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Teaching Shakespeare and Marlowe: Learning versus the System. by Liam Semler.

Bloomsbury: London, 2013. Pp. 168.

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Part of Bloomsbury's *Shakespeare Now!* series, Liam Semler's *Teaching Shakespeare and Marlowe: Learning versus the System* presents a witty, candid, and inspiring first-person account of his pedagogical negotiations with "systematized," assessment-driven, bureaucratized learning in high schools and universities. This short book is divided into two parts: "Schooling Shakespeare" and "Learning Marlowe." As both an academic and a contributor to the statewide assessments in New South Wales, Australia, Semler is well-positioned to discuss the disjunction between secondary students' intensely scaffolded and assessment-oriented experiences, and university professors' frustration at some pupils' inability and/or fear of taking intellectual risks in the classroom.

In each part, Semler shares his experiences experimenting with innovative pedagogies in the context of Shakespeare's and Marlowe's works to put pressure on existing systems. The first chapter, "Revenge Effects," is parenthetically subtitled: "How systems eat us for breakfast." Through anecdotes and statistics, Semler demonstrates

how standardized curricula and assessment-driven learning outcomes prioritize a narrow set of skills (e.g., test-taking) and promote “surface learning.” “Revenge effects” compound when students arrive at university and “are invisibly penalized for not being what they were not made” (40).

In the second chapter, “Positive Turbulence,” Semler argues for the creation of “Ardenspaces” in the classroom. Semler envisions these spaces as sites of “positive turbulence,” as “creative whorl[s]” of inspired engagement that upsets system machinery (32). He analogizes “Ardenspace” to the Forest of exile, situated between Duke Frederick’s authoritarian court and Duke Ferdinand’s permissive one in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Outside the realm of these formal courts, or learning systems, the Forest, “Ardenspace” is a place of cognitive disequilibrium where reflective engagement and intellectual risk-taking abound. Ideally, Ardenspace offers learners a temporary exile from which one returns with greater self-awareness, new skills, and a fresh mindset to resume navigation within the system.

Chapter 3 narrates Semler’s initiation of the “Shakespeare Reloaded” project, a partnership between Sydney University and Barker College (a secondary school), funded by the Australian Research Council’s Linkage Project grant. “Shakespeare Reloaded” was designed to practice these concepts and help high school students better prepare for the expectations of university. Here, Semler describes “The Bard Blitz” experiment at Barker College. This activity is inspired by an eclectic mix of pedagogical

theories and presents a four-stage method for teaching Shakespeare that moves from close reading and translation, to reflective engagement, to concrete and abstract concept development, and concludes with “active experimentation” (71). “The Bard Blitz” is designed to support students as they generate an independent thesis statement based on “close textual analysis and a personal collection and disposition of concepts” – much as they will be expected to do at university (72). Semler comments, “it is training in free-climbing for students who’ve always followed a ropes course” (72). Ultimately, however, project participants faced a recurring problem: the “collision of the reflex pragmatism of school teachers with the reflex problematization of academics” (77). Glossing this issue, Semler concludes that if even a small faction changed their mindset, “then when such agents move between systems they will take their unquantifiably altered nature with them” (78-79). Semler’s ideal outcome is learning despite the system. Yet were students to use the techniques of “Shakespeare Reloaded” on standardized assessments, Semler acknowledges they “might crash and burn” (77).

Chapter 4 shifts the scene of learning to the university and discusses “the band of perceived relevance,” or the “co-created” understanding between students and teachers about what will be conceptually relevant in the classroom and, importantly, what will be assessed. Here, Semler posits Marlowe as an “arch system antigen” in order to breach classroom decorum and introduce disequilibrium into the system of perceived relevance (83).

In Chapter 5, Semler offers sample pedagogies to give students the “Green Light” to engage affectively and even wildly with Marlowe’s works. For example, he describes using unconventional course “texts,” including a live performance of Vassily Sigarev’s *Ladybird*, and the Australian television series *Blue Murder* to simultaneously complement and disrupt the study of Marlowe’s corpus and criticism. In lieu of conventional assessment, Semler invited students to present creative interpretations of “Marlowe.” Semler’s anecdotes demonstrate his success eliciting critical, deep, and personally meaningful engagement from his students.

Although Semler tacitly chastises his English faculty colleagues for dismissing “Edu-jargon” (88), he participates in its perpetuation by coining terms like “positive turbulence” and “Ardenspace” that have long had direct analogues in Jean Piaget’s schemas of knowledge acquisition and, respectively, Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs for safe learning environments. Overall, the book’s great strengths are Semler’s interdisciplinary approach to teaching Shakespeare and Marlowe and his wry humor as he builds bridges between Literary Studies and Education: “After all, we are educators, aren’t we?” (89). Despite the book’s focus on the problems of systematized learning particular to New South Wales, Australia, readers globally can glean valuable insight about students’ struggles to meet vastly different expectations between high school and university. Additionally, “The Bard Blitz,” although designed for high-school, could be

usefully adapted for first-year literature courses to help students transition into university-level thinking and engagement.