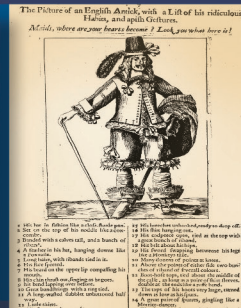
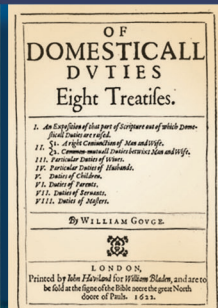


# Walking in Shakespeare's Shoes

Connecting His World and Ours Using Primary Sources



Sheridan Lynn Steelman

# Walking in Shakespeare's Shoes

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*Connecting His World and  
Ours Using Primary Sources*

Sheridan Lynn Steelman



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If you don't enter that world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved in their destiny, you won't be able to empathize, and empathy is at the heart of the novel. This is how you read a novel: you inhale the experience. So start breathing.

—Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

We know what we are, but know not what we may be.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*



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# Preface

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The book you are about to read is the culmination of a teaching pilgrimage. What I have learned is I am a teacher first, scholar second. By this, I mean that I am in constant doubt that I know enough about the Bard's work; his meaning often eludes me, yet I often teach through my doubts until I come to a place of understanding. Learning to teach Shakespeare's plays and sonnets has been one of the greatest challenges and joys of my long tenure as a teacher. For the past fifty years, I have experimented, learned, succeeded, relapsed, and laughed, picking myself up over and over again to try again. Sometimes I get it *right*, but mostly I get it *enough* to know that I can always improve. If you feel unsure, uncomfortable, unled, or unsettled about how to go about traveling with your students through the early modern puzzle we call *William Shakespeare*, this book is for you.

My second home, the school district where I work, has changed dramatically over the years. When I began teaching, I worked with middle- to lower-income families, mostly white. Today I am happy to say that the school district is growing in diversity. The number of students of color continues to rise. Our LGBTQIA2S+ population is a source of pride as my new learning swells with respect for gender identity. The changing demographics are significant in that I understand that I must be vigilant about my own growth and willingness to adapt. My classroom will always be filled with the noise, laughter, shouts, and movement often known as the American teenager but, as our world changes, so too do our classroom library, our discussions, and our focus. Today's vibrancy is often offset with the silent scrutiny of books from my classroom library and the soft whisper of turning pages. When we write, I hear the tap of Chromebook keys, rather than the scratch of pencil lead, pausing briefly as they close their eyes or look out the window for inspiration.

I invite you to enter this sacred space, the place I have intentionally created to be inviting and instructional. When you turn the pages here, you will open my classroom door, but you must imagine the aroma of freshly brewed

mocha coffee, the green of potted plants, and the view of teenagers all over the room, some swiveling in green Node chairs, some voraciously—and some nonchalantly—browsing my shelves, chatting. You will notice both keen and subtle differences: pink hair, shaved heads, dirty clogs, worn hoodies, caps, wraps, fuzzy pajamas, ripped jeans. Some confirm their identities with bare skin in winter, and some doubt with coverings in spring. They are, in essence, a conglomeration of open-hearted, open-minded young adults, ready for life to begin.

If it's a Monday, we all settle and prepare for a mindfulness session. If it's a Friday, empty doughnut boxes line the walls. On any day, we are engaged with language as if our lives depended on it. They say it's inviting and cozy; I say it's the place to be. I have stools all over the room, so I can change my teaching space, but I often sit at a student desk so we can talk. Sometimes we discuss a topic of urgency, but sometimes it's all about the basketball game or what they are wearing to Homecoming. We are all in this place of learning together.

I urge you to consider a new approach to teaching Shakespeare as if you are preparing for the first day of school. We are hungry to begin. Our minds are ready for the newness of learning and the start of another year. Begin with the Introduction, so you find your footing. You'll know which pedagogical path you've been traveling and if and where you might pause for a drink of clean water. Then find the chapter that quenches your thirst because you have been there before. Then try another, and another.

The *document approach* is one you can dabble in while you are teaching your own Shakespeare unit. If you have taught *Romeo and Juliet* for one year or twenty, you will find ideas for incorporating some primary documents into any part of your tried-and-true activities. You may be the novice who dreads having to coerce students into reading act 1 or the veteran who has an eclectic approach, using combinations of close reading and performance. The document approach to teaching Shakespeare can be used fully or partially in any classroom. Yesterday, my students watched their remix multimedia projects after experiencing Shakespeare Book Clubs. One student remarked, "Learning what was happening back then made me realize that things haven't changed that much." It's true. My students' responses electrify my own, and I am alive. Join me in the journey.

With respect for all you do,  
Sheri

# Acknowledgments

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I would like to thank Northview Public Schools for their continued faith and support as I traveled my own path of continued learning. They have encouraged my interest in Shakespeare and in literature, in general, and allowed me to work with middle school teachers to introduce a new approach to teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* alongside amazing English language arts teachers. A special thank you to the two superintendents who facilitated my work within the district, Dr. Michael Paskewicz and Dr. Scott Korpak, as well as assistant superintendent and curriculum director Liz Cotter for listening, supporting, pushing, and reminding me of how to balance and juggle with grace. Their words have kept me going.

Many teachers worked directly with me to incorporate new methods, strategies, content, and language with one goal in mind: student learning and achievement. Several middle and high school educators made this happen: Kathy Vogel, Andy Galmish, Benson Mitchell, Linda Parker, Mary V., Kevin Weber, and Emily Alt. Thank you for trying out a new approach and for going off the beaten path with me.

My principal, Mark Thomas, has been inspiring in his devotion to continued learning as well as a mentor and friend throughout the years I worked on my doctorate and this book. His continued faith in me is very much appreciated. He taught me how to lead by stepping to the back of the pack.

The Northview High School English Department has been instrumental in helping me improve my teaching on a daily basis. I thank them for their professionalism, their uplifting support, and soothing humor as we have traveled our English paths together, including but not limited to the many challenges we faced during the pandemic. I am grateful to all of you: Audra Whetstone, Sara Pitt, BJ Schroder, Betsy Verwys, Emily Alt, Shelli Tabor, Megan Porter, Mary VanderWilt, Nancy Hoffman, Ali McNulty, Alex Hower, Anna Reynolds, Karen Michewicz, Kevin Weber, and Matt Howe. My heart will always live on the second floor.

Two teachers who worked with me on Shakespeare Book Clubs deserve my grateful acknowledgement. Alison McNulty and Mindi Cottriel walked with me during the most challenging time in education, the 2020–2021 pandemic. We experimented with virtual, hybrid, and face-to-face block learning, overcoming great odds to achieve wonderful outcomes. I am indebted to them for their willingness to learn about Shakespeare’s problem plays, to explode their comfort zones, to reflect on their teaching, and to share ideas.

My dissertation chairperson and champion, Dr. Allen Webb, has been a friend, advisor, and writing coach before, during, and after I tackled the idea of a new approach to teaching Shakespeare. He encouraged me to write this book. I will always be grateful for his friendship and advice.

Dr. Jo Miller deserves my utmost thanks for her belief in me as a Shakespeare scholar. Her faith in my writing, both poetry and prose, has been a source of confidence as I have overcome challenges in my path to new learning. Her kindness and quiet strength have fed me when I most needed it.

I would also like to thank Megan Henning, who became my *teacher reader* throughout the initial phases of my research and writing. Her sensitivity to teacher concerns and love of language pushed my thinking constructively and with great insight. Many of the Document Discussions in this book were based on her feedback.

Two writers and English teacher practitioners push my thinking in such important ways: I am indebted to Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher, who model choice reading, workshop methods, conferring, and writing with fidelity. My teaching changed dramatically after reading *Book Love* (2013) and *Readicide* (2009). Student choice has been at the heart of their work, and reading has been in their souls. I credit them for guiding me and steering the paths of so many teachers who want to continue learning, growing, and loving language.

Kurt Austin, my NCTE editor, deserves the highest praise for helping me create a book in its best form. He has been honest, compassionate, and forthright in his efforts to help me write with fidelity. His steadfast encouragement is his claim to fame and my resolve to revise, revise, revise. Thank you, Kurt, for believing in this book.

My family’s support and encouragement need top-shelf recognition. Thank you, Bob, for the many sacrifices and your undying support and love. You have bravely and consistently picked up the pieces when I laid them down. To my children—Kelly, Kristin, Kerri, Kassandra, Kevin, and Katherine—thank you for saying “yes” when I asked if I should. You will always be the wind under my wings.

# Introduction

---

I looked over the sea of thirty faces in my second hour English class and knew I was in trouble. Body language told me these juniors were not eager to begin reading *Hamlet*. Aiden had his eyes closed. Charlanda rolled hers. Hunter put his head against the wall in the back, trying to use it as a flat pillow. Elissa frowned.

Sound familiar? I am a veteran teacher, but the story is the same, regardless of experience. Most middle and high school English teachers know the challenges of teaching Shakespeare. We seek to have our students engage with the richness of Shakespeare's language, envision his stagecraft, and generate fresh ideas about the plays and human experience. Despite the fact that Shakespeare is the most often taught author in American high schools and the only author specifically named by the Common Core State Standards adopted by forty-one states, today's teachers know their students will encounter difficulties with early modern language. My own students tell me: "I just don't get this old stuff."

Perhaps, today's students are reading with less tenacity than in former years. In the twenty-first century, social media and increased screen time can be distractions and deterrents to reading. When English teachers do successfully engage their students in reading, they are more likely using young adult literature. Reading contemporary literature as a whole class, in book clubs, or independently is easier compared to older, denser, poetic texts. Shakespeare, especially, is harder work.

This book proposes an approach to teaching Shakespeare in secondary English classes, one that effectively develops student interest and ability to read Shakespeare in rich and complex ways. I call this method of teaching the *document approach*. In every chapter, working with the plays that you are most likely already teaching, I show students in my own and other teachers' classrooms engaging more deeply with the plays, examining meaningful questions about their relevance to the present, and developing important knowledge and questions often overlooked in other approaches. I won't say that the document

approach makes the teaching of Shakespeare *easy*, but I have found that a cultural approach engages students, raises academic and intellectual expectations, and provides me the satisfaction and joy of great teaching.

You might wonder about which primary documents I use for the plays, where I find examples that are age appropriate and relevant, and how I have time to add more material to an already tight teaching schedule. The answer is in thematic connections, the ties that bind Shakespeare's world to our own. Once students see the relevance of the plays through characters who react to their sixteenth-century world the same way my students react to their own twenty-first-century popular culture, the distance melts. Compassion grows. The goal of the document approach is to foreground historical and cultural materials, issues, and questions from the early modern period, helping students better understand Shakespeare in his own time and, by making significant thematic connections, better understand Shakespeare's relevance in today's world.

I have chosen cultural themes that surface during each of the four plays that are most often taught in middle and high school—*Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—to capture attitudes, thinking, and trends that define Shakespeare's early modern period (see also Appendix A). Some themes, such as witches and religion or ghosts and the supernatural, are popular discussion points and elicit rapid-fire questions and comments from my students. It turns out that marriage and sexuality intrigues as much as violence and death in relation to *Romeo and Juliet*. Excerpts from sixteenth-century books on manners and customs also provide context for Macbeth's behavior at the feast in act 3, and a portrait of eight of the conspirators responsible for the Gunpowder Plot raises questions about Shakespeare's writing during the same year. Students love discussing the "hot-button" issues that provide context for his plays, especially those that surface from their own questions. You will also read about how Shakespeare Book Clubs, using the Bard's problem plays, transform a whole-class play approach to a student-centered, inquiry-based workshop.

Shakespeare's narratives and insights spring to life as students engage: he, a creative cartographer, and we, the hungry travelers. Connection is the only road to understanding.

Every teacher envisions those "Aha" moments when students willingly dig into scenes, excited about discovering meaning. It happened to me when I used the *Rainbow Portrait*<sup>1</sup> (see Figure I.1) during a class discussion on spies and spying in *Hamlet*. The beautiful depiction of Queen Elizabeth I's

*Every teacher envisions those "Aha" moments when students willingly dig into scenes, excited about discovering meaning.*

gown, covered with embroidered eyes and ears, made sense in light of Hamlet's betrayal when he asks if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were "sent for," Ophelia's dismay when she falls prey to her father's demands, and Hamlet's agency when he becomes spymaster and manipulator, rather than spied upon and manipulated. My students wondered if the Queen's dress was a warning to her subjects, or if Shakespeare's scenes illuminated a problem that was more than fictional intrigue.

