

## Secondary Shakespeare in the UK: what gets taught and why?

Victoria Elliott\*, University of Oxford, UK and Sarah Olive, University of York, UK

Victoria Elliott, Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK  
veldaelliott@education.ox.ac.uk  
sarah.olive@york.ac.uk

### Abstract:

In this paper we report data from the first national survey of secondary Shakespeare teaching in the UK, conducted online in 2017-18 with a sample of 211 teachers distributed through England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In this article we report on what is taught and why. Our survey shows that the most popular play in the UK is *Macbeth*, which is one fifth of all Shakespeare teaching instances in our sample. At age 11 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* dominate, while at A level A.C. Bradley's (1904) 'big four' - *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are the most popular. Reasons to teach certain texts related to clear plot, themes and good characters for analysis; aside from the play's characteristics, whether or not there were copies of the text in school was the major deciding factor in what to teach, along with the existence of supporting resources.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Macbeth, English teaching, curriculum

### Introduction

In this paper we report data from the first national survey of secondary Shakespeare teaching in the UK, conducted online in 2017-18. Shakespeare is a key pillar of English teaching in the UK (and in other countries around the world); he has been the only compulsory author since the inception of the National Curriculum in 1989. Shakespeare's work is not compulsory in Scotland, but is still frequently taught. Materials and courses to support the teaching of Shakespeare's works proliferate, but despite this we know little about exactly what goes on in schools in relation to this icon of English Literature. One previous survey (Wade and Sheppard 1993, 1994) was conducted in Birmingham 25 years ago and a further small scale survey was reported by Batho (1998); otherwise literature on the teaching of Shakespeare tends to be small scale descriptive studies (e.g. Irish, 2011; Coles, 2009), linked to specific organisations such as the RSC (e.g. Winston, 2015), or promoting specific teaching approaches (e.g. Stredder, 2009).

In England curricular guidance requires two plays to be studied between the ages of 11 and 14; it also requires one to be studied between 14 and 16 (although the wording of the curriculum

document means that this play does not have to be different to those previously studied) (Department for Education, 2014a). Until reform of GCSE qualifications in England (first examined in 2017) Shakespeare was almost always taught to students of ages 14-16 for coursework, or latterly controlled assessment (coursework done under supervision often similar to exam conditions but internally marked)<sup>1</sup>, which meant largely free text choice; the new specifications are entirely assessed by terminal examination so the choice of text is limited by the Awarding Body which sets the examination. Students of English Literature A level from 16 to 18 must study at least one play by Shakespeare (Department for Education, 2014b). Welsh curriculum documents say that study at both 11-14 and 14-16 must include Shakespearean drama but do not specify a number of plays (Llywodraeth Cymru, 2016). Shakespeare's plays at 14-16 are examined by controlled assessment in Wales, and schools have a free choice, aside from a prohibition from using either *Othello* or *Much Ado About Nothing*, which can be studied additionally as an externally examined 'heritage' text (WJEC, 2014). Curricular guidance in Northern Ireland does not specify Shakespeare at all but study of his plays forms a compulsory part of English Literature examination courses for 14-16 and 16-18. At GCSE there is the option to study one of three specified Shakespeare plays for external examination and/or a free choice of Shakespeare play for controlled assessment (CCEA, 2014). In Scotland there is no requirement to teach any text except the 'Scottish texts' (SQA, 2013).

This paper reports part of the data from the survey: namely which plays are taught and why they are chosen. A further article will detail the findings of the survey relating to which teaching approaches and pedagogies are utilised to teach Shakespeare's plays. As a result in the review of the literature below we focus on which plays are taught rather than the broader pedagogical literature on Shakespeare.

