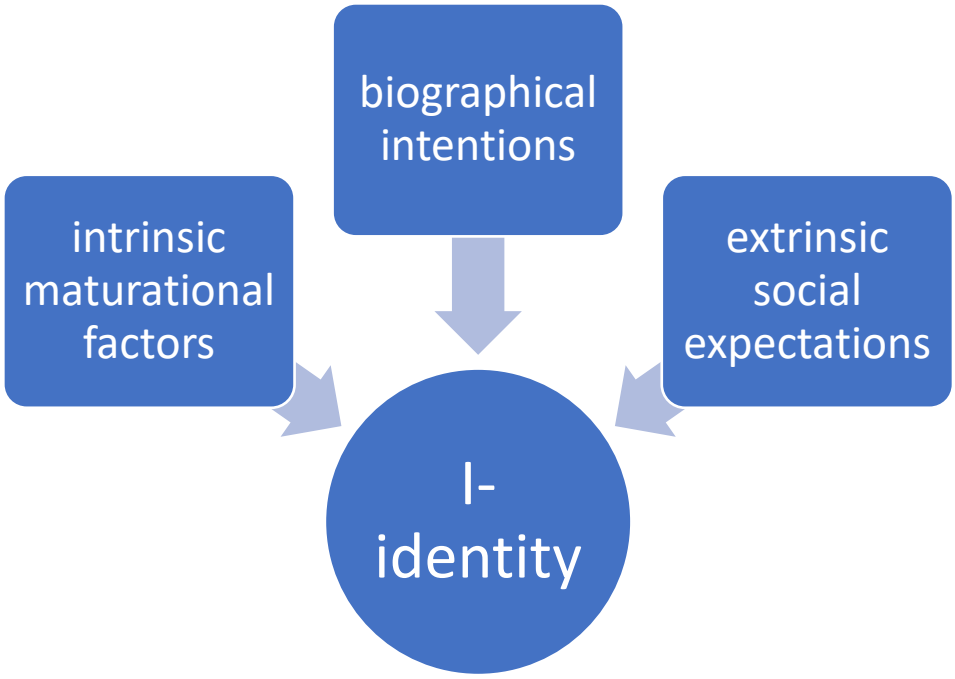

Figure 1: Three sources of developmental tasks and their ongoing productive outcome as I-identity.

In general, the educational task is to provide learning spaces and situation in which young people can engage with their developmental tasks. L2 teaching shares this aim and does so within the context of the L2 lessons.

6 Drawing the threads together

Let me translate this theoretical account of learning across different practices into the L2 situation. The student is part of a class or learning group as learning community. One of the regular sub-practices within this community are the English lessons, in which English is spoken and a series of activities relating to learning English and various cultural aspects are shared with a teacher (or sometimes two, when teacher students participate). The block method

provides an intensity of immersion and the guided participation can lead to language skills and the appropriation of cultural knowledge. The block system in the upper school affords a lively experience of sojourning; for three weeks we are journalists producing a newspaper, making a film, understanding a complex piece of literature through translating it into another medium etc. In a drama production this process is further intensified through enactment, even when only scenes are played in a workshop process, since opportunities for actual theatre productions are limited.

My contention is that expansive learning is more likely to occur in a literature lesson in English as a foreign language when the learners' aesthetic response is called for, rather than their efferent response, which always has the element of identify the 'right' answer to comprehension questions, the 'correct' interpretation. Their aesthetic response is prompted when they get up, take on a role and enact a scene. Shakespeare's gappiness and their own gaps in understanding the text allow considerable scope for creativity and identification. On the basis of such embodied experiences, a rich reflective process can take place in which the actions of the characters in the play, their own identifications and opinions on the themes (in Macbeth, we are dealing with fate and agency, the nature of evil and fear, the relationship between nature and the human world etc.) and their own biographical interests.

Bearing in mind that the pedagogical aims (Rawson, 2021) have the following priorities; firstly the development of the person, then language competence and literacy (in the case of a Shakespeare play, these two latter aspects, for example in the context of English Abitur in Hamburg, mean being able to analyse literary means, stylistic devices and their effects on the audience/reader and discussing the play and its themes in appropriate text forms). My experience of using the performative approach outlined below for over 30 years is that this way of working enhances the learning motivation of the students and thus the development of the person as well as their language competence.