Providing sketches, paintings, poetry, treatises, letters, sermons, laws, catalogues, plays, frontispieces, proclamations, plant lore, tables, speeches, and news reports allows students to compare sixteenth-century thinking with the attitudes of today's writers, artists, politicians, and medical experts. What they learn is that visual and digital expressions of thought during the early modern period were as complex and varied as they are today. Laws about carrying weapons and challenging authority in 1595 when Tybalt baits and kills Mercutio continue to be relevant today, especially in light of school shootings and national uprisings. Our own laws on purchasing, owning, and carrying assault weapons continue to be scrutinized.

In addition to students' increased ability and desire to read Shakespeare's language, my students' focus on "what happened in act 1" has shifted to inquiry-based and student-led discussions on cultural/historical issues during the early modern period and how these connect to their own place and time in the world. They now use a broader lens. Instead of merely focusing on Capulet's anger at his daughter when she refuses to marry Paris, they now debate family relationships, normative gender roles, and power hierarchies during the early modern period. Students today "get it" when they read about family tensions and understand a Lord's power over his household. Today, feelings of entrapment and control are the same if a teenager has no agency. Reading sixteenth-century primary documents, such as a sermon, where the roles of a child, wife, and husband are carefully outlined is now the impetus for impromptu class discussions. Students are thirsty for "how it was back then," and their small- and large-group discussions often evolve dynamically when they tackle the big ideas in the plays within the framework of the documents. It has been a refreshing change to listen to students talk about how Juliet manipulates her situation despite the powerful constraints she faces.

According to Paula Marantz Cohen, Shakespeare does more than write stories about marginalization that is both external and internal. Shakespeare teaches



**FIGURE I.1.** The *Rainbow Portrait*. Circa 1600–1602.



us about empathy. “We are destined to lose power and become marginal figures, if we live long enough,” Cohen writes (*What Shakespeare* 13–14). Students today, especially during the isolating forces of a pandemic, understand. Using primary sources, particularly those that illuminate the dynamic and devastating fabric of Shakespeare’s world, allows students to feel more deeply to “probe the well-springs of his characters’ actions” (Cohen, *What Shakespeare* 14). In other words, Shakespeare transforms.

The document approach provides invaluable historical and cultural information, but the most important feature is how students make connections to their own world. Shakespeare’s characters—the villains, the heroes, the alienated—provide mirrors to the soul, reflecting base truths about human nature. As students situate the plays within the context of early modern thinking, they understand how a tour de force exposes and challenges the status quo. The social pressures William Shakespeare faced in sixteenth-century London are often illuminated by other writers and artists of his time, and students often hinge their desire to plow through difficult language on finding relevance. Personal connection is key.

Undoubtedly, the rude mechanicals in a fairyland are hilarious in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but the relevance issue in past years of teaching this play has been a struggle. Once students began to read competing ideas about the supernatural, such as Robert Burton’s (aka Democritus Junior) *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in which he depicts fairies as good-natured yet mischievous, as opposed to Reginald Scot’s descriptions of them as dangerous and foreboding, they found their footing. Not all writers depicted fairies in the same way. Early modern parents, conflicted about supernatural beings, may have warned their children about fairies abducting them in the middle of the night. As today’s students read diverse documents on similar themes, they realize, similar to today’s popular culture, thinking varies. We often have lively discussions about today’s movies, books, video games, fashion, and memes—and how they connect to Shakespeare’s plays. One of my favorite days while I was teaching *Midsummer* to middle school students was when we talked about Puck’s antics and made a list of all the tricksters in today’s movies and TV shows. It was wild.

Other approaches to teaching Shakespeare—close reading, reader response, and performance—influence our teaching and learning practices. I am sure you will recognize these approaches and be able to see how they influence pedagogy. For this reason, I will review these approaches. They all have their value and strengths, and taken together in careful measure, combined with a document approach, have a great deal to offer to students.

## Close Reading

When I first began teaching, a colleague taught *Julius Caesar*, carefully working through the play with her students, line by line, as they decoded the meaning of Shakespeare's words. As a proponent of the close reading approach, they explicated passages, emphasizing the play's poetic devices, such as rhyme, meter, figurative language, and irony. Students were encouraged to find meaning through explicit analyses of scenes, dialogue, and soliloquies without connecting ideas beyond the text. This pedagogical approach—*new critical* or close reading—includes a focus on “text alone,” rather than considerations of student background knowledge or early modern cultural beliefs. A new critical approach often emphasizes the formal structure of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, which may include verse form, rhyme scheme, stanza divisions, and the five-act structure. Many anthologies, individual editions, and professional books for teachers emphasize close reading and help students understand and appreciate Shakespeare's language, establishing the pedagogical priorities found in many classrooms.

Editors of contemporary high school literature anthologies often adopt a close reading, new critical approach. In the *Insights* anthology published by McGraw Hill, for example, the *Romeo and Juliet* text has *glossed* margins, defining words, such as “star-crossed,” “in choler,” and “bite my thumb” (Carlsen et al. 324, 325). Comprehension checks at the end of each scene include short summaries with questions, such as “What character traits do you see revealed in this scene in both Romeo and Juliet?” Reading for Details, Reading for Meaning, and Reading for Appreciation elements are spaced between acts and include questions based on text alone. Students rely on literal and inferential interpretations but miss the historical or cultural influences during the time the play was written. In essence, students stay within the four corners of the text to determine meaning.

Separate editions of the plays also include this emphasis on close reading of language. The exemplary Folger Shakespeare series, for example, uses *glossed* text where words and phrases are defined in accessible, contemporary language. Students who read these editions in school are able to see the full text on one page and the glossary of difficult or early modern language on the facing page. In the Folger edition of *Macbeth*, for example, “screw your courage to the sticking place” (1.7.70) is defined as an archery term in the provided glossary, giving students immediate access to the meaning without having to interrupt the flow of reading. In most cases, glossed editions, such as the Folger ones, provide substantial definitions or contemporary substitutions of words and phrases within the context of the scene.

Some professional books for teachers, such as Mary Ellen Dakin's *Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults*, also emphasize the new critical approach. Dakin provides resource material for building units of study to help students comprehend Shakespeare's language through categorized lists and vocabulary definitions to help students comprehend text. Defining archaic or early modern English, Dakin claims, challenges the frequently held stereotype that Shakespeare's wording is "too hard." One list, vocabulary specific to stage directions, provides students with terms commonly seen in comedies, tragedies, or histories. Other lists include high-frequency words, problematic pronouns, and definitions tied to specific plays. The anthologies, separate editions, and professional books for teachers that emphasize close reading help students gain a better understanding of Shakespeare's notoriously difficult language.

While understanding the lines is important, emphasizing only close reading—the exclusive study of language and form—reinforces the belief in one "correct" interpretation of Shakespeare's work. Students often believe that "true" understanding can only happen when glossed editions or simplified versions, such as *No Fear Shakespeare*, *WordPlay Shakespeare*, or *SparkNotes*, provide meaning.

## Performance

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Jake has taught eleventh-grade English primarily using a close reading approach but, over time, increasingly felt *Hamlet* was not coming alive for his students. Instead of reading the entire play as a shared text, he integrated performance strategies, directing students to choose, study, and prepare specific scenes to perform. They set about editing scripts, rehearsing lines, blocking movement, creating costumes, and designing scenery. The process was chaotic but beautiful. As a student emerged in a ragged sheet, boldly stating, "Remember me!" Jake remarked, "I haven't seen so much activity and excitement in my classroom before!"

Language is key to Shakespeare's dramatic scripts, but movement, body language, intonation, costuming, props, lighting—natural in his day—all engage the audience and are also important to meaning. Humor and anger, as well as all of the other intense emotions, are inherent not only in words, but also in hand gestures, facial expressions, and physical movement.

Some professional books for teachers, such as Rex Gibson's *Teaching Shakespeare*, include performance ideas, thus adding another layer to his close reading approach. Gibson introduces theatrical experiences, suggesting that teachers

and students take on the roles of characters, which significantly increases opportunities to experience Shakespeare's language.

Edward Rocklin's *Performance Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English, also provides ideas to help high school and college students experience the play in dramatic form. Taking on roles of director, player, or audience, students are challenged to divide the script into practical scenes and arcs, which Rocklin asserts will provide a deeper engagement when they understand "what words do" (xx). A more recent performance approach to Shakespeare is described in *Bring on the Bard: Active Approaches for Shakespeare's Diverse Student Readers* (Long and Christel) and offers a Folio technique that includes cue scripts much like Shakespeare might have used when players rehearsed and performed several different plays in a week.

Whether incorporating viewing, acting, or analyzing, performance approaches appeal to middle and high school teachers and students because of the energy that physical engagement affords. Viewing professional performances, either live or on film, allows students to experience Shakespeare by listening to early modern language supported by nonverbal cues. One actor at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater compared the experience of watching a play on stage to walking into a dark room: at first, nothing is clear. Eventually, however, the eyes adjust, shapes become more visible, and the path is easier to navigate. Shakespeare's language, despite the initial strangeness, becomes much clearer when we engage in the sound and cadence supported by expressive movement. Viewing a live performance is also a social experience, one that creates energy among students. During pre-performance talks, student audience members are often encouraged to laugh, clap, scream, and cry during performances because it creates energy for the actors on stage.

In addition to live performances, viewing film versions of the play appeals to both teachers and students because of the versatility of streamed film. Students can watch the entire play from beginning to end, which might include strategic places to "stop and jot." Teachers can also show clips of several versions of specific scenes or soliloquies, such as Hamlet's "To Be or Not to Be" speech or the witches on the heath in act 1 of *Macbeth*. Mary Ellen Dakin's *Reading Shakespeare: Film First* is an exploration of Shakespeare's plays through film analysis. Dakin describes her text as an opportunity for students to enter two worlds, visual composition and play construction. Students are introduced to the "trinity of telling," including text, theater, and cinema (10). What is unique about *Film First* is its attention to commercial images. The focus on how Shakespeare's plays are displayed and publicized incorporates another dimension: graphic design.

Viewing film versions of plays does not provide the same intense sensory experience as performing in class, but it can be used for students to compare

different interpretations of the same play. The witches in *Macbeth*, for example, can be portrayed as men, women, monsters, nurses, garbage collectors, or hags, depending on the period in which the production is set or the director's choice. Students benefit from analyzing film, practicing media literacy skills as well as viewing diverse interpretations. Shakespeare's genius is often imagined in popular culture using unique set designs, outlandish special effects, and gender changes. In a recent Chicago Shakespeare Theater production of *Romeo and Juliet*, a female played Mercutio. Her stage presence and combat skill created a positive and passionate stir among the audience. She was a hit.

If teachers do not have experience in dramatic performance and do not have strong theater departments in their schools, they may find this approach somewhat daunting. Others may not have the option to take their students to performances or to invite local performers to the classroom. Teacher training courses traditionally use a new critical approach where teachers study Shakespeare through reading and discussion and may not experience a performance approach until they begin teaching and go to workshops or seek ideas from colleagues. Anxiety about using a performance approach can affect students too. Not all students are willing or able to engage physically, preferring seated activities. In this case, teachers may turn to less dramatic yet more responsive strategies.

## Reader Response Approach

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Alyssa began her teaching career with ninth-grade English classes and confided that she often felt insecure about how she taught Shakespeare. "I love this play," she said, "but I'm not sure my students really understand the nuances—and beauty—of the language, even after I taught it! And I know they don't see the relevance. All they think about is that Romeo and Juliet got married after a day and a half. They just don't relate." Alyssa's commitment to her students and to Shakespeare propelled her each year to try something new. Her students often read the play, followed by their own performances of other Shakespeare plays. Small groups chose tragedies or comedies and using summaries as well as the text, performed fifteen-minute "Short Shakes,"<sup>2</sup> complete with costumes and props. Still, Alyssa felt her students had not personalized the play in ways that invited Shakespeare into their own lives. How could her students inhale the relevance of four-hundred-year-old writing?