### **Teaching Shakespeare**

It is hard to extrapolate from the literature what texts are taught in schools. Although a glance at the pedagogic literature suggests a preponderance in favour of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, most plays get some sort of treatment. Gregory (2005) mentions *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* as the three plays students in her school will have encountered by 14; the Baz Luhrmann film (1996) is particularly relevant in the context of making *Romeo and Juliet* 'contemporary' to her students (although it may be rather dated now), but so are news stories about then-recent riots in Oldham or Bradford, when brought to bear on Act 1. Ahmed (2018) discusses the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet* in an ethnically diverse classroom more recently. Some plays are far more rarely mentioned: Francis's teaching of *Titus Andronicus* at GCSE at Eton College is an

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<sup>1</sup> There was an option to take Shakespeare as an externally assessed examination but it was very rarely chosen by schools.

outlier (2005). (This is not the school mentioned in our data below as teaching *Titus Andronicus*.) Resources published to support the teaching of Shakespeare's work also cluster around a familiar subset of plays: the Royal Shakespeare Company *Toolkit* for example, provides support for the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (RSC, 2010). A wider range of plays is referenced in texts which support the teaching of Shakespeare to older students (for example, McEvoy, 2000). A certain tendency towards a repetition of the same plays for study by students age 16-18 was noted by David Self in a piece for the *Times Educational Supplement* entitled 'The Museum of English Lit' (1982, p.24) which identified the existence of such a thing 'as an A level play', suggesting *King Lear*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *Winter's Tale*, with *Hamlet* and *Othello* as close runners-up; he identifies a sense that literary merit is important, and that a Shakespeare play studied at A level should be representative of his work, rather than a quixotic choice. Thompson and Turchi's (2016) book *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose* draws on a range of texts but uses *Hamlet* and *Othello* as key examples. Both of these texts feature in A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904); it was this book that emphasised the importance of the 'tragic flaw' in understanding the Shakespearean tragic protagonist, an approach which has continued to have a major influence on teaching (Olive, 2015). The other two plays named by Bradley are *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

Previous surveys have been small scale and local within England. Wade and Sheppard (1993) reported a survey of 56 English teachers in 28 schools in Birmingham (a response rate from invitations of approximately 62%). They reported a predominance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (n = 9), *Macbeth* (n = 4), and *The Merchant of Venice* (n = 4) reported by teachers to be used with 11 year olds (Year 7), although the absolute numbers were very small. These similarly dominated at Year 8, but the choices for use with Years 10 and 11, working towards the GCSE examination at age 16, were dominated by *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*, each of which were taught by 40 or more teachers to each year group (suggesting that most teachers taught two Shakespeare plays to each year group at this age). They also reported the exclusive use of some texts with sixth form classes, predominantly: *Hamlet*; *Othello*; *Antony and Cleopatra*; and *King Lear*, along with a handful of others. Some teachers also said they would only teach *Macbeth* or *Romeo and Juliet* to 16-18 year olds, despite their popularity with younger age groups with others. In a similar survey, again with two teachers in each of 45 English departments, with a final response rate of c. 67%, in the context of two local education authorities, Batho (1998) had similar findings. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest* and *Macbeth* were the most popular plays for teaching to 11 and 12 year olds. 65% of his respondents taught *Macbeth* for the GCSE, 32% *Romeo and Juliet* and 11% *The Merchant of Venice* (again implying the study of more than one Shakespeare play in the course of the two year qualification). Similarly the choice of plays for 16-18 year olds, 'largely determined by the exam

boards' (Batho, 1998, p. 165), brings the familiar *Antony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear* and *Othello*, with the addition of *Twelfth Night*.

There is no question that examination specifications loom large in the minds of teachers of students from 14 to 18, and that this bears strongly on the choices which are made. Although writing primarily in the context of an examination at age 14 in England which has since been eliminated, Harris (2005) cites the need to 'prepare pupils for a written examination that will require them to grasp the dramatic impact of particular scenes, show understanding of the way Shakespearian characters function and demonstrate critical sensitivity towards the language' (p.41). Blocksidge (2005) similarly notes the focus of A level questions on characterisation and on the presentation of themes, and that this has an inevitable impact on the way that plays are taught. From our data presented below it seems also to have an impact on which plays are taught. McEvoy (2005) also raises the issue of the 'assessment objectives' which are applied to writing about Shakespeare's plays in examinations, and particularly the question of social and historical context which might prevent the teaching of plays which require greater historical contextualisation than others. *Henry V*, for example, might require setting within Shakespeare's contemporary political context, as well as that of the time at which the events related actually happened. Alternatively, given the specific inclusion of context as an assessment objective at both GCSE and A level in the revised English specifications, it is possible that teachers in England might now deliberately turn to plays where contextualisation is an obvious requirement.

