Studying Shakespeare

A Practical Guide

Katherine Armstrong
and Graham Atkin

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STUDYING SHAKESPEARE

This book is dedicated to our own teachers of Shakespeare,
Paul Kent and Raymond Salter.

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A Practical Guide

Katherine Armstrong and Graham Atkin

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 1998 by Prentice Hall Europe

Published 2013 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN 13: 978-0-13-486788-5 (pbk)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Armstrong, Katherine.
Studying Shakespeare: a practical guide/Katherine Armstrong and Graham Atkin.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616—Outlines, syllabi, etc.
2. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616—Study and teaching. I. Atkin, Graham. II. Title.
PR2987.A76 1997
822.3'3—dc21 97–41126
CIP

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Typeset in 10/12pt Times
by Dorwyn Limited, Rowlands Castle, Hants

Contents

A note on texts

After some thought, we decided to use the New Arden (Arden 2) texts of Shakespeare throughout this book, since to date only a few titles have appeared in the Arden 3 series.

Preface

As our title suggests, the aim of this book is to provide students with an introductory guide to the practicalities of studying Shakespeare's plays at degree level. It is not a reference book of facts about Shakespeare's life, works or critical heritage, but a 'how to' book, which gives clear and concrete advice to those embarking on advanced study of Shakespearean drama. Wherever possible, we use worked examples in order to help our readers bridge the gap that may exist between knowing what to do and how actually to do it, though this should not be taken to imply that we are dogmatic about the reading and critical practices we recommend. We have tried throughout to be suggestive rather than prescriptive, and to emphasize that there are many valid ways of approaching Shakespeare.

We have assumed that most of our readers will be aged sixteen or above and studying literature or cultural studies at college or university, but we have not assumed that they will have a knowledge of critical theory, and so we have tried to explain all the specialist terms we use as they occur. We are, however, convinced that the student/tutor dichotomy is largely a false one, and whenever we talk of 'students' of Shakespeare we are including ourselves in that category. The extent to which we draw upon the experiences of those we have taught should confirm that we have been their students quite as much as they have been ours.

Since a number of introductory books on Shakespeare are already available, we ought to explain at the outset our decision to produce yet another. For all that the traditional canon of English literature has been critiqued, expanded or revised in recent years,

Shakespeare has remained a central figure in school and college curricula, and most students of literature or cultural studies will have to study him in one way or another, either as a 'Special Author', considered in isolation, or as a major element in a course or module on early modern literature. (And a significant number will focus on Shakespeare's language as part of the linguistic component of their English degree.) Although this has created a healthy demand for guides and handbooks of various kinds, it would not in itself justify our adding yet another book to the international mountain of textbook material on Shakespeare, were it not for the changes currently taking place in the way Shakespeare is studied and taught at college and university. Some of these are attributable to the ever-widening gap between Shakespeare's world and ours, illustrated, for example, by the peculiar problems of studying a play such as *The Merchant of Venice* in the shadow of the Holocaust, as we are bound to do. Some result from the general shift in education to more student-centred methods of learning. Some arise as a result of the electronic revolution and its transformation of the ways we can store and use information.

This book examines the implications of all these changes and suggests ways in which students might exploit the opportunities they have created. In Part I, Chapters 1–3 deal with what might be termed the 'basic' issues: why we study Shakespeare and how we do so in the first instance, through discussion and writing. Part II, Chapters 4–9, is subdivided into three and considers how to study Shakespeare in more depth. First, we examine the *text*, in chapters on Shakespeare's language and the context(s) of his plays. Second, we explore the *media* through which we encounter Shakespeare, in performance and in electronic forms such as audio- and video-recordings and multimedia. Third, we discuss Shakespeare's *reception* by critics and theorists.

To expand a little on this summary, in *Chapter 1* we reflect on the continuing controversy over Shakespeare's place in the literary canon. It has become commonplace for critics to state their theoretical and ideological positions explicitly at the outset of any project. That Shakespeare should and will remain central to literary and cultural studies in the future is a conviction we hold unequivocally, and Chapter 1 seeks to explain why this is so. Yet a willingness to acknowledge – and delight in – the diverse possibilities of the critical enterprise will be one of our central themes

in this book, and Chapter 1 will also, therefore, advocate the need for self-consciousness and provisionality with regard to one's critical assumptions.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the skills needed for studying Shakespeare effectively at undergraduate level. *Chapter 2* stresses the importance of discussion as a practical tool for engaging with Shakespeare's work, and suggests that talking about Shakespeare in a variety of contexts, both formal and informal, is a way of developing and testing one's ideas without some of the constraints attendant on writing them down. A willingness to discuss is seen as part of the openness of mind so vital to critical analysis, as is a willingness to listen to, and engage with, the ideas of others.

