

# "Crushing on a Capulet": Culture, Cognition, and Simplification in *Romeo and Juliet* for Young People

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## Abstract

Much of the current material designed to introduce Shakespeare to elementary and secondary school students emphasizes how to make Shakespeare "fun." Many texts also maintain that teachers are likely to be frightened of teaching Shakespeare and that curricular materials need to help assuage these concerns. There is very little discussion, however, about the pedagogical reasons for including Shakespeare in the curriculum. This essay provides an overview of current Shakespearean resources for teachers and students in England and the United States, with a focus on *Romeo and Juliet*. It describes the implicit and explicit assumptions about students, teachers, and Shakespeare that underlie these texts and discusses some responses to Shakespeare found in writings on educational philosophy. It argues that humanists need to devote increased attention to the exploration and explication of the rationales for teaching Shakespeare to children and adolescents and suggests that recent work in cognition and learning is one avenue that warrants particular attention in this endeavor.

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## Finding the "Fun" in Shakespeare

*Use the death scene in *Romeo and Juliet* to motivate a discussion of cardio-vascular resuscitation. Have the students explain and demonstrate what they would have done to rescue Romeo and Juliet if they had happened upon the last scene.*

*Juliet takes a drug to make it appear she has died. Students can present a report on different types of illegal drugs and all the reasons we should avoid them. A great follow-up would be to invite a guest speaker from a local agency to reinforce the dangers of illicit drugs. — Foster and Johnson*

The classroom exercises recommended above come from a teacher's guide entitled *Shakespeare: To Teach or Not to Teach*.<sup>1</sup> This volume has a second subtitle that reflects a standard practice in such texts; namely, urging instructors to seek "Teaching Shakespeare Made Fun!" The text focuses largely upon using the plays as springboards to other topics, such as selecting a popular

television or sports figure and describing why s/he might not be happy and what the student might do to bring happiness to that person (Foster and Johnson 1994, 71). It also offers a page of "praise suggestions" for teachers to draw from, including comments such as "wonderful," "excellent idea," "good for you," and "well done" (96). While one might wonder whether anyone should be teaching if s/he is in need of such prompts for comments, this text is not presented here as a straw man; it represents a common approach to introducing Shakespeare to children and adolescents. There are other pedagogical strategies available in print, but this emphasis upon "fun" appears frequently with classroom assignments that regularly stray fairly far from Shakespeare's drama.<sup>2</sup>

The concern with making the teaching and learning of Shakespeare "fun" apparently results from a widespread belief that both instructors and pupils fear Shakespeare because his works are too hard, too boring, or too irrelevant to generate much interest in today's classrooms.<sup>3</sup> Trying to disprove such presumptions, numerous educators endeavor to repackaging the drama in less intimidating or more cheery parcels. Lois Burdett, for example, has entitled her widely popular adaptations of the plays for children "Shakespeare Can Be Fun!" Even the Folger Shakespeare Library joins this trend in its choice of the title "Shakespeare Set Free" for the published materials emanating from its successful workshops for high school teachers.<sup>4</sup> Pauline Nelson and Todd Daubert, in the upbeat introduction to their book on bringing Shakespeare to elementary students, typify these attitudes. The dedication to the volume, published by Teacher Ideas Press, addresses their audience from a familiar perspective: "To everyone who had to study Shakespeare and hated it! You always knew there should be a better way? and now there is!" (Nelson and Taubert 2000, iv). The authors then proceed to describe their presumed readers:

We can state with a fair degree of accuracy that, like most of us, you

- know that Shakespeare lived in England a long time ago;
- can name two or three of his plays;
- couldn't tell the whole plot of any one play but could creatively combine plots of two or more to create a play Shakespeare should have written;
- did Shakespeare at school — but are still interested in his plays, despite the whole experience;
- would not choose Shakespeare on "Jeopardy," even if the only other category left was *Coelenterata*. (ix)

Despite the friendly and encouraging tone that characterizes the prose in this volume, these brief excerpts illustrate the underlying premise: most teachers, though college educated, are largely

ignorant of Shakespeare and need to be coached through the challenging and frightening process of teaching his plays, just as their students are likely to be cowed by Shakespeare's cultural place in Western civilization or by the reputation he has gained for being dull and beyond understanding. Though largely unexamined in these volumes, such preconceptions underlie the presentation of countless guides for teachers at the elementary and high school levels in the United States. The effort to make Shakespeare "fun" suggests that the plays need "a spoonful of sugar [to make] the medicine go down," since neither students nor teachers could learn from or enjoy the drama without substantial incentives. The idea that the plays have some intrinsic value for readers and audiences often gets lost in this formulation.<sup>5</sup> Instead, there appears to be an assumption that since students are required to study Shakespeare, it might as well be made as palatable as possible for everyone concerned.<sup>6</sup>

