All's Well that Rehearses Well:

How Theatre-Informed Practices Foreground Equity and Empathy

in Public Secondary Language Arts Classrooms

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I.

This iteration of this project began after my partner and I attended a local production of Chad Beguelin and Bob Martin's *The PROM* at Four County Players in Barboursville, Virginia. I walked in without knowing much about the premise other than the brief summary I had heard from my coworker and *PROM* ensemble member Katie Wall a few weeks prior: there's a cancelled prom, washed Broadway actors show up, small public high school, rural America, hijinks ensue. And some of the critical action happens in a booth at an Applebee's. Walking into the Four County Playhouse, I couldn't help but start to think about my thesis – *this* thesis. It had been bouncing around off the inside of my brain for almost a year, and I was no closer to figuring out what I was meant to actually write about. I was trained as an English Renaissance scholar in undergrad and, then, as a humanities instructor at Virginia, and I knew that I fundamentally believed these two subjects have to intersect for the good of students yet to come. Every draft came out pretentious, like I was trying to argue that America's rural public schools *needed* an infusion of high culture in order to breed the kind of ivory tower academic success stories that I know firsthand are not always useful in those communities. Sometimes, there is simply not enough room for a deep investigation of John Donne's punctuation use across his *Holy Sonnet* sequence when a whole school district is on free lunch and tariffs are making it impossible for the local farms to buy enough fertilizer to grow the hay to feed the cows on which the local dairy economy relies.

The PROM's second act finds Broadway and sitcom actor Trent Oliver confronting a gang of teenagers outside of their town's 7-Eleven in order to get to the bottom of why they are so closeminded about the idea of having a lesbian couple attend prom. As it turns out, the local high school has no drama program! Upon learning this, Trent remarks, before turning on the

charm in the Bible-inspired gospel number “Love Thy Neighbor”, “Ah. That explains your general lack of empathy” (*PROM* 91). Then, because it’s a musical, an ensemble of touring *Godspell* equity actors enter from stage right with tambourines and ribbon batons, and the action continues.

Watching this group of rural teens get exposed to an alternative, Bible-literal version of Christianity where all of their normative behaviors would condemn them for eternity was when it clicked. My life-long love affair with theatre has never been about getting famous or being in movies or being able to act across from Daniel Radcliffe in his inevitable revival of *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying.* It’s been about the kinds of people that are drawn to the theatre, drawn into other worlds, drawn to the opportunity to find other shoes to step into without the fear of losing oneself in the process. It’s been about finding ways to get underneath the language and read its impact on the human body as a secondary mode of analysis. It’s been about redefining my relationships with my identity and practicing existing authentically around those for which that authenticity is paramount.

Most importantly, it’s been about joy.

So often, the experience of sitting in a high school classroom, one a student is so often assigned to due to a lack of other course offerings in schools like the fictional Edgewater High school or my former stomping grounds Housatonic Vallely Regional High School, is far from joyful. It comes as no surprise to me that, despite some estimates placing rural schools at the top of national graduation rates at nearly 80% as of 2020, the rate of bachelor’s degrees among residents of rural communities is “just 29 percent […] compared with an average of 33 percent nationwide”, with the National Student Clearing house noting that rural students are much more likely to drop out of college than their urban or suburban counterparts (Lumina Foundation). A

peer of mine once joked that school "is the place you go to avoid juvie"; once the threat of punishment for truancy goes away, why would students with that mindset continue with the same kinds of education that didn't serve them in their adolescence?

Importantly, I understand that I cannot make all students love high school. For every student that graduates feeling like they are equipped and ready to take on college and change the world, there are infinitely many more that, like that peer, showed up every day because they had to and that they're never stepping back into a classroom. There are yet others that would thrive in higher education and are kept from choosing that path due to any number of barriers, whether immediate – they need to work at the family business, someone has to stay home to keep any eye on Grandma – or systemic – lack of transportation or high-speed internet infrastructure, or they simply cannot afford it, regardless of scholarship support. What I advocate for here is a mindset change in public language arts education towards an educational mode that foregrounds communication and empathy in the classroom through the medium of dramatic texts and using techniques developed by theatre practitioners; educators would then use these meta-learning targets in conjunction with any existing mastery-based curricula in order to facilitate learning that more easily translates into non-academic fulfillment. A theatre-informed set of classroom practices would also allow Virginia teachers to fulfill the state-set Standards of Learning without feeling tethered to lectures on minutia that cannot keep students engaged. There is so much that can be borrowed from the theatre world that I truly believe has the capacity to reinfuse joy into public education, even for those who are there to avoid a juvenile hall stay.

II.

When I wasn't in my UVA master's classes, I worked at Dreams Made Real, a youth theatre and after school educational center founded by Virginia native Melissa Charles, at their

Charlottesville studio, primarily as a stage manager and prop designer. Stage management for productions serving a school-age actor base looks quite a bit like teaching: in addition to the indispensable help we provide by tying shoes and opening juice boxes, the DMR stage management team's primary tasks include managing schedules for the students and production team, communicating expectations for behavior in the space, and serving as an intermediary between the rest of the production team and our actors' parents. Several other members of the DMR staff have worked as educators, like scenic and costume designer August Applewhite, a charge artist at UVA and scenic design mentor at Monticello High School, or student mentors, like the aforementioned Katie Wall, founder of Viterbo College's student theatre organization during her undergraduate years there. I was also lucky enough to act in the Wayne Theatre's spring 2025 run of Jonathan Larson's *RENT*, a cast populated in part by early childhood, elementary, middle, high school, and special education teachers as well as an elementary school principal. Just like DMR, the Wayne runs an afterschool program out of their auxiliary studio space, Studio Wayne, led in part by *RENT*'s director Lesley Larsen.