The question of 'why Shakespeare?' and the importance placed on his work by the English curriculum has been explored at length elsewhere (Olive, 2015). She notes that the 'curriculum is silent about what should be achieved through the study of Shakespeare in particular' (2015, p. 25). Muñoz-Valdivieso (2017) compares Shakespeare's place in society and education to the Bard's own depiction of Cleopatra: 'Age cannot wither [him], nor custom stale/ [His] infinite variety' (2005, II. ii, 270–1). She also characterises Shakespeare as an 'imagined community' (2017, p.76), an approach which speaks to the shared but also differing experiences and views of Shakespeare and his plays found in our survey.

## **Methodology**

An online survey was designed with reference to Sheppard (1993), to allow some comparison of the results, but also drawing on literature on current teaching methods. It was open to completion for one year from 2017 to 2018, and asked participants to answer with reference to their practice for the current academic year. Participation was anonymous. Questions were a mixture of closed and open questions. Those open-ended questions that are reported here were coded by the two

researchers jointly in discussion. It is worth noting that we asked respondents about their practices in relation to specific year groups; these groups are called slightly different things in Northern Ireland and Scotland than they are in Wales and England. The survey included the year group names for all four countries, but in this article we refer to Years 1-7 for simplicity. Year 1 in this case is children of age 11-12; up to Year 7 which is students of 17-18 years of age. External examinations are taken in all the countries at 16 years of age (National 5 in Scotland and GCSE in the others) and at the end of schooling (Higher in Scotland and A level in the others). There are only 6 years of secondary education in Scotland; the youngest year group in the study is therefore in this context a primary class (P7). We did not gather data on which examination specifications teachers were following.

### ***Sampling***

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, through an online call shared through Twitter. The sample was boosted by direct emails sent to as many secondary schools as possible in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (through contact details on school websites), as we were aware the reach of our Twitter networks was primarily in England. We recruited 211 participants: comprising 128 in England, 5 in Northern Ireland, 47 in Scotland and 29 in Wales. Proportionally with the number of secondary schools in each country, the sample was weighted most heavily towards Wales, followed by Scotland, Northern Ireland and England in that order. The survey asked participants to give their school postcode so that we could check for clustering of participants: 11 schools had two participants; one school provided 4; otherwise there was no more than one participant per school. The majority (77%) worked in state comprehensive schools; others worked in grammar schools (4%); independent (12%); comprehensives in a selective area (6%) or sixth form colleges (1%). This is broadly representative of the proportions of these nationally except for independent schools which are over-represented in our sample. Table 1 shows the number of years of teaching experience participants had; almost a quarter had more than 20 years, and 60% had more than ten years. Fewer than 10% of participants were in their first two years of teaching; the rest were divided almost equally between roles as classroom teachers, teachers with responsibilities lower than Head of Department, and Heads of Department. We take this breadth of teaching experience to be a strength of the study, given that research on English teachers is often concentrated on teachers within their first few years of teaching because of their accessibility to those of us working on PGCE programmes.

Table 1 about here.

The sample, therefore, was broadly distributed over experience, career stage and geographically, although as a voluntary sample, it cannot be taken to be representative. Cross-tabulations were performed for demographic data against answers to other questions; no significant patterns were present.

## **Findings**

### ***The importance of Shakespeare***

We asked two questions relating to the importance of Shakespeare: a closed question asking if Shakespeare teaching should be compulsory and an open question asking if teaching Shakespeare is important. Coding the open question for 'Yes', 'Yes but not for all', 'No', and 'I don't know' produced 181 (91%) responses for an unequivocal yes. However, only 74% agreed that study of Shakespeare's work should be compulsory in secondary schools (see Table 2). There was slight variation here in terms of types of school: 92% of respondents working in the independent sector thought study of Shakespeare's plays should be compulsory, but the sample distribution was not large enough for this to be statistically significant.

