

## Teaching Shakespeare's Plays from the Viewpoint of Comprehensive Art: A Cross-Genre Approach in English Classes for a Better Understanding of Individual Plays

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### Abstract

Shakespeare's plays are often taught to undergraduate students in Japan by incorporating them into the syllabus of English or British literature. One of the methods of teaching Shakespeare's plays is through the intensive reading of the texts, which is an essential technique to enable students to focus on the words and arouse a deep interest in the beauty of his plays. Students are encouraged to consider alternative meanings and connotations of various words or phrases spoken by characters through an intensive reading. At the same time, it is important for teachers to make students recognise that Shakespeare's plays were originally written to be performed in theatres. This means that multiple aspects of the plays, which include not only words but also visual images, music, mutual responses between performers and audiences, and even a faint sound of breathing brought by their excitement, are incorporated in the same spatial world in theatres. If teachers want to develop the diverse gifts of students by teaching Shakespeare's plays, they should expand their approaches further to equip students with wider knowledge. With this assumption, I suggest that a cross-genre approach would be meaningful because drama is primarily a comprehensive art, and Shakespeare's plays should also be taught as such. I refer to several ways for teaching Shakespeare's plays from cross-genre perspectives.

**Keywords:** cross-genre, Shakespeare, performance, plays, class

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## Introduction

In literature classes, intensive reading is one of the essential ways to promote students' understanding of the texts. This method enables the students to understand the correct grammatical meanings of each sentence while also developing chronological and horizontal views, which, as a consequence, lead to further interpretations of layers of descriptions, rhetoric, and other aspects that reflect the authors' uniqueness. The same is true in 'reading' Shakespeare's plays through textbooks in literature classes. Focusing on details of theatrical elocution through reading the sequence of lines is significant for deepening the interpretations of both the entire play and specific themes of partial scenes, although, compared to the instantaneous response of the audience and the exciting atmosphere in theatres, the act of following each page on textbooks takes much more time and needs perseverance.

At the same time, when teachers work on Shakespeare's plays in English literature classes, they should include more cross-genre approaches for students because drama is fundamentally a comprehensive art and Shakespeare's plays provide students with tremendous potential for developing their comprehensive outlook, which would expand their capacity to think. Teachers could provide clues to approaching each play from a variety of fields such as music, painting, architecture, and movies, and thereby encourage diverse perspectives in the students. These approaches are also significant for assessing the quintessential values of individual plays.

In this paper, I suggest three different approaches for teaching Shakespeare's plays: music, painting, and movies. Combining intensive reading and cross-genre approaches would create awareness of an abundance of the means of human expression through which students established their own ways of expression over the centuries.

## Why Is Cross-genre Approach Important?

Shakespeare's plays continue to offer significant themes and topics of discussion to each generation. Those who are fascinated by his plays have responded to them in different ways and derived diverse interpretations based on their impressions. This means that his plays continue to act as a means to extract the inherent potential in the people who seek to find the best forms of self-expression. It is therefore essential for students to recognise that, apart from learning the basics about drama and his plays, they should always be conscious of linking one aspect to another and consider how those aspects have common points while maintaining individual characteristics. Teachers are responsible for supporting them to get closer to Shakespeare's plays by introducing cross-genre approaches.

It is also important to recognise that, in early modern London, Shakespeare's plays were primarily performed to entertain the ordinary people who travelled to the south bank of the Thames to willingly pay a fee out of their own pockets. When Hamlet invites players to his court in Act 2, Scene 2, he says, 'Words, words, words'

(2.2.189); these words were not intended for the pedants but for entertainment, and they convey that plays have the magical power to transport the audience to a different reality other than their own. The recognition of the entertainment aspect of the plays and the function of words in theatrical performances will also enable students to approach Shakespeare's plays in diverse ways.

Furthermore, incorporating music, sounds, and individual performance of players as much as possible, mimicking the actual theatrical performances, would allow the students to make good use of their five senses even in the classrooms. Separating these aspects from one another to teach Shakespeare's plays is unreasonable and has the possibility of narrowing students' views because they are interrelated at the fundamental level. In that sense, reading literary works should also be regarded as an element of cross-genre activities in that it is a means of drawing out other characteristics of human beings, and, as a consequence, expands students' perspectives and provides them with hints for considering what 'the act of expressing' means and how that action influences people. This realisation also improves their critical thinking because it plants the seeds for the accumulation of thoughts and nurtures a wide variety of thinking skills. Furthermore, students learn how to compile their ideas based on their experiences and put their thoughts into different media. This perceptual change is, in a sense, contradictory to the recently announced guidelines by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) for teaching Japanese as a subject at high schools from 2022, standardising the achievement levels of reading ability of high school students because they insist on the necessity of segmentation of Japanese. It purposefully excludes the specific genre of literary works from compulsory subjects by aiming only to improve the ability to handle sporadic information from short passages.<sup>1</sup> Teachers should not deprive students of the opportunity to nurture creative thinking.