The answer came to her by accident. Our high school was under construction, and the builders had constructed temporary walls that Alyssa deemed perfect.

She invited her students to express their feelings about *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as other plays, by painting giant murals. Watching students with buckets of

paint and smocks cover entire walls with Shakespeare quotes and symbols gave our newest English teacher a feeling of accomplishment. “These students have loved the creativity of expressing Shakespeare’s language in their own way. It’s awesome!” Alyssa’s approach, known as *reader response*, provided her students with opportunities to internalize Shakespeare’s words and construct meaning through art. Some students collaborated on initial sketches and then brought their ideas to life through color, texture, and form. This ninth-grade class may not remember Shakespeare’s exact language, but they will remember their personal responses to *Romeo and Juliet*.

The reader response approach, described by Louise Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration*, argues that the meaning of text depends on reciprocal, personal transactions with the reader. Rather than focusing on one correct interpretation inherent in a text through a study of language and form, Rosenblatt emphasizes that, for each reader, meaning depends on the prior knowledge and experience they bring to the text. Teachers may wonder how students can gain prior knowledge and experience with the issues posed in Shakespeare’s work. Rosenblatt suggests that teachers can counteract that concern by helping students “submit vicariously to a cultural pattern and code different from his own” (252). What this means is that students can build empathy as they approach literature personally, resulting in deep connections to the successes and failures that Shakespeare’s characters encounter.

Similar to Alyssa, teachers who use the reader response approach find ways for students to understand Shakespeare based on personal interpretations that can be expressed through Socratic Seminars (see Appendix B), creative writing, sketch notes, one-pagers, memes, or social-media platforms. Rosenblatt’s reader response approach takes into consideration the meaning derived when readers “live through what is being created during the reading” (33). Rosenblatt concedes that the same text, depending on time and circumstance, “will have a very different value and meaning” (35). Thus, living through the poetry of *Romeo and Juliet* may not necessarily provide opportunities to acquire information; rather, the acquisition of experiences teaches them the joy of new love, the pain of family discord, the heartache of death. And these understandings may vary not only based on prior knowledge, but also at different life junctures. According to Rosenblatt, the most valuable part of the reading experience is the ability to register others’ responses with understanding and empathy.

Although the reader response approach recognizes and respects different interpretations and is a rich and valuable way to teach literature, it may be a difficult approach to Shakespeare if reluctant readers do not initially engage with text that seems beyond comprehension or interest. Deborah Appleman believes

literature teachers have a responsibility to “move students beyond their own personal responses” (25) and that using reader response as the sole lens through which students interact with imaginative literature may narrow their limited range of understanding.

Close reading, performance, and reader response complement one another, and can be combined, but something important is missing: the historical and cultural context of the plays and sonnets. Without context, it is much harder to see how Shakespeare is relevant to our own day.

## Document Approach

Several years ago, my class was reading *Macbeth*, and I showed them an excerpt from Shakespeare’s early modern source, Raphael Holinshed’s 1577 *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (Figure I.2). At first, the students were dumbfounded and a little “put off” by the spelling, but then Jamie asked, “Can I try reading it?” With just a little stumbling, she figured out that the letter *u* took the place of a *v* and the single letter *j* was replaced by an *i*.

Students laughed when “neither shall he leaue anie iffue” stumped her, but then Aiden asked, “What is *iffue*?”

“Those elongated *fs* are really the letter *s*, so the word is *issue*, and that word means children. So, what is this strange woman saying?” I asked.

“You mean the witch?” asked Jamie.

“In the Holinshed’s excerpt, Banquho [spelling as per the source] refers to them as women. Let’s go back and see how they are referred to in Shakespeare’s text,” I ventured. We went back to the play.

“The character names are called FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD WITCHES,” said John from the back.

“Yeah, but, when they sing, they call themselves ‘Weird Sisters,’” said another student.

Then Banquho: “What manner of women (saith he) are you, that séeme so little fauorable vnto me, whereas to my fellow here, besides high offices, ye assigne also the kingdome, appointing foorth nothing for me at all?” “Yes (saith the first of them) we promise greater benefits vnto thée, than vnto him, for he shall reigne in déed, but with an vnluckie end: neither shall he leaue anie issue behind him to succeed in his place, where contrarily thou in deed shalt not reigne at all, but of thée those shall be borne which shall gouerne the Scottish kingdome by long order of continuall descent.”

**FIGURE I.2.** Excerpt from Raphael Holinshed’s 1577 *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande*.

“Later, Macbeth calls them ‘imperfect strangers,’” added Jamie.

“But Banquo says ‘fantastical,’” said Aiden. “It says in the side note, ‘figments of the imagination.’”

“Who wrote that?” asked Jenna. “And what about this Holinshed guy?”

Jamie spoke up. “He says, ‘the prophetic of three women supposing to be weird fifters or feiries.’”<sup>3</sup>

“Fairies?” asked Aiden.

“That’s what it says. And look at the picture—they look like three women all dressed up with long skirts on and funny hats!”

“Well, that one hat looks kind of pointy, like a witch hat.” Aiden looked up from the text for some verification.

“But they almost seem like royalty. If that’s what the original story was, why would Shakespeare change it up? He says they look like hags and have beards!” Everyone laughed.

“That’s a good question,” I said. “Why do you think Shakespeare changed the source story?”


“Maybe he wanted Macbeth and Banquo to be scared,” said Cierra.

“Maybe he wanted us to be scared,” answered Colin.

“Beards aren’t scary,” said Nick. “It’s weird!” More laughter. I had never seen such engagement in our discussions and wondered about what other documents might interest them. I knew King James VI had written *Daemonologie* within ten years of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. Other early modern writers would undoubtedly provide a rich context for *Macbeth* and cast a wider net on his culture’s ideas about supernatural beings. If my students understood how different perspectives created a backdrop, situating Shakespeare’s writing, they could then reflect and respond to his characters and their complex motivations.

My review of the established approaches to teaching Shakespeare illuminates the need for a document approach. A close reading approach is important to understanding Shakespeare’s language at a basic level but does not investigate historical and cultural questions and issues. The reader response approach does elicit personal responses but is culturally limited by the knowledge and background of the students. Performance approaches engage students in the plays as living, interpreted scripts but do not deepen knowledge of the time period nor raise questions about Shakespeare’s relevance to the present.

Throughout this book, I will show how students are able to engage more deeply with Shakespeare’s work, his words, and his world by combining the study of his works with key historical documents. Drawing on today’s lively



*Was Shakespeare responding to his own popular culture?*



and diverse classrooms, I will reveal student engagement punctuated with deep thinking and great joy, where Shakespeare is the proffered example of an author whose work is drawn from a source play. In the Common Core English Language Arts eleventh- and twelfth-grade reading standard 11-12.1, students must “cite strong and thorough textual evidence” as they look at what the text says and infers, especially “where the text leaves matters uncertain.” In standard 11-12.4, students must determine figurative and connotative meanings of words as they are used in a Shakespeare text and “analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.” In other words, as pinnacle standards for students who are on the cusp of post-secondary education, students must, in an analysis of craft through close reading, analyze the impact of Shakespeare’s language. More important, and how the historical/cultural approach allows students to meet these standards, is how incorporating primary documents provides opportunities for critical thinking about language and issues involving the past and the present, thus synthesizing these two standards.

College Board national assessments, the SAT, AP Language and Composition, and AP Literature and Composition national exams include essay topics that require students to analyze how writers express complex ideas. In the 2021 AP Language and Composition national exam, for example, the synthesis essay asks students to “synthesize the material from at least three of the sources” to develop a position.<sup>4</sup> Students taking this exam will have scoured multiple primary documents, analyzing author’s craft from a variety of genres to form an opinion and write a well-developed essay on a relevant issue. The SAT, now required in many states, also asks students to read a passage and analyze how the authors strategically add power to their writing.<sup>5</sup> Reading and studying early modern primary documents as part of the study of Shakespeare affords students multiple opportunities to examine how diverse artists and art forms speak to specific cultural issues. Writing about how Shakespeare and others develop relevant themes, based on varied viewpoints and genres, directly aligns with the skills needed to successfully meet and exceed academic standards. The document approach provides meaningful and real-life practice for priority standards and high-stakes tests. It’s good teaching.

This book uses the document approach by addressing Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets one chapter at a time. Teachers will be drawn first to the chapter about the plays they teach, which makes the organization accessible and useful. I urge you to read chapters about plays you do not teach, including his sonnets and the problem plays, to consider how to incorporate a workshop model

through project-based book clubs. The chapters are filled with ideas that can be springboards to new classroom activities and writing prompts. Several appendices include strategies for teaching Shakespeare and the documents, assessment rubrics, contemporary literature based on Shakespeare's plays, and teacher online resources for further exploration. I invite you to learn a new approach to teaching Shakespeare and know you will enjoy the journey.



## A Maiden Voyage with *Romeo and Juliet*

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“We were told to read *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* last year. I tried reading it on my own, but it was impossible.”

“Yeah, we read that too at my old school,” said Stephanie, “and it was all homework. I just went to *SparkNotes*. I had no idea what the play was about.”

“I hate Shakespeare,” said Tyler. “Well, really, I just don’t get it. It’s just too old.”

All twenty-eight students were nodding. Colin, however, sitting in the back, was quiet. Just minutes before, he danced into the room on his toes with a smile on his face and gave me his best Romeo line: “What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.” This kid was beaming. “I love that part,” he said.

Why do high school students have such diverse experiences studying the Bard? And why do many teachers loathe the thought of teaching Shakespeare for several weeks, knowing it will end with frustration, confusion, and defeat?

According to Turchi and Thompson, a secondary English teacher’s primary goal is to “equip students with the tools to understand, decode, and analyze complex texts” as a way to satisfy the Common Core but often use methods that require students to simply summarize online plot summaries (par. 5). What often results, they claim, is a regurgitation rather than a discovery of universal themes. It *is* true, we sometimes fall into the trap of trying to cover an entire Shakespeare play without knowing exactly how to get through pages of early modern language. As one colleague said to me before we began our journey into *Romeo and Juliet*, “I dread this unit. I just don’t know what to do with it. And I know my students dread it too.” Turchi and Thompson give teachers “an opportunity to reboot,” confirming we need to provide opportunities for students to *explore* complex texts in ways that are both challenging and empowering.

Most new middle and high school teachers expect to teach Shakespeare and consider it a staple in the curriculum. Unfortunately, how teachers approach

his plays and sonnets varies widely, but most admit feelings of guilt if they do not read the play from cover to cover. Believing that “less is more,” Turchi and Thompson suggest selecting key scenes and exploring ambiguities, which leads students to ask questions and to make sense of language, certainly, but to think deeply about big ideas, absolutely. The theme of violence, for example, can be explored in act 3, scene 1, when Tybalt challenges Romeo to “turn and draw,” but the same theme can also be explored in Vincentio Saviolo’s 1595 fencing manual (see Figure 1.1), the document Shakespeare may have consulted when he wrote the fight scene that ended in the stabbing and subsequent avenging of Mercutio’s death.

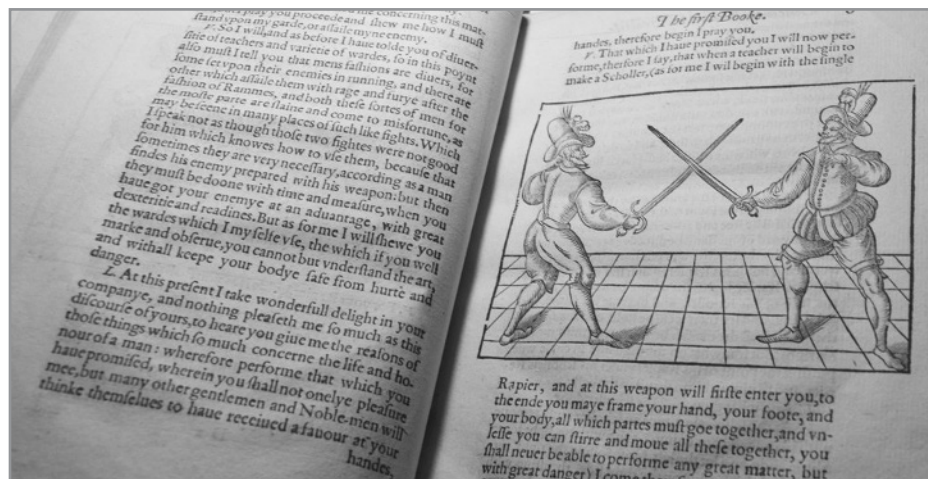


FIGURE 1.1. Vincent Saviolo’s *His Practise* (sig. D3 of “The Firft Booke”; 15).

