



## Doing Shakespeare      Hans Jansen

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Although you won't think much of me as a contrary, rebellious teenager, and you'd probably be right about that, I did refuse to follow the flow when I was young. Where my schoolmates favoured pirate radio station Radio Veronica, I supported Radio Noordzee. For no other reason than that most of my schoolmates did not. I did not really like pop music.

When I was a student I actually disliked Shakespeare. Mainly because we were told to like him. After all, he was the greatest writer ever. Yeah. Whatever.

When I started giving theatre talks, about 25 years ago, I refused to do Shakespeare, though for a different reason. I had by then read his complete works (after I graduated, when I was unemployed and had little better to do), but I still knew relatively little about Shakespeare and renaissance theatre. Do not fear; that has changed, and I can talk to you today as a bit of an expert. I am merely trying to indicate that I can understand feelings of rebellion or rejection where it comes to the bard, whether that applies to you as teachers, or to your pupils at school who are unfamiliar with the theatre, and would not dream of approaching such a vested literary giant as Shakespeare in their investigations.

But rejection is difficult, not just in the light of his evident quality, his good stories, the broad humanity he brings to his characters and their diverse plight, and the humour and the inventiveness which generations of experience in Doing Shakespeare have built up in the Brits. In fact, you'd be silly NOT to do Shakespeare, when you see how easy it is to see his plays in the theatre, not to mention in the cinema or on the television screen.

This year alone, and so far in the current season only, we have a *Hamlet* here in Groningen (27 January), *As You Like It* (12 February), *Romeo and Juliet* (19 March), an adaptation of *King Lear* (3 April), and later in summer *Romeo and Juliet* in Diever (August-September). The situation may be different where you come from, but chances are that *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet* can be seen quite near you, and theatre directors will be only too happy to welcome a group of secondary school kids. Well-behaved ones, that is.

And yet it is curious to see how old these feelings of rejection are when it comes to Shakespeare. And it is interesting how this has led for centuries to a similar solution to doing Shakespeare: adaptation and alteration.

In May last year I bought a ticket for a *Design for Living*, a play from 1933 by Noel Coward, which I had seen before and enjoyed. To my great surprise, when I entered the theatre two weeks ago, the production programme was for *Blauwdruk voor een nog beter leven* by Ilja Leonard Pfeiffer. I assumed there was a mistake, even considered asking my money back. And then I read Pfeiffer's explanation. He had been asked to translate Coward, found the 80-year-old play dated, the dialogue impossible and the



jokes stale. As a result, he ended up writing his own version. And I decided to stay. Because I realized I was witnessing something special. It was precisely what happened to Shakespeare's plays 80 years after he wrote them. And I was intrigued by the parallel. It was as if I had gone back 330 years to the 1680s.

In the 1660s, 70s and 80s, after the Restoration of the monarchy and the admission of women to the English stage, Shakespeare's plays were deemed old fashioned. It may be a surprise to hear this, but their language had become dated and impenetrable, and there were, of course, not enough women in them. Besides, after the strictures of the Puritan Commonwealth, people longed for more joy and laughter. The reason that they still did Shakespeare was that for almost twenty years, during the closure of the theatres from 1642-1660, there had been no new playwrights, and no new plays, and consequently people had to fall back on the classics to fill the repertoire of the two official licensed theatres. *The Taming of the Shrew* was turned into the more topical *Sauny the Scot* (named after the comic part of Petruchio's servant in this adaptation) by John Lacy in 1667. In 1669 John Dryden rewrote Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with more female roles than the single Miranda Shakespeare had scripted for a boy actor. More female parts meant, well, more female parts, and actresses to show them off. Miranda has acquired a sister, Dorinda, and Caliban a sister Sycorax. *King Lear* was given a happy ending by Nahum Tate in 1681, with the main characters surviving, and Edgar marrying Cordelia.

In that sense it is odd to think that people ever doubted the authorship of the man from Stratford-upon-Avon. There's a curious paradox in the argument that a simple glover's son from the provinces could not be responsible for the brilliant works that are considered his. Not only were aristocrats like Edmund de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, strictly speaking equally provincial (and arguably so were Londoners, since London had between 100.000 and 200.000 inhabitants), few were interesting or brilliant. And as we have just seen, fifty years after his death, Shakespeare was considered old-fashioned, primitive and quaint.<sup>1</sup> It was not until his original texts had been restored, and published with explanations and a growing body of critical reflection in the nineteenth century, that mainly Americans started alternative theories: Celia Bacon was convinced about Sir Francis Bacon (c. 1857), Wilbur Zeigler thought of Marlowe in 1895, and J.T. Looney favoured Oxford in 1920.

