A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Teacher's Solution to Disinterest and Society's Solution to Anti-Literacy

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Intensive reading, discussion, and (in some sections) viewing of plays from the comedy, tragedy, romance, and history genres.

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Shakespeare has made his way from the heart of commonplace Globe attendants, through the minds of scholarly experts and into the adolescent classroom. As an icon in the history of written English literature, Shakespeare has influenced writers for centuries. Now, thousands of ninth grade students study *Romeo and Juliet* and other plays each year. The universal themes promoted by Shakespeare’s myriad of publications as well as his stylistic prowess in make his work a popular part of high school English syllabi. However, arguments about the psychological and academic impact of these plays on today’s youth present a contrary argument. This paper will show how teachers can be wise in selecting a Shakespeare text for their classroom and the best methods to teach this material in a way that will engage, motivate, and educate their students.

The Common Core State Standards found on corestandards.org explicitly require that Shakespeare be included in the high school literature curriculum.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.9 Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with
multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

(Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.) (Common)

With the federal government mandating Shakespeare works, teachers have no choice but to incorporate it into their lesson plans. However, they do have a choice of which works they will include, and this decision must be made judiciously. Requiring text that is boring or inaccessible to students can have serious repercussions on their motivation to read.

Literacy has decreased dramatically over the last decade. Evidently, “teenagers’ scores on standardized reading tests have declined or stagnated” (Rich), partially because of society’s changing focus from traditional printed text to fast paced, short-attention-span-inducing media. “Last fall the National Endowment for the Arts issued a sobering report linking flat or declining national reading test scores among teenagers with the slump in the proportion of adolescents who said they read for fun” (Rich).

This plunge of reading test scores and the decrease of student interest in reading is alarming. With so much working against literacy, students must be exposed to material that captures their attention and promotes reading, not forced to suffer through long, culturally disconnected, depressing texts full of difficult vocabulary. When teachers make them study such literature, students get turned off from reading and from language arts in general.

Shakespeare’s plays are a veritable culprit. High school (and university) students are dismayed by the length of the histories, depressed by the disasters in the tragedies, discouraged by the language in all of his work, and generally disconnected from much of the content. One teacher shared this experience:

[R]ecently, a high school student working at a grocery store noticed my Shakespeare key ring and said, "I don't really care for Shakespeare. Everyone
always dies at the end." I don’t think it's right to place young people in a protective bubble and pretend that life is easy; however, I don't think they need a constant dose of tragedy, either, especially if that is the only form in which they will ever meet Shakespeare. Who can blame students for not wanting to return to his plays on their own if all they equate Shakespeare with is gloom and doom?"

(Biondo-Hench 42)

Proper scaffolding must be provided by educators to help students understand the text, for the sake of their literacy, but also for the sake of their sanity. The tragedies can be taught to teenagers, but for ninth graders who are encountering Shakespeare for the first time, there is a better option.

Today’s youth are bombarded by images and media that promote unhealthy relationships, premature sexual activity, addiction to harmful substances and practices, rebellion, violence and more. School bombings, increased gang involvement, drug warfare and broken families are tragic evidence of the impact this media is having in society. According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention at CDC.gov, suicide is currently the third leading cause of death for teenagers (Center). Adolescents should be taught to critically analyze the negative and pursue the positive. The overall message of their high school reading material should be one of hope and encouragement, not tragedy and despair. When catastrophic texts such as Romeo and Juliet are read, copied, re-written, acted out, emphasized and inadvertently glorified, students can be confused and misled. This kind of Shakespeare unit does much more harm than good. As teachers select with care the text appropriate for their grade level and guide their students to understand, critically analyze, and connect to the characters, plot and writing techniques, Shakespeare plays can be an effective component of the English classroom.
Invariably, the commonly taught Shakespeare plays contain some measure of arguably negative content. What, then, is a teacher to do? One experienced high school educator, Kim Carnahan, explains how to come to terms with the problematic content of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

When teaching Shakespeare, it is utterly impossible to teach every detail and subtext. Shakespeare is too rich, and you could literally spend a vast amount of time on one play, disproportionate to the time allotted or suggested by your curriculum. It is necessary to choose the themes, motifs, etc. that you feel are most important to the play. In doing so, you will be excluding other equally valid themes, etc. The same can be said for subtext. Although it is true that sensitive readers will detect the sexual subtext, it is unlikely that ninth grade readers will do so unless you specifically point it out, which you won't do, of course. It is a comedy and a love story, after all! So if you want to teach it, go ahead!