Saviolo moved to London in the early 1590s and was teaching fencing in the Blackfriars playhouse, placing him in close proximity to Shakespeare when the latter was writing *Romeo and Juliet*. The manual, which first admonishes fighting—“Wherefore by way of advise, I wish all men to avoid evill companie” (68)—does give men permission not only to draw, if challenged, but also to strike the accuser if the challenged is unable to defend himself. And isn’t that just what happened when Mercutio takes it upon himself to answer Tybalt’s written challenge to Romeo? Both Shakespeare and Saviolo offer similar yet competing texts, providing students the opportunity for deep analysis. Despite what national standards, SAT preparation, and curriculum maps indicate, teachers already understand and desire a richly diverse classroom where students learn to approach a variety of text types actively and without trepidation.

The fencing material in *Romeo and Juliet* typifies the eclectic nature of Shakespeare's borrowings and was probably culled from his own London experience as well as from various literary sources. (Holmer 163)

## Beginning a New Approach

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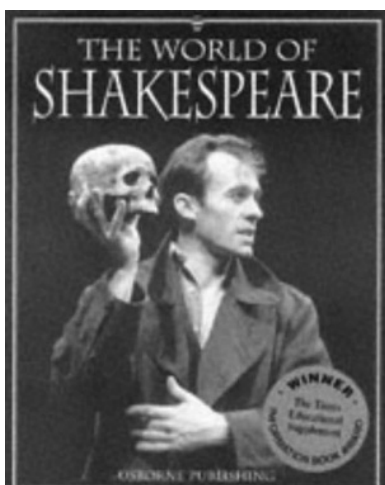
Having taught English for more than forty years, I can confirm that my classes always studied a Shakespeare play or sonnet. Only the very best students admitted *loving* the plays—perhaps ten percent of my students—and the rest simply endured. Some enjoyed performing bits and pieces or reading in groups, but the majority preferred movie versions where the meaning was often carried in the action. Still, despite the visual effects, some lines remained a mystery. The same questions or comments surfaced year after year:

- Why are the Montagues and Capulets so angry with each other?
- Why does the Prince threaten anyone who disturbs the peace with death?
- Why did Romeo and Juliet decide to get married when they just met?
- Why does the friar call Romeo's tears "womanish" when he is banished?
- Why are Romeo and Juliet so quick to commit suicide, and why are they buried side by side?

None of these questions are answered by the text, and yet students believe the actions to be incredible and incredulous by today's pop culture. Eventually, the play becomes just another old text lacking relevance.

Before approaching the text, we researched Shakespeare's world, delving into student-selected interests, such as clothing, food, living conditions, romance, and schooling. The Usborne *World of Shakespeare* (Claybourne and Treays) offers an accompanying, interactive website that expands on the content found within its colorful pages (Figure 1.2).

Students perused the pages, followed by taking virtual tours of the Globe Theatre, reading about the Elizabethan cure for lice and drunkenness, watching clips on medicine in London, or walking through photo galleries of play performances. They made lists of topics and questions to explore. Ryan, for example, wondered why women weren't allowed on stage and asked, "If people tried to shut down plays, but the Queen liked them, wouldn't they be disobeying her by shutting them down?" Kiara speculated why Shakespeare's wife didn't go to London with him. Nick asked how Shakespeare was different from other



**FIGURE 1.2.** Students use this book's accompanying interactive website for early modern cultural information.

authors of that time period. Brenna thought it might be hard to make murders look real on stage and wondered how people were stabbed. Eden considered why Shakespeare would leave his family, and Nick was confused about the Globe not having a roof. Elle asked what determined social rank and wondered if Shakespeare ever wore purple. Ainsley noticed that many of Shakespeare's plays were about love and violence and wondered why.

I wrote their questions on the board for us to revisit throughout the unit. How would we find the answers, I queried? Would Shakespeare's play reveal all? Or would we have to look at other documents? That was the beginning. Students first learned that Shakespeare would not be our sole text; other early modern documents would also be our source of learning.

My goal was for students to understand Shakespeare as a pop culture artist who might have been tapping into his own society for ideas to be explored, manipulated, and exploited in his own work, similar to Kendrick Lamar, Rupi Kaur, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Jill Soloway, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who have been recently touted as "culture defining" in the twenty-first century. Rather than study *Romeo and Juliet* as a single piece of literature from a specific time period, we explored the questions we had about Shakespeare's world by categorizing them into broad themes that might have been addressed by other sixteenth-century artists. In this way, any author's oeuvre, including Shakespeare's, could be considered a primary document and therefore "fair game" to be included in the quest to both challenge and empower.

Students soon learned that not all authors shared the same ideas; some disagreed but, by comparing several documents, they could compare competing early modern ideology. For example, act 1, scene 5, when Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time, and act 2, scene 2, when they exchange vows during the balcony scene, caused more than raised eyebrows. "But they just met!" said Nick. Other documents from the same time period, however, included records depicting the average age of marriage in 1595 in several areas north of London (Laslett Table 1.2; Young 470), a sermon on the legality of underage children who get married without parental consent, a *banne* or required marriage announcement from the pulpit, and Arthur Brooke's poem "The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet." Scrutinizing these documents tells more than a single story. According to Chimamanda Adichie, if we "show . . . people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again . . . that is what they become" (09:14). A single story,

she claims, is dangerous and often leads to viewing people through one lens, leading to misunderstanding and mistrust. Was sixteenth-century England a place where children married young? Were children impulsive and oblivious to their parents' wishes? Did parents disown their children for such infractions? During the first two weeks of reading *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as other primary documents, students found that ideas about marriage and sexuality may not have changed much in the past four hundred years. Jake's question from our first few days together drove the entire unit:

"Why did Shakespeare write this play?"

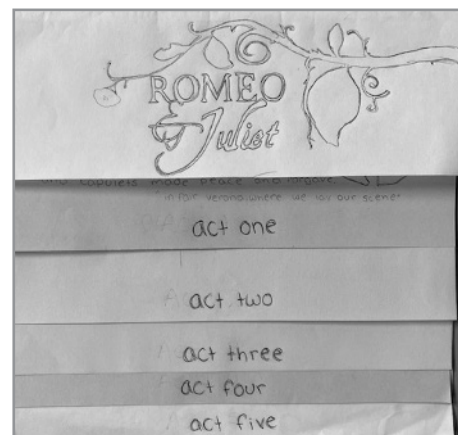
### Document Discussions

Reading several documents can lead to rich discussions in which students debate what the documents reveal: their variability, their complexity, and their relevance.

## Working with Primary Documents

The first question I had to answer was how many documents I should incorporate and which broad themes would initiate student inquiry. Because the play opens with the fighting among servants of the Capulet and Montague households, I chose *gender* and *clothing*, knowing that students would be interested in how sixteenth-century gender identity may have contributed to the feud. Both documents and videos that incorporate period clothing, such as the 2013 film production (Carlei), starring Hailee Steinfeld (as Juliet) and Douglas Booth (as Romeo), help students picture early modern dress and cultural mores. I decided to include eight documents in booklet form to read and discuss after each act. Students each had at least one part in the play, so, when we read aloud, they practiced reading and followed character development. They also made *foldables* (see Appendix B) with five tabs, one for each act, and spaces for dramatic terminology, such as *aside*, *soliloquy*, and *stichomythia* (Figure 1.3).

Using foldables for class notes, scene titles, character sketches, and document reflections provided an interactive system for recording students' learning.



**FIGURE 1.3.** A student example of a *Romeo and Juliet* foldable.



Beginning the play was the most difficult part, but I wanted their first experiences with language to be engaging. An idea from the Chicago Shakespeare Theater's education department, which used to host a teacher workshop annually, suggests students leave their seats and physically experience the language. I gave each pair of students a line from the prologue. Each group memorized this line and created motions to carry the message. They had fun figuring out their assigned ten syllables. I had to explain that "loins" were not *lions*, a common mistake. We formed a large circle with the groups in sequential order. Moving from group to group around the circle, students performed the prologue several times, laughing as they *played* with the language. Next, students chose the two most important words from their assigned line and adapted their motions. Finally, each group chose the most important word from their line and narrated the play in fourteen words and motions. We went around the circle quickly, filling the hall with laughter. Perfect.

To help students remember which characters were Montagues and which were Capulets, I made a class set of envelopes containing the names of all the characters that they could arrange as a family tree on their desks while I narrated the story. As I added characters, I wrote the names on the board while students created their own graphic organizers. Once students had all the characters' names in a meaningful assembly, they put them back in the envelopes and met with another student, trying to replicate their family tree. Before reading the play, students created these family trees several times, helping them to visualize relationships and to pronounce names.

The first scene of the play was slow going. I expected students would mispronounce words, fumbling through the first eighty lines, and that did happen. With practice and patience, though, we moved through the first scene. Most importantly, we talked about what it meant to be "at war" with other students, families, or countries in our world. We laughed about gestures, such as "I do bite my thumb, sir" and compared it to today's "flipping someone off." Students then listened as our class Prince Escalus read his lines. He read slowly, warning the two families. Their job was, first, to listen as Prince Escalus read aloud and, second, to reread his words with a partner. In their foldables, they explained what he meant by "If you ever disturb our streets again / Your lives shall pay the forfeit of our peace" (96–97). When they read Queen Elizabeth I's 1594 "Proclamation Prohibiting Unlawful Assembly" (qtd. in Callaghan 232–33; see also Hughes and Larkin), from one year before *Romeo and Juliet* was written, in which the Queen bestowed "a provost martial with sufficient authority to apprehend all such as shall not be readily reformed and corrected by the ordinary officers of justice; and them without delay to execute upon the gallows by order of martial law," students understood why Escalus was so harsh in his justice. The Queen's

proclamation made clear the precedent for Shakespeare's scene. Early modern audiences would have understood the Prince's power—he could and would carry out her proclamation to “apprehend” and “execute” or defy his matriarch. Another proclamation they read was from 1562, one that defined who could carry a rapier and the parameters for the size of the blade; any person who was found to carry a weapon “passing the length of twelve inches,” specifically with intent to harm, would be imprisoned. Where, I asked, does Shakespeare mention the law during the fight between Sampson, Gregory, and Abraham? Eden, who played Sampson's part, said, “When he says, ‘Is the law of our side if I say ay?’” They were getting the idea. Shakespeare was not writing in isolation. He was writing to an audience who knew about fighting in the streets, who knew about wielding a rapier, what size was allowed, and what would occur if an enemy said, “I am for you.”

### Document Discussions

Using contemporary primary documents about gun control will help students understand the importance of looking to the past to understand the present. How do our weapons laws speak to who we are today?

At the end of act 1, students received eight documents about gender or clothing to read as a Jigsaw or Each Teach activity (see Appendix C). They first read one document together in groups of three to four while I circled the room and answered questions about wording. In Samuel Rowlands's poem “The Humors that Haunt a Wife” (*Humors Looking Glasse*), the speaker condemns the woman who tries to be too modern, a selection that could be compared to Jane Anger's 1589 pamphlet “Protection for Women,” the possible rebuttal to Charles Pyrrye's “Dispraise of Women.” The pamphlets, much like a contemporary, rousing debate we might read in editorials, listen to on podcasts, or watch on televised debates, were written responses to controversies over normative gender roles. The rise of printing made pamphlets disseminate quickly, more attacks than defenses on “the woman question.”