Table 2 about here.

The reasons given for answers in the open ended question were varied. While some teachers were extremely emphatic on the importance of Shakespeare ('YES! YES! YES! ABSOLUTELY VITAL! FOR EVERY STUDENT!!!! regardless of ability or inclination. '), others were more nuanced in their attitudes. Some suggested teaching Shakespeare meant the exclusion of other, equally worthy early modern playwrights. There were a number of responses which highlighted his importance in terms of his cultural influence, so that he should be studied because he is 'hugely influential on contemporary literature'. Others suggested that early study of Shakespeare's plays was important to dispel myths about difficulty before national exams, while others suggested that studying Shakespeare was not appropriate for all students, or that studying the plays should be postponed until 14, 16, or even degree level. One respondent argued that suggesting Shakespeare should be compulsory in Scotland was equivalent to 'cultural imperialism'; while this was from a Scottish teacher, two other Scottish teachers specifically bemoaned the fact that the introductory of a compulsory 'Scottish text' for study for examination classes had 'squeezed out' Shakespeare from Scottish classrooms. There is clear evidence, therefore, that secondary English teachers continue to regard the study of Shakespeare as an important part of the subject, even if only three quarters of our respondents believed he should be a compulsory author.

### ***The plays which are taught***

The survey asked teachers to identify which plays they had taught in the current academic year to each of the secondary year groups. Table 3 shows the frequency of each play in each year group, in reducing level of overall popularity.

Table 3 about here

*Macbeth* accounts for 22% of all Shakespeare play teaching in the UK according to our sample, with *Romeo and Juliet* providing a further 18%. The high overall scores for these plays were highlighted by the response of one teacher to the 'Is Shakespeare important?' question who replied that while Shakespeare was important, there should be more variety of plays taught - and named these two as the culprits. *Macbeth's* place at the head of the table is cemented by the play's popularity for the national examinations at age 16, far exceeding the teaching of other plays in Years 4 and 5. These two most popular plays are also the most popular in Year 3, which supports the suggestion that many schools are adopting a three year GCSE course leading to examination at 16, but also anecdotal reports that some schools are teaching GCSE set texts in the third year of secondary school, before the course has officially started, and then re-teaching them as part of the course. Since examination reform in England, Shakespeare is an examined text, rather than the subject of non-examined assessment, and schools in England now have a far smaller choice of play to teach at this age (of between 4 and 6 options); the possibilities largely overlap between exam specifications and *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* appear on all of them, as do *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. (*Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, *Othello*, *Henry V* and *Twelfth Night* make up the other options.)

In most year groups a small number of plays makes up the vast majority of teaching, with a long tail of other plays being taught by one or two respondents. Tables 4 and 5 show the plays which are taught in Years 1 and 2, in descending order of popularity; the thick lines demonstrate the cut off points for 'half' and 'three quarters' of responses. In both years *A Midsummer Night's Dream* leads the field, but in Year 1 it accounts for 37% of the teaching of our participants. Between them *Dream* and *The Tempest* easily make up half of all teaching, and with the addition of *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* these four plays are 75% of all teaching in Year 1. In Year 2 *Romeo and Juliet* becomes more popular, but there are still only three plays making up half of all teaching.

Table 4 about here

Table 5 about here

The opportunity to teach other plays remains, in that a variety of plays make up the long tail of each year group.

Table 6 shows the combined teaching of the last two years of secondary school, representing the work for final qualifications. While *Othello* and *Hamlet* take up half of all responses, to reach three quarters a further five plays are required, suggesting a much greater diversity of choice at this level.

Table 6 about here

It is noticeable that the top four plays are those which were the topic of A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904). We do not suggest that teachers are directed by a critic who wrote more than a century ago, but this may point to a convergence - a participation in Muñoz-Valdivieso's 'imagined community' (2017, p. 76) perhaps - in beliefs about the plays most worthy of study. Nine plays were not taught by our respondents to any age group: *Cymbeline*, *Henry IV pt 2*, *Henry VI pt 1, 2 and 3*, *Henry VIII*, *King John*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Timon of Athens*.

