

In Defence of Shakespeare

by Mrs. O. Norton, Compton PNEU School, Chichester

I ONCE asked my sister-in-law 'Why don't you ever give prunes to your children?' and she replied, 'Because I don't like them!' It was not clear whether she meant the children or the prunes. Could this be the same attitude that many have towards reading or teaching Shakespeare to the young?

Twenty-five years ago, when I began to use the PNEU programme, we read the Bible stories to the 5–6-year-olds and from then onwards we had, as now, to start reading directly from the Bible.

I queried whether this great step was really necessary. Wouldn't the children find it too difficult and lose interest?

I sought advice from our Director of Studies, who explained clearly, to me, that Charlotte Mason believed that children from the age of six years should *first* listen to the Bible, then have the meaning of the parable explained to them, and in this way they would grow accustomed to the music of the language of the Bible and become capable of learning beautiful passages off by heart quite easily and of course re-tell the story in their own words. She asked me to persevere; naturally, I did so and succeeded.

Thus, I have learnt to be obedient to Charlotte Mason's theories and do the same now with teaching Shakespeare plays to the 9–13 years old and find the children learn to love it and love to learn it.

Here is an uncorrected essay written by one of my pupils in the open class of eighteen children, Form IIB–IIIA inclusive, the 9–12 years old. All wrote in a similar way; the children describing how they overcame nervousness and found courage and then pleasure.

Shakespeare, by Christine Williamson

When I first started reading Shakespeare on Friday afternoons, I found it very hard to understand. I was eleven years old and the first play that I read was *The Merchant of Venice*. I found it even harder to write about it the following Monday. After I had written quite a few essays, I could understand it and put it into my own words better.

I have read and written essays on *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Twelfth Night*. The way we do Shakespeare is this. On Friday afternoon, for an hour, we read the play set for the term. We each have a book and we read the speeches in turn. After we have read a few speeches, first we try and explain what the characters are talking about. If it is too hard and we can't, Mrs. Norton explains it to us. Then we carry on reading.

The next Monday morning we write what had just happened in our own words. In this way, we write the whole play in our own words. We study a play a term and if you stay till the end of IIIA, you read and write twelve plays. If you stay only until the end of IIIB you will have done nine.

During the summer term we learn our roles for the play to be performed at the

end of the term. The play that we act has either been read before or is being read at the time.

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We choose our costumes from our theatre cupboard but often we have to alter and adapt them by our own choice of perhaps a different ruff or jacket or colour of tights.

We make all our own props and scenery. We act the play outside in the garden. Shakespeare has greatly increased my vocabulary.

The strong family spirit in our school gives each child a great respect for the rest of the cast and no one ever fails to learn their words, which they do out of class, either at home or in the playground where they help each other. Parents repeatedly remark on the self discipline of their children in their attitude to learning their part.

Last year, we all went to watch an amateur Shakespeare Company perform in a big theatre. The children's reactions were interesting. They admired the diction and the word perfection of the actors but their criticisms were, 'Their dresses were not the right length. The modern hair styles and permanent waved hair were not acceptable, being out of period. Why play a modern Spanish guitar; where was the lute?'

After our last summer's performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the children wished we could find a village green suitable to repeat the performance as presented by strolling players, one Saturday afternoon. But where could we find a green that had no traffic dashing by to drown our words?

We keep a record of each year's performance. An album of coloured photos provides us with happy memories.

I hope I can inspire other teachers to give the children the heritage they deserve and I believe that if you have not got the taste for it, the children will get it, if you give them the chance.