(Carnahan)

By choosing appropriate plays, teaching the themes that connect to real life, and focusing on “language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful” (Common), teachers can meet the stipulations of the common core and still help students love reading Shakespeare. The best play for ninth graders, as an introduction to Shakespeare, is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It has a happy ending, the literary elements employed are exemplary, and the content of this play includes themes to which teenagers can relate.

Research completed by Erikson and Piaget shows that when learning is tied to personal or cultural interests, students are more likely to pay attention to the material because they can relate to the subject matter (Shaffer, 1994). While some
people would argue that something written so long ago is outdated, issues of love, rebellion, death, and acceptance are prevalent in the lives of most students as well as the play. (Berry, Donovan, and Hummel)

What high school student hasn’t enjoyed hours of fantasy film or literature, delving into the world of fairies or magic spells? Who hasn’t experienced jealous feuds over love, or silly pranks and mischievousness? These topics are all a part of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream.*

“Shakespeare's characters come alive when students realize that themes and conflicts in today's world share common characteristics with lives of long ago.” (Tabers-Kwak and Kaufma, 70).

For starters, Lysander and Hermia’s forbidden love provides intrigue that will interest adolescent boys and girls alike.

Lysander: How now, my love! Why is your cheek so pale? / How chance the roses there fade so fast?

Hermia: Belike for want of rain, which I could well / Beteem them from the tempest of mine eyes.

Lysander: Ay me, for aught that I could ever read / Could ever hear by tale or history, / The course of true love never did run smooth. (1.1.130-136)

Once the students are hooked by a love scene like this, the teacher can take advantage of their attention to point out the beautifully incorporated metaphor, alliteration, and iambic meter present in these passages. But the plot (and the students’ connection to it) thickens. Next, unrequited love shows its ugly face for poor Helena.

Demetrius: Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit, / For I am sick when I do look on thee.

Helena: And I am sick when I do not look on you. (2.1.215-217)
When the relationships between Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena, and Titania and Nick Bottom go awry due to Robin Goodfellow’s meddling, the story takes a twist that breaks the rules of illusion and reality, a factor which, according to Hazel K. Davis in her article on TeacherVision, is very appealing to young people (Davis).

Certain characteristics of the play itself make it accessible to students. This work does not run the risk of turning students off from reading. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is relatively short: the LibriVox audio version is only two hours long, compared with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry V* at three hours, and *Hamlet* at four (LibriVox). The prevalent mood is playful. The idea of entertainment is an inherent part of the plot, exemplified by the peasant characters themselves engaging in a woodland theatrical performance. This scene presents an opportunity for students to analyze dramatic interpretation and its implications in society (used as part of the wedding celebration in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), although the commentary on playwrights and actors is inherently mocking – an amusing touch of the bard’s humility. Here, Snug the joiner assures the ladies of the woodland audience that he is not a real lion, so they need not worry. Not only does this scene provide fodder for discussion about Shakespeare’s use of meta-theater, it also is hilarious.

You, ladies, you, whose gentle hearts do fear
The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,
May now perchance both quake and tremble here,
When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.
Then know that I, one Snug the joiner, am
A lion-fell, nor else no lion's dam:
For, if I should as lion come in strife
Into this place, 'twere pity on my life. 5.1.222-228

This clarification in their performance was necessary because of a previous discussion held by the actors Quince, Bottom, and of course Snug. Quince argued, “If you should [roar] too terribly, you would fright the duchess and the ladies that they would shriek, and that were enough to hang us all” (1.2.65-67). As the reader compares the format of Quince’s words to the rest of the play, is to be noted that the actors speak not in iambic pentameter, but in common prose. Why does the bard change meter here? What is the importance of meter in this and other scenes? These and other questions are aimed towards critical thinking and analysis of the text.

