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Mastering

Shakespeare

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For Jane Clarkson

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xvi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xviii

PART I THE WORLD OF SHAKESPEARE

1 What's it all about?	3
1.1 Themes in Shakespeare ('what a question's that')	3
1.2 Themes in individual plays ('so singular in each particular')	4
1.3 Shakespeare's main themes ('greater themes')	4
1.4 The themes of love and war ('double business')	6
1.5 The best thing and the worst thing ('What is love?')	8
1.6 Young love ('this man and maid')	8
1.7 The value of love ('to love, to wealth')	8
1.8 Sudden love ('a plague/That Cupid will impose')	9
1.9 The signs of love ('old signs')	10
1.10 How lovers behave ('here come the lovers')	10
1.11 How lovers talk ('if you speak love')	11
1.12 Laughing at lovers ('most loving mere folly')	13
1.13 Love, action and enterprise ('and now 'tis plotted')	13
1.14 Cupid and the blindness of love ('the sign of blind Cupid')	14
1.15 Love and the old ('Saturn and Venus this year in conjunction')	14
1.16 Sex ('When the blood burns')	15
1.17 The pains of love ('O misery')	15
1.18 Love and war ('slain in Cupid's wars')	16
1.19 The ambiguity of war ('pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war')	17
1.20 Leaving for war ('Yours in the ranks of death')	17
1.21 Staying behind ('a moth of peace')	18
1.22 The professionals ('of great expedition and knowledge in the ancient wars')	18
1.23 The spectacle of war ('Enter Martius, bleeding, assaulted by the enemy')	19
1.24 War's victims ('We would have all such offenders so cut off')	21
1.25 Honour ('when honour's at the stake')	22
1.26 Conflict in Shakespeare's plays ('conflicting elements')	23
Exercises	24

2	Who's who	25
2.1	Shakespeare's varied characters ('which oft our stage hath seen')	25
2.2	Common humanity ('the common people')	25
2.3	Playing a role ('A stage where every man must play a part')	26
2.4	Class divisions ('high birth')	26
2.5	Kings in Shakespeare ('here comes the King')	27
2.6	Queens in Shakespeare ('poor Queen')	29
2.7	Unscrupulous characters ('the murderous Machiavel')	30
2.8	Families divided ('between the child and parent')	31
2.9	Children divided ('brothers divided')	32
2.10	Married couples ('my husband')	33
2.11	Lovers and theatrical conventions ('sweet lovers')	33
2.12	The beloved ('O mistress mine')	34
2.13	Shakespeare's fools ('to play the fool')	35
2.14	Strangers ('being a stranger in this city here')	38
2.15	Characters and people ('a kind of character')	38
2.16	Stock characters ('I must play the workman')	39
2.17	Character and dramatic function ('their particular functions')	41
2.18	Characters explaining themselves ('Tell me thy mind')	42
2.19	Understanding Shakespeare's characters ('the mind's construction')	42
2.20	Characters and language ('my language')	43
	Exercises	44
3	What and where: stories, plots and worlds	45
3.1	Shakespeare's stories ('there is an old tale goes')	45
3.2	The interest of stories ('your tale, sir, would cure deafness')	45
3.3	Shakespeare's use of stories ('like an old tale')	47
3.4	Stories and their themes ('here is every thing')	47
3.5	Stories and plots ('the sequent issue')	48
3.6	Aims and expectations ('I long to hear the story of your life')	49
3.7	The movement of plots ('good plots')	50
3.8	The form of Shakespeare's plots ('half to half')	50
3.9	How plots begin ('the true beginning of our end')	51
3.10	How plots develop ('the middle centre')	52
3.11	How plots end ('and there an end')	53
3.12	The design of Shakespeare's plays ('like a mirror')	56
3.13	Plots and sub-plots ('tell you another tale')	57
3.14	A plot in action – <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> ('what the play treats on')	58
3.15	The 'world' of each play ('it is a world to see')	59
3.16	Different plays, different worlds ('countries different')	60
	Exercises	62
4	Words on stage	63
4.1	Watching plays ('played upon a stage')	63
4.2	The stage and life ('All the world's a stage')	63
4.3	The imagination of the audience ('Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them')	65
4.4	Language and action ('the meaning or moral of his signs and tokens')	66