### Shakespeare in Twenty-First Century British Schools

The questions of why, whether, and how Shakespeare ought to be included in pre-university education currently is discussed more openly in England than in the United States, due to recent changes in curricula there and to national educational debates,<sup>7</sup> which Peter Reynolds summarizes:

Until quite recently, Shakespeare's position at the core of the English curriculum has been unchallenged. His plays have been studied, celebrated, and performed by generations of students. However, in the face of growing apathy and overt hostility from significant numbers of school students, there has been a noticeable withdrawal of support within some state schools from the very idea of trying to teach Shakespeare at all, and certainly to question the wisdom of attempting to introduce his work earlier in the curriculum, and to non-examination students. (Reynolds 1991, 3)<sup>8</sup>

According to Reynolds's account, assertions that Shakespeare inspires dread may not be exaggerated, although he also believes that the opposite reaction — bardolatry — also creates pedagogical impediments:

The Bard himself may be long dead, but a monument to his name exists, a monument whose growth seems inexhaustible in scale and reputation. To some it is a living monument, serving as an inspiration. But to others, and especially to the academically less able, the edifice can have a deadening effect, engendering a potent cocktail of responses, ranging from awe and respect, to fear and dread. Neither is particularly helpful to constructive thought. From fear usually arises dismissal: Shakespeare's boring, irrelevant etc. Awe

generates an almost equally negative response which automatically assumes that everything the man once wrote is above criticism. (3)

Reynolds does not offer to make Shakespeare "fun" or draw connections to drugs or CPR in order to offset these negative reactions to Shakespeare, however. Instead, he proposes a focus upon Shakespearean language that is designed to diminish the mystification surrounding the plays.<sup>9</sup> Aiming toward bringing Shakespeare to all students, Reynolds offers what he calls a "practical" approach to Shakespearean pedagogy, which engages students and teachers with the language of the plays:

One of the objectives of this book is to . . . [suggest] practical ways of involving young people of widely differing abilities and ages in the process of re-claiming Shakespeare for themselves. If Shakespeare's works are not to become even more divisive indicators of class, education, and culture, the undergrowth surrounding them has to be cleared. (4)

After announcing this goal, Reynolds' guide focuses on a variety of ways to involve students in becoming familiar and adept with Shakespeare's language. Even though "fun" does not appear to be at the heart of the volume, the strategies included involve sufficient variation to appeal to the diverse audience he wants to reach.

An emphasis upon language also characterizes Fred Sedgwick's *Shakespeare and the Young Writer*, another British book that runs counter to many standard offerings on teaching Shakespeare in elementary and secondary education. He argues, for instance, that the difficulty of Shakespeare's language should not be reduced through simplification. When told of various teachers' use of adaptations, for instance, he responds: "I have not found a polite way of asking, What's the point of this? Shakespeare is essentially his language. By comparison, his plots are almost incidental" (Sedgwick 1999, 13). Sedgwick offers detailed descriptions of his own practices teaching Shakespeare's language, but he also breaks from the norm by refusing to provide lesson plans for his audience. His rationale, though straightforward, is unusual:

One of the readers of a typescript of this book suggested that I supply "lesson plans" for each of the case studies. I have not done this for two reasons. First, I think that teachers are able to work out their own plans. The profession has many problems these days and one of them is composed of the thousands of omnipotent, intellectual and creative individuals and organizations — politicians, inspectors, advisors, academics, publishers, journalists, writers — who conspire to tell teachers both what to do and how to do it with varying degrees of tact and grace. Teachers' status has been reduced, largely, to that of hired hands. I would

rather offer much passion and a little knowledge about a subject (in this case Shakespeare) on the unfashionable assumption that teachers can, do and should think for themselves; can, should and do reflect on the subject they are teaching and its relationship to the children in their classes. (143)

Whether or not one agrees with Sedgwick's assessment of the status of teachers in the late twentieth century, his decision to credit his readers with the ability to read and teach Shakespeare without elaborate rewritings or other pedagogical scaffolding offers a significant contrast to many of the texts in the genre of Shakespearean teaching guides.

Another British entry into this push to introduce Shakespeare to young people without simplification is documented in Maurice Gilmour's two-volume set on *Shakespeare for All*. Volume 1 focuses on primary schools and Volume 2 discusses efforts in secondary schools. These texts discuss a British project designed to bring Shakespeare to all students in public education. As Andrew N. Fairbairn, Chairman of the RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts Manufactures and Commerce) Advisory Arts Group, explains,

There has been a tendency in the past thirty years or so to "interpret" in simple terms many of the great classics of literature, liturgy, and music. Very often Shakespeare has not been "interpreted", but simply ditched . . . all sorts of reasons are given by the protagonists of "interpretation" — study of the original would be too difficult, too elitist, not sexy enough and in any case the new generation are mainly visually conscious and have to be led gradually to the classics. (Gilmour 1997a, x)

The RSA Shakespeare in Schools Project, undertaken in the 1990s, was set up in order to counter the trend toward simplification. As Fairbairn notes, those involved in this endeavor held very different beliefs than those detailed above:

The contention of the Project is that Shakespeare is accessible in the original to all age groups from 5 upwards provided that the teaching and learning approach is well prepared and made exciting and enjoyable. We sought to demonstrate that the approaches set out in this book are applicable to the smallest rural primary school and also to similarly situated secondary comprehensives. (Gilmour 1997a, x)

As texts cited at the start of this essay indicate, Fairbairn and the RSA are not spouting the conventional wisdom often offered in such curricular debates. Fairbairn also departs from the norm in his willingness to discuss what he believes children will gain from this kind of exposure to Shakespeare: "it is quite wrong to deny our youngsters the experience of the magnificent

language, the wisdom, the history and the humanity of everyday living enshrined in the works of the bard" (Gilmour 1997a, x). Whether or not one agrees with this rationale, it is fairly unusual for being stated succinctly, and the volumes presenting the results of the project suggest that it not only met its goals, but can serve as a model for similar ventures elsewhere.

### Cultural Literacy

As noted, while the British books cited above offer valuable information, they do not reflect the dominant messages found in typical books on Shakespearean pedagogy. More commonly, such texts demonstrate a reluctance to credit instructors and pre-university students with the ability to encounter Shakespeare productively without considerable assistance. This perspective may, in part, reflect a concurrent trend: that is, a widespread reluctance of many educators to articulate why curricula might include Shakespeare. Some texts on Shakespearean teaching make forays into this arena, but many others remain surprisingly reticent. Pauline Nelson and Todd Daubert are among those who make some effort and offer twenty reasons to teach Shakespeare to children, emphasizing that "students need to be rescued from the DDT — Dumbing-Down Trend!" (2000, x). Among the fairly vague gains they attribute to Shakespearean study are some addressed to parents, some to students, and some to teachers, such as "Parents are impressed, and they begin to revive their faith in public education," "Children enjoy top-quality work," and "Teachers use all kinds of topics as starting places for thematic units — Shakespeare is a top-quality starting place" (xi). Although they stop short of proclaiming that teachers also need to be saved from their own dumbing-down, the implication is clear.

Possibly because the so-called "culture wars" have left numerous teachers and scholars wary of entering a potential minefield, however, many other authors who advocate the teaching of Shakespeare offer little indication of what the rationale might be for including Shakespeare in a curriculum. In fact, even prominent conservative writers, whom Michael W. Apple claims promote "a thoroughly romanticized return to the 'Western Tradition'" (1996, x), offer relatively brief discussions of reasons to incorporate Shakespeare into elementary and secondary education. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in his influential *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, for instance, wants students to encounter some Shakespeare, but considers the plays interchangeable for his purposes: "Any Shakespeare play will do to gain a schematic conception of Shakespeare; it doesn't matter whether the play read in ninth grade is *Macbeth* or *Julius Caesar*. . . . But there is a limit to the flexibility of the intensive curriculum. If we want people to have a conception of Shakespearean drama, then a play by Neil Simon is not a satisfactory substitute for a play by Shakespeare" (Hirsch 1988, 129-30). Hirsch supports the idea of having students study "many

similar things in school" (Hirsch 1998, 8) in order to facilitate "functional literacy and effective national communication" (xi). Because Shakespeare's texts help "[impart] the traditional reference points of literate culture" (xii), they figure in Hirsch's lists. He offers little discussion of anything else that Shakespeare or other canonical literary texts might provide to students.

In *Our Children and Our Country: Improving America's Schools and Affirming the Common Culture*, William J. Bennett elaborates on a related concept when he promotes America's "common culture" (Bennett 1988, 47). According to Bennett, "in its highest form, this common culture is the sum of our intellectual and spiritual inheritance, our legacy from all the ages that have gone before us. It is the knowledge, ideas, and aspirations that shape our understanding of who we are as a people and what we are capable of" (47-48). He goes on to claim that "Our common culture also consists of great books that give the highest kind of expression to the way we find ourselves in the world, ageless works like *The Odyssey* and *Macbeth* and *Huckleberry Finn*," (48) and that failing to include such works harms teachers as well as students "because transmitting our common culture is one of the noblest aspects of their profession" (48). Diane Ravitch, in *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times*, offers a similar argument: "Students should study the development of Western civilization in order to understand where we got the ideals by which we judge ourselves. . . . In literature, students need a common foundation of readings. Unless they have read, as a minimum, the classical myths, the Bible, and some Shakespeare, they will be unable to comprehend the fundamental vocabulary of most Western literature" (Ravitch 1985, 315). From this perspective, therefore, Shakespeare needs to be taught because his works are part of Western civilization. The content of individual plays is largely irrelevant in this framework, but if contemporary children and adolescents are to be counted as educated, they need to experience Shakespeare in some form during their formal schooling.