### **Factors contributing to choice of text**

We asked respondents to tell us what qualities they looked for in their choice of Shakespeare play for teaching below age 14 and between ages 14 and 16, and if there were any other factors that affected their choice. We also asked if there were any plays which they would not teach students below 16 (see Table 7) and their responses serve as a good introduction to the factors which contribute to the choice of Shakespeare text in UK secondary schools. While the choices in Table 7 point strongly to the idea that both tragedies and histories are considered unsuitable for younger children, many participants specifically commented that tragedies were more 'complex' and therefore only suited to older groups. The history plays were by and large rejected and one respondent commented that this was because 'they are slower and more about the character than the plot'; another commented that 'the pupils need the discipline to find out more about the context. Younger ones don't seem to have the patience for learning both English AND History in the same classroom'. Two respondents mentioned the sexual content of *Othello* was problematic for younger classes, and another two suggested the philosophical content of *Hamlet* made it more



appropriate for older students. *Titus Andronicus* (which was taught to 11 year olds by one of our sample!) was deemed 'a bit ott [over the top] on the violence' and the same respondent said they would also not teach *King Lear* to younger students because of 'the eye surgery'! However, 14% of respondents (29) said that there were no plays they would not teach below age 16.

Table 7 about here

These responses demonstrate that both content and characteristics of the plays were considered when choosing texts, which was similarly seen in the responses to questions about qualities that teachers sought when choosing texts for younger age groups.

The top ten qualities cited by participants in relation to choice of texts for 11 to 14 year olds can be seen in Table 8; these are also the only qualities which were mentioned by ten or more respondents. A clear plot was the most commonly cited quality and a number of other respondents mentioned the problems which could arise with complexity, such as the reliance of comedies on identity confusion, which meant tragedies would be a more popular choice (despite the position of humour as a key quality).

Table 8 about here

These qualities suggest a focus on making Shakespeare easier to approach and to understand; for example, 'I pick the plays with the best TV adaptations to really challenge children's prejudices against Shakespeare.' Some teachers referenced specific content which they looked for: magic (4); blood and gore (4); romance (1); and ghosts (1). One respondent, coded as blood and gore, said they looked for 'Game of Thronesishness' at both 11-14 and 14-16 years of age. Four teachers also said they wanted age appropriate content, with specific reference to sexual content, for the youngest age group.

At the slightly older level of 14-16 years of age, there were twelve qualities which were mentioned by at least ten respondents (Table 9). While the same qualities largely apply as with the younger age group, the existence of external examination clearly affects the choice of play to be taught. Responses which simply said that the choice of play was determined by the examination specification were not coded, because this is not a quality of a play; it was notable, however, that a number of respondents felt that they had no choice of play at all because of examination specifications, when all specifications offer a choice of at least four Shakespeare plays.

Table 9 about here

The category 'enables exam performance' included a number of respondents who mentioned the importance of memorable language or plot, which reflects the need in the reformed GCSE English Literature in England to memorise quotations for a closed book examination. One respondent said a play needed to withstand being revisited 'at least three times' in order to prepare for an examination. It is also notable that 'short' became a desirable factor at this level (although also mentioned by six teachers in relation to the younger age group), with some respondents explicitly mentioning the constraints of time imposed by the content requirements of the examination. The one quality which teachers looked for in a play for under 14s which disappeared entirely with the examination age group was humour (although no distinction was made between physical comedy and the word-play-based humour which often falls flat in the classroom, in the authors' experience). There is a sense that while the qualities which make a good play for under 14s are those which promote enjoyment of Shakespeare, between 14 and 16 the qualities are more strongly related to exam performance. Two Scottish teachers said they would not teach Shakespeare to examination classes (Scotland is the one country where he is not a compulsory author in the UK) because the difficulty of the texts would undermine their class's exam performance.

