

Shakespeare and the Press: the Ideological Appropriation of *Romeo and Juliet*

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With the advent of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, readers of Renaissance studies critical literature have become familiar with a textual strategy frequently used by practitioners of both critical trends: an initial narrative or anecdote usually opens the article. This anecdote is often in the form of a “non-literary” text and, despite its non-literary status, this text is placed shoulder to shoulder with other “literary” texts. This textual strategy responds, on the one hand, to the interest both critical trends have in bringing down the walls which have traditionally been erected between literary and non-literary texts and, on the other, to an interest in showing how a given cultural practice interacts and informs other contemporary cultural practices. I would like then to borrow this textual strategy from the practices of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism in order to show how non-literary texts from several non-tabloid British newspapers interact with a well-known literary text. From these non-literary texts, one can obtain a narrative which involves several daily British newspapers, a British school and Shakespeare. The interest of this narrative is that it offers a chance to observe the interplay of three contemporary British cultural practices: Shakespeare as the Bard, i.e. as a national icon or institution, education and the Press, while at the same time, in this narrative one can witness the appropriation of Shakespeare by the educational establishment and the Press for their own ideological aims.

In January 1994, a story featuring the headmistress of a British school was turned into front-page news. Jane Brown, the headmistress of Kingsmead Primary School, a school in Hackney, East London, refused to accept, on behalf of the school’s pupils, some subsidised tickets offered by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for a ballet version of *Romeo and Juliet*, which was being performed at the Royal Opera House in London. The ballet, Kenneth Macmillan’s production with Prokofiev’s music, was said to be closely based on Shakespeare’s play. Allegedly, the reason given by Jane Brown for refusing the tickets was that she did not consider the performance fit for the pupils on the grounds that the story of *Romeo and Juliet* privileges heterosexual love at the expense of other forms of sexuality. The headmistress was reported to have said that *Romeo and Juliet* was “entirely about heterosexual love”¹, and that “until books, films and the theatre reflected all forms of sexuality, she would not be involving her pupils in heterosexual culture”².

The pupils of Kingsmead Primary School did not attend the Royal Opera House performance of the ballet, but the headmistress was obliged to face an inquiry and apologise. Her apology did not appease anybody and there were voices calling for disciplinary action. The media hype created around her and the zeal with which journalists started probing into her sexuality and her private life turned Jane Brown’s life into an ordeal: newspaper stories revealed that she had recently set up home with another woman, Nicky Thorogood, and her three children. Thorogood, a governor in the school, was acting as chairperson in the school governing body which appointed Brown as headmistress. It was also said that she had

previously applied for the post and had failed to obtain it.

An investigation was then launched into her domestic arrangements and her designation as headmistress. Not only was a conflict of interest seen as having taken place at her appointment but there were also allegations that she had benefited from “interview coaching” and help from the people who would later interview her for the post. The issue of whether to suspend her or not while further enquires were carried out divided school governors and local councillors: parents and governors sided with Brown and refused to dismiss her while Labour councillors, eager to get rid of the “loony-left” label born by Labour-controlled Hackney Council, repeatedly demanded the headmistress’s head. It was not clear at all who had power over whom: governors and parents over Labour local educational authority or vice versa. Voices again were heard, this time calling for John Patten, the Education Secretary, to intervene. The irony of the situation did not escape political commentators who noticed that Patten’s dilemma was worse than Hamlet’s: if Patten were to stick to Tory educational policy and defend the power a previous Tory government had transferred from local authorities to parents in the 1988 Act, he was inevitably helping to keep in office a lesbian, politically-correct headmistress who had publicly denied Shakespeare his place in education; whereas, if he wanted to give this lesbian troublemaker her due, then not only was he forced to support a much-hated inner city Labour education authority but he would also expose himself to the slings and arrows of criticism for preaching one thing and doing another³. What had started as a routine decision about school activities and the place of Shakespeare in the curriculum, turned into a nasty national debate on how schools are run and who has the ultimate say in schools⁴.