4.5	The changing life of dramatic language ('whilst this play is playing')	68
4.6	Prose and verse ('here follows prose') ('you talk in blank verse')	69
4.7	The uses of verse and prose ('words, life, and all')	70
4.8	Shakespeare's verse ('full of noises/Sounds')	71
4.9	Shakespeare's imagery ('painted imagery')	73
4.10	Rhetoric in Shakespeare ('sweet smoke of rhetoric')	75
4.11	Wordplay ('there's a double meaning in that')	77
4.12	Dialogue and soliloquy ('tis time to speak')	79
4.13	The unity and variety of Shakespeare's plays ('it is so varied too')	81
4.14	Shakespeare's theatre ('this cock-pit')	83
	Exercises	85

PART II THE COMEDIES

5	Comedy	89
5.1	Popular ideas of comedy ('a pleasant comedy')	89
5.2	Shakespeare and the nature of comedy ('have made our sport a comedy')	89
5.3	Comic plotting ('ruminated, plotted and set down')	90
5.4	How comedies begin ('I will tell you the beginning')	90
5.5	Comedy and love ('and I begin to love')	91
5.6	Bars and impediments ('if there be any impediment')	92
5.7	Practices and devices ('in practice let us put it')	93
5.8	Practisers and practising ('I will practise')	94
5.9	Common practices ('this is an old device')	95
5.10	Disguise ('assume thy part in some disguise')	96
5.11	Cross-dressing ('suit me all points like a man')	98
5.12	The problems of disguise ('Disguise I see thou art a wickedness')	99
5.13	Mistaken identity ('You throw a strange regard upon me')	99
5.14	Overhearing ('I will hide me')	100
5.15	Advantage and knowledge ('And watch our vantage in this business')	101
5.16	How comedy affects characters ('I do feel it, and see't')	102
5.17	How comedies end ('a happy evening!')	103
5.18	The debate about comedy ('look you for any other issue?')	104
	Exercises	106
6	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	107
6.1	Two different plots ('Proceed in practice')	107
6.2	Kate and Petruchio ('what company is this?')	108
6.3	The place of the Induction ('Well, we'll see't')	110
6.4	Study and love ('Aristotle's checks')	110
6.5	Is Kate tamed? ('Tis a wonder, by your leave, to see her tamed so.')	111
6.6	The role of Bianca ('maid's mild behaviour and sobriety')	114
	Exercises	114

7	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	115
7.1	The elements of the plot ('write a ballad of this dream')	115
7.2	Oberon and plotting ('here comes Oberon')	116
7.3	Shakespeare's fairies ('and we fairies')	117
7.4	The trials and joys of love ('The course of true love never did run smooth')	118
7.5	Theseus and the plot ('I will overbear your will')	119
7.6	The mechanicals and the conventions of drama ('Hard handed men that work in Athens here')	120
	Exercises	122
8	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	123
8.1	Antonio's sadness ('And mine a sad one')	123
8.2	Antonio's love ('To suffer with a quietness of spirit')	123
8.3	Venice ('Like signors or rich burghers')	125
8.4	Portia, wealth and wooing ('a lady richly left')	126
8.5	The spirit of enterprise ('had I such venture forth')	126
8.6	Religion and love ('Become a Christian and thy loving wife')	127
8.7	The centrality of Shylock ('I am a Jew')	127
8.8	Portia and the outcome of the plot ('O sweet Portia')	129
	Exercises	131
9	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	132
9.1	Plot, amazement and comedy ('All this amazement')	132
9.2	The doubling of characters ('a double heart')	132
9.3	Characterisation ('So you walk softly, and look sweetly, and say nothing')	133
9.4	The distinctiveness of Beatrice and Benedick ('Beatrice and Benedick')	134
9.5	Wooing, art and the plot ('so fine a story')	135
9.6	Cupid and practising ('for we are the only love-gods')	137
9.7	The limits of practising ('if peradventure this be true')	137
9.8	Making mistakes ('some strange misprison in the princes')	138
9.9	Art in the service of nature ('kind of merry war')	139
9.10	The mood of the play ('Why, it must be requited')	139
	Exercises	140
10	<i>As You Like It</i>	141
10.1	The pastoral element ('Why, whither shall we go?')	141
10.2	Father and daughter ('a banished father')	142
10.3	Love ('what think you of falling in love?')	142
10.4	The importance of Rosalind ('But heavenly Rosalind!')	142
10.5	Orlando and speech ('What passion hangs these weights upon my tongue?')	144
10.6	Courtship and games ('Nay, you must call me Rosalind')	144
10.7	Love and disguise ('You a lover?')	145
10.8	The holiday mood ('for I am now in holiday humour')	145
10.9	The character who doesn't fit in ('The melancholy Jaques')	146
	Exercises	147
11	<i>Twelfth Night</i>	148
11.1	How the plot starts ('What country, friends, is this?')	148
11.2	Music, harmony and discord ('for I can sing')	149