Chapter 3 takes a pragmatic approach to writing about Shakespeare, beginning with the hidden but crucial matter of note-taking, and proceeding to consider a range of modes from formal essays, to reviews, to close commentaries, to dissertations, to exam answers – all of which the student may be asked to produce in the course of studying Shakespeare. The emphasis is on the need for meticulousness, both in the use and acknowledgement of sources and in the planning of the final product; but being prepared to take intellectual risks and write imaginatively are also seen as vital.

Chapter 4 begins by acknowledging that for many students in further and higher education Shakespeare's language presents certain difficulties, but goes on to argue that this should be seen as challenging rather than intimidating. The chapter points out that Shakespeare's own style was highly idiosyncratic and experimental, and then shows how an increased knowledge and understanding of his lexical range, syntax, rhetoric and other stylistic features can enhance our enjoyment of his work.

Chapter 5 deals with the questions raised by attempting to contextualize Shakespeare. The traditional advice to students might have been to read one or two 'background' books in addition to works of criticism. However, such an approach has certain limitations. Even if we acquire some knowledge of the political and social conditions of Shakespeare's age, we may have little experience of interdisciplinary thinking and be at a loss to bring our historical knowledge to bear on Shakespeare's plays without either reducing them to mere products of wider cultural forces or implying that history is somehow less significant because it fails to match the 'transcendence' of the literary text. In Chapter 5 we also

discuss some of the theories of cultural production which have informed Shakespeare studies in recent times, and which have helped to problematize the conventional boundaries between literature, history and politics. As with other chapters, we give a range of specific examples to show how the student might tackle contextualization at a practical level, notwithstanding the potential difficulties of relating literature and history with due subtlety and care.

Chapter 6 responds to the general shift within the discipline of English to a more performance-centred, less 'literary' approach to dramatic texts. Nowadays students may and, some would say, should wish to refer to productions of a play in a range of media – televisual, cinematic, theatrical, perhaps – rather than confining themselves to the text on the page. Attention to the text-as-performance can prompt us to take the realities of the Elizabethan/Jacobean stage into consideration, or it can lead us to reflect on the extraordinarily diverse interpretations which Shakespeare's plays have inspired up to our own time.

Chapter 7 considers the impact of new media on the study of Shakespeare, technological developments having led to an exponential rise in the information available, in forms other than the printed word, to students of literature and of Shakespeare in particular. The widespread availability of film, audio, televisual and video versions of his plays has had a significant impact on the way Shakespeare is studied; even more significant, perhaps, have been CD-ROM (Compact Disk-Read Only Memory), the Internet and multimedia. In addition to the general indices and bibliographies available via the Internet or on CD-ROM, there are now a number of databases dedicated solely to Shakespeare. They include several CD-ROM versions of Shakespeare's works, some of which incorporate substantial archives of primary and secondary source material, and at least one is a bibliography of recent Shakespeare criticism. In the last couple of years creative multimedia packages have appeared which allow students freedom to role-play and devise their own theatrical interpretations of Shakespeare. The consequences of such innovations are far-reaching; the already blurred distinction between undergraduate 'study' and postgraduate 'research' is likely to erode still more rapidly now that almost anyone can produce an accurate statistical breakdown of linguistic features in a text or texts, undertake a search to compile

an instant bibliography of secondary literature on the most obscure aspect of Shakespeare's work, or experiment, using virtual reality, with camera angles, close-ups, voice-overs and even casting.

The information revolution can, of course, be paralyzing rather than enabling, as many commentators have suggested. *Chapter 8* confronts the irony that, while the historical distance between Shakespeare and his audience inevitably widens with each year, the industry devoted to interpreting him is such that students may feel they are faced with unmanageable volumes of material from which to select their secondary reading. In the least well-stocked academic library there is almost certain to be an embarrassment of riches for any reader looking for criticism on Shakespeare, and on-line catalogues and other databases can seem to exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the problems this raises. In this chapter we have therefore suggested ways of managing this vast critical heritage – through selective assimilation – so that it can inform your own discussions of Shakespeare without swamping them.