Because of this and other entertaining and also educational scenes, the play carries a sense of humor that will delight young minds. For example, in Act III Scene I, Nick Bottom’s head turns into the head of an ass and beautiful Titania professes her love for him. In Act II Scene II and Act III Scene II, Lysander and Demetrius both break character to swoon desperately over Helena, which causes friendship drama for the girls and relationship stress for the couples. Throughout Acts II and III, mischievous Oberon and Robin plot to trick and tease humans and fairies alike. Because of all these fun factors, Susan C. Biondo-Hench, another experienced high school teacher, insists that comedies are the way to go. She calls *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* “a movement toward identity” (41), and affirms it to be appropriate and enjoyable for teens. Compared to the betrayal of *The Winter’s Tale*, the violence and suicide of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the gore of *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is like a bed of roses. “People deserve happy endings throughout the larger stories of their lives” (Biondo-Hench 42).

But picking the right play is only half the battle. Teaching techniques and strategies must follow suit in quality. Traditional methods of teaching Shakespeare such as dissecting the
language and summarizing the plot must be done away with. Three innovative methods that will keep the students on board include picture books, Shakespeare soundtracks, and student performances.

One ninth grade class worked collaboratively with a fourth grade class to re-write *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in picture book form. “Although some students are shocked by the introduction of picture books in a high school class, they are quickly enticed by the original, stimulating, and exciting nature of the text” (Tabers-Kwak and Kaufma 70). This activity requires the students to be able to summarize the text and prioritize which parts are valuable enough to be included in the limited space of a picture book. Personal connection and critical thinking will enable young artists to illustrate the story using original art, computer pictures, photography, or collages. The creativity involved in creating a picture book provides an opportunity for the students to be personally invested in the project, and working with elementary school students makes the ninth graders accountable for their quality work.

Tabers-Kwak and Kaufma also advocate using music to help the plays come alive. The article described “a project where students created original compositions and matched existing musical scores” (71) to scenes in *Julius Caesar*. In this class the students were bored to death with *Julius Caesar* until this opportunity to interpret it with music. This made the plot and the characters come alive for them. One particularly disinterested boy completely changed his opinion as the unit progressed. He eventually exclaimed, "This is awesome! How did Shakespeare know what people were *really* thinking?" "For this student, attributing the music of today's age focused a perspective about Elizabethan drama through a twenty-first century lens" (71). Hearing this kind of response from students should be every teacher’s goal. If music can help teenagers find connections to a difficult play like *Julius Caesar*, think how successful it
would be for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In Act III Scene I lines 125 and 126 Titania begs Bottom, “I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again: / Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note.” Students will also be “enamoured” of Shakespeare through music.

Shakespeare’s plays were meant to be performed. The Scholastic Scope magazine’s issue from January 24, 2005 includes an illustrated script of the play by Rachel Waugh (4-9). Clever but clear animations help the reader keep the characters straight. Visual learners benefit from such an aesthetically pleasing guide to the play. Lines for the most important characters are provided in the script, as well as parts for three different narrators. This inclusion encourages participation from a high number of students. The language in this version has been modified to be easy for younger readers, but still preserves important, famous quotes from the play: Lysander’s afore-mentioned “The course of true love never did run smooth,” Titania’s “What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?” and Puck’s “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” Thus, this version stays true to the most valuable component of Shakespeare’s art – the words. In *Shakespeare Troupe: An Adventure in Words, Fluid Text, and Comedy*, Susan C. Biondo-Hench revels in the success of her students as they made *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* come alive through stage adaptations because of the focus she made on Shakespeare’s words. “The words are the most important part” (38). The audience was laughing; the actors were connecting deeply with the characters (41). Biondo-Hench could tell that this was an experience that no one would forget soon. With costumes, rehearsals, lights, music, and of course, all those powerful words, this masterpiece of Shakespeare was crossing the myriad of barriers that normally divide the time period, setting, lifestyle and language from today’s society.

In order to allow students to reach this level of comprehension of Shakespeare and to help them develop a lifelong commitment to literacy, ninth grade teachers should choose *A
*Midsummer Night’s Dream* as the focus of their Shakespeare unit, and should incorporate innovative teaching methods like picture books, music, and performances to achieve their goal.
Works Cited

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