The incident in itself might perhaps seem to be of little consequence for the study of Shakespeare, but the way in which most of the British broadsheets chose to report it is of some interest to the practitioners of Cultural Materialism and Shakespeare studies. Although it later put a spanner in the works of Tory educational policy, at the onset, the Hackney affair was about political correctness and the teaching of Shakespeare and, mostly, it was about *Romeo and Juliet*. The incident, or rather the way in which it was reported by the Press and the comments it aroused, offers a chance to listen to people other than Shakespearean critics and scholars expressing their views on the play. *Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps the one Shakespearean play everybody has heard of: people may quote the most famous line in Shakespeare without ever wondering who Hamlet was, but most people in Britain today know that Romeo and Juliet were young lovers who died tragically. The so-called balcony scene is so ubiquitous that it even found its way onto the now extinct version of the £20 note. It is hardly surprising then that Jane Brown’s words dismissing the play as “blatantly heterosexual” and “entirely about heterosexual love”, which were quoted ad nauseam in all the national newspapers, had the power to unleash such a torrent of voices praising the play. *The Daily Telegraph* said *Romeo and Juliet* was “a great work of art”⁵ and *The Times* called the play “the world’s most famous love story”⁶. In *The Guardian*, the play was said to be “a masterpiece”⁷ and in *The Independent* it was referred to as “one of Shakespeare’s best known and best loved plays”⁸. Everybody, except Jane Brown, seemed to think that *Romeo and Juliet* is a beautiful love story. Not a tragedy, of course, but just a *story*, and not about anything else but *love*. Most people in Britain, if asked, would no doubt have shared the views expressed by Colin Beadle, a Liberal Democrat councillor in Hackney, who was quoted as saying: “Why do these people insist on walking straight into trouble? How can you say that *a beautiful, traditional love story* like this is not politically correct?”⁹.

The claim that *Romeo and Juliet* is the world’s most famous love story is of course difficult to prove and perhaps it could have been toned down with one of those adverbs such as “probably” or “arguably” which beer slogan writers are so fond of. However calling the play a masterpiece is likely to raise some

eyebrows since Shakespearean criticism has always felt inclined to consider the play an imperfect tragedy. Also, the play may be well-known, as the newspapers claim, but one suspects that it is in fact far from being *known well*, particularly when one finds that people think of *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of little more than a beautiful love story. In fact, in the articles which sprouted in the British Press as a result of the Hackney affair, there were times in which instead of presenting *Romeo and Juliet* as a *Love Story*, the play was seen as a *West Side Story*. One of Jane Brown's colleagues was quoted in several non-tabloid newspapers saying that it was not so much the heterosexual incorrectness of the play that bothered the headmistress but the feuding between the Montagues and the Capulets:

"She is not trying to promote homosexuality," he said. "All she was trying to do was to prevent the children being fed a constant diet of gang fights and killing. The school is on the edge of a notorious estate and showing yet more male stereotyping, feuding and knives is no joke. Shakespeare wrote brilliantly about gang fights, teenage sexuality and suicide. But we want the children to look at other worlds. We want them to see that you can be a boy and be gentle."¹⁰

Jane Brown's unnamed colleague seems to have in mind a 20th century New York *à la West Side Story* as the only possible *mise-en-scène* for the play and he also seems to think that *Romeo and Juliet* is "blatantly" violent and "entirely" about sex and violence.

The reporting of the incident by *The Daily Telegraph* shows how Shakespeare can be appropriated by a newspaper for its own political ends. *The Telegraph* clearly turned the reporting of the affair into a site of ideological struggle. In a front-page article which begins by reporting the headmistress's apology, *The Telegraph* took advantage of the resonance usually achieved by anything bearing the name of Shakespeare to stage an indirect attack against the Institute of Education and against those teachers whose left-wing ideology is put to use in schools. The article places this attack immediately after reminding its readership, for no apparent reason, that despite the inquiry and the apology, the headmistress had not been suspended from office and remained in charge of the school:

Ms Brown was not suspended and was continuing to run the school.

She received a Bachelor of Education degree from Avery Hill College, London, and holds a Master of Arts from the Institute of Education.

The Institute is the most influential teacher-training centre in the country. Its critics claim that the ideology of its predominantly Left-wing staff percolates throughout the education system¹¹.