### ***Hamlet: Painting and Shakespeare's Plays***

*Ophelia* (1851-1852) by John Everett Millais (1829-1896) is a famous Pre-Raphaelite painting depicting Ophelia drowning with a small bunch of flowers in her hands. The scene is derived from Act 3, Scene 4 in *Hamlet*: After being rejected and told to go to a nunnery by Hamlet, Ophelia goes mad and drowns herself while singing songs of flowers. Matsushita mentions Millais' *Ophelia* as follows:

*Ophelia* succeeds in picturing a complete scene which is described only in the words of Gertrude in the play. Ophelia does not express any emotion while she is singing, and is unaware that she is drowning, and this is what makes this scene much more impressive because her lack of expression of her straight feelings helps intensify her insanity. (33)<sup>2</sup>

In Shakespeare's plays, vital scenes are often described by characters without being performed directly on stage, and the audience is only given a description of the scene. This situation requires the audience to use

their own imagination, where the same description yields different images to different people even when the audience hears the same words and share the same theatrical space. This helps them enhance their imagination, and the same is true in teaching Shakespeare's plays to students because the words used in the plays enable the students to form their own mental images. They are able to consolidate the sequence of words, and convert them into visual images and demonstrate it. The spontaneous movements of characters described through words can be preserved and even immortalised through paintings.

Another painter is Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), who painted *Hamlet et Horatio au Cimetière* (1839). This is a famous scene in which Hamlet holds the skull of Yorick, a former 'King's jester' (5.1. 171), in a graveyard and laments the vanity of humans, saying, 'Where be your jibes now – your gambols, your / songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set / the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own / grinning quite chapfallen' (5.1.179-182). John Simmons (1823-1876), many of whose paintings have the common motif of fairies, painted several scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* such as *Titania* (1866) and *Hermia and Lysander* (1870). There are many other painters, illustrators, and artists of line drawing, who have been attracted by the words of Shakespeare's characters and eternally captured their imagined world on canvas through the artists' own visualisation. Students are able to recognise the possibilities that the same scenes of plays provide artists with different ways of expression to construct their own dramatic world. In addition, they learn that momentary existences could be made permanent, while at the same time the breathing rhythm of each actor, which changes from moment to moment, is also valuable for its ephemeral nature. These experiences enable students to add more dimensions to the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays.

### **Songs in Shakespeare's Plays**

Many of Shakespeare's plays mainly consist of both spoken words and songs, which often require actors and actresses to sing with melodies that suit the atmosphere of each scene and their character traits. Players even need to play a specific instrument to be true to some scenes of a play. Woolfenden refers to these characteristics as follows:

Tragic heroines sing, swan-like, before death; clowns and fools have licence to sing the unsavoury and the unsayable; unsuccessful suitors serenade; lovers sigh; low-life characters hymn the joys of country life; fairies chant lullabies; supernatural airy spirits give breath; and home-spun villagers amuse with their simple offerings. (Foreword)

Consequently, scenes that include songs have attracted several composers of the contemporary and later periods. Specific words have been used for songs to maximise the effect of each scene, usually accompanied by melodies on stage, which also have important roles in theatrical performance because different melodies

provide different impressions to the audience. This introduces an alternative approach to teaching Shakespeare's plays. Music has a different auditory effect on the audience as compared to visual images, and students can learn how the melody and sound of songs and instruments affect the atmosphere of the individual scenes. Words are uttered in melody, and that very melody helps to create a visual world in the minds of the audience.

Woolfenden edited twenty-three songs in total from Shakespeare's plays. Examples include a melody of Thomas Morley (1557-1602), a contemporary composer of Shakespeare, titled 'It was a lover and his lass', from *As You Like It*, Act 5, Scene 3.

It was a lover and his lass,  
 With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,  
 That o'er the green corn-field did pass,  
 In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,  
 When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding;  
 Sweet lovers love the spring.

Between the acres of the rye,  
 With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,  
 These pretty country folks would lie,  
 In the spring time, &c.                    (*As You Like It*, 5.3.18-27)<sup>3</sup>

If students read the lines given above in class, they will realise that these lines contain alliteration, rhyme, and repetition, all of which are written with melodies in mind, although no one knows the original melody that the bard had in mind. Songs and melodies have a great influence on the effect of the scene; therefore we should pay attention to them too, because they function as an extension of words and phrases uttered on stage.

There are mainly three different types of music performed within plays: songs that are incorporated into the lines of characters and sung by them, melodies that are performed by players with instruments, and background music, which is usually not included in the script and differs according to the production. This means that students are able to learn how words and music influence each other and give different impressions according to the production.