Students were also intrigued by John Gerard's plants from his 1597 *Herball*; specifically, black hellebore, which is “good for mad and furious men” or those

*This period is a landmark because for the first time in England women began to write in their own defense and for the first time anywhere significant numbers of women began to publish defenses. (Henderson and McManus 4)*

plagued with love melancholia. After much discussion on all the documents' main points, students formed three groups of eight students where all documents were represented. Students in each group spent several minutes teaching their documents to the rest of the group, explaining the meaning, the theme, and the purpose (Figure 1.4).

Excerpts from *The Praise and Dispraise of Women* by C. Pyrrye

***Here Beginneth the Dispraise of Women***

*This Monster is the woman kinde,  
whose ougelye shape and port:  
I meane to paint, writ thou my minde,  
not forcing her report.*

*This woman kinde I know right well,  
is comelie to the eye:  
Of perfect shape she beares the bell,  
I can it not denie,*

***Here Beginneth the Prayse of Women***

*I thinke thou doost not call to minde,  
in sicknes or in health:  
How we are holpe by woman kinde,  
whose care is for our wealth.*

*First (as thou knowst) she takes great paine,  
by traueling in bed:  
And greuous gronings doth sustaine,  
before she see our head*

**FIGURE 1.4.** Students compared controversial early modern pamphlets written about women, such as these excerpts from Pyrrye's *The Praise and Dispraise of Women*.

As a final activity, our large-group discussion centered on what students learned about Shakespeare's world: What attitudes were unearthed from the documents? How might Shakespeare have exposed some of these attitudes in his play? (See also Appendix D.)

"They sure had attitudes about girls back then!" said one student.

"How do you know? I asked.

"Well, look at what it says about being a virgin!" said another. "It says she is 'the beauty of nature' and 'her parents' joy.'"

"And what is a 'wanton' woman?" asked a student from the back.

"I think it's someone who hooks up," said another. They all laughed.

"Well, this document calls her a witch and a devil!"

"Same as now, then," said someone else. They all laughed again.

"Devin, do you have a question?" I asked the student on the side of the room who normally seemed rather quiet but now had his hand up.

"Well, I was just wondering why Shakespeare makes Juliet seem so different. When she meets Romeo, she is not shy at all, like in the document on virgins. But she isn't a devil either. Romeo treats her like she's perfect, but she's definitely interested."

### Document Discussions

Early modern historical and cultural attitudes are embedded within the primary documents and provide a framework for student learning.

“If the audience knew about the pamphlet wars and had the impression that women were a problem, as you read in the documents, why do you think he portrays Juliet this way?” I asked.

“Maybe he was trying to make people mad.”

“Maybe he was making people wonder if they were wrong.”

“Maybe he was trying to get them to think.”

“Maybe he was trying to get them to come to his plays.”

“I think all of you could be right,” I ventured.

### Working through the Tough Stuff

If I’m giving you the impression that students read the documents easily without struggle, confusion, or questions after the first “go,” I should admit that this was not the case. Some students, especially those who were trying to make sense of John Lyly’s *The Anatomy of Wit*, could not comprehend his point. I joined their small group to help them break it down. William Whately’s sermon on women’s roles from 1619 was no easier because of the spelling and sentence structure. Students did pick up on certain lines that jumped off the page, though, such as “mine husband is my superiour, my better” (36).

“Seriously?” asked Shayna. “They really thought that?”

“I know, right?” I answered. “What ideas and thoughts will you share with your Jigsaw group that explains this document?” I asked.

Brooke admitted she didn’t get half the language: “Why does it say that women must give men leave to ‘chew the cud’? What does that mean? And what is ‘good carriage’? How can her ‘good carriage be withered’?”

We worked through as many language issues as possible the first time we tackled the documents, but working in small groups helped to build confidence and skill. During their collaborative work, I met with each group and asked students the following:

- What will you share in your Jigsaw group?
- How does this document help your reading of Shakespeare’s play?

Students who needed more support benefited from having a list of ideas to share before joining others who read different pieces.

### Jigsaw Strategy

1. Teacher provides overview of each document and its genre (letter, pamphlet, poem).
2. Teacher assigns numbered documents to eight small groups.
3. Students individually read assigned document for general meaning, underlining key ideas: *first reading*.
4. Students join small groups with same document. One student reads aloud slowly, stopping halfway to recap meaning: *second reading*.
5. Students choose three important points to share with larger group.
6. Teacher visits each group to listen to conversations and to help clarify meaning.
7. A second student in small group rereads document aloud: *third reading*.
8. Students form groups of eight with each document represented.
9. Each student shares their document's content while others jot notes.
10. Students reflect on thread running through all documents.

Ready to share, students formed groups of eight, with all documents represented. Discussions began slowly, tentatively. Most students walked through their documents, reporting “what it said.” Some, however, made text-to-text connections. Alana noticed, for example, that the compliments in John Gough’s poem “Encomiums on the Beauty of His Mistress” mimicked Romeo’s compliments of Juliet’s beauty: “She doth teach those torches to burn bright” (86).

“Isn’t that plagiarism?” Rena asked.

“Not really,” I answered. “Copyright laws in 1595 did not exist, and writers often borrowed from other writers. What does this similarity tell you?”

“Shakespeare probably read a lot,” they said. My thought was—and I told them—that they were thinking through so much more than what was happening in the play.

Immediately following discussions, writing about cultural issues that surfaced in *Romeo and Juliet* became our norm. Their reflections solidified their understandings about the connective tissue between Shakespeare and other writers of his day. The more genres they explored, such as letters, poems, treatises, pamphlets, and sketches, the more they realized that other writers were also

grappling with troubling issues within their society. The writing helped them sort out their own thinking about how the documents related to Shakespeare's tragedy.

#### **Student-Written Reflections**

- Women had "barely any rights."
- Juliet's father says he will allow her to select any husband she wants but forbids her to see Romeo.
- Women needed to accept they were inferior to men.
- Men were controlling, but women received a lot of compliments.
- Men thought they were more knowledgeable than women.
- Rosaline prefers to stay chaste, but Romeo acts like he's not used to having girls saying no to him.
- Men treated women like animals.

"'Love-Melancholy' makes it sound like love is a disease," wrote Eden, whose writing made it seem as though she was trying to work out her own thoughts about gender equality and finally came to the conclusion that it was not only young, forbidden love, but also diseased love from the viewpoint of many others. Eden's ideas surprised me, not because of what she said, but because the vast majority had opinions about what they were discovering about early modern writers. For several students, this was their first experience with primary documents, and yet I had never witnessed so much discussion during a Shakespeare unit of study and particularly during the first few weeks. I was both stunned and excited.

### **Working with Shakespeare's Text**

If students know about *Romeo and Juliet*, many know about the balcony scene. When Juliet asks, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?" most commonly believe she is asking him where he is, rather than why he is called Romeo. This scene, however, can be considered somewhat "steamy." Are they planning to have sex? Is he getting her to agree? And, of course, when Romeo asks Juliet, "Oh wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?" (2.2.125), most of us expect hormonal snickers. If any act hits the mark squarely when it comes to student interest,

it revolves around the theme of love and sexuality. Act 2, specifically, has the potential to be pivotal. Is Shakespeare friend or foe? Young love and heartbreak are emotions they understand.

Lessons in ninth-grade English classrooms must activate, engage, inspire. I decided to play the audio of act 2, scene 1, when Mercutio and Benvolio, in their post-party stupors, call out for Romeo and make fun of his Petrarchan love for Rosaline. I knew professional readers would provide the intonation and cadence necessary to carry the meaning. For the next section, I put two stools in front of the room for our student players, Romeo and Juliet, to read the balcony scene as they profess their love for each other. Before they began, I asked students to think about how Juliet might react to Romeo's proclamation of love. Was he only interested in sex? Did this new love seem real?

They read. We listened. We discussed. They wrote.

I am hoping this is the point that you notice I use combinations of performance, close reading, and reader response while I teach. The document approach is not necessarily a solo act. Many of us do use a variety of activities, an eclectic pedagogical recipe that, when combined in strategic ways, offers students variety. For example, I use close reading as a rereading technique. On this particular day, I assigned several lines from the balcony scene to each partner group. I directed them to *reread* the lines and to explicate or unfold the meaning. What were Romeo and Juliet saying to each other?

#### **How to Unfold Meaning**

1. Teacher assigns one to two lines to partner groups.
2. Each student reads lines aloud to partner, then in unison.
3. Partner groups read aloud to class in chronological order.
4. Partner groups decide on how to say lines in today's language.
5. Partner groups read new lines sequentially to create contemporary poem.

After approximately fifteen minutes, students reported their findings to the class. I asked them to share their most powerful line as well as a contemporary way to express the words. First, in sequential order, each group recited their Shakespearean line, creating a poem. Next, each group read their contemporary line, creating the modern version. I found that rereading excerpts often resulted in clearer understanding, but I also realized that numerous exposures to shorter

pieces of text was how students learned about how early modern language worked.

Students balked at Shakespeare's language far less than in other years. They were more confident in their ability to decipher what he was saying and less concerned if they did not know every single word. They were beginning to see how the Montague and Capulet feud was affecting Romeo and Juliet. Students now understood why the timing of their marriage was so important. The fear of parents finding out about what they were doing was also known by twenty-first-century fourteen year olds.

Each day, we actively engaged with the play, including the day a colleague dressed up as Romeo and I as Friar Laurence. We placed ourselves in the middle of the room, *fishbowl* style (see Appendix B), and read act 2, scene 3, when Romeo confides his love for Juliet to Friar Laurence (Figure 1.5).

*Numerous exposures to shorter pieces of text was how students learned about how early modern language worked.*



**FIGURE 1.5.** Teachers can use a fishbowl strategy to demonstrate small-group discussion techniques.

We mustered up as much emotion as possible, then discussed the scene together. We talked about what the friar is doing with plants when Romeo arrives. Was that a normal activity for a friar during this time? How did the friar feel about the knowledge that Romeo was no longer in love with Rosaline and now loved Juliet? Was the friar Romeo's friend? Would he tell Romeo's parents what he



was doing? Our discussion would provide a model for students to read the next scene—when Peter and the nurse speak to Romeo about his intent to marry Juliet—in small groups. I was learning that students needed time to talk about what they were reading and to ask each other questions about uncertainties. During act 2, we engaged in a vast array of activities: small-group readings, large-group discussions, audios, reflections, fishbowl discussions, poetry writing, close reading explications, movie clips, and performance. The key? Variety.

Students moved through activities like fish through water, gliding and turning through currents of language that sometimes confused and overwhelmed them. Yes, they struggled, but it was the type of struggle where they did not feel submerged. No one said, “I can’t” or “I won’t.”

<p>Activities for Reading Shakespeare</p> <p>3 – 2 – 1</p> <p>Big Chunk / Little Chunk</p> <p>Blocking Scenes</p> <p>Cognitive Mind Maps</p> <p>Digital to Visual</p> <p>Divide and Conquer</p> <p>Document Walk</p> <p>Explicate or Unfold</p> <p>Family Tree</p> <p>Fishbowl Discussion</p> <p>Foldables</p> <p>Inquiry Dive</p> <p>Five Types of Writing</p> <p>Jump-In Reading</p> <p>Page-to-Stage</p> <p>Play it Again, Sam!</p> <p>Quick Writes</p> <p>Read-Around</p> <p>Re-Enactments</p> <p>Samoan Circles</p> <p>Silent Annotations</p> <p>Socratic Seminar</p> <p>Think-Aloud</p> <p>Turn and Talk</p> <p>Verbal Fluency</p> <p>Whip-Around</p> <p>Who Said What?</p>
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**FIGURE 1.6.** Appendix B provides further descriptions of classroom activities for teaching any Shakespeare play.

## Group Activities

I was excited to share the documents on marriage and sexuality, but I knew varying, active reading strategies were needed (Figure 1.6). In this activity, I had arranged the room so that we had four large groups of six or eight. Roaming Team Leader (see Appendix E) is an activity in which small groups choose a leader to move to a different group to share thinking.