However, more worrying than this ideological attack masquerading as relevant information is the fact that the Hackney headmistress is presented as a left-wing teacher while the only "left-wing" ideas *The Telegraph* attributes to her are a case of political-correctness (*firefighters* versus *firemen*), encouraging children to use first-names when addressing teachers and suppressing Nativity plays and Christmas parties from school activities:

Mrs Sandra Curtis thought that Ms Brown had made too many changes since becoming headmistress two years ago. Nativity plays and Christmas parties had been replaced by a short pantomime because of the multi-ethnic nature of the school. Children were encouraged to call staff by their first names. Fifteen-year old Helen Curtis, a former pupil, said: "She seems a lot more on girls' side than boys' side.

“Once at the school fete I wrote a sign saying “firemen park here”. She had a go at me and told me to write “firefighters park here’.”¹²

The textual strategy employed by *The Telegraph* is now exposed: the headmistress is presented as having left-wing ideas mostly because of her insistence on “politically-correct” attitudes; the headmistress is also presented as depriving her pupils of an important part of their national heritage –Shakespeare the national poet– and she is therefore constructed as a threat to the educational establishment; the inevitable conclusion of all this seems to be that left-wing ideas are a danger if they “percolate” down to schools and pupils, because they result in the disintegration of the nation’s cultural heritage. By means of this way of reasoning, Shakespeare is appropriated by the newspaper for conservative ideological ends: since left-wing, lesbian teachers such as Jane Brown deprive their pupils of the joy of being acquainted with the Bard, one can assume that left-wing ideas are inseparable from a desire to abolish Shakespeare from schools.

It is important, therefore, to remember that left-wing Renaissance scholars who have written on the issue of Shakespeare and education hold very different views from those of the Hackney headmistress. Most politically-aware Shakespearean scholars would endorse the idea that by pulling Shakespeare out of syllabuses, school teachers may think that they are challenging the iconography of upper and middle-class culture, when in fact what they are doing is simply depriving their pupils of contact with a significant part of the dominant culture, and this inevitably renders the pupils even more powerless. One of these Shakespearean scholars has precisely issued a warning about the risks involved in attitudes to Shakespeare such as those of the Hackney headmistress, which rather than posing a threat to the establishment, help to preserve it in place:

They are profoundly mistaken however if they believe that by the simple gesture of ignoring the iconography of the dominant culture its self-evident irrelevance will result in its withering away. The child in the school party reared on rock music and the packaged simplicities of television, who gazes uncomprehendingly up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, is in significant ways as powerless as his ancestors who stood for centuries in churches across Europe amid the cadences of the Latin Mass.¹³

The Telegraph continues its appropriation of Shakespeare for conservative ideological ends in another article which appeared in the Arts section of the same issue.¹⁴ This article -fittingly entitled “A plague on the houses of all subverters”- takes advantage of the *Romeo and Juliet* incident in order to warn the newspaper’s readership about the dangers of readings of Shakespeare which “subvert” the Bard, whether from the Left or from the Right:

There is a danger though that Shakespeare can be hijacked, by both Left and Right. Far from being and irrelevant “dead white male”, as the politically correct tend to dismiss him, his plays constantly reflect current events, and his views can be distorted into representing almost any point of view.¹⁵

The author of this article also claims that the plays of Shakespeare –or at least *Romeo and Juliet*– have a single, unique “moral” that Shakespeare represented “mankind” and that “no one has ever had a thought that doesn’t find an echo somewhere in Shakespeare”¹⁶. The claims that “Shakespeare can be hijacked” and that “his views can be distorted” obviously rest on the belief that Shakespeare’s plays have “a meaning” which is “one” “unique” and “universal”, a single meaning which is there in the texts and

