

The Wizards of Hogwarts and the Bard of Avon: Classical Influences on the Harry Potter Stories

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Introduction

A year ago I wrote an article about using film to teach literature. The thrust of my argument was that literature is basically stories and how they are presented is less important than the stories themselves: as long as I can get students thinking about themes and being relatively enthusiastic about presenting on them, then all is pretty much well in the classroom world. However, as many great books (*Madame Bovary* springs immediately to my AI's mind) lay bare, to be human is to never be satisfied. Thus I found myself wondering whether this relatively happy house I had built where we watch films, remember key information about plot and character and then dive a little deeper into themes could not be turned into something a little grander. I had had some success in exploring the social and historical context of particular stories and encouraging learners to apply what they saw on screen to their own lives: to compare and contrast and even to imagine What if?, but did I dare to hope that students might also be persuaded to show an interest in an author's influences? To pay some attention to the shoulders of the giants in addition to the more easily relatable writers and directors who are currently standing on them? And, following from this, is there a good reason, beyond my own restlessness, why I should try?

The only person who I am certain regularly reads more than the title of my publications is my father and it was a comment he made that swayed me. The very few teachers I remember as being *good* teachers, he said, were the ones who, against the odds, just kept on trying because maybe *someone* in the class was actually listening and taking it in and would be positively influenced even if they didn't show it or even know it yet. Thus I tentatively began to attempt a

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kind of reverse engineering of the films I showed. The principle I argued for in last year's article, that if students don't have an unforced interest in what you are presenting to them then you have essentially nothing, remains the same. What's new is that now I am attempting to expand that interest into a curiosity about where and how the characters, scenes and story arcs that students love instinctively originated.

In what follows I am going to examine how J.K. Rowling's readings of Shakespeare plays (Macbeth in particular) have fed into and shaped the Harry Potter stories, what benefit may be derived by tracing these classical influences and what the end game might be in terms of what can actually be done in the classroom.

How do we know the Harry Potter series was influenced by Shakespeare's Macbeth?

In Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix it is mentioned that Cybil Trelawney made a prophecy while being interviewed by Dumbledore, in the Hogs Head pub, for the position of Professor of Divination. This was in 1980, not long before Harry Potter, and Neville Longbottom, were born: respectively on July 31st and 30th of that year. The full prophecy is:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..." (Rowling, 2003)

Severus Snape, working for Voldemort, was eavesdropping, but was interrupted and so only heard the first part: *"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.* This is what he passed on to Voldemort. Harry Potter, however, is later told the entire prophecy when Dumbledore is preparing him to take on Voldemort after his (Dumbledore's) death.

That the wording of Cybil Trelawney's prophecy echoes that of the

Witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is clear if you compare the two:

Act 1, Scene 3

First Witch: All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee Thane of Glamis.

Second Witch: All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee Thane of Cawdor.

Third Witch: All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter...

...Banquo: If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow, and which will not,
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favours, nor your hate.

First Witch: Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

Second Witch: Not so happy, yet much happier.

Third Witch: Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
So all hail Macbeth, and Banquo.

Act 4, Scene 1

First Apparition: Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth, beware Macduff;
Beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me, enough.

Second Apparition: Be bloody, bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

Third Apparition: Be lion-mettled, proud; and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are.
Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

(Shakespeare, 2001)

And should you still be in doubt, this is what J.K. Rowling herself said in an interview with fansites *The Leaky Cauldron* and *Muggle Net*: "It's the 'Macbeth' idea. I absolutely adore 'Macbeth.' It is possibly my favorite Shakespeare play." (Rowling, 2007)

Why should we care about the influence?

It helps to make the stories compelling

Shakespeare knew a thing or two about how to keep a diverse audience engaged and entertained from the start to the finish of a story. Two of the keys to doing this are dramatic tension and audience engagement. Professor Trelawney's prophecy poses questions: Who is the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord? Who will win the upcoming battle? Will the prophecy prove to be true? As Yan Brailowsky writes about the Bishop of Carlisle's prophecy in Shakespeare's *Richard II*: "The lack of a definitive answer to these questions subtly produces the required anxiety among the audience to make prophecies dramatically efficacious..." (Brailowsky, 2020).

