

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 29 - English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Communicating the value and relevance of poetry today
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This case study describes the impact of the research activities of the University of Sheffield's Professor of Poetry, Simon Armitage. Armitage is one of the UK's best known and most highly acclaimed poets, a respected translator of medieval texts and a leading light for the public communication of arts research. His work is direct, emotionally powerful, and communicates strange, marginal, and extreme experiences in language which allows readers to re-experience those states: the impact of his poetry therefore derives from the communication of affect across time and space through the medium of the poem, on the page and in readings. This impact is felt by audiences on a global, national, and local level, through Armitage's work as a poet in different media (from broadcast to the material landscape), a teacher, a public intellectual, and a curator of poetry festivals. In these varied roles, Armitage champions the power of poetry and demonstrates its relevance to our lives today. Specifically, his work has had four major forms of impact:</p> <p>(i) the power and accessibility of his poetry – and its rich explorations of mind, world and language – have created cultural capital for a wide readership, enriching the emotional and intellectual lives of individuals and groups of readers;</p> <p>(ii) his work disseminating and encouraging poetry has led to an enhanced understanding and an increased appreciation of what poetry does in the world, fostering future generations of readers and poets both within the UK and internationally and thus contributing to the sustainability and vitality of this art form;</p> <p>(iii) his investigation of topics such as trauma and victimization has illuminated cultural attitudes and changed perceptions, as well as directly helping those who have experienced such ordeals;</p> <p>(iv) book sales and ticket sales have had economic impact for the arts organizations, venues and publishers involved.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Armitage's work as a poet has been developing since joining the University of Sheffield in February 2011, as he has moved to create new forms of artistic expression with an increased absurdist/comic edge, to extend his explorations of regional and historical language, and to promote transnational and transhistorical forms of imagination.</p> <p>The historical work, which had featured in his celebrated translation of the Gawain poet, came to fruition when Armitage published his translation of <i>The Death of King Arthur</i> (Faber and Faber, 2012), confirming his position as communicator of medieval poetry and culture. Reviewing the book in <i>The Independent</i> (27 Jan 2012), Bill Greenwell commented that the text is even 'more remarkable and sustained' than Armitage's fêted translation of <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> (Faber and Faber, 2007). <i>The Death of King Arthur</i> – a translation of the alliterative <i>Morte Arthure</i> (c. 1400) – gives new life to a neglected masterpiece of story-telling, revealing the living relevance of medieval culture as it traces Britain's military campaigns on foreign soil and the horrors of war. Both the medieval and twenty-first-century poet thus bear witness to the impact of conflict.</p> <p>Armitage's research into war culture looked into the ways that war scars minds, affects family and loving relationships, and how culture at the level of nation or tribe can institute forms of mourning and remembrance. This work is complemented by his recent exploration of the ways in which poetry can express other forms of trauma, and in August 2011 Radio 4 broadcast Armitage's <i>Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster</i>, a drama-documentary constructed out of conversations held between Armitage and Sylvia Lancaster, mother of Sophie, the Lancashire teenager murdered four years earlier in 2007, and a sequence of poems written by Armitage in Sophie's voice; this radio drama became a stage play at Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre in 2012.</p> <p>Armitage's work also investigates the tight relationship between poetry and place and the ways in which poetry can create and sustain regional and linguistic bonds. This strand of his work is exemplified by the Stanza Stones project, commissioned by the Ilkley Literature Festival and imove (Yorkshire's cultural programme for London 2012). Armitage wrote six original poems, inspired by the Pennine topography, which were carved into the natural landscape by stone artist</p>

Pip Hall. The poems form the Stanza Stones walking trail between Marsden and Ilkley and were published in an anthology alongside work by young Yorkshire writers mentored by Armitage.