### **Watching Movies based on Shakespeare's Plays**

In the modern period, students have many opportunities to watch movies based on Shakespeare's plays. It might be easier for them to approach Shakespeare's plays by watching this form of visual representation rather

than reading textbooks or going to theatres. If so, teaching his plays by introducing several movies would also be an option for the teachers. For example, students have the option of watching multiple movie adaptations of the same plays that are related to their classes and compare the same scene from several movies or with textbooks. An analysis of the differences between these media would lead to new discoveries: the consideration of the effects of adapting or omitting some scenes in plays helps them find both positive and negative points of reproducing original plays. For example, comparing two movies, *Romeo and Juliet* produced by Anthony Havelock-Allan and John Brabourne (starring Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting, 1968) and *Romeo + Juliet*, produced by Baz Luhrmann (starring Leonard DiCaprio and Claire Danes, 1996), or comparing these two movies with a theatrical performance of the same play would be useful for understanding the meaning of visualisation.<sup>4</sup>

Both movies and theatrical performances appeal to the audience through the actions of the performers. However, they are completely different because, in movies, camera—subject distance constantly changes and specific parts are dynamically selected, so it would be difficult to figure out the relations of the parts to the whole. In theatres, the audience watches the entire stage and focuses on those parts which they prefer. This demonstrates how movies are strongly linked to visual cues; for instance, off-camera scenes might slip out of the spectator's consciousness while close-up scenes would have a greater influence on them. This is a good opportunity for students to discuss how the medium will develop in the future.

Filming theatre performances and broadcasting it live has also become popular. This makes it possible for the spectators to experience both the reality of performance on stage and camera-eye focus on specific characters in movies. For example, over the past decade, the National Theatre has live broadcast theatre performances, titled 'NT Live project', and succeeded in attracting many spectators. However, some actors from *Antony and Cleopatra* commented on their experiences in *The Times* on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019: It mentioned that stars like Ralph Fiennes and Sophie Okonedo spoke of 'how "weird" and "horrible" it is when cameras are brought in to capture their performances'. (3)<sup>5</sup>

The individual plays can be approached through both the written format and movies. Students can be introduced to each of them by mixing and separating genres. The visual representation and the written format are different methods of description, and we do not need to exclude the possibility of interpretation through visual images.

## Conclusion

In the modern world of diversity, we are often required to have a global mindset in various fields. Categorisation of genres is difficult, because the conventional division of genres or subjects in schools has become inconvenient in some cases. There is a possibility that we can learn a lot more and broaden our perspectives only if we make the barriers slightly lower and eliminate the readily established ideas of

categorisation or genre. Combining or deconstructing conventional categories makes students realise the importance of flexible ideas and tolerance of accepting a new direction that is logically suitable to the necessities of current social circumstances.

Shakespeare's plays provide us with the hints of combining many genres or removing the limits of categorization. This is the first step to approach his plays from new perspectives, and the consciousness of the cross-genre style of teaching his plays in classes would shed light on the development of students' ways of conceptualising drama and other forms of cultural entertainment.

### Notes

1. Regarding the details of a new guideline announced by MEXT for teaching Japanese as a subject in Japanese high schools from 2022, see 'Koutougakkou Gakkusyu Shidou Youryou Kokugohenn Kaisetsu' (MEXT) 68-273. [https://www.mext.go.jp/content/1407073\\_02\\_1\\_2.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/1407073_02_1_2.pdf) According to this guideline, Japanese as a subject is subdivided into 6 sections: Modern Japanese language, Japanese language and culture, logistic Japanese, literary Japanese, Japanese expressions, and ancient Japanese. (English translation is mine).
2. English translation is mine. The original reference is written in Japanese.
3. Poems based on songs are slightly adjusted to fit the melodies. So, the songs in the play are not necessarily identical with the songs in the original texts.
4. In *Romeo + Juliet*, the movie is set in Brazil and a gun is used in the final scene. I mentioned the effects of introducing movies in classes for the purpose of comparison with original versions of literary works in my paper titled 'The effects of using DVDs to diversify the interpretation of literary works: Practical approach and problems' (*Bulletin of the Educational Research and Development*, Vol. 25, 2016)109-115.
5. *The Times* also reports as follows: 'There have been concerns that screening a National Theatre or Royal Shakespeare Company production for a national audience could harm regional theatres. Sir Alan Ayckbourn, the playwright . . . said in an interview in 2014 that "eventually we and our equivalent theatres will stop doing plays and they'll all be streamed live from these centres of excellence". However, research by the consultancy company Nesta has suggested that there has been no negative impact on sales of theatre tickets outside London, while in the capital they rose slightly'. (3)

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