Similarly to the plays of Shakespeare as they were originally performed at the Globe Theatre, the engagement with such questions can occur on different levels. Those who have not been concerned with the minutiae of the Harry Potter series may find it hard to grasp the extent of speculation about meaning, motives and outcomes among the community of Potter fans. Up until the publication of the 7th and final book in the series this included the idea that Neville Longbottom and not Harry Potter was the chosen one who would vanquish Voldemort in the end. This is not as far fetched as it might seem because Neville was born the day before Harry in July, so also 'as the seventh month dies'. His parents had also 'thrice defied' Voldemort, just as Harry's parents Lily and James had. However, since Rowling was never ambiguous about the fact that Harry was the hero of the story who must go on alone and defeat the Dark Lord, it is tempting to put speculation about Neville down to the delusions of the ill-informed. This, though, is what professor of British literature at the University of New Hampshire, James Krasner wrote at the time: "*Lord Voldemort has to die. And Snape, who is really fighting for good despite all appearances, will likely die. Neville Longbottom is really the chosen one, so I suspect he'll die.*" (quoted in Estes, 2007). Neville, as you will know if you have read or seen the final adventure, neither dies nor supplants Harry as the evil-vanquishing hero, but rather ends up as Professor of Herbology at Hogwarts.

At the other end of the depth continuum, where professors of literature

more commonly choose to dwell, are the philosophical questions raised by prophecies. The earlier quote from J.K. Rowling herself continues thus:

And that's the question isn't it? If Macbeth hadn't met the witches, would he have killed Duncan? Would any of it have happened? Is it fated or did he make it happen? I believe he made it happen." (Rowling, 2007)

She continues on her own official site:

"If neither boy was 'pre-ordained' before Voldemort's attack to become his possible vanquisher, then the prophecy (like the one the witches make to Macbeth, if anyone has read the play of the same name) becomes the catalyst for a situation that would never have occurred if it had not been made. Harry is propelled into a terrifying position he might never have sought, while Neville remains the tantalising 'might-have-been'. Destiny is a name often given in retrospect to choices that had dramatic consequences." (J.K.R official site) (My emphasis)

It connects the stories to social and literary history

'Macbeth' is based on real events that took place in the 11th century in Scotland and the character of Macbeth is based on a real ruler of the time who slew Duncan I in battle to become king himself. Shakespeare's play was probably first performed in 1606 and was written partly to please King James I who had ascended to the English throne in 1603 and was patron of Shakespeare's acting company, taking over this role from Elizabeth I's Lord Chamberlain. King James was both a published poet and a lover of the supernatural and these royal preferences partly explain the centrality of witchcraft to the plot of Macbeth and the witches' delight in delivering their mischief in rhymes: "By the pricking of my thumbs. Something wicked this way comes" (Macbeth, Act 4, Scene 1).

The reign of King James (1603-1625) is referred to as the 'Jacobean period' (from *Jacobus*, the Latin form of James). This, of course, followed the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), a period during which the Protestant Church of England, created by Elizabeth's father Henry VIII as a break from the Catholic Church which would allow him to divorce his wife, became more accepting of Catholic practices. Elizabeth's tolerance, however, should not be mistaken

for weakness or a willingness to relinquish control. As Yan Brailowsky writes in 'Prophecy and the Supernatural: Shakespeare's Challenges to Performativity':

As religious reformists in England attempted to implement key Protestant ideas to purify the Church of England from Popish customs and to extirpate superstitious practices from the populace, Elizabethan and Jacobean authorities exercised a parallel effort to maintain the royal supremacy in matters of religion, prosecuting attempts at dabbling in witchcraft and unlicensed prognostications, which could sow the seeds of heresy and sedition amongst parishioners. (Brailowsky, 2020)

Elizabeth was particularly concerned about the danger of prophecies and introduced or re-introduced the poetically titled, *An act Against Fond and Phantastical Prophecies* and *An Act against Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcrafts* which threatened seditious prophesiers with a year in prison.

In this context, it may appear strange that a playwright so closely aligned with the Protestant-oriented royal court should be so keen to have witches as central characters in his works. Two factors explain this apparent contradiction: the function of fiction as a realm in which what cannot be given expression in reality can be experienced in the imagination; and King James' aforementioned inclination towards that which is embodied by the archetypal witch.