It was not only snobbery which led to these theories, which are all ludicrous and faulty. (You will realise that I am what is called a Stratfordian.) There had also been a dawning realization that not all which was ascribed to Shakespeare was in fact his, or solely his. Indeed, critical opinion is now almost unanimously in favour of the idea that Shakespeare was part of a group of writers who often, though not always, collaborated on plays, improved older plays, and rewrote their work.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular, critical opinion was clear about the almost divine status of the author. An author, certainly one of genius like

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<sup>1</sup> From the Preface to Nahum Tate's *King Lear*, *Shakespeare Made Fit*, ed. Sandra Clarke, p. 296



Shakespeare, wrote perfect texts. These texts were gradually corrupted through copying, performance, poor memorial reconstruction by actors, and bowdlerizing by printers and censors. As a result, we now have various texts of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, to name but a few. And it is the task of scholars to recreate the perfect authorial original as well as possible. Academic editions such as those in the Arden series claim to be such reconstruction of the author's perfect creation. The words of the bard can be heard in their original and undebased form through these books.

But that view has changed. Anyone who looks at recent publications of Shakespeare's plays will find that their emphasis has changed. No longer is the text sacred in one definitive form. They contain multiple texts. They pay attention to the performance history, and to the text as a living organism that can change and adapt to different situations. The Complete Works in the Oxford series contains both *The History of King Lear* and *The Tragedy of King Lear*, which are now considered to be different plays. The Arden Shakespeare published three different texts of *Hamlet*. In addition, it is increasingly realized that Shakespeare did not write alone. *Henry VI part 1* is probably Shakespeare's reworking of an older play. The play of *Sir Thomas More*, which only survives in manuscript, contains two or three passages which Shakespeare added to improve the play. If these passages are indeed his, they are the only samples of his handwriting. The anonymous play of *Edward III* seems to contain Shakespearean scenes. These are all early plays. We know that Shakespeare collaborated with others near the end of his life. With George Wilkins he wrote *Pericles*, with John Fletcher *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, probably *Cardenio*, and *Henry VIII or All is True*. Thomas Middleton in his turn was responsible for parts of *Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth* as we know these plays now.

This places the genius of Shakespeare in a different perspective, and provides a different attitude to the texts of the plays as we have them. They are living organisms that were adapted to different playing conditions, for reading, for travelling, for new actors, for new audiences.

And that allows us to DO Shakespeare in new ways, just like Ilja Leonard Pfeiffer approached Noel Coward. In the professional theatre in the Netherlands this has recently led to *Hamlet vs Hamlet* by Tom Lanoye, which was a fascinating production, with a lot of Shakespeare, and lot of Tom Lanoye. I am personally looking forward to *Koningin Lear*, in April this year.

In February of last year, I had the honour to provide the introduction to a new stage play by Jisca van Son, an ambitious 18-year-old, who produced her own version of *Romeo and Julia*. In it the Veronese setting of the play had made way for contemporary Groningen. Romeo belonged to a very rich family and a circle of friends accustomed to travelling first class and staying in 5 star hotels, while Juliet, at the same school as Romeo, was the daughter of a struggling single mom, who could better be described as white trash. No wonder his folks were opposed to the union. The two went through part of their courtship using Whatsapp. Amazingly, the play contained an aged couple, Romeo and Juliet in old age, who looked back with fond memories to their courtship.



While I was amazed at this happy ending, old Romeo, who had been coughing throughout most of the scenes, died of pneumonia, leading old Juliet to commit suicide since she could not live without him. A wonderful modern take on the age old story. Jisca wrote this version as part of her *profielwerkstuk*, which consisted of a study of the play, an adaptation, and a production, for which she did the PR, direction, organised a cast and a venue, and me, as a professional introduction.