### *Romeo and Juliet* for Young People

This brief overview of some representative approaches to the theory and practice of teaching Shakespeare prior to university emanates in part from my puzzlement at what I encountered when I first undertook the topic that I initially wanted to address in this essay; namely, adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* for young people. I chose *Romeo and Juliet* because I supposed, rightly, that there would be an abundance of such texts available and that they would display considerable diversity in format and presentation. Not surprisingly, one could fill warehouses with copies of *Romeo and Juliet* that have been designed for children and adolescents. My bibliography includes as many of them as my budget and the patience of Emory University's Interlibrary Loan staff could afford. Among those I gathered are picture books, comic books, texts with "translations" into

modern English, junior novels, and entries in popular children's series. I will detail some of their characteristics below, but one quality that most of them share remains surprising to me. Almost none offers any explanation of why such books exist, unless they are explicitly offered as study guides. The book jacket blurb for Bruce Coville's picture-book retelling of the tale, for example, offers a brief accounting of the book's intent, but leaves much more unspoken: "A classic in its own right, this beautiful volume is the ideal gift for both new-comers to Shakespeare's work and devoted followers" (Coville 1999). Typically, therefore, Coville's text is marketed to those who take it as a given that a child can and should be introduced to Shakespeare. No further discussion on the topic is offered.<sup>10</sup>

Coville's series of Shakespearean adaptations is carefully crafted. Like the other Shakespearean volumes in this series, his *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* is presented in prose, although it includes numerous phrases from Shakespeare's text. It also offers lovely illustrations by Dennis Nolan. The quality of Coville's books is not in question here. Instead, I would like to draw attention to the widespread inarticulateness of those who champion the introduction of Shakespeare to young people. Apart from those who want Shakespeare included in curricula in order to bring youth into the "common culture" of Western civilization, few of the texts presented to children or prepared for their teachers provide much reason to read them apart from the implicit assumption that children "should be" or that they "have to be" exposed to Shakespeare, so let's make the best of it. Children or adolescents who encounter these books are not going to receive much help in discerning why they should read them, therefore, unless they pick up one of the books designed primarily to help students pass exams or write essays. Even Coville, who mentions Shakespeare in many of his texts for youth, generally takes a covert approach in his junior novels: "I was hoping that if I caught young readers with the thread of story I could also pique their interest in the plays those stories came from" (Coville 2003, 58). This method may work, but it does not help children understand the value of such literature.

Many available volumes, in fact, maintain that children are unlikely to become interested in Shakespeare, but purport to help young people survive their unavoidable exposure to the plays. Barron's, for example, offers several plays in its Shakespeare Made Easy series. Proclaiming that "a fuller appreciation of Shakespeare's plays comes in later life" (Durband 1985, 6), the introduction to *Romeo and Juliet* states that it is intended to help students understand Shakespeare better than they could with the only tools previously available to them; that is, footnotes and "a stern teacher" (6). These volumes provide on facing pages modern English versions of the texts alongside the Elizabethan rendition. *Romeo and Juliet* from the British Comic Book Shakespeare series



takes this method a step further, adding pictures to its "dual language" version of the play, with Shakespeare's text appearing in black print, facing the orange type of the translation. No source text or information about the editor, Simon Greaves, is provided; however, the book cover assures readers that the series provides: "Skilfully edited original Shakespeare text which preserves all key speeches" (the failure to identify source texts is common in these volumes); "[a]ccompanying modern English text which translates original verse into understandable, contemporary English"; and "[n]otes on plot development which help to make plot easy to follow" (Greaves 2003, cover).<sup>11</sup>

### Study Guides

The new Classics Illustrated version, which has been revised from its original incarnation as a comic book several decades ago, is now presented as a "study guide," "featuring essays on the author, background, theme, characters and significance of the work, by accomplished scholars and teachers with special interest in their texts" (Shwartz 1996, back cover). Although the source text for this edition is not cited here, there is some academic information provided about the editor, Susan Shwartz, and modernizations to the text are generally restricted to the stage directions, though the play is considerably streamlined. Similar to the issues many of us remember from our youth, the current Classics Illustrated volumes endeavor to present literature without patronizing the intended audience. While these texts do not explain the rationale for their existence in any detail, they bill themselves as "your doorway to the classics" (Shwartz 1996, cover). In contrast to the Comic Book Shakespeare, which appears designed to make *Romeo and Juliet* easier, the Classics Illustrated version offers an introduction rather than a dilution. The repackaging as a "study guide," however, suggests that its audience is not perceived as being general readers, but students needing help with their classroom assignments.