7 The workshop process in the Shakespeare block

I prefer a schools' edition of the chosen play, such as the Oxford School Shakespeare – I use here the example of Macbeth – because this offers a series of introductory texts, brief character descriptions, synopsis of the plot and a readable text. Each scene is introduced with a short summary, e.g. "King Duncan hears good news of the battle. Banquo and Macbeth have fought valiantly against his enemies, and the king rewards Macbeth with a new title." The text has simple explanations of some of the most unfamiliar vocabulary. Furthermore, these editions have short general sections about Shakespeare's language and the Globe Theatre. All of these aspects provide students with the key resources they need.

In a previous block I introduce the class to background information about Shakespeare's life and theatre and briefly introduce historical themes relevant to the play (e.g. kingship, medieval world view, the role of women, religion in Shakespeare's times) and practice Shakespearean English by reciting sonnets and passages from other texts. In the Shakespeare block itself, I briefly introduce the play and divide it into scenes of similar length, allocating them to groups, with always one more student than roles in the scene (in the event of absences and as 'director'). The students take their scene and start working with it (i.e. they locate a free space in which they can work since the classroom can at best accommodate two groups acting their scenes at the same time). They also follow this sequence of work steps:

1. reading through the scene, establish who the characters are, what the location and situation is,
2. reading to establish plotting (where characters enter, exit, stand, move, using notation that has previously been learned),
3. choosing a role and start walking through the scene with book in hand,
4. regularly sharing understandings of the situation within the group,
5. trying to read the text (with considerable tolerance of ambiguity) and accompany it with gestures,
6. summarizing to the others in the class (usually at the beginning of the lesson when all are together) what is happening in their scene, what the issues are,
7. tracking the themes in the scene (ambition, regicide and the impact on nature, magic and prophecy etc.) and through the play in discussion with the other groups, since no one group has the whole play,
8. finally, the scenes are enacted (usually without costume, stage set, stage effects) as a workshop production (involving up to six different Macbeths).

8 Gaps in the language

The main challenge of working with Shakespeare is obviously the language. Therefore, it is important to establish from the start what the aim is. In contrast to working with other literature, we are not aiming to understand the text as such, but the relationships and interactions between the characters and the overall dramatic situation. Here the brief synopses of each scene and introduction to the characters are most helpful. These are supplemented by the teacher telling the story and discussing how the characters respond to the situation. In this performative 'reading', it is the enacting that is most important, not fine text analysis. Later, after this block the students can write essays and reflect on the play, skills they are familiar with from literature and historical studies.

Shakespeare's language is of course important and has a performative aspect in itself. This is looked at in a punctual way by focusing on certain passages. By selecting some key lines in the text that we explore in detail, the students gain a strong sense of the quality of Shakespeare's language. For example, we may take a speech such as:

> Methought I heard a voice cry, “sleep no more;
>
> Macbeth does murder sleep”, the innocent sleep,
>
> Sleep that knits up the ravell’d sleeve of care,
>
> The death of each day’s life, sore labour’s bath,
>
> Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,
>
> Chief nourisher in life’s feast. (Act 2 scene 2, p. 38-43)

Given the sheer unfamiliarity of the language, as teacher I explain key words verbally more than I would normally do in any text work in modern English (where students use dictionaries), so that the students can quickly get to the underlying meaning. I help the students ‘unpack’ each image and explain it as far as possible, then let the students put the ideas into their own words, draw images or make gestures to accompany the imagery in the text, all which gives the students insight into the dimensions of the languages and word pictures that Shakespeare creates. We also track how certain images weave through the play. A few lines after those just cited above, Macbeth expresses this powerful image:

> What hands are here? Ha: they pluck out mine eyes
>
> Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
>
> Clean from my hand? No: this my hand will rather
>
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
>
> Making the green one red. (Act 2, scene 2, p. 62-66)