11.3	The problem of gender and identity ('good Cesario')	150
11.4	The place of Malvolio ('The madly-used Malvolio')	150
11.5	Madness, revelry and folly ('sad and merry madness')	151
11.6	Class ('she'll not match above her degree')	152
11.7	The character of Feste ('Feste the jester')	153
11.8	The passing of time ('We did keep time, sir, in our catches.')	154
	Exercises	156

PART III THE PROBLEM PLAYS

12	Shakespeare experimenting	159
12.1	The problems of the problem plays ('all difficulties')	159
12.2	The problem plays as comedies ('All is well ended')	159
12.3	The dark mood ('muddled in fortune's mood')	160
12.4	Experimenting with comedy ('give me leave to try success')	161
12.5	Drama and thought ('fine issues')	163
	Exercises	163
13	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	164
13.1	No beginning, no end ('Beginning in the middle')	164
13.2	Cultural icons ('Let all constant men be Troiluses')	164
13.3	The most interesting character ('O Cressida')	165
13.4	Love and the language of war ('In that I'll war with you')	167
13.5	Where are the heroes? ('proud of an heroical cudgelling')	168
13.6	Relativism, viewpoints and framing ('What's aught but as 'tis valued')	169
	Exercises	171
14	<i>Measure for Measure</i>	172
14.1	Governing a nation and governing oneself ('Of government')	172
14.2	The character and role of Angelo ('Lord Angelo')	173
14.3	The character and role of Isabella ('heaven give thee moving graces')	175
14.4	The play's title ('measure still for measure')	177
14.5	Different attitudes to death ('Be absolute for death')	177
14.6	The bed-trick ('And perform an old contracting')	178
	Exercises	179

PART IV THE LATE COMEDIES

15	The worlds of the late comedies	183
15.1	The last plays ('to hear an old man sing')	183
15.2	Features of the late comedies ('a song that old was sung')	183
15.3	The elements of the plots ('Like an old tale still')	184
15.4	Reconciliation ('look upon my brother')	185
15.5	Young girls ('The fairest I have yet beheld')	185
15.6	Natural imagery ('Welcome hither/As is the spring to th' earth')	186
15.7	Art and thought ('mine art')	187
	Exercises	189