The British Letts Explore series has a similar goal, which it states explicitly in its *Romeo and Juliet* for GCSE. Its linkage to a specific curriculum and examination structure keeps the text from venturing into the realm of "fun," however. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) encompasses the syllabi and exams that assess student achievement in the United Kingdom for the last two years of compulsory education (Key Stage 4). The Letts Explore series typically makes no effort to explain why Shakespeare is included in the curriculum; instead, it "helps you get to grips with the novels, poetry and plays most commonly studied for GCSE coursework and exams" (Mahoney 1994, back cover). Each volume in this series apparently contains: "Detailed commentary on the text; exploration of characters and themes, with easy-reference graphics and examiner's tips; self-text quizzes; and Example questions and outline answers for coursework and examination essays" (back cover). The guide makes no obvious effort to simplify *Romeo and Juliet*,

but presents itself as an aid in preparing for serious assessment: "Most of you will use your study of *Romeo and Juliet* to write a coursework essay fulfilling the Shakespeare requirement for English and English Literature. In writing this essay, you must meet certain requirements. In particular, you must show awareness (though not necessarily at great length) of social and historical influences, cultural context and literary traditions. . . . It is also essential that you show considerable evidence of textual knowledge" (Mahoney 1994, 58). This guide to *Romeo and Juliet*, which does not include a copy of the text, is not presented as a short-cut through the play. Instead, it seems intended for diligent students who desire guidance through the work of preparing for the assessment of their secondary school achievements. The examinations clearly give pupils and the publisher ample reason to be serious about this endeavor, but the text is silent on questions of enjoyment or other potential benefits to Shakespearean study.

The Lorenz Educational Publishers' *Romeo and Juliet*, from its Access to Shakespeare series, purports to have a similarly erudite purpose, despite its presentation as a facing-page translation of the play into modern English. Its editor is identified as Jonnie Patricia Mobley, Ph.D, from the Drama Department at Cuesta College, which is part of the San Luis Obispo, California community college system.<sup>12</sup> The introduction to the text indicates that the volume "consists of two versions of the play. The first is the original [*sic*], based on the Globe Edition of 1860, which was in turn based on the Folio of 1623. And this further, was a reprint of a still earlier edition. The second version is a translation of the original into contemporary English. . . . Insights from modern scholars have been included in both versions" (Mobley 2004, iv). Notably, no further information about the source texts is included, and there are no notes indicating when "insights from modern scholars" are being drawn from, nor are any scholars identified by name or text. These assertions attempt to claim legitimacy for the volume, but a wary reader (probably an adult) would have reason to be skeptical.

Mobley's introduction explains the rationale for its design, but conventionally does not discuss why its audience might be reading the play:

The translation of *Romeo and Juliet* is not meant to take the place of the original. Instead, it is an alternative to the notes usually included in modern editions. In many editions these notes interfere with the reading of the play. Whether alongside or below the original text, the notes break the rhythm of reading and frequently force the reader to turn back to an earlier page or jump ahead to a later one. Having a translation that runs parallel to the original, line for line, allows the reader to move easily from Elizabethan to contemporary English and back again. It's simply a better way to introduce Shakespeare. (Mobley 2004, iv)

The back cover of the text elaborates upon this superior way to encounter Shakespeare, claiming that "you'll be able to experience this play as Shakespeare's first audience did," although it does not address how a modernized text accomplishes this recreation of an Elizabethan theatrical experience.

Clearly, many of the texts offering modernized or simplified versions of Shakespeare's plays are designed predominantly in order to take advantage of a perceived marketing opportunity, and they have every right to do so.<sup>13</sup> The concurrent dearth of explanation about any rationale for reading Shakespeare, however, leaves open the possibility that simplifiers and "translators" of Shakespeare could be claiming a disproportionate voice in the presentation of Shakespeare to children and adolescents. While it can make sense to place a text in front of young people without explanation, letting "the story speak for itself," such a strategy may not be prudent for those who value the study of Shakespeare in a culture that frequently emphasizes the difficulty and tedium of Shakespearean drama. In today's environment, where the education of young people remains contentious, silence can have serious repercussions. The overwhelming message currently being presented — i.e., that Shakespeare is frightening and needs to be made fun in order for his plays to be tolerated at all — is not being counteracted with sufficient force.

### Novel Approaches

There are exceptions to this pattern, of course, even among those writers who do not make their aims explicit.<sup>14</sup> Although *Classics Illustrated* has changed its presentation from high-brow comic book to study guide, there are still a number of individual books and series that are designed to introduce Shakespeare to young people in forms aimed to entice readers, without pretending to substitute for the actual play. If these authors perceive Shakespeare as scary or tedious, they do not emphasize that fear in their texts. Although they are offering popularizations of the stories, their works seem intended to render familiar, not replace, the actual plays. Terry Deary, for example, author of the popularly irreverent *Horrible Histories* series, offers a volume entitled *Twisted Tales: Shakespeare Stories As You've Never Read Them Before*. Deary begins his section on *Romeo and Juliet* with the announcement, "The next play is very famous" (1998, 118). He then gives an extremely brief biography of the author, relates some prominent adaptations of this story, and describes the main characters in modern terms. Romeo, for example, is introduced as: "Romeo Montague: Young, handsome hero. Madly in love . . . with Rosaline! That is until he meets Juliet, of course. Good with swords and words. If he lived today, he'd be into boy-racer cars, drinking lager and supporting Manchester United Football Club" (119), while Mercutio is said to be "Romeo's cousin. Hates Capulets, hates wimps, hates women and probably hates himself" (119). After these