Building on the insights into the uses of Shakespeare criticism outlined in Chapter 8, in *Chapter 9* we look more specifically at the theoretical dimensions of recent critical approaches. Rather than attempting a schematic summary of the best-known theoretical schools, it illustrates a number of ways in which students might apply the insights of two perspectives, cultural materialism and feminism, to their own readings of particular Shakespearean texts.

It is the guiding assumption of this book that all these developments, within literary studies and beyond, represent opportunities rather than problems for the student of Shakespeare. In our opinion Shakespeare has never been more exciting, provocative and demanding than he is today, when on the one hand innovative research resources and tools are continually being made available, and on the other controversy rages ever more fiercely over how his work should be edited, interpreted, read and taught. At most institutions of higher education, studying for a degree used to be based in large part on the ability to pin back one's ears in a large, impersonal lecture hall and make notes which could be accurately reproduced under examination conditions. Of course, degree-level English has always depended to a certain extent on dialogue, but nowadays students are expected to do far more than simply participate in class discussions, defend their essays in tutorials and

produce polished exam answers. They may find themselves working in small groups on tasks which require them to report back to the larger class, either then and there or at some future date. They may have to give regular seminar presentations as part of their assessment, and these may be prepared individually or collaboratively. They may need to identify and research a dissertation topic on Shakespeare with only minimal guidance from their tutor. Arguably, they will have greater responsibility for their own learning than students generally did in the past: classes grow ever larger, staff–student contact time diminishes, and aside from these economic factors, independent study skills are now an explicit aim of many undergraduate courses.

The overwhelming majority of those students quoted in this book were finalists or recent graduates who had taken a year-long compulsory course of Shakespeare as part of the English literature component of a combined subjects degree. We are very grateful to all of them, but particularly to those who allowed us to describe or quote from their written work (Sarah Hornsby, Susan Lee and Haydn Smith), or who responded to the letter we sent them (see Appendix), especially Sadie Bentall, Louise Burnett-Wells, Norma Casement, Samantha Clark, Agatha Dunlop, Kathy Dyson, Edward Cooper, Elisabeth Eastwood, Alan Ewing, Alex Figgis, Alison Foster, Christopher Goodwin, Tracy Goulding, Rebecca Green, Richard Hulse, Danielle Marks, Anita Reid and Ilse Von Brandis. Thanks are also due to Andrew Dethick and Ann Mackay, who told us about their experiences of studying Shakespeare on a part-time single honours degree programme in English literature.

In addition we would like to thank those who read and commented on earlier drafts of the book: the readers at Prentice Hall, Marion Wynne-Davies, Sally Atkin and Lucy Armstrong. For advice on multimedia we are very grateful to Peter Williams, Deputy Librarian at University College Chester. For a helpful suggestion about *The Tempest* thanks are due to Michelle Haslem.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank University College Chester for a grant which gave one of us study leave to make substantial progress with the preparation of this book.

Our greatest debt is to our dedicatees.

PART I

Basic skills for the Shakespeare student

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CHAPTER 1

Why study Shakespeare?

Introduction

To ask why we study Shakespeare is a conventional enough way to open an introductory guide of this kind, but it is a provocative question none the less. A cynical answer might be that we study Shakespeare because we have to: he is compulsory for the majority of students at school in Britain and the United States, and anyone who pursues literature in English at a higher education level will probably find, on graduating, that they have been watching, reading, talking and writing about Shakespeare more or less annually for eight years or longer.

Yet if this explains, it certainly does not justify why we study Shakespeare, and over recent years many commentators have argued that Shakespeare's pre-eminence in the canon of English literature (the body of classic authors commonly studied at school and college) has more to do with tradition, issues of national identity and ideological coercion than it has to do with his intrinsic literary merit.

It is the chief purpose of this chapter, and indeed this book, to argue that Shakespeare richly deserves his unrivalled place in the curriculum, since to us the most compelling answer to the question, 'Why study Shakespeare?' is that we benefit immeasurably from doing so. Pleasure is one such benefit – the majority of students like studying Shakespeare and are enriched by the experience – and instruction another – through studying Shakespeare we learn about society, the ways individuals behave, language, and so on, and also develop our skills of critical analysis and expression.