There is so much to talk about even in these few lines, including Shakespeare’s acting directions built into the text: “what hands are these?”, “this my hand” , that more or less tell the actor what to do with his/her hands. Furthermore, Macbeth has a mind-boggling vocabulary (for a medieval Scottish laird), such as *multitudinous* and *incarnadine* (as a verb!) in one sentence of four words! The dictionary will only help so far with such language. In the end we have to imagine what Macbeth/Shakespeare means (pile upon pile of water, layers of sea water, turning the green of the water into crimson with so much blood etc.), which is also part of the gappiness. The students are familiar with poetry and metaphor. Now here in drama, the words have to be enacted, not only in their meaning but in their sound, shape and movement. We have to visualize the image and then act out of this visualization. And then in the context of the play, the two big images here - sleep has been murdered and nothing can wash the blood away - re-occur again and again, for example when Macbeth says:

> Strange things I have in head that will to hand,
>
> Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd. (Act3, Sc. 4. Lines 145-6)

To which Lady Macbeth replies, "*You lack the season of all natures, sleep*". And later we watch Lady Macbeth sleep walking and endlessly trying to wash the invisible blood from her hands in her madness, commenting with flat realism that just emphasizes the madness of it all (not in blank verse for once, but in prose) "Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?"

The students do not need to understand everything that is said; they can fill in the gaps in their imagination. And of course, it is also the gaps in the characters that draw our attention. How did Macbeth manage to write a letter (on the blasted heath following the battle) explaining the events and his meeting the witches and the prophecy, that we see Lady Macbeth reading just before the King arrives? Does Lady Macbeth persuade her husband, using her sexual charms and appeals to his ambition, or did Macbeth decide for himself? Did Lady Macbeth actually have a child that she plucked from her nipple and dashed its brains out, and how come the Macbeths have no children, unlike all the other leading characters, and how old are they anyway?

And there is the recurring issue of Macbeth's language and the ideas he expresses, for example through the complexity of his famous speech in Act 1 scene 7. Macbeth the slayer of Vikings, who is about be become the brutal, haunted murderer, with the habitus of a gangster, is also an existentialist philosopher poet…

> If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
>
> If it were done quickly…

Can we unpack this sentence and put into our own words what is he actually saying? Can we lay out the arguments or options he is weighing up?

> … If th'assassination
>
> Could trammel up the consequence and catch
>
> With his surcease, success, that but this blow
>
> Might be the be-all and the end-all…

With a little effort (and only the word *surcease* needs explaining really) we can understand the words, but can we follow the argument and the options being weighed?

Then we have a majestic, apocalyptic vision:

> And pity, like a naked newborn babe
>
> Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin hors'd
>
> Upon the sightless couriers of the air
>
> Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
>
> That tears shall drown the world…(Act 1, Sc. 7, lines 21-25)

Tease out the images and then see how we can portray them, in gesture, sound, picture. Other images Macbeth offers us, are in many ways much simpler, final and devastating (and remind us again that we are all actors in a play and all the world's a stage, idiots telling our tale):

> Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
>
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
>
> To the last syllable of recorded time:
>
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
>
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
>
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
>
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
>
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
>
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
>
> Signifying nothing. (Act 5, scene 5, 17-28)

In having discussions that arise out of such encounters, we engage in a process of shared self-reflection and describe how this affects us (I have documented such comments in Rawson, 2019). It is not a question of ticking off prescribed learning goals as achieved or giving correct interpretations. The use of we here is not rhetorical. My role as a teacher in this Shakespeare block is different to my usual role in the upper school, where I am frequently the facilitator and giver of feedback. In this work, as a teacher I am a participant – albeit a very experienced one – and the process is a genuine discovery for me. My insights and enthusiasm are part of my role and this does not inhibit my students from offering alternative interpretations because my basic position is that there is no definitive interpretation. The learning process also involves reflecting on our engagement with the challenges posed by a major work of art and in the process of which, each individual is called on to get up, step onto the stage and

cross a threshold. Can we achieve this in a school setting? Not often; but the workshop method in an English block in class 12 does increase the chances.