16	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>	190
16.1	The shape of the plot ('Thou metst with things dying I with things new-born')	190
16.2	Understanding Leontes' madness ('It is a bawdy planet that will strike')	191
16.3	The functions of Camillo and Paulina ('good Camillo')	192
16.4	Hermione's character ('Hermione, Queen to the worthy Leontes')	193
16.5	Hermione's trial and death ('accused and arraigned of high treason')	193
16.6	How not to repent ('Apollo, pardon')	194
16.7	The pivotal scene ('if thou'lt see a thing to talk on when thou art dead and rotten')	195
16.8	Autolycus and Bohemia ('When daffodils begin to peer')	195
16.9	The significance of the sheep-shearing scene ('This your sheep-shearing')	196
16.10	Nature, art and Perdita ('great creating nature')	197
	Exercises	199
17	<i>The Tempest</i>	200
17.1	<i>The Tempest</i> and interpretation ('know thine own meaning')	200
17.2	Politics in <i>The Tempest</i> ('You did supplant your brother Prospero')	201
17.3	Colonialism ('Which first was mine own king')	201
17.4	The importance of Caliban ('some monster of the isle')	202
17.5	Prospero's island ('the isle')	203
17.6	Issues about Ariel ('my industrious servant Ariel')	204
17.7	Understanding Prospero ('Prospero, master of a full poor cell')	205
17.8	The masque ('such another trick')	206
17.9	Wonder in <i>The Tempest</i> ('O you wonder')	207
17.10	Revenge or reconciliation ('the rarer action')	207
17.11	How <i>The Tempest</i> ends ('Please you, draw near')	209
	Exercises	210
PART V THE TRAGEDIES		
18	Tragedy	213
18.1	The problems of definition ('define, define')	213
18.2	The vast world of tragedy ('for the world is broad and wide')	213
18.3	Unavoidable death ('Keeps death his court')	214
18.4	Division and tragedy ('these divisions')	215
18.5	Order and tragedy ('by degree stand in authentic place')	215
18.6	Suffering and tragedy ('the rack of this tough world')	217
18.7	Heroic figures ('outstretched heroes')	217
18.8	Tragedy, morality and ambivalence ('I was born to set it right')	218
18.9	Hubris and bravado ('This is I')	219
18.10	Tragic self-presentation ('actions that a man might play')	220
18.11	Fortune and tragedy ('O, I am fortune's fool')	221
18.12	The tragic fall ('fall to the base earth')	222
18.13	Isolation and inevitability ('The way to dusty death')	223
18.14	Horror and pity ('Howl, howl, howl, howl')	224
	Exercises	225

19	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	226
19.1	Youth and passion ('never was a story of more woe')	226
19.2	The comic elements ('And if thou dar'st, I'll give thee remedy')	227
19.3	Verona divided ('The quarrel is between our masters and us their men')	227
19.4	Tybalt and hatred ('the fiery Tybalt')	227
19.5	The Nurse ('these sorrows make me old')	228
19.6	Mercutio and language ('thou talk'st of nothing')	228
19.7	The love scenes ('my heart's dear love')	229
19.8	Coping with banishment ('I must be gone and live, or stay and die')	232
19.9	Love and death ('Here in the dark to be his paramour')	232
19.10	Their tragedy ('now at once run on/The dashing rocks')	233
	Exercises	234
20	<i>Hamlet</i>	235
20.1	Asking questions ('Who's there?')	235
20.2	The place of politics ('this post-haste and rummage in the land')	236
20.3	Death and Hamlet ('hearsed in death')	236
20.4	How the plot works ('if the king like not the comedy')	237
20.5	Hamlet the thinker ('Now I am alone.')	238
20.6	Hamlet and revenge ('revenge his foul and most unnatural murder')	240
20.7	Remembering and forgetting ('It is, "Adieu, adieu, remember me"')	241
20.8	Ophelia's plight ('The fair Ophelia')	241
20.9	The passions and Hamlet ('passion's slave')	242
20.10	Plays, players and playing ('Madam, how like you this play?')	244
20.11	Deciding about Hamlet ('Good night, sweet prince')	245
20.12	Stories in the play ('To tell my story')	246
	Exercises	247
21	<i>Othello</i>	248
21.1	The response of the audience ('The object poisons sight')	248
21.2	Gulling ('Thus do I ever make my fool my purse')	249
21.3	Iago, honesty and trust ('Honest Iago')	250
21.4	Iago and motive ('Demand me nothing')	252
21.5	The image of chaos ('Chaos is come again')	253
21.6	Othello, stories and wonder ('the story of my life')	253
21.7	The 'temptation' scene ('My lord, you know I love you')	255
21.8	Othello's language ('I think this tale would win my daughter, too.')	257
21.9	Othello's tragic status ('It is the cause')	258
21.10	His final speech ('a word or two before you go')	258
21.11	The question of themes ('What is the matter?')	259
	Exercises	260
22	<i>King Lear</i>	261
22.1	Themes, characters and drama ('This great world')	261
22.2	Different kinds of division ('the division of the kingdom')	262