But before exploring in greater depth these reasons we ought to consider the argument, frequently proposed in recent years, that we study Shakespeare merely because students have always done so, at least since the birth of English as an academic discipline. No book on Shakespeare published today can afford to ignore the fierce, if sporadic, debate about his canonical status which academics, critics and directors have been conducting since the 1980s. Numerous critical books and articles have dealt with the issues arising from this controversy, and it received a wider airing in the 1994 Shakespeare season ('Bard on the Box') on television. Though the canon of English literature has been much discussed and attacked in recent years, Shakespeare's place in it has provoked particularly intense discussion amongst those responsible for the teaching of English in schools and universities in Britain and, to a lesser extent, North America. The first part of this section will try to explain why so much energy has been expended on this issue.

The Shakespeare debate

The issue boils down to politics: for every traditionalist who insists that all fourteen-year-olds should study at least one Shakespeare play, there are scores of educationalists and critics who argue that the teaching of Shakespeare has more to do with ideology than literature. To these commentators, Shakespeare has been foisted on us by a reactionary educational and political establishment determined to safeguard its values and traditions.

This may sound extreme, yet it is undoubtedly true that politicians and other public figures have at times used Shakespeare for dubious ends, and professional teachers of English have naturally resented their doing so. To take one example, John Redwood, formerly Minister for Wales, used Shakespeare's history plays to defend Anglo-Welsh unity following the pit closures in South Wales, on the obscure grounds that 'Glyndwr in *Henry IV* [Part 1] bridged the two cultures by speaking both Welsh and English'.[1] More notoriously, Nigel Lawson, formerly Chancellor of the Exchequer, quoted from *Troilus and Cressida* in his autobiography, using Ulysses' disquisition on the need for social hierarchies to defend the economic policy of the Thatcher government.[2] And the tendency to use Shakespeare rhetorically has not been confined to

politicians: the Prince of Wales, for instance, has repeatedly promoted Shakespeare as a key element in the shaping of British national identity.[3]

These are instances of overt ideological appropriation, and are ultimately, perhaps, of limited significance, but some have argued that Shakespeare's very place in the curriculum is a question of politics. As the American critic John Bender observes, for certain left-wing British academics:

> the stress on Shakespeare goes beyond any question of residual aesthetic admiration to become a contest with established ideology (and especially with Thatcherism) over the significance of a playwright at once deeply embedded in the British system of education and central to an outworn and delusionary nationalism.[4]

It is easy to take for granted the terms of a debate which has been continuing for some years, and it is as well to remind ourselves of the reasons for the deadlock between the political left and right over Shakespeare. In brief, those who defend Shakespeare's unique status in the literary canon are driven by the conviction that studying Shakespeare is vital to the moral and spiritual development of the student, and they subscribe implicitly to the view that a universal knowledge of his work will be conducive to social cohesiveness and a common pride in Britain's national heritage. Their opponents, however, feel that this agenda is politically indefensible and misguided, if not indeed disingenuous, in its underlying claim that Shakespeare's appeal is universal, transcendent and ahistorical. In a pluralistic, multicultural society it can seem inappropriate to insist that all students study the work of a long-dead, white male playwright, even if room is made for other writers who speak more obviously to the concerns of our times.

Most famously, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield prefaced their influential volume *Political Shakespeare*, first published in 1985, with a trenchant discussion of the institutional uses to which Shakespeare has been put in the last four hundred years, concluding that the plays can only be understood in relation to the socio-political contexts of their production. According to Dollimore and Sinfield, who describe themselves as cultural materialist critics, we should be seeking not to uncover an intrinsic meaning in Shakespeare, but to understand the conditions which have

determined his interpretation by successive generations. They conclude their preface with the following declaration:

> cultural materialism does not pretend to neutrality. It knows that no cultural practice is ever without political significance – not the production of *King Lear* at the Globe, or at the Barbican, or as a text in a school, popular or learned edition, or in literary criticism, or in the present volume. Cultural materialism does not, like much established literary criticism, attempt to mystify its perspective as the natural, obvious or right interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact. On the contrary, it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class.[5]

To the dismay of one traditional critic, M. C. Bradbrook, who asked if Shakespeare himself had been completely lost sight of in *Political Shakespeare*, another materialist critic, Graham Holderness, pointed out that there is no immanent, inviolable Shakespeare, only a series of readings of him.