Each of these three projects illustrates key aspects of Armitage's writing as collaborative art which explores both recent and remote history, is rooted in landscape and community, and which demonstrates the relevance of poetry to our lives today by speaking to pressing contemporary issues and events, challenging popular conceptions about the 'proper' subject matter of poetry by using it to explore topics such as violence and murder and to give voice to marginalised, or alternative, perspectives. His writing is also grounded in the local and particular, giving it a concrete specificity that paradoxically allows it to speak to national and international audiences. The three projects are thus indicative of the range and spirit of Armitage's poetry as research into language, community, identity, history, and culture, and of his commitment to promoting poetry as a living and valid art-form through a variety of media, and to a broad range of audiences..

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1. Armitage, S. (2012), *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster*. Hebden Bridge: Pomona. [returned REF2014]
- R2. Armitage, S. (trans.) (2011), *The Death of King Arthur*. London: Faber and Faber. [returned REF2014]
- R3. Armitage, S. *et alia* (2012), *Stanza Stones*. www.ilkleyliteraturefestival.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Stanza-Stones-Anthology-web.pdf

The quality of Armitage's underpinning research is evidenced by the following awards since 2011:

- *Black Roses*, BBC Radio Best Speech Programme (2011)
- *Black Roses*, shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award for Poetry (2012)
- *The Death of King Arthur* made Poetry Book Society Choice (2012)
- Armitage awarded Hay Medal for Poetry (2012)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Armitage's research, outlined above, is based on a commitment to showing the relevance and importance of poetry in the modern world and explores poetry's power to speak to current culture about neglected zones, experiences, histories, and trauma. This cultural work has had three main modes of impact: (i) cultural and educational impact through demonstrating the importance of poetry for contemporary audiences, readers and citizens, as well as informing them about the art form and its practitioners; other, specific beneficiaries here include young writers, school teachers, and pupils; (ii) emotional and attitudinal impact, through highlighting cultural values and social assumptions, changing perceptions, and aiding specific individuals and groups come to terms with, or understand, experiences; and (iii) social and economic impact, through collaboration with local communities, arts organisations, and publishers.

Cultural and Educational Impact

Armitage has consistently promoted poetry as a medium and for its ability to change people's perceptions, be they of the past, as with the *Death of King Arthur* creative translation project, or of the present, as with the *Black Roses* piece. As Kate Kellaway wrote of *The Death of King Arthur* in *The Guardian* (19 Feb 2012), Armitage 'has a miraculous ability to make the past fresh, moving and urgent, not allowing legend to create distance'. His poetry has global reach and impact and his readership extends well beyond the academy [S1]: for example, *The Death of King Arthur* was reviewed in the tabloid and broadsheet press in the UK and abroad (e.g. *Chicago Times*, *New York Daily News*), as well as on personal blogs; it featured on lists of 'recommended reads' in publications such as the men's magazine *GQ* (29 May 2012); it garnered Armitage numerous invitations to literary festivals in the UK (e.g. Hay-on-Wye, June 2013) and abroad (e.g. Jaipur, January 2013).

The wide reach of Armitage's work and its underpinning philosophy about the cultural role and communicative power of poetry have led to him becoming one of the UK's leading champions for the place of poetry and the arts in today's society, informing the wider public about poetic traditions and processes, and demonstrating the ability of the poetic imagination to provide a form of commemoration and historical recovery and of giving voice to both marginalised and traumatic experience. His public role as disseminator of poetry's power to speak to us is measurable through the sheer number and variety of commissions that his work has triggered in the national media. Since 2011, he has presented five major BBC documentaries which demonstrate this range: *Oblique Strategies* (Radio 4, 2013) explored the creative process through investigating