After these two questions we asked if there were any other factors which affected the choice of text, and three factors stood out clearly. The cost of texts, and therefore the need for them to already be available in school was cited by 38 respondents in addition to 12 who had already mentioned this factor in relation to the age group questions. The existence of resources to support study was cited by 20 participants, including online resources, 'easier' versions such as translations of texts or graphic novels, and existing schemes of work. Teacher expertise, which also appears in Table 9, received endorsement from a further 17 teachers as a factor. One Head of Department said that while in an ideal world teacher expertise and preference would be the determining factor, in practice the number of copies in the store cupboard and the need for the whole year group to do the same play to enable switching between classes meant that these factors took a back seat. A number of respondents across all three questions suggested that the teacher liking the play was a key consideration, as it would help them to promote it to students and teach it engagingly.

In 'other factors' the ability (sic) of the class was also mentioned as a potential factor affecting choice by 11 teachers; some interesting attitudes towards the relative difficulty of different plays were demonstrated here, such as the participant who wrote that 'lower ability more able to access *Romeo and Juliet/ Macbeth*, higher ability may be able to do *Julius C[esar]*.' This ranking of the difficulty of plays as if it were an acknowledged fact again speaks to the imagined community of Shakespeare [teaching] (Muñoz-Valdivieso , 2017, p. 76); when presenting this study at conferences,

American audience members typically predicted that *Julius Caesar* would be the most commonly taught play across the year groups, rather than *Macbeth*, which suggests that national contextual factors can affect how teachers think of plays. A consideration of gender was also demonstrated in text choice, although in the 16 teachers across the three questions who mentioned this, all but two were referring to the need to engage boys. One respondent commented that while they needed to get the boys 'hooked' with darker themes and action, 'girls will study just about anything'; another, however, did suggest that it was important not to have a play which was entirely dominated by one gender.

Cross-tabulations against demographic characteristics of respondents did not suggest that any of them had a significant effect on text choice. There was no general pattern in terms of school type for play choice, although the very rare plays were more likely to be seen in independent schools. *Pericles*, *Coriolanus*, *Richard II* and *Troilus and Cressida* were all taught in independent schools; *Titus Andronicus* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* were taught in state schools, however, a comprehensive and a grammar school respectively. One respondent reported that her multi-academy trust passed down instructions for text choice to all schools in the trust; Burns et al. (2019) shows this occurs in History as well, and she suggests it is an increasing trend. (We are indebted to Katharine Burns for her suggestion that we look for this.)

## **Discussion**

Many of the plays we found most commonly taught at each age group were in a similar position in Wade and Sheppard's (1993) survey. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the most popular play for teaching to 11 and 12 year olds both in 1993 in Birmingham and in our national survey.

Overwhelmingly the most popular plays taught to 14-16 year old examination classes were *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* in both studies. The top four plays for examination study for over 16s in our study were those cited by A.C. Bradley over a century ago. Wade and Sheppard's respondents named the same plays that they would only teach to 16-18 year olds as ours named as being unsuitable for study at a younger age.

There is a strong sense that the most popular Shakespeare plays for teaching at each age remain the same over time. One way to look at this would be to suggest an innate conservatism in text choice. Elliott has argued elsewhere (2017) for inertia in change in exam text choices because of the wealth of resources that build up behind texts; the popularity of the existence of resources as a factor in choice, and the one teacher who said that they chose a 'popular' play because of the wealth of resources there would therefore be, supports the idea of inertia being a factor. In addition, the cost implications of changing texts and the need to rely on books which are already in the cupboard

are clearly important in preventing schools from choosing different plays. Teacher expertise also argues for inertia; you may feel expert in that which you have taught before, and indeed for many teachers these are the plays they will have studied in their own school days (Elliott, 2016). Workload can also prevent individual teachers and departments as a whole from changing texts unless forced. *Macbeth's* extensive lead overall may also be due to some schools teaching the play three times, in Year 3, 4 and 5 in order to maximise examination success (a possibility which is supported by observations in schools and by the respondent who said a play needed to be able to be revisited 'at least three times').