Human beings are a superstitious species. Conspiracy theories run rife, urban myths proliferate, otherwise rational people avoid black cats, walking under ladders and stepping on the cracks in the pavement, while others seek out four-leafed clovers, say "bless you" when someone sneezes and knock on wood after they have tempted fate. In a time when real punishments such as the ducking stool and burning at the stake could be the outcome of 'witch hunts', a phrase still commonly used if usually metaphorically, the hold of supernatural beliefs over the human mind was vastly greater than it is today. This was a threat to the church-state whose power was to a large extent dependent on the population accepting its authority as to what was acceptable to believe. Thus a night at the Globe Theatre, an invitation to indulge in speculation over fictionalised magical elements of a state sanctioned drama, may have acted partly as a release valve for both the relentless demands placed by the unknown on the

average human mind to worry about the future; and the temptation to seek relief from uncertainty in those 'charlatans' who would strive to organise against the crown's interests. Additionally, there is a lesson in Macbeth to those who would seek to usurp the established order. The witches mischievously feed Macbeth's ambition, and by proxy that of his wife, and test his loyalty with temptation. This of course ends badly for him and the legitimate order is restored. The message couldn't be clearer, nor could it be better suited to an establishment that feared the threat to its power posed by the siren call of false prophets.

The previous J.K. Rowling quote is relevant here: "*Destiny is a name often given in retrospect to choices that had dramatic consequences.*" Her point is that it is the choice, not the pre-written script of fate which brings the result, a rational, level-headed viewpoint shared by many in our highly literate twenty first century world. James, however, rational though he was in many ways, also believed in the power of poetry to provide a window on the future. In 1585 he published his *Essays of a Prentise, in the Divine art of Poesie*. This, as I alluded to above, may have influenced Shakespeare's creation of witches who speak in rhyme and, following from that, it is probably not coincidental that Professor Trelawney's subject at Hogwarts was divination or that she had a flair for speaking in poetic language. Additionally, James did not just dabble in poetry and prophecy, but also applied his talents in more pragmatic ways. It was, according to some accounts, James' interpretation of a letter intercepted by his secret police which uncovered the Catholic lead Gunpowder Plot of November 5th, 1605 to blow up the Houses of Parliament and lead to the arrest of Guy Fawkes.

James would not have been the first King to believe himself exceptional, nor the first to claim divine power. During his reign, Church and State were not separated as they are so assiduously in (most) modern Western democracies, but rather acted in consort to ensure legitimacy and give the Crown a monopoly on power. Thus, labelling as destiny choices whose consequences well-suited the established order, irrational though it may be on a philosophical level, was perhaps a very pragmatic move. As Brailowsky writes, again in regard to Richard II:

"The characters' prophecies are true – or become so in due time – betraying a supposed divine plan that oversaw the crowning of Elizabeth and a Golden Age for England with half a century of peace and prosperity."
(Brailowsky, 2020)

It enriches the stories culturally and confers status

In their time Shakespeare's plays were popular culture. Answering the question, Who came to the theatres?, the 'Shakespeare's Globe' website states: "Just about everyone in London society." This included not only the majority, "a gang of porters and carters," but also Kings, Queens and foreign ambassadors, and all social classes in between. This situation continued right up until the nineteenth century, after which: "...as his language fell out of style he became less accessible to the masses and more commonly the subject of academic study." (Hawley, 2020). The key word here is 'accessible'. Status is often marked by exclusivity. Economy class passengers are excluded from the first class areas because they paid a lot less for their ticket. The vast majority of those who might aspire to attend Oxbridge or Ivy League universities are excluded because they lack the necessary class privilege, education or intellect. Paperback editions and television adaptations mean that few people in developed countries are denied access to Shakespeare's plays, but the difficulty of the language and perhaps an exaggerated reverence encouraged by a 'high culture' elite remain serious barriers for many. And yet, such is the power of the stories that somehow people still know them and want to engage with their timeless themes.

I believe it is self evident that anyone who wants to engage with Shakespeare should have the opportunity to do so. And further, that those who have the potential to want this, but lack the confidence to allow it on their radar, should be encouraged to scan the horizon more boldly and with an open and curious mind. But how as a teacher can I get past the idea that students may have that this kind of high culture is too difficult or only for those who attend elite universities? Enter Harry Potter centre stage! According to Wikipedia (2025), the books have been translated into 80 languages. In the case of book one, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, these include Latin and Ancient

Greek, "...making it the longest published work in Ancient Greek since the novels of Heliodorus of Emesa in the 3rd century AD." The books have sold over 600 million copies, making J.K. Rowling the first billionaire author, and this is before considering the films and video games.