This is an extreme example of the new creativity that students and pupils can bring to Shakespeare, just as that of Nienke Arkes and Ayla Berg from the Vechtdalcollege in Hardenberg (A.A.C. Andriessen), who devoted their *profielwerkstuk* to Shakespeare and Contemporary Music, adding a new song to the ever expanding corpus, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q\\_4-upWXA5I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_4-upWXA5I)

If this was young people reacting to Shakespeare, *Meeuw jeugdtheaterschool* in Leeuwarden created their own version of *Hamlet*, with all young actors, who reacted particularly strongly to the theme of death / separation and re-marriage. Nearly all had experience of divorced parents with new partners and the sentiments that generates. Sentiments with which Hamlet, of course, struggles very much himself.

But my point is that the riches of the Shakespeare industry, in film and on stage, should bring opportunities to teachers and pupils alike. It can, in fact, provide a multidisciplinary approach to language learning and culture / reading.

In addition to historical awareness and theatre history, Doing Shakespeare can lead to a discussion of the function of the arts in relation to the times. What the cinema is for us, or the Internet, was of course the theatre in ages past.

But the plays of Shakespeare have indeed provided modernized version in the cinema, which can be quite entertaining and also gripping.

I have previously had occasion to mention such High school adaptations as *She's the Man* or *10 Things I hate about you*, which are based on *Twelfth Night* and *The Taming of the Shrew* respectively. One can add *O* for *Othello*. Other people may prefer to look for the links between *The Lion King* and *Hamlet*, or *Renaissance Man* and *Hamlet*. Or *Get over it* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. But in addition, the Shakespeare film industry has generated modernized versions of straightforward plays such as *Coriolanus*. This may not be the best known play, but this story of what is basically a politician who refuses to suck up to the voters, turns out to be extremely topical. The recent film version with Ralph Fiennes is a thumping good view.

Other people may be more interested in the documentary *Cesare Deve Morire*. This Italian film shows us a group of Italian prisoners auditioning for Shakespeare *Julius Caesar*, rehearsing it, and eventually performing it. The conflict between crime and punishment that this film about political plotting and murder



In the end, the challenge for any teacher is to link up in activities with what interests the pupil. That could be purely narrative (the storyline), it could be linguistic, or it could be a theatrical interest in interpretation. We can therefore concentrate on **text, play, film, adaptations** and **the translator's approach**.

### Text

I noted before that the doubts about Shakespeare's authorship appear to have coincided with the increased annotation of his works. After they had been modernized and regularized in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the return to the original texts, with increasingly complicated and intricate annotations and explanatory glosses. Shakespeare's language, originally very modern, contemporary and up-to-date, had become obsolete and hard to comprehend. No wonder that students and actors alike will exclaim "I can't do that shit", when confronted with Shakespeare. To say nothing of audiences, to whom the language can be equally impenetrable. Generations of English school kids must be raised in a deep dislike of doing Shakespeare.

The *No Fear Shakespeare* series can be of immense help to make young people (and older ones, actually), read Shakespeare. The translations into Modern English are an indispensable help in understanding the text, and although obviously the poetry is lost, and I mean the aesthetic quality of the text as much as the form, clarity has gained a lot. For sensitive pupils, it can actually lead to a discussion about the quality of literature and beautiful language.

The *No Fear Shakespeare* series comes as books, but also exists as an app and a free website, part of the Spark Notes domain.

### Words, words, words ...

Part of the problem is the way in which seemingly ordinary words have changed their meaning since Shakespeare. Here are some quotes to illustrate this point.

Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer's staff and not to grace an **awful** princely scepter (2H6 V.i.98) (awe-inspiring; worthy of respect)

Romeo bid him bethink how **nice** the quarrel was (RJ III.i.154) (trivial, unimportant; foolish)

Mice and rats and such small **deer** (KL III.iv.132) (animal, beast)

A vain, giddy, shallow, **humorous** youth (H5 II.iv.28) capricious, moody temperamental

I do occasionally receive queries from pupils preparing for a *Profielwerkstuk* on Shakespeare or the History of the English Language, and although there are some websites that contain some information, none are really very useful or trustworthy. A really good one, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is available on subscription only, and I doubt many schools subscribe. But anybody interested in changes is well served by David and Ben Crystal's *Shakespeare's Words*. This book illustrates the



changes Shakespeare's words have undergone, and some pupils, certainly more advanced ones, may find it fascinating. The website is identical.