Each group reads, annotates, and discusses one document together before sending the “roaming team leader” off to another group. The roaming leader or new group member shares the group thinking about their document and then listens while the new group members reciprocate. After roaming team leaders have shared with each group, students have learned about all the documents. The repetition of shared information found in this activity provides struggling readers opportunities to take leadership positions as they showcase their documents while building confidence and skill. I occasionally and intentionally choose roaming team leaders in each group to provide students the practice they need to improve verbal skills.

Act 2 documents on marriage and sexuality included William Whately’s sermon “On Rushing into Marriage” in which he warns, “He that leapes over a broad ditch with a short staffe, shall fall into the midst” (45–46), words akin to Friar Laurence’s “Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast” (line 101). Students also read about the plant sowbready, considered by John Gerard as a “good amorous medicine” (000) (Figure 1.7).

The lawful age of marriage, assumed to be fourteen for men and earlier for women, who are “soon ripe than men” (Swinburne 48), contrasts with the chart from 1550 that lists the average age of marriages, specifically for females, in Devon, England, as twenty-six (Laslett Table 1.2; Young 470). Students read, annotated, and discussed the document types and messages before moving to the next partner group to share findings.

Reading primary documents for act 2 posed far less difficulty (Figure 1.8). Even so, I knew I would need more arrows in my quiver to help students comprehend early modern documents (Figure 1.9). Reading strategies that included active rereading, discussion, and movement were paramount.

Students had now read two acts in *Romeo and Juliet* and expected variant spelling and syntax, such as in William Miller’s 1676 letter of advice about marriage when he states that a “Huswife dedicates her time and pains: her Children are her Garden, her Park, nay her Court” (15–16). After the “roaming” discussions, I asked students to choose a document they considered the most shocking or interesting and write about their reactions. Elle thought it was “absurd that society thought they could control such personal and private habits.” Marissa agreed with Elle and added that these ideas were “overstepping the boundaries a bit.” Eden discussed the sowbreade document and wondered if people really believed it worked. Another student conjectured that “this plant could’ve increased testosterone in males and strengthened women’s sex drive.” Breana paired up two



FIGURE 1.7. “Of Sowbreade,” *The Herbal or Generall Historie of Plantes* (Gerard 694)



FIGURE 1.8. Small groups reading and annotating act 2 primary documents to discuss early modern plant lore.

Activities for Reading Documents
Diminishing Maps and Notes
Document Walk
Four Reads
Gradual Release
GRAPES
Genre, Rhetorical schemes,
Audience, Purpose
Effect, Speaker
Jigsaw
Listen and Bubble
OPTIC
Overview, Parts, Title,
Interrelationships,
Conclusion
PAPER
Purpose, Argument,
Presuppositions,
Evaluate, Relate
Q & A
Questioning
Say Something
Shared Reading
Shift and Share
SOAPStone
Subject, Occasion, Audience,
Purpose, Speaker, Tone
Student Writing
T-Square Notes
Text Comparison
Text-to-Text
Text-to-World

**FIGURE 1.9.** Appendix C describes classroom activities for working with primary documents.

articles and noted, “It’s interesting to hear their rules, like you’re only supposed to have sex for kids, not for pleasure, yet Romeo tries to have sex with Rosaline, and he wants to have sex with Juliet before they get married.” After asking students about what questions they still had, Kyla wanted to know about the father’s role, and Cody was curious about whether they used sowbreads as a prank. After reading John Donne’s letter of apology to Sir George More for eloping with his daughter Anne, Spencer was curious about whether Donne was punished. Their questions revealed deep thinking about the early modern society, a thirst for knowledge that entrenched them in Shakespeare’s popular culture.

### Conquering the Midpoint Slump

We were at the pivotal act 3, where structurally the play moves toward tragedy or comedy. In a mini-lesson, we considered how both comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and tragedies, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, began with a block to love by an authority figure. Although Hermia’s father Egeus demands she marry Demetrius, she desires Lysander, much in the same way that Juliet’s father demands she marry Paris and forbids any liaison with the Montagues. Structurally, both comedies and tragedies move from the *block to love* to an escape. Hermia and Lysander escape to the green world whereas Romeo and Juliet secretly marry by escaping to Friar Laurence’s cell. From this point, however, in *Romeo*

and *Juliet*, act 3, we see the *pivot* or turn in action that leads to tragedy. In this case, it is Mercutio’s death that is the inciting event, placing all characters on the path to destruction: the death of Tybalt and the exile of Romeo lead to unintended, tragic consequences. This is an action-packed part of the play, yet many students often lose steam.

To maintain engagement, we watched how the act 3 violence begins in the 2013 film version (Carlei). Next, I asked our student players, Romeo, Tybalt, and Mercutio, to demonstrate what they noted in the film using plastic *Star Wars* sabers. They reenacted (see Reenactments, Appendix B) the duel in silent slow

motion, so students could see in real time how Romeo blocks Mercutio, allowing Tybalt's sword to hit its mark using a *passado* or quick thrust under Romeo's arm. Finally, we divided the class into acting groups, so students could block some short scenes:

- Benvolio, Mercutio (lines 1–9)
- Benvolio, Mercutio (10–33, up to where Tybalt enters)
- Benvolio, Mercutio, Tybalt (34–44)
- Mercutio, Benvolio, Tybalt (45–54, up to where Romeo enters)
- Tybalt, Mercutio, Romeo (55–71)
- Mercutio, Tybalt, Romeo (swords: 72–88, up to where Tybalt stabs Mercutio)
- Mercutio, Benvolio, Romeo (swords: 89–107, to where Mercutio exits)
- Benvolio, Romeo (108–19, to where Tybalt enters)
- Benvolio, Romeo, Tybalt (swords: 120–35, to where Romeo exits)
- First citizen, Benvolio, Romeo, Tybalt, Capulet's wife (136–49)
- Prince, Benvolio, Capulet's wife, Montague, Prince (150–96).

Students had fun getting out of their seats to practice scene work, but the highlight of the week was working with an expert in stage combat (Figure 1.10). Moving our class to a larger space, a local stage combat professional first



**FIGURE 1.10.** Ninth-grade students learning stage combat from a theater director.



**FIGURE 1.11.** Di Grassi's depiction of the *true art of defence* (fig. 19).

reviewed the parts of the rapier and demonstrated some of the moves that were used in act 3, scene 1, such as *passado*, *alla staccata*, *punto reverso*, and the *hai*. Students used foam swords to fight each other, incorporating a demi-lunge, thrusting—both straight and around the side—and circling. Our expert taught us about Giacomo di Grassi,<sup>6</sup> an Italian swordsman whose 1570 document, which was translated into English in 1594, Shakespeare may have used as a source for the scene (Figure 1.11).

Back in the classroom, we analyzed another publication, Vincentio Saviolo's *His Practise*, which, according to Joan Holmer in "Draw, If You Be Men': Saviolo's Significance for *Romeo and Juliet*," conveys how Saviolo stresses "much

more the importance of the occasion for the gentleman's quarrel" (176). Holmer emphasizes the sequence of events in a challenge, which is explained in the document: an oral confrontation must occur, followed by a concise, polite letter of challenge. In gentlemanly fashion, the appointed time and location, a field, are specifically named. When the two documents—Saviolo's *His Practise* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (2.4.6–35, 3.1.26–106)—are placed side by side, students are then able to compare texts. "How do both documents develop the theme of violence and death?" I asked.

#### Document Discussions

Using a side-by-side comparison of Saviolo and Shakespeare helps students understand the cultural influences on the act 3 violence. Shakespeare manipulates the sixteenth-century protocols of a gentleman's challenge, duel, and technique.

Collin said, "Well, it doesn't seem like Shakespeare followed this guy's rules. Romeo did receive a letter, but there wasn't any confrontation before that."

"Yeah," said Devin. "When Romeo was at the Capulet house, Tybalt wanted to fight, but the old guy Capulet held him back."

Collin quipped, "Go to! Go to!" We all laughed, but Devin made his point.

“Another thing you should know,” I said, “is that Saviolo moved to London in 1594 and rented a room in the Blackfriars playhouse from owner Philip Henslowe to teach fencing lessons the year before Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* and two years before it was first performed at the Globe. If Shakespeare had done any rehearsing at the Blackfriars or had heard about London’s newcomer, he may have met Saviolo and perhaps watched some of the fencing lessons.”

An interesting comparison we noted is how Saviolo compares the art of the rapier to music: “I thinke it necessarye that euery one should learne this arte of rapier, for as a man hath voice and can sing by nature, he shall neuer doo it with time and measure of musicke” (qtd. in Holmer 172).

“What music terminology do you notice in this section of the play?” I asked. Three of the band students shouted,

“Minstrels!”

“Fiddlesticks!”

“Discords!”

“What about yesterday, when you learned about di Grassi, the Italian fencing teacher who may have also written a book on dueling? Do we know which document Shakespeare may have relied upon for his terminology?”

“He probably used both,” said Brenna. “How would anyone know?”

“You’re right. We don’t. But we do know that many documents from that time period used similar wording, including Shakespeare’s.”

“How do we know Shakespeare didn’t know fencing? Maybe he already knew these words,” said Nate.

“Does anyone have an answer to that?” I asked. The silence was palpable. “Good. More questions than answers. That’s exactly what learning is all about.”

## “Writing Floats on a Sea of Talk”

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When writing either precedes or follows a discussion, magic happens. My students expected *short-writes*, bursts of three- to five-minute opportunities to write into their thinking. We had read and discussed Shakespeare’s and Saviolo’s documents, and now I wondered how student thinking about sixteenth-century violence would deepen. Brenna and Jake both wrote about the obvious fight scenes in the play, but Brenna pointed out that “Mercutio thinks he [Romeo] is soft and cannot fight.” She noted that Saviolo mentions if it is appropriate for a third party [Mercutio] to step in. “It’s talked about,” she wrote, “when he says, ‘when one doth call another for an offence done unto him by a third person,’ and the passage talks about how a third challenger needs a reason.” Jake discussed

this same idea by pointing out, “Mercutio duels Tybalt even though Romeo was the one who was challenged by Tybalt. Shakespeare must have been aware of Saviolo’s fencing manual.” Reading the students’ writing about how sixteenth-century writers speak to cultural issues, such as violence and death, energizes me. In past years, student writing focused primarily on scene summaries or character descriptions, exactly as required. Using primary documents to help situate Shakespeare’s writing moves students beyond the storyline. They are more equipped to discuss how Shakespeare’s writing reflects the cultural views of his time. Similar to today’s artists, he was very much aware of competing views and created believable yet controversial characters and situations.

Discussing the controversial issues that permeate today’s society is a necessary yet natural transition. Young adult and pop culture books, such as bullying in *The 57 Bus* (Slater), identity in *Educated* (Westover), or senseless crime in *Concrete Rose* (A. Thomas), become logical extensions of early modern thinking about challenges, fights, and death. If I had ever wondered how to make Shakespeare’s plays relevant to today’s teens, I know now that foregrounding primary sources opens pathways to contemporary society. Pushing into early modern writers and artists to learn how they reacted to or influenced the world around them becomes an instinctive gateway into the twenty-first century.

#### Document Discussions

Using primary documents as stimuli for wondering should be a measure for engagement and a step toward understanding. Curiosity and wonder interface with how sixteenth-century thinking connects to today’s issues. The measure of understanding may be in the strength of our connections.

How early modern artifacts lead to discussions about today’s world was exemplified when I showed my students the woodcut found in the Saviolo text (Figure 1.12). It contained a skeleton on the ground with two men standing next to it: a ragged man and a rich man.

The message ran around the circumference of the picture:

Oh wormes meat: O Froath, O Vanitie. Why art thou so insolent?

“Does this language ring a bell?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Sarah. “Mercutio says that when he yells, ‘A plague on both your houses!’ Then he says, ‘They have made worm’s meat of me!’”

“So that’s where it comes from,” said Jake.



**FIGURE 1.12.** The *Wormes Meate* woodcut from Saviolo's fencing manual *His Practise* appears in Book 1 as the only nontechnical illustration (sig. K3 of "The Firft Booke," 51) and as the only pictorial ornament in Book 2 (sig. Gg6 of "The Fecond Booke," 135) (qtd in Homer 174).

"He's saying you all are putting me in the ground. Killing me. And now the worms are going to have me for dinner," quipped Sarah.

