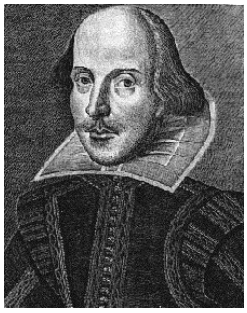
Tekst 6

Poor Shakespeare must be turning in his grave

by **Melanie Phillips**



1 The new artistic director of London's Globe theatre, Emma Rice, says she sometimes struggles to understand Shakespeare's plays. As a qualification for the job, that's certainly imaginative. Might we now expect the governor of the Bank of England to confess he can't do long division or *Bake Off*'s Mary Berry to reveal she labours to confect a sponge that doesn't come out of a packet?

2 The Globe, reconstructed in 1997, is a shrine to the works of Shakespeare. In 1599, the Bard's own theatre company built the original Globe on a site very close by. How can its management have appointed as artistic director a person who says some Shakespeare plays "feel like medicine", they make her "very sleepy" and that she'd prefer to listen to *The Archers* instead?

3 The depressing likelihood is that Ms Rice ticks all the boxes marked "relevance", "diversity" and "inclusion". She promises casting will be gender- and colour-blind, texts will be slashed, productions will be populist.

4 "There's no way that every line can still be relevant, in my opinion," she says. Her biggest fear is someone coming out of one of her shows and saying "that was boring" or "I didn't understand it". That's because she herself doesn't understand it. In particular, she doesn't grasp that Shakespeare doesn't need cuts or additions or trapeze artists gyrating in hotpants to David Bowie. In Shakespeare's plays, the words are everything.

5 The notion that they are unintelligible and off-putting to modern audiences, particularly the restless young, is wide of the mark. Properly taught or produced, the plays can connect to and inspire even the most unpromising audiences. Prince Charles, who is not only passionate about Shakespeare but has expended much energy upon rescuing disadvantaged and alienated youth through his Prince's Trust, understands this very well. More than a decade ago, he observed a class of difficult children at a pupil referral unit in Balsall Heath, Birmingham, responding with enthusiasm to the text of *Romeo and Juliet*, which they were being taught by an inspirational teacher.

6 Shakespeare's plays connect British children to their national identity. They also teach them everything they need to know about human nature and relationships, about love and death and ambition and conscience and betrayal. Yet for decades, teachers have sniped at their inclusion in the school curriculum on the grounds that they are boring, off-putting or a mummified form of an outdated nationalism.

7 In 1995 Professor Asher Cashdan, a teacher trainer, wrote in an educational magazine about "a right-wing witch-hunt" via the national curriculum. "I am continually amazed at teachers meekly accepting the imposition of Shakespeare plays on all pupils," he said. Less advantaged children would "make very little of a Shakespeare play and may be turned off all literature by having the Bard stuffed down their throats at an early age".

8 The repeated flinching at the apparent difficulty of the language derives from the view that children must never be presented with any obstacles. This explains the obsession with "relevance", or couching everything in the idiom of today's world. The result is the debasement of Shakespeare's sublime poetry.

9 Three years ago, Francis Gilbert wrote *Star-Crossed: Romeo and Juliet for Teenagers.* This used, in his own words, "modern phrases and obscene terms" to make the play "more approachable for 21st-century students". The obscenities in Gilbert's translation certainly jar, but not as badly as the plodding and excruciating banality to which he reduces Shakespeare's soaring imagery. So for example "It was the nightingale and not the lark/That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear" becomes "you heard the nightingale singing, that means it's night-time; that's when they sing".

10 The accessibility of Shakespeare depends upon the intelligence, passion and talent of the teacher or theatre director. One teacher who didn't get it wrote a few years ago: "I think the most difficult thing about Shakespeare for kids is that they will never fully understand all of the nuances, because they come from culture long ago." But another wrote in reply: "I have seen academically challenged kids get excited when they figure out what 'Macduff was from his mother's womb/Untimely ripped' actually means."

11 Shakespeare's language has to be decoded to be understood. Children love cracking codes because it gives them power. That enormously boosts their self-esteem. According to the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, performing Shakespeare's plays helps improve students' understanding of other complex material including science and maths.

12 **__24__** Shakespeare's plays help the most disadvantaged. So, teachers or theatre directors who bowdlerise them or imbue them with "relevant" gimmicks treat the most disadvantaged with contempt, corrupt the work of the greatest playwright in history and debase our general culture.

13 Now this is happening at the Globe, of all places. Alas, poor Shakespeare.

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