capsule views of Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, and Tybalt, Deary provides four-and-a-half pages of comic book illustrations with short captions, then concludes with an anecdote about performance history. Like most of these authors, Deary does not indicate whether his books are produced with the aim of increasing cultural literacy or in order to demystify Shakespeare for students, but he also claims no academic justification for his work. Similar to his *Horrible Histories*, Deary's Shakespeare stories include a little bit of history and a modicum of plot summary in a funny format. Making no pretence at offering the play with any textual validity, the tales act predominantly as humorous, brief introductions to famous plays.

Two other popular children's versions of *Romeo and Juliet* present similarly light-hearted approaches to the drama, also inserting modern references into the familiar story. The intrepid dog Wishbone, for instance, appears in the Wishbone Classics version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Wishbone, whom children recognize from television as well as from books and toys, is presented throughout the 125-page volume, helping to explain the story and engage the readers' interest, as he does in the other books in this series, such as *The Odyssey* and *Don Quixote*. Wishbone Classics introduce children to famous literature, with Wishbone here guiding children through a prose version of the play with regular explanatory interjections, such as:

*Romeo and Juliet* is considered a tragedy because some very sad things happen. But every once in a while, funny characters like the Nurse show up to give the audience a few laughs. These laughs in the middle of a tragedy are called comic relief. (Aronson 1996, 33)

Each chapter of the book also includes an introduction, offered by Wishbone, such as: "Shortly after Romeo and Juliet finished their wedding vows, our story takes us back to the town square. A group of Montagues are on one side, and a group of Capulets are on the other. Need I say more?"(72). Although this novelization does not include original text, it presents an exciting version of the tale with Wishbone's annotations, which are sufficiently lively to captivate its intended audience.

Juvenile audiences are also likely to be drawn to a series conceived in a similar vein, the Cracked Classics written by Tony Abbott, the popular children's author of the Secrets of Droon books, among other creations. Like the extremely successful Magic School Bus and Magic Tree House series, the Cracked Classics feature children who travel through time. Abbott's Devin and Frankie are presented as academic underachievers who expand their knowledge by visiting other times and places with the aid of their school librarian's mysterious "zapper gates." In *Crushing on a Capulet*, the students escape a rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet* and end up as part of the "real" action in Verona, assisted by a copy of the playtext. Since neither child did the assigned reading in advance, they do not always know what is about to happen, but they nevertheless advise

Romeo, Juliet, the Prince, and others about what to do and how to interpret events. They take a more active role in the text than Wishbone does, while still offering considerable commentary and assistance for readers who are new to the story. Like the Wishbone series, moreover, the Cracked Classics books introduce children to a number of "classic" literary texts, including *Treasure Island*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. As usual, they offer no reason why children might be interested in reading the source texts, but they provide informative and entertaining renditions of famous stories for young elementary school students. Unlike the Wishbone series, however, which presents *Romeo and Juliet* simply as "one of the world's greatest books" filled with "a lot of interesting characters" (Aronson 1996, Introduction), the Cracked Classics series implies that *Romeo and Juliet* is composed in an unfathomable language, as Devin suggests in response to his teacher's quotes from the play: "Mr. Wexler, the last time I checked, you were an English teacher. But you're not talking English. You're talking some other language. A weird one!" (Abbott 2003, 3). By the end of the novel, however, Frankie and Devin are thoroughly engaged with the story:

"Frankie, it's funny," I [Devin] said, as we put away our costumes.

"Both of us tried really hard to change the sad ending to a happy one. But even though we couldn't, even though it's a real bummer of a story, I still sort of feel okay about it."

She nodded. "I know exactly what you mean. It's like what the prince said. 'Go hence to have more talk of these sad things.' You do want to talk about it. It makes you feel better by talking about the whole tragedy of it." (Abbott 2003, 136)

While these books do not substitute for exposure to the actual play, they still build the kind of familiarity that helps students understand and better appreciate their future encounters with Shakespeare's drama.

### Cognition

The format of these two junior novelizations of *Romeo and Juliet* highlights one of the reasons why I am advocating more articulation of the rationale for presenting Shakespeare to young people, not just a reiteration of "Shakespeare is part of an educated person's knowledge base" or a piece of "cultural literacy." There are many reasons to introduce Shakespeare to children and adolescents, but students, parents, and educators will be in a better position to achieve their goals in humanities education if these aims are discussed openly. The versions just described, for instance, seem relatively innocuous in their present form and their value in Shakespearean education could

easily go unnoticed. *Crushing on a Capulet* and the *Wishbone Romeo and Juliet* do not articulate their intended purpose. Nevertheless, they present the texts in a way that will assist children when they encounter the play in the future, since their use of familiar figures (Wishbone, modern school children) and places (elementary school) aids the cognitive mapping that students will draw from as they continue their studies. I make no claims to be an expert in cognition, but I am concerned that much of the instructional work in cognitive studies appears to be focusing on how children learn math and science, not the humanistic disciplines, as Sharon M. Carver and David Klahr's *Cognition and Instruction: Twenty-five Years of Progress* (2001) illustrates.