"Not exactly the best thought," said a voice from the back.

"Well, we're all afraid of that. Where we go, I mean. Nobody likes the thought," said Sarah. She looked down as though she was thinking about someone or something else. Our discussion didn't stop there, though. We left Mercutio and worm's meat behind and moved into other topics: burial, cremation, funerals, and senseless death. I went with wherever my students led me. Increased and engaging discussion was my yardstick for measuring comprehension and engagement.

## Early Modern Poisons and Drugs

As we approached acts 4 and 5, I wanted my students to reflect more on the relevance of Shakespeare's world to today's popular culture. Drugs and potions, particularly those that have unusual lore connected with them, are hot topics.



An interesting, accessible article, “Would Shakespeare’s Poisons and Drugs Work in Reality?” (Hammond), was our entry point into Juliet’s plea and Friar Laurence’s plan. The potion’s promise to “shut up the day of life” and “appear like death” (4.1.101, 103) intrigued my students. Was this real? We watched two versions of Juliet’s soliloquy when she fearfully considers the consequences of drinking the “distilling liquor.” Many students wonder what drug could make her sleep for a defined amount of time. How could Juliet’s parents think her dead when her heart was still beating? How could they *really* pull off this ruse? We looked at other documents from Gerard’s *Herball*. Sleeping nightshade, or *Atropa belladonna*, according to Claudia Hammond (quoting Gerard), may have been the answer because “a small quantity leads to madness, while a moderate amount causes a ‘dead sleepe’ and too much can kill.” Other possibilities are leopard’s bane, which was thought to kill animals but not humans. Students much preferred the idea of the mandrake because of its early modern lore. As a medicine, it had both soporific and aphrodisiac powers. “Is that why she woke up with so much love for Romeo?” a student asked. The most humorous, however, was the idea the plant sprung from the seed of a hanged man, but that is not all. According to early modern lore, the plant actually screams when pulled out of the ground, which reminded a few students of the same scenario in Harry Potter. In the 1579 document *Bulleins Bulwarke of Defence*, the author claims the scream not only causes the plant’s death, but also “the feare thereof kylleth the dogge or beast, whych pulled it out of the earth” (Bullein 41). Early modern audiences would not have touched the mandrake because of the poison found in the leaves that permeates the skin. They might have imagined the Friar using a harnessed dog to do the job, followed by a careful grinding of the root that “beareth the image of a man” (41). Philip Barrough’s document warns users that sleep-inducing drugs are dangerous because of the dose, which if given in excess, can kill. André du Laurens agrees and adds “wee must take heed to deale with very good aduise, for feare that in stead of desiring to procure rest vnto the sillie melancholie wretch, wee cast him into an endlesse sleepe” (qtd. in Pollard, *Drugs* 67).<sup>7</sup> Plants, and their sleep-inducing, death-like constitutions, were a constant source of discussion and intrigue among my students. Did they find plant lore relevant? Absolutely. They knew today’s drugs, whether synthetic or natural, generated stories passed from person to person and also had the power to help or to kill.

Students developed listening skills by comparing audio performances of scenes. Ellen Terry and Emily Trask perform Juliet’s act 4 soliloquy in which she laments her plight, fearful of taking the Friar’s potion. After listening and writing about both performances, students discussed which actress expressed Juliet’s fears in the way they envisioned the text. Next, they worked with a part-

ner in a close reading activity where they reread the soliloquy, making lists of the fears Juliet expresses about taking the potion. At this stage in our unit of study, I was both amazed and gratified at how eagerly the students now dove into Shakespeare’s text. Despite the length of her speech, a full forty-four lines, students had already listened twice and had read the plant lore’s warning about the mandrake’s screams. Juliet’s fears “That living mortals, hearing them, run mad” (4.3.48) seemed totally justified. Discussions led to writing, which many students were anxious to share. Zac said, “Juliet is listing things that could happen if she takes this potion. She wants to know if it would work.”

Table 1.1 lists early modern documents about poison, potions, and death that are featured in excerpted form for high school students on the *Teaching Shakespeare* website ([shakespearedocuments.info](http://shakespearedocuments.info)) and can be used as a basis for writing and discussion.

Having looked up from her writer’s notebook, Ainsley argued that Juliet was doubting the potion would work and doubting Romeo would save her. “She’s scared,” she said.

## Gradual Release

By the end of the play, students were reading the early modern documents without the same confusion they had when they had only one act under their belts. Their confidence in getting the gist of early modern documents, knowing that they might not understand every word, was increasing their confidence in reading Shakespeare’s language too. At this point, formatively assessing their

**TABLE 1.1.** Documents about poison, potions, and death.

Text comparisons of afterlife	<i>Book of Common Prayer</i> , <sup>8</sup> 1549; <i>The Bible</i> ; John Calvin’s works from the <i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> ; Edward Vaughan, <i>A Divine Discoverie of Death</i> , 1612 (qtd. in Targoff 20; see also Marshall 217); John Donne’s letter of consolation to Lady Kingsmill, epitaphs, 1624; Ramie Targoff, “Mortal Love: Shakespeare’s <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> and the Practice of Joint Burial,” <i>Representations</i> , 2012
Catalogue	John Gerard, “Sleeping Nightshade,” “Mandrake,” “Garden Poppies,” “Black Henbane,” <i>The Herbal, or Generall Historie of Plantes</i> , 1597
Catalogue	William Bullein, “Mandrakes” (41–42) and “Poppy” (25), <i>Bulleins Bulwarke of Defence</i> , 1579
Woodcuts	Hans Holbein the Younger, <i>The Dance of Death</i> series, 1538 (see Pennant-Rea)
Article excerpt	Tanya Pollard, “A Thing Like Death’: Sleeping Potions and Poisons in ‘Romeo and Juliet’ and ‘Antony and Cleopatra,’” <i>Renaissance Drama</i> , 2003
Article excerpt	Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, editors, “Suicides in the Early Modern Period,” <i>Sleepless Souls: Suicide in the Early Modern Period</i> , 1996, including “Mortality Record: ‘The Difeafes and Cafualties this Week,’” 1665

*Note:* All excerpted documents recommended in this book are also featured on the accompanying *Teaching Shakespeare* website ([shakespearedocuments.info](http://shakespearedocuments.info)).

independence in reading both the play and other documents was critical to success on the summative assessment. Using a Gradual Release of Responsibility strategy (see Appendix C), I was moving students from teacher-facilitated collaborative support to independent reading. They worked through difficult language with more confidence and skill. Instead of students reading with a partner, they formed groups of four, but this time each read different documents on the same theme.

I introduced a new idea: how to “read” documents, specifically visual texts, through a cultural lens. First, I asked the question, “Why were Romeo and Juliet buried side by side?”

“Because that’s how they did it back then?” Jenna asked, eyebrows raised.

“Well, let’s see what other writers said about burials, beliefs, and the afterlife.” Students read several quotes from Renaissance authors who had competing ideas about what happens after people die. In John Calvin’s *Corpus Reformatorum*, he claims “husbands and wives will then be torn apart from one another” (see, e.g., Thompson), whereas Alexander Hume believes “we shall see them face to face.” John Donne, in an effort to console a grieving widow, shares a personal thought: “God hath another purpose to make them up again.”<sup>9</sup>

We also discussed how to analyze visual texts through a close reading of Hans Holbein’s wood engravings of death intervening in everyday life (Figure 1.13; see also Pennant-Rea). Matthew suggested that Holbein thought death could be anywhere—it didn’t matter if you were rich or poor: “He could show up when you were doing something else.”

“Who are you talking about?” asked Lydia.

“Death! He’s like a person in those pictures.”



**FIGURE 1.13.** *The Nobleman, The Old Woman, and Fool*: Three of nine Hans Holbein wood engravings of death intervening in everyday life.

“That’s called *personification*,” said someone quietly in the back of the room.

“Right,” said Lydia, “but we don’t really see that in *Romeo and Juliet*. I mean, Shakespeare didn’t have Death come and get either of them.”

“Is it the same way we think of death today?” I asked. One student suggested *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak as an example of how death is the narrator of the story. Another girl mentioned *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Me Before You*, where death is the expected outcome, causing tears and questions about why someone so young has to die.

Jenna raised her hand. “Did the audience cry when they saw *Romeo and Juliet*?”

## Moving Toward the Assessment

Even though summative assessments test what has been learned, ongoing, formative checks throughout a unit of study help students practice without penalty. But when do we begin *talking* to students about what they should be able to *do* when act 5 comes to a tragic close? It makes sense that teachers *and* students understand how each piece of their learning fits the end goal.

Begin with the end. On the first day of the unit, I gave my students this assessment prompt:

Analyze how Shakespeare develops a theme, drawing evidence from primary documents, including *Romeo and Juliet*, to reflect on how early modern cultural issues are relevant today.

We broke it down into sections and worked toward understanding each week. Students wondered about themes. After each act, we listed the cultural ideas we saw embedded in Shakespeare’s play and in other plays, poems, sermons, pamphlets, recipes, woodcuts, and paintings. Each act was also infused with pre-writes, quick-writes, warm-ups, summaries, poetry, silent discussions, and reflections. Writing or talking about themes was a daily activity.

### Steps to the Assessment

- Varied and multiple writing about themes and how they integrate the play
- Focused close reading opportunities to find evidence of text to support themes
- Reflections and discussions about how themes are relevant today

Students also wondered about evidence. We looked for textual details in text that supported a variety of themes. We studied clues from visual text. We inserted quotes from documents to support opinions. We read. We discussed. We wrote.

The interest in how Shakespeare continues to be relevant grew out of the document approach. Students wanted to talk about today's issues too. They could relate to ongoing feuds, family problems, unnecessary violence, sudden attraction, emotional outbursts, and tragic endings.

As a final activity to think about the end of the play, we watched the 2013 film version of act 5, scene 3 (Carlei), followed by *silent annotations* (see Appendix B). I divided the text into eight sections and created small groups of three or four. I had glued each of the eight sections to large "sticky note" chart paper and hung them in the hall.<sup>10</sup> Students in each group used markers of different colors and went out to the hall to stand in front of their excerpt. For ten minutes, students silently read the text and, based on close reading and the film clip, silently annotated with explications, sketches, definitions, and questions (see Figures 1.14 and 1.15). After ten minutes, I allotted two minutes to discuss the excerpt and decide how to present their thinking in a one-minute "flash" presentation.