9 Conclusions

When we work with this play, the students (age 17/18) are young adults and their developmental tasks include all those listed above. However, working with Shakespeare in this way is not related to qualification (it is not really about learning English vocabulary or grammar), it is not really about attachment, identity or identification (who identifies with the Macbeths - or indeed any Shakespearean figure?), it is not really about becoming a consumer or participating in civil society. And it is certainly not merely a means to the end of learning English and getting good grades in exams, nor making the English lesson more interesting. So, what is it about?

It is about improvisation, acting and performance and these activities involve stepping up, taking a risk, going beyond the safe bounds of hard wrought identity and certainty. It is about engaging with a major work of art that is more than the sum of its parts (and when I teach art history we also enact Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, and perform Botticelli's *Primavera*), in ways never entirely explained by Sparknotes (or other published guides to text interpretation for school students), because the deeper you go, the more questions it raises and the fewer answers it provides. It is about engaging with Shakespeare's gappiness. This gappiness enables each student at whatever level they understand the play, or even just the scene and character they played, to have a sense that they have discovered something rich and strange and full of meaning that can only be revealed by doing it, and even then, something that cannot be reduced to facts and certainties. In fact, there is no right way of doing it, one cannot fail (unlike so much that happens in school). But the act of doing so, brings us into being (this even works for me as a teacher, even after doing this 30 or more times). This is a subjective judgement based on my observations as a teacher, but students also write in their feedback and reflections that they feel they have grown through the experience.

Emma Smith (2019) compares Macbeth (first performed in 1606) to Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* that was published in 1621 (which shows that Shakespeare was not influenced by Burton, but Burton was possibly influences by Shakespeare). Burton's book was really the start of the modern science of psychology because it explored (at great and often tedious length) the question of causation in human agency. It explores the origins and causes of melancholy and stands at the historical hinge articulating medieval beliefs in supernatural causes (witchcraft, magic, microcosm/macrocosm alignments) and an emergent scientific approach to medical knowledge (humours, the gall bladder, the blood but also interestingly our upbringing and childhood experiences). Both possible explanations – the

metaphysical/magical and the rational/material/scientific live side by side in Macbeth; either he was the agent of his own destiny or he was bewitched - or perhaps both at different times. The Protestant King James the 1st of England and James 6th of Scotland for whom the play was performed (and whose claim to the thrones of both Scotland and England went back to Banquo in the genealogy he had constructed) wrote a book about witchcraft and also encouraged science in his realm. The play does not discuss these issues, it merely performs them, leaving the biggest gap of all, wide open and unresolved and possibly unresolvable - why did he do it? Macbeth is not a 'who dunnit', it's a 'why has he done it'? The play asks; why do things happen? Macbeth, like all Shakespeare's great characters, has an afterlife. He and the others live on because they are unresolved, some more than others. They change because we change and have different gaps or questions about agency. It is this aspect that in my experience of doing this for over 30 years with students, provides them not with answers - Shakespeare never offers answers, any more than he offers morals or role models - but with the energy to ask questions yet also live with the ambiguity of possible answers. This is a developmental task on the threshold to adulthood, near the end of a school career, when the answers school can provide have started to lose their potency. It is up to them to pose the questions and find the possible answers.

Studying a Shakespeare play as a text is quite a different experience from this performative approach. Reading a classic work of literature or a modern novel will leave some students at the margins in a class of widely different academic abilities in the foreign language. The performative aspect, however, has a levelling effect on a class because no one finds the language easy. Some struggle because they are used to understanding texts; others are used to not understanding texts, they don't expect to understand straight away. They have developed strategies (if the teachers are alert to them and support them) of coping and getting by. Suddenly this skill of reading between the lines, intuiting meanings, picking up scraps of information to build fragmentary pictures, becomes an advantage. Shakespearean situations and characters are dramatic, which means they have an immediate appeal at a visceral level. They get it quickly; the witches, Macbeth and Banquo after the battle, the old king, the scheming Lady Mac, the horror of death, murder and regicide and nature out of balance, and so on. But sooner or later even the students who are usually able but find Shakespeare impossible, give up trying to follow word for word, let go and start trying to understand not with the head but with the body and heart. They cross the threshold from the head to the whole body and that is transformative, even in short moments.

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