22.3	Cordelia, love and sacrifice ('Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least')	263
22.4	Lear and hatred ('To match you where I hate')	264
22.5	The two plots ('there's father against child')	264
22.6	Seeing and blindness ('See better, Lear')	265
22.7	Edgar and Edmund ('Brother, I say')	265
22.8	The different meanings of 'Nature' ('Thou, nature, art my goddess')	267
22.9	Dover Cliff ('Come on, sir, here's the place')	270
22.10	Love, measurement and suffering ('what can you say to draw/A third more opulent')	271
22.11	Making sense of the end ('Is this the promised end?')	272
	Exercises	273

23	<i>Macbeth</i>	274
23.1	The atmosphere of the play ('As thick as hail/Came post with post')	274
23.2	The weird sisters ('Fair is foul')	275
23.3	Macbeth and death ('Strange images of death')	276
23.4	Horror, poetry and goodness ('horrible imaginings')	277
23.5	The Macbeths' language ('Come, thick night')	279
23.6	Why Macbeth kills the king ('if it were done')	279
23.7	Guilt ('These deeds must not be thought/After these ways')	281
23.8	Discovery and the banquet scene ('What sights, my lord')	282
23.9	Macbeth's suffering ('Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow')	283
23.10	A heroic death ('I will not yield')	284
23.11	More and less than a man ('I dare do all that may become a man')	285
	Exercises	286

PART VI THE ROMAN TRAGEDIES

24	Shakespeare's Roman World	289
24.1	The city of Rome ('the Roman state')	289
24.2	Politics and the individual ('our great competitor')	289
24.3	Roles in a changing state ('deed-achieving honour newly named')	290
24.4	Morality and honour ('the honourable men')	291
24.5	The secular quality ('if Jupiter/Should from yon cloud speak divine things')	291
24.6	The code of suicide ('the high Roman fashion')	292
24.7	The importance of ideas ('a Roman thought')	292
25	Coriolanus	294
25.1	Mother and son ('he did it to please his mother')	294
25.2	Coriolanus at war ('the Volscas are in arms')	296
25.3	War and heroes ('this war's garland')	298
25.4	Heroes and politics ('I had rather be their servant')	299
25.5	The instability of power ('how soon confusion/May enter')	301
25.6	Coriolanus and Aufidias ('Do they still fly to th' Roman')	301
25.7	Women and victory ('You have won a happy victory in Rome')	302
	Exercises	303

26	<i>Julius Caesar</i>	304
26.1	Caesar, Brutus and tragedy ('O mighty Caesar! Dost thou lie so low?')	304
26.2	Caesar: for and against ('the noble Caesar')	305
26.3	Cassius and the plot ('that spare Cassius')	306
26.4	Difficulties with Brutus ('the noblest Roman of them all')	307
26.5	Antony's change ('a masquer and a reveller')	309
26.6	Antony and the people ('Friends, Romans, countrymen')	312
26.7	The morality of assassination ('These many, then, shall die')	313
	Exercises	314
27	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	315
27.1	Action and reaction ('Here is my space')	315
27.2	Antony's status ('The demi-Atlas of this earth')	315
27.3	Love and adultery ('new heaven, new earth')	316
27.4	Love and war ('What Venus did with Mars')	317
27.5	Rome ('Octavia is of a holy, cold, and still conversation')	318
27.6	Antony and failure ('near him thy angel/Becomes afraid')	320
27.7	Cleopatra's roles ('Royal Egypt, Empress')	320
27.8	Folly and suicide ('The long day's task is done')	322
27.9	The magnificence of Cleopatra ('Give me my robe')	324
	Exercises	325
 PART VII THE HISTORIES		
28	<i>Shakespeare's English history</i>	329
28.1	England in the history plays ('this realm, this England')	329
28.2	The past, the future, and continuity ('there is a history in all men's lives')	331
28.3	The pressures of power ('the image of his power')	332
28.4	The power of kings ('the mortal temples of a king')	334
28.5	The characters ('all in England')	336
28.6	What is a history play? ('on the French ground played a tragedy')	337
28.7	History and plots ('they do plot/Unlikely wonders')	338
	Exercises	339
29	<i>Richard II</i>	340
29.1	The start of the history cycle ('And future ages groan for this foul act')	340
29.2	Ritual and ceremony ('And formally, according to our law')	340
29.3	Richard's guilt ('he did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death')	341
29.4	The wayward king ('Richard my life's counsel would not hear')	341
29.5	Language in the play ('Look what I speak, my life shall prove it true')	342
29.6	Rebellion ('If then we shall shake off our slavish yoke')	345
29.7	The fall of Richard ('No matter where')	345
29.8	The deposition scene ('for I must nothing be')	346
29.9	Richard's final soliloquy ('Yet I'll hammer it out')	349
	Exercises	350