In the eyes of many left-wing participants in the controversy, Shakespeare has been particularly susceptible to co-option by the forces of reaction. As Holderness puts it, he 'functions in contemporary culture as an ideological framework for containing consensus and for sustaining myths of unity, integration and harmony in the cultural superstructures of a divided and fractured society'.[6] This argument is a tendentious one, and we can only determine its validity by exploring in specific terms how such ideological functions might be carried out.

An obvious starting-point might be to scrutinize the ways in which examination papers implicitly encourage students to think and write about Shakespeare. Alan Sinfield has written eloquently on the uses and abuses of Shakespeare by GCSE and A-level examination boards, arguing that the overwhelming majority of exam questions require the candidate to respond to Shakespeare in a spirit of humanistic celebration: 'Almost invariably it is assumed that the plays reveal universal "human" values and qualities and that they are self-contained and coherent entities; and the activity of criticism in producing these assumptions is effaced.'[7] Through a multitude of examples Sinfield demonstrates that the teaching of Shakespeare in post-war British schools has been subtly coercive. His argument may seem initially unpalatable

to those readers, myself included, who were trained to think of Shakespeare as 'not of an age but for all time',[8] and innocent of any bias, least of all political. Yet it was confirmed for me only recently by the candid responses of a class of mature women students to whom I was explaining the cultural materialist critique of Shakespeare's place in the literary canon. A number of the students admitted that they had never liked Shakespeare at school and had deeply resented his attitude to women; they also said that they had never articulated these feelings on the assumption that any attempt to criticize 'the Bard' would be penalized.

Once such responses are voiced and discussed, the class becomes theorized in the sense that the Shakespeare text is being approached not as an autonomous, historically transcendent artefact, but as a product of cultural forces, past and present. Cultural materialists and feminists are not necessarily opposed to studying Shakespeare *per se*, but they wish to question the ways in which he is typically taught and studied. As well as critiquing his patriarchal bias, they have, for example, pointed to his patriotic representations of the Plantaganet, Tudor and Stuart kings in the history plays, and argued that his popularity continues to rest, in part, on his appeal to English nationalism. Plays about Agincourt and Bosworth Field still have emotional power in a country increasingly devoted to its past. We hanker after 'Tudorbethan' homes for our families; county councils continue to use the red and white roses to symbolize Lancashire and Yorkshire; and *Henry V* was being used for nationalistic purposes as recently as 1975, according to those who have suggested that its performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the time of the first oil crisis was suspiciously opportunistic.[9] And Shakespeare did more than appear to paint a flattering portrait of Tudor and Stuart power; many of his plays evoke a lost world of folklore and festivals, and have contributed greatly to the sentimental idea of a 'Merrie England' which is supposed to have existed prior to industrialization.

Whereas traditional critics try to divorce literature and education from ideology, the materialists regard them as inextricably intertwined. For the traditional critic Shakespeare is vital as a means of testing the ability of students to respond sensitively and intelligently to literature. Cultural materialists would object first, that other authors could serve the same purpose, and second, that what constitutes a sensitive and intelligent response to literature is

not a given; rather, it is defined in particular ways by particular cultures and historical periods.

Of course, to say that some of Shakespeare's advocates admire him for elitist, or politically questionable, reasons, or for no good reason at all, is not necessarily to imply that he should be removed from the syllabus or relegated to a lower league in the literary tables. He may still be worth studying, even if we recognize that he has sometimes been studied for the wrong reasons. Having said this, I would agree that unacknowledged factors have been far too influential in creating an institutional culture of 'Bardolatry'. For some, Shakespeare is almost a cultural icon, a figurehead of Britain's national identity. Shakespeare remains compulsory in the Key Stage 3 'SATs' examination, and each summer for the past several years the broadsheet newspapers have run articles discussing the advantages and limitations of studying Shakespeare for all secondary school pupils irrespective of their ability. For some his difficulty for the modern reader is perversely what makes his study seem essential for fourteen-year-olds.