approaches used by Brian Eno and David Bowie in the 1970s (and indicates the more absurdist turn of recent work); *Staying Bright* (Radio 3, 2013) looked at the history and cultural place of stainless steel – particularly in the north of England – over the century since its discovery; *Poems from the Pennines* (Radio 4, 2012) put the ‘Stanza Stones’ project within a longer tradition of landscape art; *Down Off The Pedestals* (Radio 4, 2011) brought to a wider audience two neglected 19th-century dialect poets, Samuel Laycock and Ammon Wrigley; *The Pendle Witch Child* (BBC4, 2011) uncovered the lethal power of words in one of British history’s most infamous 17th-century witch trials. As such, all five programmes were closely connected to, and grew out of, key local/regionalist and historical strands of Armitage’s research. Armitage has also appeared on BBC1’s *Countryfile* (2012, on the Stanza Stones), BBC2’s *Review Show* (various appearances 2011, 2012); ITV’s *Britain’s Secret Homes* (2013, talking about the radical poet William Blake); BBC2’s *The Culture Show* (on The Smiths, 2013); and a BBC 4 documentary on Ford Madox Ford’s First World War trilogy *Parade’s End* (2012). The impact of these media appearances has been to make poetry, and literature more generally, a living art for wider, non-academic audiences.

Armitage’s poetry has had a specific impact on school-children, through the inclusion of his poems on the AQA GCSE syllabus (including the currently uncollected ‘Harmonium’, which will be published in 2014 in *Paper Aeroplane: New Selected Poems 1989-2014*). Armitage has further supported secondary-school learning through his contribution to the BBC’s Learning Zone of six short films (2011) in which he unpacks the techniques and imagery used in those of his poems included on the GCSE syllabus. *The Death of King Arthur* was also issued in 2012 by W. W. Norton, a leading USA-based publisher of undergraduate and secondary school teaching texts.

Armitage has also had significant educational impact through his role as mentor. He has established productive, durable links with arts organizations in Yorkshire and with schools and youth groups from across the socio-economic spectrum. His 2012 Stanza Stones project, for example, involved leading workshops with six groups of writers aged 12-26 to produce an anthology of poetry, as well as dance and dramatic performances [S8]. This was one of two projects that Armitage led for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad: the projects are evidence of his impact as a poet, but they also speak to his commitment and ability to reach multiple audiences. Whilst the Stanza Stones project was rooted in the Pennine landscape of his childhood and involved mentoring young, inexperienced writers, the second, Poetry Parnassus, took place at London’s Southbank Centre [S7] and was conceived and curated during his time as artist-in-residence there (2012). It was the largest poetry festival ever staged in the UK, involving 204 published poets from practically every country in the world [S5][S6]. Its aim was to popularize poetry as a global human activity, central to every nation’s cultural sense of itself and enabling connection, through translation, to other cultures (aims that underpin Armitage’s *Death of King Arthur*). Over 100 events – from conventional poetry readings and talks on topics such as the relationship between poetry and politics, to pop-up performances and public classrooms along the South Bank – were designed to strip poetry of its aura of exclusivity and intimidation. The events were attended by thousands, in London and at regional events as part of its national tour, and resulted in the publication of an anthology, *The World Record*, edited by Neil Astley and Anna Selby (Bloodaxe Books and Southbank Centre, 2012) and an interactive international poetry map, made available to a global audience through the Guardian website (26 June 2012). The impact of Armitage’s contributions to the Cultural Olympiad has been to nurture future generations of readers and poets, aiding the sustainability and vitality of this art form. Further to that, there is additional impact on the young writers participating in the Stanza Stones project, who benefitted from increased understanding and appreciation of their local environment, its place in the cultural tradition, and their own capacity to participate within that tradition: factors which enhance quality of life and cultural capital.

Emotional and Attitudinal Impact

The impact of Armitage’s use of poetry as a communicative medium, with the power to change perceptions and give expression to marginalised or traumatic experience, is particularly evident from the reception of *Black Roses*: 1776 copies had been sold [S2] to 31 July 2013, and 1457 seats were sold at the Royal Exchange production in September 2012 [S4]. This poetic drama (first broadcast on Radio 4) did not merely reach a diverse audience through a variety of media: it also had a profound impact on those audiences [S3], as captured on the Radio 4 website. Illustrative comments, testifying to the transformative power of the piece, include the following: ‘A