30	<i>1 Henry IV</i>	351
30.1	New king, old troubles ('So shaken as we are')	351
30.2	Falstaff and the <i>Henry IV</i> plays ('little better than one of the wicked')	351
30.3	The comic elements ('What trick, what device')	353
30.4	Hal's soliloquy ('I'll so offend to make offence a skill')	354
30.5	Hotspur and honour ('To pluck bright honour')	355
30.6	Fathers and sons ('I'll play my father')	357
30.7	The rebels ('our induction full of prosperous hope')	357
30.8	Civil war ('We'll fight with him tonight')	358
	Exercises	359
31	<i>2 Henry IV</i>	360
31.1	Rumour in a changing world ('The sum of all/Is that the King hath won')	360
31.2	The new rebels ('Let order die!')	360
31.3	Time and growing old ('We are time's subjects')	361
31.4	The troubled king ('Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown')	362
31.5	Father, son and crown ('Why doth the crown lie there upon his pillow')	363
31.6	The new king ('This new and gorgeous garment, majesty')	365
31.7	The rejection of Falstaff ('I know thee not, old man')	365
	Exercises	366
32	<i>Henry V</i>	367
32.1	The Chorus and the stage ('Admit me chorus to this history')	367
32.2	The morality of making war ('May I with right and conscience make this claim?')	368
32.3	Treachery ('you would have sold your King to slaughter')	368
32.4	Falstaff's death ('He's in Arthur's bosom')	369
32.5	The invasion of France ('Thus comes the English')	369
32.6	The siege of Harfleur ('Holding due course to Harfleur')	370
32.7	Disguise and the eve of the battle ('behold/The royal captain of this ruined band')	372
32.8	The battle of Agincourt ('Then call we this the field of Agincourt')	374
32.9	France, love and peace ('Our fertile France')	376
32.10	What do we make of Henry? ('This star of England')	376
	Exercises	376
33	<i>Richard III</i>	377
33.1	The dominance of Richard ('Famous Plantagenet')	377
33.2	The fun of scheming ('Plots have I laid')	377
33.3	Richard the role-player ('canst thou quake and change thy colour')	378
33.4	Richard's enemies ('That foul defacer of God's handiwork')	380
33.5	Movement and inactivity ('Set down, set down')	381
33.6	The princes in the Tower ('The tyrannous and bloody act')	381
33.7	Evil and sufferings ('And turns the sun to shade')	382

33.8	England reconciled ('We will unite the white rose and the red')	383
33.9	Richard and the stage ('The bloody dog is dead.')	384
Exercises		384

<i>Glossary</i>	385
<i>Further reading</i>	392
<i>Index of plays</i>	393
<i>General index</i>	394

Preface

I wonder if you've opened this book because you have to 'do' Shakespeare. Perhaps that makes you feel gloomy. If it does, rest assured you're not the only one. I've met many students who ask, with a frown: 'Do we have to do Shakespeare?'

Shakespeare's picked up a reputation for being irrelevant, old-fashioned, heavy, intellectual and establishment. Once you know the plays, these seem strange complaints. The more you read him, the more you see that he's writing about *your* life – its loves, hopes, problems and trials. We can see ourselves in Shakespeare. In one sense, he's old-fashioned, but we spend our lives coming to terms with people who aren't like us and we find that we've a lot in common. Just how much we've got in common with Shakespeare can be seen in the popularity of films. I recently heard a student say that *Romeo and Juliet* was the best film she'd ever seen.