The 'Shakespeare Debate' looks set to continue, given that Shakespeare retains much of his former importance in the syllabus, even as educators, critics and students become increasingly sophisticated in their understanding of how his mythological status has been created and maintained. Given the nature of degree study, students are increasingly likely to participate in the Shakespeare debate themselves: many will find themselves taking a course in Shakespearean drama alongside theory courses which question the basis of the traditional literary canon. Shakespeare remains one of the 'Top Ten' authors studied in the English departments of colleges and universities in Britain even as the number of books which query the value of 'Dead White European Male' authors proliferate and as applications from finalists to undertake postgraduate research on early modern literature slow to the barest trickle.

And, of course, new critical approaches to the study of Shakespeare such as feminism and cultural materialism reflect a wider cultural shift; there is less interest in other canonical authors amongst students now than there was fifteen or even five years ago. In 1992 the *Guardian* reported the findings of the Consortium for College and University English (CCUE), whose survey showed that some twentieth-century authors are now

more popular than Shakespeare on degree courses in new and old universities. The *Guardian* expressed surprise and disquiet, but the gap between the National Curriculum (which has enshrined Shakespeare from the very beginning) and the typical college or university English syllabus (which increasingly favours the likes of Sylvia Plath, Angela Carter and Emily Brontë) will probably widen in the future with potentially controversial results.

None the less, the anxieties of the lecturer or tutor about Shakespeare's appropriation by individual politicians or indeed the state can look misguided when it is placed alongside the optimism and interest of many students, few of whom come to Shakespeare weighed down by a knowledge of his abuses at the hands of the British establishment. It can be salutory, if disconcerting, for lecturers to find themselves more chary of Shakespeare than are their classes: their initial assumption may have been that teaching Shakespeare would require them to devise ingenious strategies for 'sugaring the pill'. When I began teaching Shakespeare, I looked for all kinds of ways of engendering enthusiasm in my students. With *Richard II*, for example, I discussed an exhibition on the Wilton Diptych (which Richard is thought to have owned) at the National Gallery in London, brought in pictures of a nearby National Trust house in order to illuminate references in the play to windows bearing the family coat of arms (III.i.24–5), and handed out a family tree of the descendants of Edward the Confessor. Rightly, the students were polite but tepid in their responses, explaining that they wanted to analyze the text itself, and saw no obvious advantage in contextualizing it, at least in the early stages of their course.

'I'm looking forward to *Antony and Cleopatra*'; '*Twelfth Night* was amazing'; 'Why on earth cut Shakespeare?' These were the unselfconscious reactions of some third-year students (graduating in 1995) to whom the news that next year's cohort would be studying only half as much Shakespeare as was currently offered. The new module was pedagogically sound – we would be reading three Shakespeare plays rather than ten, plus three plays by some of his contemporaries. We would, therefore, be focusing not so much on the isolated achievement of one dramatist as on the milieu which produced many outstanding authors and many less-known ones who are equally deserving of close study. Yet my explanation did not convince the students, even though they admitted they would have

liked the chance to read Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and John Webster. And in the end, a course exclusively on Shakespeare was restored by popular demand, though not without misgivings. Were the students justified in asserting their right to study Shakespeare, or were they guided by a conservative instinct of the kind which the educator has a responsibility to counter? Having for the most part read no other sixteenth- or seventeenth-century authors, were they in a position to make an informed choice? In the end, these issues remained unresolved: it was accepted that the restored course, like its successor, had its strengths and weaknesses.

For the students I quoted, Shakespeare's greatest attractions were, they declared, his range and profundity, exactly the qualities which professional critics and scholars have admired in him. 'How could any course be more varied?' asked one student – exactly the point put by one of Shakespeare's most extravagant admirers in the nineteenth century, Professor Edward Dowden, who wrote of Shakespeare's 'enormous receptivity' and the 'vast and varied mass of information' contained in his plays.[10] More recently, the director of the newly opened Globe Theatre in London has said he could spend the rest of his career working on Shakespeare, and not get to the bottom of him.