which the subverters willfully ignore and malevolently subvert. This vision of Shakespeare as the repository of universal, indestructible truths and as the expression of the essence of “man” is an interpretive position which has been repeatedly contested during the last two decades by most contemporary criticism of Shakespeare, including not only Cultural Materialism or New Historicism but also feminism, Marxism and psychoanalytic approaches to Shakespeare. Feminist critics, together with Third World critics, have often complained that “when texts are said to speak for humankind, humankind often shrinks radically to include only those within a traditional pale of privilege”¹⁷. In fact, the call for impartial, objective interpretations of Shakespeare’s plays which is launched from the Arts section of *The Telegraph* is in itself contributing to foreground conservative ideology: apolitical readings, i.e. readings which are blind to the political implications of Shakespeare’s plays, are necessarily conservative because their silence implicitly accepts the *status quo*, i.e. the inequalities of race, gender and class which existed in Shakespeare’s society and still exist in ours. It could be further argued that objective, apolitical readings, the readings devoid of all kinds of ideological pollution which are demanded by the author of the *Telegraph* article, are nothing but a utopian *desideratum* on his part, because, as recent criticism of Shakespeare keeps reminding us, we inevitably bring our own preconceptions and prejudices with us when we approach Shakespeare’s plays and therefore those attempts which try to “re-discover” Shakespeare as he really was, hoping to liberate him from the distortion of 20th-century ideological preoccupations, must necessarily be misguided.¹⁸

Ideological appropriations are often achieved through extremely complex processes, partly because if they were overt, transparent and easily detected, their effect would be greatly diminished. In this case, the author of the *Telegraph* article appropriates Shakespeare for the newspaper’s conservative ideology at the same time that he warns about distortions from both the Right and the Left and condemns those who “seek to subvert Shakespeare for their own ends”¹⁹. The writer gives his intentions away when he claims: “Happily, the Bard is big enough to survive all the theorising, both lunatic and serious, that he attracts”²⁰. With this denial of the value of multiple interpretations, he is appropriating—or reinventing—Shakespeare for conservative ideology. The belief underlying this claim is that Shakespeare’s plays express universal, eternal truths which cannot be tainted or destroyed by left-wing, politically-aware, ideologically-conscious and historically-oriented criticism.

Unfortunately, this shallow, uncomplicated approach to *Romeo and Juliet* is not only favoured by right-wing *Daily Telegraph* contributors or by politically-correct school teachers. Even in *The Guardian*, the play is thought to be a simple, straight-forward story. In an article entitled “Much ado about a liberal playwright”, Martin Kettle presents *Romeo and Juliet* as a universal myth whose meaning is clearly packaged to be delivered on demand, although, unfortunately, he does not say what this meaning is:

As Shakespeare plays go, *Romeo and Juliet* is not one of the more difficult ones. It is also, by a long way, one of the most popular. *Romeo and Juliet* is among Shakespeare’s few truly mythic plots... It is also, ironically, one of the most overtly moral and liberal plays in the whole canon. There is no mystery either about its themes or about Shakespeare’s message.²¹

Whether it is seen as a simple love story, as a West Side Story or as a universal myth, the effect this reductionism has on the play is the same: there is little room left for political considerations. Issues such as the role played by gender and power relations, or the significance of the civil war between Capulets and Montagues in a society whose obsolete feudal structures are beginning to be replaced by the modern

state and the emergent figure of the absolutist monarch, are ignored in these easy-to-swallow approaches to the play which are handed out by British broadsheets. In the dominant reading of *Romeo and Juliet* as a love-story for teenagers, the deep political implications of the play are erased, the love-story is decontextualised and the fighting is divested of its social significance.

Amongst the polyphony of voices in the newspaper texts of the Hackney affair, the only voice which seemed to hold *Romeo and Juliet* as more than a simple love story or a universal myth was that of Roy Hattersley. In an article published in *The Guardian* at the time of the Hackney affair, he argues that, in Shakespeare's play, Verona is not a nice exotic background for a love story but rather a society, not unlike post-Thatcherite Britain, ripe with social and political conflict²². In fact, Hattersley shows that it is the social as well as the domestic inadequacies of the Verona families that brings the tragedy about:

The Capulets' attitude to family values was particularly deplorable - not least because they were the sort of people who were supposed to set an example to the rest of the city. They seemed to take no interest in their daughter at all, until they decided to marry her off to one of their friends. It is not surprising that she appears in public in her underclothes, hangs about derelict buildings and spends the night with her boyfriend. And the girl is only 14! It is a miracle that she has not become a one-parent family by the end of Act Two.²³