**FIGURE 1.14.** Silent annotation activity: Three students explicating an act 5 excerpt.

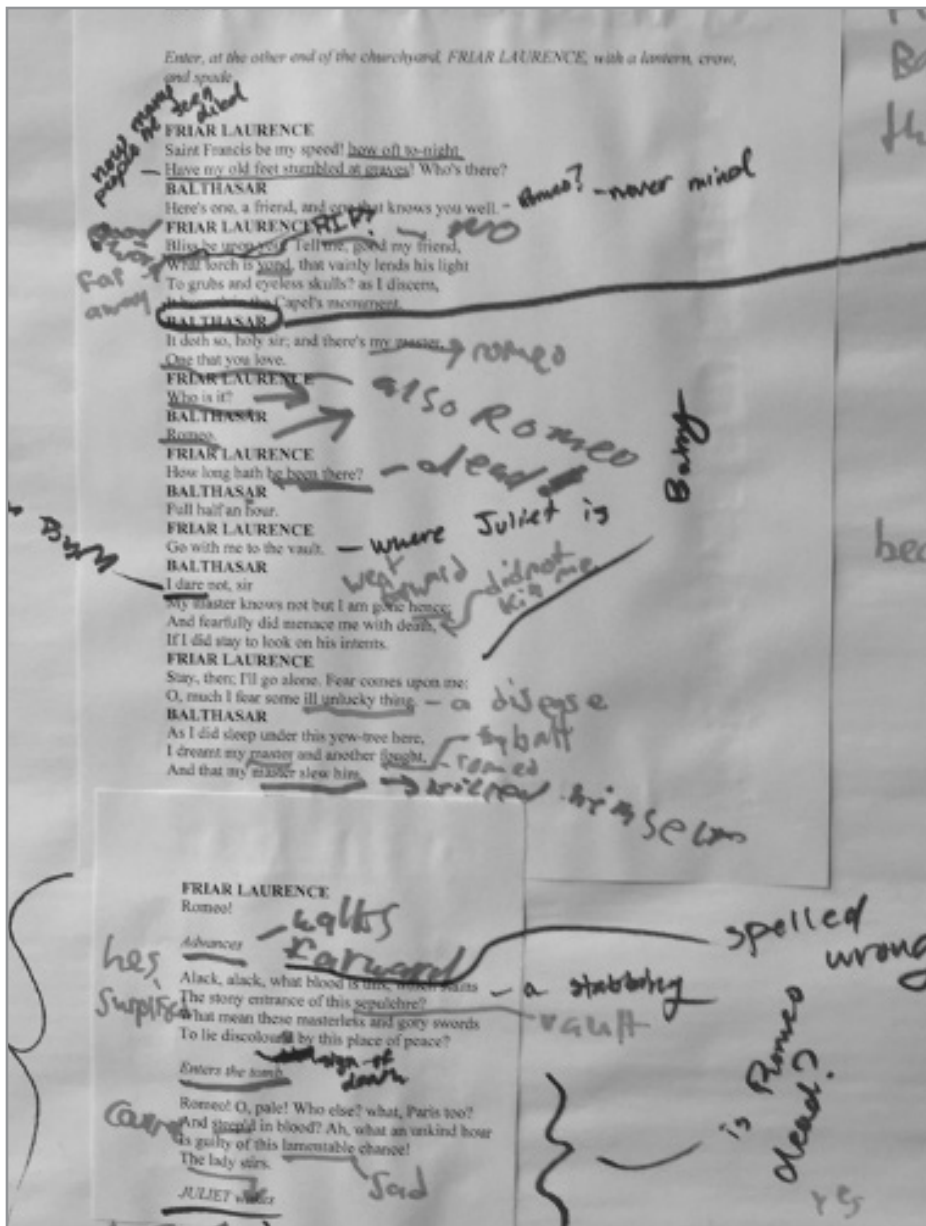


FIGURE 1.15. Annotations of act 5, scene 3 excerpt.

The hallway exploded with voices. After two minutes, all students were invited to the first group, and we began our Document Walk (see Appendixes B and C). Each group explained their annotated section of text before sending us off to the next group.

## Final Reflections

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After we finished the last couplet of the play, students reflected on our process. Conner said, “the story was pretty good” and “I liked the way we read it because, if we just read it one way, it would have been boring.”

Kyla liked the story but admitted she “would have liked to watch the movie more.” Olivia disagreed: “The process we read it was perfect for me. I came to class really wanting to read and see what was coming next.”

Spencer said, “I like how we went through the book in class. I haven’t ever read a book like this in class, and it’s hard to compare to other books.”

Elle, an avid reader, said, “It may be because love stories are so common, but I thought the first half was sort of predictable. Two people fall in love after one day and things keep stopping them from being together. That’s not unusual for a romance.”

“But they don’t live happily ever after,” Marissa commented. “I really liked when we watched it but also when we read it aloud. Watching it made me understand what was happening better because I could visually see it. Reading aloud was fun because it got us involved and reading to each other.”

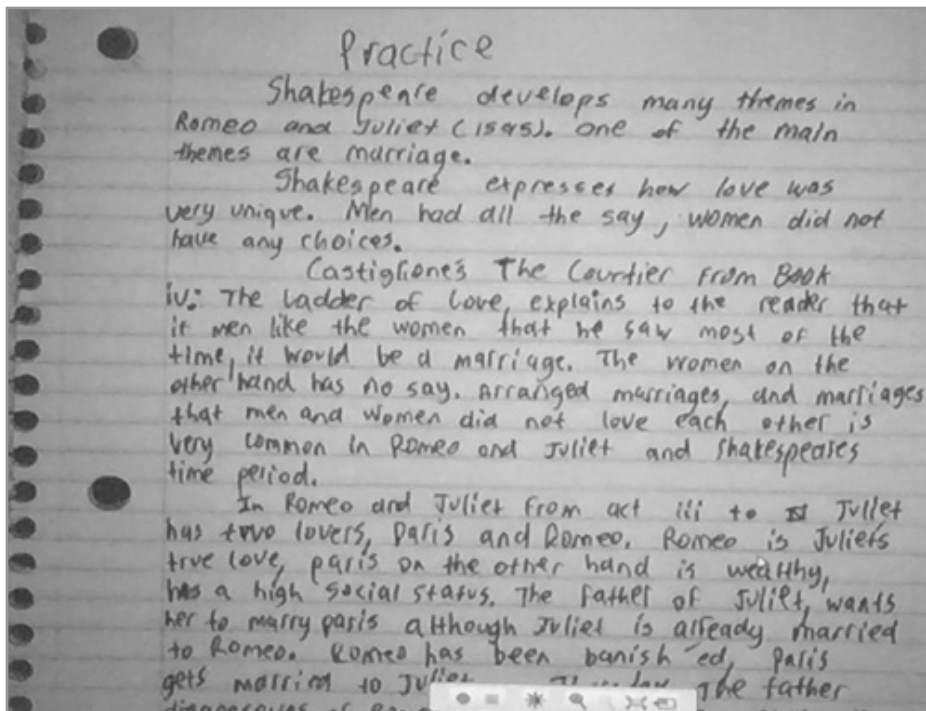
Anna was excited about “taking the time to talk about it. I also liked all of the background information that we learned. My favorite part was the sword fighting and actually seeing some of the culture that wasn’t just a picture.”

“We felt as though we were a part of it,” Eden said. “For me, the documents made Shakespeare more exciting.”

Students indicated the most helpful activity to prepare them for the assessment was the independent practice. Two days before the assessment, I set up the room as it would be arranged—in rows—and they wrote for an hour on a document they had never seen: “The Ladder of Love,” from Book 4 of Castiglione’s *The Courtier*, which was published in 1528 and translated into English in 1561. In this one-page excerpt, Castiglione claims outer beauty is holy and the gateway to inner beauty. Students immediately thought about how Romeo’s first attraction was outer beauty but soon loved Juliet’s inner self. It was then easy to write about how they saw that in today’s culture where social media made physical perfection everyone’s dream.

The following day, I broke down one student’s essay into chunks, pointing out its organization, supporting evidence, and conclusions (Figure 1.16).

After projecting several student essays, pointing out strong vocabulary and organization, we made a list of *transportable writing moves*. What did these student writers do to convey their ideas? What transitions did they use? Which active verbs drove the sentences? In other words, which writing techniques



**FIGURE 1.16.** Student formative practice on how Shakespeare develops cultural themes in *Romeo and Juliet*.

could they use in their own essays, moves that good writers incorporate? Students made lists in their notebooks and reviewed their essays from the day before. After rereading their own essays, they rewrote their weakest sections and shared the revisions with their writing groups. Feeling ready, most students left our classroom with a thumbs-up self-assessment.

For the final assessment, students had a choice. They chose a document to write about and, using the skills they had developed for the past five weeks, wrote about how that writer's ideas either contrasted or paralleled themes found in *Romeo and Juliet*. One document, Sir Francis Bacon's "Of Marriage and Single Life," written in 1553, was an essay that developed gender, marriage, sexuality, liberty, identity, and relationship themes. Bacon claimed single men "are more cruel and hardhearted because their tenderness is not so often called upon" (1554; see also Bacon, *The Essays* 34). In a homily against disobedience and willful rebellion, Thomas Cramner considers rebellion a sin against God and believes rebels are violating not only their country but also their parents. This document could be used to support violence, death, religion, goodness and evil, family relationships, spirituality, or gender. The third document, based on





**FIGURE 1.17.** *Everyone Living Shall Die Presently* (Day 82)

a visual from Richard Day's *A Booke of Christian Prayers* (1578), contains the service for burial and touches on death, burial, religion, love, compassion, and empathy (see also Figure 1.17).

After the minister speaks, the collection of people surrounding the casket ask the Father to raise the living from the death of sin "unto the life of righteousness" in hopes that when "we shall depart this life, we may rest in him, as our hope is this our brother doth."

Students knew they could choose either a document or a visual found in any document, a viable option for struggling readers. Organizing their desktops with books, foldables, documents, and writer's notebooks, students fell into an easy silence. I noticed they often paused to stare off into the distance or close their eyes but other than the sound of pages turning and pens moving, the entire hour was filled with thinking and writing.

## Analyzing Assessment Data

I couldn't wait to read their writing. Nick wrote about rebellion, because "Romeo and Juliet are rebels. They defy everything that their parents desire for them." Despite the connotation of the word *rebel*, Nick insightfully thought about how neither Romeo nor Juliet considered the ramifications of their parents' feud, choosing instead to be together. Other rebellious characters Nick wrote about were the nurse, who disobeys her master, Lord Capulet. Although Nick acknowledged "people defy authority [to] fight for what they believe in," he discussed Cranmer's document by delineating how breaking rules recklessly is not the same as fighting for a cause. He added that Friar

Laurence is a holy man but one who also rebels against the senseless family feuding. He is a rebellious co-conspirator by marrying Romeo and Juliet against his own better judgment and gives Juliet a potion disregarding the danger of his actions. Nick finished his essay by ruminating on our own rebellions, such as multiple protests in 1960s' America to bring the troops home from Vietnam.

Micah wrote about the theme of death, explaining it can take you anytime and anywhere, using act 3 as his source for how Shakespeare incorporates this

idea. Noting that the *Booke of Christian Prayers* portrays death religiously and therefore “a good thing,” Micah understood that people were expected to welcome death as a ticket into heaven, rather than as an enemy, which he thought “plays a huge role in the ending.”

Cody spent considerable time writing about how the early modern theme of violence is still relevant today. He discussed terrorists, such as members of ISIS, as having had a “huge impact on our world by bombing, shooting, and stealing.” “It’s terrible,” he wrote. He added other levels of violence inherent in gangs, noting, first, “for some gangs, to be able to join, you have to beat someone up just to be a part of it no matter [if] it is women or male” and, second, in online bullying, “so much they take their own lives.”

## Collaborative Course Teams

Our ninth-grade English team functioned well together during our maiden voyage with primary documents. Discussions about the hundreds of students who studied *Romeo and Juliet* using the document approach provided new learning. First, we confirmed the value of classroom observations to learn new strategies, especially when followed by debriefings. Questions that forced our thinking about process were beneficial as we collaborated on how to increase student success.

### Document Discussions

If someone tells me I have to overhaul everything, I freeze up. If someone says, “Here, you’re welcome to all of this you want, and you may want to start small,” then I feel empowered and on my own I feel driven to try it all at once.

Second, we realized more documents would provide alternative choices, especially visual texts. Students loved analyzing sketches, paintings, frontispieces, and portraits to reflect on both early modern and contemporary thinking. We discussed how to add more opportunities for student inquiry, including research of both early modern and contemporary documents. One idea was to add a twenty-first-century document outlining the average ages of marriage to contrast with the early modern table we studied, “Mean Age at First Marriage in England by Fifty-Year Periods, 1550–1849” (Laslett Table 1.2; see also Young 470). We developed a shared Team Drive (Google) to house all the documents

and organized them by acts and themes. Finally, our own discoveries about Shakespeare's world became a source of great joy. We know the process will open doors to our own discoveries about Shakespeare.

Whether you insert a few strategically throughout the unit to gauge the reaction or dive into a new approach "feet first," positive student reaction is always our primary thermometer for measuring how primary sources enliven and enrich our teaching of Shakespeare. I suggest that you peruse the documents described in these and other chapters and decide when and where they fit in your current curriculum. If it works well, add a few each year. Try some group activities, add some quick-writes, and open discussions on text comparisons between Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In short, allow documents to permeate what you presently do and let it mushroom. I know it will.

You may be a teacher who is reading this chapter because you are or will be teaching *Romeo and Juliet*. If so, keep reading. I promise that many of the strategies and documents used with other plays and students are versatile and adaptable. In the next chapter, you will join another "virtual" classroom by witnessing the joy and challenges of teaching *Hamlet* to struggling readers in English 11 class.

If you with patient eyes attend, "our toil shall strive to mend."