painful listen, but one that has changed me as a person; *'A brilliant piece of drama. I wasn't going to listen but thought I'd give it 5 minutes to see what it was like. I was hooked immediately*'; *'Wonderful play making us face up to reality [...] This needs to be part of sixth form curriculum across the country*'; *'The programme was a testament to the power of poetry. A perfect illustration of the need for continued funding for the arts*'. Also see the Royal Exchange comments pages [S4]: *'Such an important production especially for young people to see*'; *'I heard the radio broadcast, so moving it had me in tears and I had to listen to it again when I got home. Such tragic end to such a promising life, my heart goes out to Sophie's friends and family*'. Armitage's drama has had a further positive impact: a third of the cover price from sales of the book version goes to the Sophie Lancaster Foundation, a charity dedicated to countering prejudice and intolerance. The broadcast version also led to a 'More than Words' listening workshop run by the BBC where members of the public could talk to Sue Roberts, producer of *Black Roses*, and Sylvia Lancaster, Sophie's mother. The play had spontaneous impact too: teenagers from the Royal Exchange Young Company and Burnley Youth Theatre watched the play in September 2012 and shared their thoughts and feelings about the performance. In February 2013, the Young Company and members then attended six creative writing workshops, exploring the themes and style of the play, whilst the Burnley group explored their responses through improvisation, discussion and devised drama. The focused reflection on their own affective responses to the play helped them not only realize the emotional trauma of the family, but enabled a local sense of emotional solidarity.

Social and Economic Impact

Armitage's work as a poet and his role as champion of the arts has benefitted independent publishing, encouraged widening participation, and aided a variety of arts organizations, especially those which use local resources or connections to enrich the lives of the community through the arts. Since 2011 this commitment is evidenced through his use of the small independent press Pomona for the publication of *Black Roses* [S2], his work with young writers (for example, on the Stanza Stones project), and his continued active patronage of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (his residency involves readings and publications), the Arvon Foundation (a creative writing charity for which he teaches), the Wordsworth Trust (where he contributes to the Wordsworth Trust Poetry Series), and the Elmet Trust (a charity which celebrates the poetry of Ted Hughes in the village in which he was born and brought up, for which Armitage does poetry walks and other events).

Armitage has also helped sustain local arts organizations within Sheffield, most particularly The Poetry Business [S9] (an independent poetry press and writer development agency), Bank Street Arts (a cross-disciplinary arts centre), and *Off the Shelf* (Sheffield's annual literary festival): the localism of Armitage's creative work led directly to these collaborations. This engagement with the local community has been consolidated through the annual Lyric poetry festival, inaugurated in 2011 and co-curated with Dr Joanna Gavins (School of English), and the city-wide week-long Sheffield Poetry Festival, founded 2012 with Armitage as patron. Lyric brings over 1500 people each year to the University over the course of a weekend and is now being developed to include a range of community-based workshops. The Poetry Festival features over 50 poets and 500 visitors, whilst promoting local and national poetry presses. Testament to Armitage's impact on the city's cultural scene is provided by the directors of The Poetry Business, who have spoken of how activities such as Lyric and the Sheffield Poetry Festival have *'made a genuine difference to how [they] work across the city*'.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1. Faber & Faber UK Sales team can corroborate sales of Armitage's publications
- S2. Pomona Books (sales of *Black Roses*)
- S3. The discussion of *Black Roses* on 'Feedback' (Radio 4) is indicative of its impact: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/radio4/feedback/feedback_20110318-1500a.mp3
- S4. The impact of the stage production of *Black Roses* can be corroborated by the Royal Exchange, and its comments pages, <http://www.royalexchange.co.uk/event.aspx?id=584>.
- S5. www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2012/07/poetry-paranassus-london (corroborates the impact of Poetry Parnassus as a force of dissemination of world poetry)
- S6. <http://tinyurl.com/72rpha9> (impact of Poetry Parnassus)
- S7. Southbank Centre can further corroborate the impact of Poetry Parnassus.
- S8. The Ilkley Literary Festival can corroborate the impact of the Stanza Stones project.
- S9. Poetry Business can corroborate Armitage's impact on Sheffield's cultural scene.