Students retain new material best when it is linked to information they already possess. As psychologist Margaret W. Matlin notes, however, conscious memory of this learning is not necessary for it to aid in future studies. As she explains, "semantic memory" is "knowledge without reference to how that information was acquired" (1994, 214). In other words, people know many things even when they cannot identify the source of their knowledge. As Matlin explains it, "pattern recognition involves comparing the sensory stimuli with information in other memory storages" (1994, 33). The way these books are framed, therefore, places the play within familiar contexts, which helps the drama become part of the students' stored body of knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Neither Tony Abbott nor Billy Aronson (writer of the *Wishbone Romeo and Juliet*) indicates whether he drew from cognitive research when planning his books. As noted, the authors also do not discuss why they decided to pursue the "classics" in their juvenile series.<sup>16</sup> The correlation, therefore, between the format of these novelizations and cognitive science may either be coincidental or planned. For the children who read these texts, it may not be important whether the authors were thinking about cognition when they composed them, although, as psychologist Robert S. Siegler notes, "young children have greater learning capabilities than is usually realized" (Siegler 2001, 199) and could profit by more explicit teaching in these texts and elsewhere. Accordingly, the intellectual vacuum in which many such books are presented may well matter in the educational and cultural lives of children and adolescents. If "educational" books of this type are regularly being produced without conscious consideration of diverse, sometimes controversial, educational aims and cultural goals and without recognition of research in cognitive structures,<sup>17</sup> children may be impeded in the development of their knowledge and in their understanding of why they might want that knowledge. As I know from teaching Shakespeare at the university level, typical undergraduates cannot explain why they study the humanities. Indeed, they often encounter serious family and societal pressures against it. They can usually muster a sense that Shakespeare is an important part of a college graduate's education, but are generally at a

loss to explain why in any detail. If undergraduates don't really know why they read Shakespeare, younger students are even less likely to understand.

In a time when the content and methods of elementary and secondary education are under attack from many quarters, the relative silence surrounding studies in the humanities for children could have significant ramifications. Part of the problem, as Elliot W. Eisner indicates in his collection of essays on arts education, is that cognitive studies still fail to illuminate the ways in which different subjects enhance intellectual development. Although Eisner's observations do not reflect the most recent work in cognitive science, they are so pertinent to the current discussion that they require quotation at length:

If work in the arts is cognitive or intellectual, in what way is it so? Are there such things as qualitative forms of thought and problem solving, and if so, are the processes used for such thinking the same as those used, say, in learning to read? Are there optimal periods in a child's life for developing different modes of thought and expression? Do certain human intellectual capacities atrophy or crystallize with disuse? Questions like these provide direction for inquiry into the course of human development. The answers to such questions, will, in principle, at least, have profound implications for what we believe to be appropriate content for school programs. For example, if through research on the nature of human intelligence we find that the modes in which thinking occurs — visual, auditory, kinesthetic — are relatively independent and that each mode requires for its full development opportunities to utilize media and to engage in tasks that elicit and refine it, the argument for including such activities and materials in school programs is strengthened. (Eisner 1976, viii).<sup>18</sup>

Eisner's comments underscore the importance of expanded information about the relationship between studies in the humanities and cognitive science, since such linkages could be used to build financial support for education in the humanities, as well as help writers and educators fashion optimal presentations of texts. His cited remarks are based upon speculation about research that has not yet been undertaken sufficiently; however, he finds support for his views in recent work done in neuropsychiatry, which finds that "[w]hat is lyrical, holistic, synthetic, and metaphorical, what comes to consciousness in the forms of icons or images, is largely a product of the thinking of the right hemisphere. Such processes, central to human adaptability and creativity, could be fostered through programs that are genuinely educational" (Eisner 1982, 223). While Eisner's volume focuses predominantly on the non-dramatic arts, many of the points made within this collection carry implications for studies in drama and other fields in the humanities, as well. As

noted, much of the best pedagogical writing done on Shakespeare focuses upon the language of his plays. This phenomenon supports the idea that cognitive studies may prove extremely useful for Shakespearean teaching, even though more work in this field is needed.