However, an analysis of the qualities suggested in Table 9 suggest a slightly more positive view; that *Macbeth* might well be the ideal play to teach at this level. It is short, and has a clear plot line which is centred around strong characters, with appeal to both boys and girls. There are sections of text within it which demonstrate a variety of different linguistic and literary techniques which lend themselves to easy analysis, and which yet have a depth to enable students who can to go further. It has been a popular play over many years and there are a number of film adaptations including some very up-to-date ones. Ambition, relationships and the effect of tyranny are all themes which can be made to relate easily to modern life. It is harder to make the case for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* having a 'clear plot' but there are ways to simplify the strands. The existence of magic in both *Dream* and *The Tempest* may outweigh other considerations in choice at this level for some students.

## **Conclusion**

Studying Shakespeare in the UK means that you are highly likely to have studied at least one of a small number of plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*. If you continue to study Shakespearean drama at an advanced level in school you are likely to study one of the 'big three' tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello* or *King Lear*. While some teachers do teach lesser known or less popular plays, by and large the study of Shakespeare in the UK is the study of these famous plays. Perhaps this suggests a certain sympathy on the part of teachers to Self's (1982) suggestion that A level plays should be representative of the Bard's work and not 'quixotic'; though what counts as representative would be an argument for another time. Popularity breeds popularity; resources are produced to support plays which are widely taught and the existence of resources means that schools will teach the play. Cost factors and examination pressures are clear constraints in the choice of play. However, there continues to be a 'long tail' of plays which are taught.

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Table 1: years of experience of teaching

Years of experience	Numbers (% to 1 decimal place) (n=209)
1	8 (3.8)
2-3	21 (10)
4-6	25 (12)
7-10	23 (11)
11-15	50 (23.9)
16-20	32 (15.3)
20+	50 (23.9)

Table 2: Teachers' views on the importance of Shakespeare

Should Shakespeare be compulsory? (n=208)		Is teaching Shakespeare important? (n=199)	
Yes	154 (74%)	Yes	181 (91%)
No	46 (22%)	Yes, but	6 (3%)
I don't know	8 (4%)	No	11 (5.5%)
		I don't know	1 (0.5%)



Table 3: the frequency of teaching of Shakespeare plays

Play	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Total	%
Macbeth	13	24	42	84	103	10	8	284	22%
Romeo and Juliet	14	30	41	62	63	11	5	226	18%
A Midsummer Night's Dream	62	35	17	3	3	2	2	124	10%
Othello	3	3	1	1	3	44	46	101	8%
Tempest	40	25	14	5	4	5	6	99	8%
Hamlet	4	4	2	2	6	33	36	87	7%
Much Ado About Nothing	2	18	15	13	9	5	5	67	5%
Merchant of Venice	4	9	13	20	12	4	2	64	5%
Julius Caesar	1	5	8	14	6	4	1	39	3%
King Lear	0	0	0	0	2	12	23	37	3%
Twelfth Night	7	11	5	3	3	4	3	36	3%
Antony and Cleopatra	0	0	1	1	1	6	8	17	1%
Taming of the Shrew	2	5	3	1	1	3	2	17	1%
Richard III	2	2	3	2	3	1	3	16	1%
Henry V	2	1	3	0	5	1	2	13	1%
Measure for Measure	0	0	1	0	1	7	3	12	1%
As You Like It	5	0	0	1	0	2	1	9	1%
Winter's Tale	1	0	2	0	0	3	3	9	1%
Love's Labours Lost	0	0	1	0	1	2	1	5	0.5%
All's Well That Ends Well	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	4	0.5%
Henry IV pt 1	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	4	0.5%
Titus Andronicus	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	<0.5%
Comedy of Errors	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	<0.5%
Richard II	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	<0.5%
Troilus and Cressida	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	<0.5%
Coriolanus	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	<0.5%
Pericles	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	<0.5%
Two Gentlemen of Verona	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	<0.5%