Another way in which people engage with the stories is through fan fiction on sites such as *Archive of Our Own* and *Fanfiction.net*. Fan fiction is a way for people to take their favourite characters, settings etc. from different media and use them as inspiration to create their own stories. Of particular relevance here is a popular form known as 'crossover fan fiction' where characters from one story are brought into contact with those from another, so that to take one example, a story ('Drama Club') in which Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger become romantically involved (unthinkable in the original) also includes Shakespeare's common plot device of a play within a play, in this case a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Instinctively, I like this idea. It seems irreverent in a good way, like creating museum exhibits that children can touch and interact with because what could be more tortuous and spirit breaking than taking children to a place full of colourful and interesting objects and telling them not to touch! In his article "*The Rivalry is Hot: Shakespeare, Harry Potter, and the Magic of Fanfiction*" Jamie Hawley puts his finger on some reasons why this might be so. Firstly, "By considering fanfiction as another popular response to Shakespeare, we can nudge him yet further off his pedestal and interact with his plays as his original audience would have done - in conversation." (Kativa Mudan Finn, quoted in Hawley, 2020). In other words it helps to make the plays accessible to all classes of people. Secondly, fan fiction is a way of better distributing the cultural capital that has accrued to the Bard's works in the ways discussed above. And not only that, but rather than simply taking, fan fiction authors add their own creative effort to the mix and contribute to the abundance which these timeless stories have proved over the past half millenium or so is the gift that never stops giving. Thirdly, since we are all human and thus never completely immune to the desire to achieve superiority, it is a positive that: "Shakespeare's association with a mass-cultural product, medium, or genre lends that item a

moiety of highbrow depth, 'universality,' authority, continuity with established tradition, or seriousness of purpose..." (Douglas Lanier, quoted in Hawley, 2020). Finally, to return to the metaphor I ventured earlier, fan fiction allows the radar of naturally curious minds to scan for ideas and inspiration in a way that is not limited by preconceived notions of what is difficult, what has an appropriate status or what comes with permission to approach.

"As the object of fandom corresponds with a textual field of gravity, rather than a text in its classical sense, readers gain new tools to normalize texts and to reconcile their object of fandom with their expectations, beliefs, and sense of self..." (Douglas Lanier, Cornell Sandvoss, quoted in Hawley, 2020).

What does this mean for the teaching of literature in a second language classroom?

I hope I have persuaded those who were not already persuaded that the influence of Shakespeare enriches the Harry Potter stories, connecting them to transformative social trends and events and to literary history and thus elevating them from entertaining stories into a more profound realm of timeless ideas. This, to me, is what the *study* of literature is ultimately about: travelling through a skillfully crafted story back to its archetypal origins in order to reach an enriched understanding of reality and see yourself and your world with new eyes. A shallow story, designed with entertainment and/or profit in the forefront of the writer's mind cannot take the reader deep enough for them to be truly nourished. A deep story read for plot and distraction equally squanders the opportunity to truly learn and grow. It is not necessary to be highly educated to benefit from this enriching dynamic of easily relatable and enjoyable story to deeper archetypal meaning gathering. However, *higher* (and deeper) education should at least make an attempt to encourage this kind of growth, to instill a habit of meaningful engagement with stories by leading students to an experience of the deeply satisfying act of connecting tales that delight them effortlessly with a harder to win connection to broader and more timeless truths. In a nutshell, I believe it is our responsibility as teachers to advocate for the

importance of *studying* books and films in contrast to their mere consumption. The Harry Potter series is well-suited to this because its charm has motivated countless millions to read the over 1 million words that make up the 7 books and in many cases to make the effort in the original English even though it is a foreign language to them. Its themes of death, having the courage of your convictions and persistence in the face adversity were not new in Shakespeare's time and will not become obsolete in the *next* half millennium, whether people of that time are still reading about Macbeth and Harry Potter or not. In addition to the delightful idea of boarding a train to a school of magic by means of an invisible platform designated by a fractional number, I believe students deserve the opportunity to contemplate this deeper connection to the history of imagination. I am thus resolved to keep making the effort to take students beyond the delight that Harry Potter has gifted them because, although the odds are most probably stacked against it, *someone* in the class may actually be paying attention.

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