### Play

Yet it is always a good think to remind oneself, if not one's pupils, that Shakespeare's plays are indeed stage plays, and not merely texts for reading. There has been a long ongoing debate about the nature of Shakespeare's texts, with some people taking the view that they are NOT in fact intended for acting but for reading only. The idea appears to have started with the publication of his collected plays in 1623, where the buyer was encouraged to "reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe." As we saw before, some of the plays appear to exist in different versions, which may indeed reflect an acting and a reading versions (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and perhaps it is only an acting version which survived of the *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Macbeth*).

Whatever your view on the matter, the texts can always be read, but there are fortunately frequent occasions to see the plays. Involving pupils in this will be tricky, and depend on the time of the production. And in any case I would suggest involving a variety of activities around the production: reading the text, perhaps viewing a film, talking about character and interpretation. In some cases preceding the real theatre experience, in others following. Some of you, I know, have experience with this, and I'd be interested in your stories.

### Film

In all probability, William Shakespeare currently heads the list as most prolific script writer in Hollywood. On January 21, 2015 he had 1038 titles to his credit, which is in all ways amazing. But it is ironic to think that a writer for the bare wooden stage, who paints his set in words ("Well, this is the forest of Arden" (AYLI II.iv 11) and asks his audiences to imagine armies (*Henry V* I.o 23-28) could be successful in that most realistic of mediums, film. I have rarely been convinced by Shakespeare on film, I must admit, perhaps apart from the daring High-school adaptations referred to above.

Those objections aside, films have presented fascinating modernized takes on *Richard III*, *Romeo + Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, *Much Ado About Nothing*<sup>2</sup> and many others, which may give young people a way into Shakespeare. Seeing the film may encourage reading the play (or reading along with the film, although that is quite a challenge, giving the very heavy cutting the text is usually subjected to).

Yet, the films that I mentioned here are all relatively faithful to the original text, and there is the original awkward clash when we hear contemporary characters avail themselves of Shakespeares original English, and Americans thee-ing and thou-ing in a modern Californian or New York setting. Still, the appeal of the modern characters brings the story much closer, as was particularly clear when Baz Luhrmann released his highly successful *Romeo + Juliet*.

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<sup>2</sup> *Richard III*, Richard Loncraine 1995, *Romeo + Juliet*, Baz Luhrmann, 1996, *Hamlet*, Michael Almereyda 2000, *Coriolanus* Fiennes 2011, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Joss Whedon 2012



### **Adaptations**

I will not discuss the High-school movies which I mentioned above. But people might be interested in seeing looser adaptations and modernisations. Of course, that would include not just film or television versions, but also the Manga Shakespeare graphic novels series. This series comes with additional teaching material and provides a totally new way into the plays. <http://www.mangashakespeare.com/>

In addition to this, pupils might care to investigate the use of Shakespeare plots in modernisations such as *Shakespeare Retold*. A 2005 BBC tv series of modern adaptations of *Macbeth*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *the Taming of the Shrew*.

### **Translations**

I want to close off by finally pulling Shakespeare into a Dutch textual context and talk about translations.

More than anything else, translations illustrate to foreign learners the changing nature of Shakespeare's text, since they demonstrate quite clearly the changes in their own language. Two translations are readily available online. Burgersdijk's translation from the 1880 can be read completely on line.<sup>3</sup> A much more recent one, by translator Jan Jonk, is partly available. The first acts of all plays, and the complete text of *King Lear*.<sup>4</sup>

### *Sonnetten*

Special mention must be made of Shakespeare's sonnets, because they are so relatively short and can be dealt with in many different versions. A couple of years ago one of my students (Djoeke ter Horst) provided an exciting *profielwerkstuk* in which she examined the genre of the sonnet, and discussed I a number of sonnets in translation.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion I would like to say that there are clearly many ways to engage with Shakespeare. Modern media such as the Internet allow us the diversify greatly. No longer are we all dependent on one book, but we can easily take a project approach and work together, but independently on one play, on one theme, looking at different aspects and approaching language, story, themes, characterization and modernization, or adaptation in a variety ways. Different pupils can satisfy different interests. You need only google "hamlet rap" to see the infinite variety of new approaches.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dbnl.org/auteurs/auteur.php?id=burg015>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.janjonk.nl/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://fmlekens.home.xs4all.nl/Q1609/index.htm>



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### Correspondence

Hans Jansen  
Department of English Language and Culture  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Groningen  
[j.p.m.jansen@rug.nl](mailto:j.p.m.jansen@rug.nl)