Hattersley also draws attention to how the play glorifies rebellion against power and authority: rebellion against social order that prevents Montagues and Capulets from marrying each other, rebellion against parents who are tyrannical with their daughters, rebellion against political power which dictates norms of conduct for the citizens of Verona. Politically, the efforts made by the rulers to preserve law and order are ineffectual and this also contributes to the tragic end of several young people.²⁴

Hattersley's voice was a *rara avis* in the broadsheet coverage of the Hackney affair. The impression one obtains from a mere look at the reporting of the incident in the so-called "quality" press is that we might have to get used to the existence of very different versions of the play we were wont to call *Romeo and Juliet*, not owing this time to the differences between Q1, Q2 and F, but rather to the gap which keeps popular imagination estranged from scholarly interpretation. Interestingly, one of the things to be learnt from the reporting of the Hackney affair in the British Press is that both the left-wing, politically-correct headmistress and the conservative article in the Arts section of right-wing *Telegraph* advocate similarly reactionary readings of *Romeo and Juliet*. The headmistress reduces the play to a heterosexual love-story and the newspaper article reduces it to a story which shows "the futility and waste of gang warfare"²⁵. For both of them, Romeo and Juliet is just a sad love-story peppered with the irrational street violence of gang-fights. In the wake of the Hackney affair, one fears, the play is seen by many as the Elizabethan equivalent of a daily dose of TV violence with a dash of romance.

NOTES

¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 1994, p.1. Incidentally, in quoting these words, the newspapers were probably wanting to draw attention to the use of the word "heterosexual", although perhaps the word that deserves attention in this quote is "entirely".

- ² *The Times*, 20 Jan 1994, p.1.
- ³ See the leading article entitled “Lacking the authority” in *The Guardian*, 27 January 1994, p.21.
- ⁴ See the leading article entitled “After Romeo”, in *The Times*, 28 January 1994, p.15.
- ⁵ *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 1994, p.1.
- ⁶ *The Times*, 20 January 1994, p.1.
- ⁷ *The Guardian*, 20 January 1994, p.1.
- ⁸ *The Independent*, 21 January 1994, p.3.
- ⁹ *The Times*, 20 January 1994, p.1. The italics are mine.
- ¹⁰ *The Times*, 20 January 1994, p.1.
- ¹¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1994, p.2.
- ¹² *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1994, p.2.
- ¹³ David Hornbrook, “Go play, boy, play”: Shakespeare and educational drama” in Graham Holderness, ed., *The Shakespeare Myth*, (Manchester, 1988), p.154.
- ¹⁴ Charles Spencer, “A plague on the houses of all subverters”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1994, p.17.
- ¹⁵ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1994., p.17.
- ¹⁶ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1994., p.17.
- ¹⁷ Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O’Connor, eds., *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, (New York and London, 1987), p.4.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare*, (London and New York, 1992), Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*, (London, 1990), and Brian Vickers, *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels*, (New Haven and London, 1993). See also Hornbrook, op. cit., p.157.
- ¹⁹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1994, p.17.
- ²⁰ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1994, p.17.
- ²¹ *The Guardian*, 22 January 1994, p.23.
- ²² See Roy Hattersley, “Lesson to learn from a tale of two boroughs”, *The Guardian*, 24 January 1994, p.17.
- ²³ Hattersley, op. cit., p.17.
- ²⁴ Hattersley’s reading of the play is not of course the first politically-aware reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. Kiernan Ryan has offered a reading that transcends the received image of the play as a tragedy which simply dramatizes a love-story-cum-family-feud. For Ryan, *Romeo and Juliet* is the tragedy of two lovers bound by the sexual norms and social practices of Verona: i.e. by material and ideological forces. They are defeated, not by “the universal and immutable tragedy of the human condition” but by “a particular social construction which is open to dispute and therefore open to be changed”.(See Kiernan Ryan, “*Romeo and Juliet*: the language of tragedy” in Willie Van Peer, *The Taming of the Text: Explorations in Language, Literature and Culture*, (London and New York, 1988), pp.106-121.)
- ²⁵ *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1994, p.17.