Ultimately, whether we find cognitive, cultural, aesthetic, emotional, historical or other reasons for introducing Shakespeare to children and adolescents is probably less important than the task of explaining why, or even if, we continue to find this endeavor worthwhile. Focusing on making Shakespeare fun in order to make it palatable to those who are required either to teach or study the subject falls far short of adequate justification for continuing to promote Shakespeare for children in classrooms or at home. Linking the plays to CPR or drug education, so that the lessons will have contemporary relevance, also shortchanges our students. The so-called "crisis in the humanities" makes it clear that the rationale for studying classic literature is not self-evident. At the same time, the increased emphasis upon standardized testing; the decline of arts education; and attempts to introduce "intelligent design" into American public schools illustrate the curricular power of groups who may not share the perspectives of those supporting the humanities in elementary and secondary education. As this brief overview of *Romeo and Juliet* resources for young people suggests, children are offered little explicit information as to why they might read Shakespeare or watch his plays on stage. Their teachers, on the other hand, are told that they need to make the texts fun or absurdly relevant if they and the students are going to survive the exposure. These approaches do not serve the students, the teachers, or the texts with respect and appropriate contextualization. In order to promote the continuation and expansion of humanities education in our schools and homes, we need to do a far better job of explaining why it matters. There is unlikely to be one answer that will satisfy all parents, students, and educators, but the current silence is certainly more harmful than a thoughtful and spirited debate about the role of Shakespeare in the lives and education of today's children and adolescents. As I indicate here, the part that Shakespearean study can play in cognitive development is one area that deserves further exploration. It is time also to reexamine and rearticulate the aesthetic, philosophical, historical, and other benefits awaiting students who encounter the plays in their youth.

### Notes

1. One of the authors, Cass Foster, also authors a series of "sixty-minute" scripts of Shakespeare's plays and adaptations (with discussion questions) for children, including *Romeo and Juliet*.
2. Some of the books available for teachers are excellent, but the emphasis upon "fun" that links many of them often diverts the content far from Shakespeare. Carol Rawlings Miller's *Irresistible Shakespeare: 6 Sensational Scenes from Favorite Plays and Dozens of Fun Ideas*



*That Introduce students to the Wonderful Works of Shakespeare* (Miller 2001), aimed at grades 5 and up, however, frequently provides more serious teaching exercises than its title might suggest.

3. In this essay, I am focusing on current texts, and so do not consider children's versions of Shakespeare by earlier writers, such as the Lambs.
4. The Folger text offers some valuable exercises and emanates from a justly acclaimed program for high school teachers. I do not wish to disparage this volume, although I wish the title differentiated it more clearly from other texts in this genre.
5. In an interesting contrast, Jean Trounstone begins her memoir of teaching Shakespeare to female inmates with an explicit statement of her rationale: "I first focused on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, filled with conflicts about love and law and peopled with fascinating characters I hoped would engage the prisoners and their audience. I believed that if my students tackled Shakespeare, a writer they thought was beyond reach, they would also be learning to take on what was most difficult in life" (Trounstone 2001, 1).
6. I am grateful to the Emory University Teaching Fund and to the Graduate School and Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of New Hampshire for their support of my research for this essay.
7. Susan Leach maintains, however, that "[i]t appears that Shakespeare, like God, is not to be questioned; only this is a particular kind of God, and a particular kind of Shakespeare" (1992, 4). Leach, along with Aers and Wheale (Aers and Wheale 1991), offers a valuable overview of discussions of Shakespeare in the British education system.
8. I cannot claim to have researched these texts exhaustively and I do not wish to state that writings on British Shakespearean pedagogy are more substantive than their counterparts in America. Curricular reforms may have necessitated this influx of serious British pedagogical guides. In addition to those cited above, the works of Rex Gibson with the Cambridge School Shakespeare are particularly noteworthy for their astute contributions to the study of Shakespeare.
9. An emphasis upon language often appears to be the defining characteristic of serious Shakespearean pedagogy. Although the texts discussed above are British, Randal F. Robinson of Michigan State University has a useful volume in this category, *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language: Help for the Teacher and Student* (Robinson 1989).
10. Coville elaborates on his motives elsewhere, though in his essay on adapting Shakespeare, he assumes "that most people reading this will agree that there is value in exciting young people about Shakespeare's work" (2003, 58). He then explains his practice: "what I want to discuss here is not the why, but the how — not the reason, but the method" (58).

11. I was unable to obtain the teacher's volume that can accompany this text.
12. Dr. Mobley is not currently listed on the Cuesta College faculty list [5 November, 2005].
13. While I was working on this essay, an article on CNN.com announced that Dot mobile, a British cell phone service, is planning to condense classic literary texts to SMS text messages. The headline to this piece announces "Romeo, Romeo?wer4 Rt thou Romeo" (2005).
14. Lois Shultz's volume *The Bard for Beginners* (Shultz 1985) offers ways to introduce Shakespeare throughout the curriculum.
15. I am undertaking a lengthier study of intersections between cognitive theory and Shakespearean pedagogy that will address these issues in more detail than is possible here.
16. Coville admits that the original idea for his Shakespeare books came from his editor, Diane Arico (Coville 2003, 56).
17. As Siegler notes, research on cognition and instruction has been booming over the past thirty years (Siegler 2001, 195).
18. Eisner expands on the topic in his subsequent work (1982).

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