A film such as that shows us that Shakespeare's work isn't heavy. It's wonderful art but it's not earnest and heavy. There's always something light, familiar, effortless and even chummy about this work. Certainly he makes you think, but this is because he shows us that living forces thoughts out of people.

I can understand why students don't like the establishment feel of Shakespeare. Because he's compulsory from the age of 14, he might feel like algebra. The only way to cope with this is to remember that the *plays* aren't establishment works; the comedies are all about how to outwit the older generation, and histories and tragedies show that kings are ordinary human beings.

But there's often another problem. A friend of mine was once teaching *The Tempest* to a lively group. He thought things were going swimmingly until one day three students approached him and said: 'We don't understand a word of what's going on in this play.'

If you have this feeling, you're not alone. When I did my A-levels I had the uneasy feeling that I might be misunderstanding whole sections. You won't be surprised to hear a teacher tell you that the best way to cope with this is: get to know the play. The more you get to know Shakespeare, the clearer he becomes. For a start, you can get the story clear. Of course, there's more to getting to know Shakespeare than this, but important points emerge in the moment by moment unfolding of the plot.

As you get to know the plot, you'll become familiar with the characters. In the early stages you'll have to keep reminding yourself who they are, what they want, what they've done and what they know. And remember, some characters are in disguise, so keep track of what the character knows and what the others think they know. If you're in doubt, mark your script 'D' for disguise.

Some people have problems with the words. In fact, once you've got used to him, the gist of what Shakespeare's saying comes easily. In long speeches, begin with the

general sense, and piece together how they work out bit by bit. Always remember that what matters as far as meaning is concerned are the sentences, not the lines of verse. If individual words bother you, look them up in a critical edition. Some words have changed their meaning since Shakespeare's day. And remember, some bits still puzzle the experts!

We should always remember the positive things about our experience of Shakespeare.

- **He's memorable** My mother never claimed to like Shakespeare, but I can remember as a child her gripping account of seeing *The Merchant of Venice*. Her memory was of the excitement of the story and the drama of the play's main scene.
- **He's enjoyable** It's my experience that of all the works students study at A-level, Shakespeare is the author they most enjoy. Furthermore, examiner's reports frequently show that students do better on him than anyone else.
- **He's adaptable** You can perform him in all sorts of ways. I once heard a professor of English say she saw a production of *The Merchant of Venice* done by a Chinese company in Hong Kong. They played it as pure farce, and the audience loved it.
- **He's part of our world** There's a sense in which he's not so much an author as a whole way of thinking and feeling. It's not only the pithy phrases, scraps of speeches and characters that have become part of the language, it's the stories themselves: *Romeo and Juliet* as the tale of love in a divided society or *The Merchant of Venice* as the story of love and prejudice in a commercial world.
- **He's varied** He never quite does the same thing again. Although we talked about comedies, tragedies and histories, each play is a distinct world of characters, language, mood and atmosphere.
- **He's haunting** Shakespeare is a powerful presence in our imaginations. Recently, someone said to me that events in the royal family reminded her of Shakespeare's histories. One of the strange facts about being alive is that when we experience something important – a struggle for power, a disappointment, a new love – we often discover that Shakespeare has already been there. As another friend of mine once said: 'The trouble with dying is that one hasn't finished with Shakespeare.'

This book is designed to do two things: give you some lines of thought about the *kind* of plays he wrote and provide ideas on individual plays. If you look at the Index, you'll find that there are discussions of your set plays in the general sections and, occasionally, as part of the discussion of other plays. In the sections on individual plays I've dealt with them in the order in which they were probably written; the exception is in the sections on the Roman tragedies and the English histories, where the order is historical.

A note on the text I've tried to provide a textual location for all the quotations. I've used the *Oxford Shakespeare* (general editors: Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor), though the fact of resetting extracts means in some cases that the number of lines per extract in this book may differ from the Wells/Taylor edition lines cited. If you're using another edition, you may find that some references, particularly those to passages in prose, are slightly different.

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