Table 4: Plays taught in Year 1

<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	62	37%
<i>Tempest</i>	40	24%
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	14	8%
<i>Macbeth</i>	13	8%
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	7	4%
<i>As You Like It</i>	5	3%
<i>Merchant of Venice</i>	4	2%
<i>Hamlet</i>	4	2%
<i>Othello</i>	3	2%
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	2	1%
<i>Richard III</i>	2	1%
<i>Henry V</i>	2	1%
<i>Taming of the Shrew</i>	2	1%
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	1	0.5%
<i>Comedy of Errors</i>	1	0.5%
<i>Winter's Tale</i>	1	0.5%
<i>Titus Andronicus</i>	1	0.5%
<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>	1	0.5%
<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	1	0.5%
n = 19		

Table 5: Plays taught in Year 2

<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	35	20%
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	30	17%
<i>Tempest</i>	25	14%
<i>Macbeth</i>	24	14%
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	18	10%
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	11	6%
<i>Merchant of Venice</i>	9	5%
<i>Taming of the Shrew</i>	5	3%
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	5	3%
<i>Hamlet</i>	4	2%
<i>Othello</i>	3	2%
<i>Richard III</i>	2	1%
<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>	2	1%
<i>Henry IV pt 1</i>	2	1%
<i>Henry V</i>	1	0.5%
<i>Richard II</i>	1	0.5%
n = 16		

Table 6: plays taught in the final two years of secondary school or sixth form college

	Year 6	Year 7	Total	
<i>Othello</i>	44	46	90	28%
<i>Hamlet</i>	33	36	69	21%
<i>King Lear</i>	12	23	35	11%
<i>Macbeth</i>	10	8	18	6%
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	11	5	16	5%
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	6	8	14	4%
<i>Tempest</i>	5	6	11	3%
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	5	5	10	3%
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	7	3	10	3%
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	4	3	7	2%
<i>Merchant of Venice</i>	4	2	6	2%
<i>Winter's Tale</i>	3	3	6	2%
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	4	1	5	2%
<i>Taming of the Shrew</i>	3	2	5	2%
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	2	2	4	1%
<i>Richard III</i>	1	3	4	1%
<i>Henry V</i>	1	2	3	1%
<i>As You Like It</i>	2	1	3	1%
<i>Love's Labours Lost</i>	2	1	3	1%
<i>Titus Andronicus</i>	1	1	2	1%
<i>Henry IV pt 1</i>	1	0	1	0.5%
<i>Richard II</i>	0	1	1	0.5%
<i>Coriolanus</i>	0	1	1	0.5%
<i>Pericles</i>	1	0	1	0.5%
n = 24				

Table 7 Plays that respondents would not teach below age 16

<i>Hamlet</i>	53
<i>King Lear</i>	47
<i>Othello</i>	44
Histories	20
<i>Titus Andronicus</i>	16
<i>Winter's Tale</i>	12
<i>Coriolanus</i>	9
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	9
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	8
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	4
<i>Tempest</i>	4
A Level Specification Plays	4
<i>Cymbeline</i>	2
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	2
<i>Richard III</i>	2
<i>As You Like It</i>	1
<i>Comedy of Errors</i>	1
<i>Henry V</i>	1
<i>Macbeth</i>	1
<i>Merchant of Venice</i>	1
<i>Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	1
<i>Taming of the Shrew</i>	1
<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	1

Table 8: What qualities do you look for in a Shakespeare play to teach to 11-14 year olds?

Qualities	n
Clear plot	38
Appealing characters/ strong characterisation	29
Accessibility	27
Themes	22
"Engaging"/ Enjoyable	22
Relatable/ relevant (to modern life)	21
Good language for analysis	15
Existence of film(s)	14
Big social questions/ "issues"	12
Humour	11

Table 9: What qualities do you look for in a Shakespeare play to teach to 14-16 year olds?

Qualities	n
Appealing characters/ strong characterisation	36
Themes	36
"Engaging"/ Enjoyable	31
Accessibility	29
Clear/ easy plot	26
Good language for analysis	26
Enables exam performance	25
Relatable/ relevant (to modern life)	22
Challenging	13
Existence of film	12
Teacher expertise	12
Short	11