Of course, the same could be said of any number of prolific and excellent writers, but Shakespeare's diversity is certainly astonishing. For a start, he wrote tragedies, comedies and history plays, and even these widely different genres can be further subdivided, Polonius-fashion (*Hamlet* II.ii.392–6), into revenge tragedy, Roman tragedy, the chronicle play, the problem play, tragi-comedy, romance, contemporary comedy, historical comedy, the Venetian play and pastoral comedy. His characters range in social terms from royalty to beggars, and he deals with every conceivable emotion from passion to horror, as well as with a vast range of moral, political and philosophical issues.

Of Shakespeare's achievements with form there is similarly no doubt. Though some more recent critics have asked why coherence, complexity and ambiguity have been traditionally valued so highly in Western culture, there has been no attempt to reject such qualities in absolute terms, merely to re-estimate the worth of others (informality, for example). Additionally, in many colleges and universities the trend has been towards expanding the numbers of authors read and studied, rather than replacing traditional

figures with less familiar ones: the course in seventeenth-century drama mentioned above is an example of this practice. Although Shakespeare has ceased to be unquestioningly regarded as the last word in literary excellence, he remains at the core of English studies. In the second half of this chapter, then, I will discuss why, notwithstanding the debate just considered, Shakespeare deserves to retain his privileged status in the literary canon.

Why we should study Shakespeare

To appreciate the pleasures and fascinations of studying Shakespeare we need look no further than the opening exchange of *Hamlet*:

Enter BARNARDO *and* FRANCISCO, *two Sentinels.*
Bar. Who's there?
Fran. Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.
Bar. Long live the King!
Fran. Barnardo?
Bar. He.
Fran. You come most carefully upon your hour.
Bar. 'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.
Fran. For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.
Bar. Have you had quiet guard?
Fran. Not a mouse stirring.
Bar. Well, good night.
If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.
Fran. I think I hear them.[11]

(I.i.1–15)

There are three times as many words in the Arden edition notes and longer notes to this passage as there are in the passage itself (249 as compared with 82), which testifies to the wealth of meaning in even the simplest dialogue by Shakespeare, as well as to the acumen and scholarship of the Arden editor, Harold Jenkin. The first line is a question, which seems an apt beginning for a play much concerned with perplexity and doubt. It is a martial greeting, reminding us that Denmark is at war, vulnerable – like Hamlet

himself – to alien enemies. Francisco's reply is even more wary; he will not give his name until he is sure his questioner is friendly. He asks Barnardo to 'unfold' himself – that is to say, to disclose his identity. But the form of words is interesting, implying a discrepancy between outward appearance and inner reality which will prove a key theme in the play itself: 'one may smile, and smile, and be a villain' (I.v.108), as Hamlet puts it.

Barnardo's reply is extraordinarily resonant: 'Long live the King!' Is this an expression of loyalty to the old king, or a tribute to the usurping Claudius, Hamlet's detested stepfather – 'the King is dead, long live the King'? In other words, are these sentries on the side of Hamlet and his father, or are they merely ciphers, insignificant except in so far as they illustrate the submissiveness of ordinary Danes to the tyrant ruling them? The audience cannot be sure, and it is a question which will plague Hamlet, who is rightly suspicious of his supposed friend, Rosencrantz. Hamlet will finally pronounce him a 'sponge', one 'that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities' (IV.ii.14–15).

Even now, Francisco wants to make absolutely sure of his interlocutor, and will not be satisfied until he knows his name. Once Barnardo has replied, the tension is immediately released, and the two proceed to informalities: Barnardo has been very punctual, says Francisco gratefully, and Barnardo urges him to go to bed after his long vigil. Francisco punningly acknowledges he is glad to do so: 'For this relief much thanks.' Then he confides that he is 'sick at heart', but does not elaborate. The audience or the reader is bound to wonder whether he has no need to spell out his reasons, or whether he is simply afraid of being overheard. Again, the dialogue anticipates Hamlet, who likewise suffers from ennui and nameless forebodings.

The tension increases again with Francisco's answer to Barnardo's asking if he has had a quiet watch. 'Not a mouse stirring' awakens more anxieties than it quells since, according to dramatic convention, such moments of unnatural peace are frequently the prelude to a violent disturbance. Seemingly loath to part with Francisco, Barnardo reluctantly bids him goodnight, and urges him to send his co-sentries as soon as possible. By referring to them as 'rivals' he does not mean to imply enmity, only that the three are sharing the duty. But the word, as so often in Shakespeare, leaves an aftertaste. None of these men seems