These extracurricular spaces borrow heavily from traditional educational structures. DMR's Youth After School (YAS) program is run by "teachers" who teach elective-style classes to students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Applewhite, for example, teaches classes on scenography – the study of theatrical set and prop design – and elementary makeup design. Other classes run the gambit between audition preparation taught by guest Broadway actors for older students to beginner playwriting to weekly improv challenges. The walls of DMR's studios are perpetually papered with that week's group craft activities, like the gratitude tree that springs up outside the office every Thanksgiving, and a hefty sprinkling of glitter on most hard surfaces that reminds me that students are here to learn theatrical skills as well as how to have fun in

community with those around them. This perpetual return to community building through working creatively together is where I'd like to begin in the hopes of demonstrating how traditional education can borrow back from the theatrical world.

Something almost all students at DMR are asked to do is speak aloud, whether that comes in the form of reading lines in a rehearsal, practicing a scene as audition preparation, or sharing set or costume schematics with a show's design team. Acclimating to the stresses inherent for many young students of speaking in front of audiences can be instrumental in building those students' confidence in their communication abilities which has myriad carry-over effects, from being more willing to try out new hobbies or sports to developing stronger intrinsic motivation in educational spaces. In rehearsal spaces just as in many language arts classrooms, speaking aloud is inextricably linked with the process of *reading* aloud. There is a vast academic corpus on the benefits of reading out loud, with studies demonstrating a causal relationship between elementary teachers regularly reading aloud to their students and increased listening comprehension (Hogan, Adlof and Alonzo), as well as anecdotal evidence that suggests a strong link between students being read to and increased executive function skills including short- and long-term recall (Anderson). Though the research base on the impact of students themselves reading aloud, especially in secondary level classrooms, is significantly smaller, Laurice Joseph's pedagogical meta-study "Adolescents Can Respond to Intervention Too: Programs That Have Promise for Teaching Basic Reading Skills to Middle and High School Students" provides an overview of several late-stage reading intervention models that show promise in the public education sector, all of which are reliant on reading aloud as the main intervention vector. One that Joseph points to as showing special promise for middle and high school students is the Great Leaps Reading Program: published by Ken Campbell in 1995, Great Leaps focuses on sight

word fluency in isolation (i.e. asking students to read as many individual sight words from a list in one minute) and in context (i.e. giving students an excerpt from a grade level-appropriate text and asking them to read as many sentences as accurately as possible in two minutes). Johnson notes that the programmatic and predictable difficulty escalation built into Great Leaps "is particularly helpful to middle school students with serious emotional disturbances", which in turn helps regulate the environment of classrooms as wholes (45). While her research focuses on teaching students basic reading skills like phonics, the fact that reading aloud demonstrates such profound and sustained impacts on the outcomes of these late-in-life readers gestures to its ability to impact similar learning outcomes at other levels as well. If nothing else, the current data set suggests that the largest detrimental impact of asking students to continually read out loud is annoyance – and that is something that I as an educator am willing to risk.

Another opportunity that drama-informed practice affords students is the opportunity to flex memorization muscles. Students will likely rail against the kinds of memorization exercises that are assumed to come with the territory of doing drama. I vividly remember the surge of dread that ran up my spine when I read the syllabus for my first-year writing seminar at Middlebury College and saw that one of the most heavily weighted assignments for the full semester was presenting a series of five memorized sonnets at an end of year dinner our professor was hosting at his home. I wasn't taking a class on Shakespearean sonnet form because I longed to pace around my dorm room, muttering iambic couplets to myself while my roommate looked at me like I had lost my few remaining marbles; I was there to learn about poetry! As loathe as I was to admit it at the end of that semester, being asked to memorize sonnets while analyzing the form and function of them in class made me a much more effective analyzer of poetry as a genre: I was applying my understanding of form as studied in a vacuum to particular

texts *and* engaging in the embodied process of repeated verbalization over time, a process by which my understanding of sonnets fundamentally changed.

My experience of memorization as a key component of further developing my analytical thinking is reflected in the 2018 article "Memorization: A Proven Method of Learning" by Dr. Enamul Hoque, director at the Education and Development Research Council and contributor to the Journal of English Foreign Language Education and Research. This literature review of much of the 21st century's work on benefits of memorization on school-age learners highlights not only benefits like "improv[ed] neural plasticity" in students and the importance of memorization in the proliferation of "creativity", due in part to the high cognitive load that memorization requires (145). He also points out that memorized information is perpetually accessible to students, which, in the context of a language arts classroom, means that students are more likely to have immediate access to primary evidence that directly supports the claims they make in discussions or in papers without needing to wade through primary source materials to locate one singular line (146). Memorizing even small sections of scenes from multiple plays jumpstarts the pathways that will allow for synthetic reasoning down the line as it requires students to get comfortable holding pieces of complimentary evidence alongside themselves in their minds.

Memorization and familiarizing oneself with texts by reading aloud have the unmatched capacity to build, not only an effective language arts classroom, but an equitable one at the same time, primarily by levelling the expectation playing field for students who are English Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL students. Beck Barsanti, an eighth and ninth grade English teacher at the Hillside School in Marlborough, MA, pointed out in an interview with me that the confidence he observed among his ESOL cohort rose dramatically after the class was asked to memorize a short speech from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and perform it for their peers. "Because

so many ESOL students learn English through memorization anyway, they were so excited to be able to use techniques they were comfortable with, especially knowing the American students weren't." (3:23) He also noted that his American students looked to their international peers as "mini-experts" and were continually trying to glean tips from their language-learning knowledge bases (3:35). This singular example speaks directly to Hoque's advocacy in his work in "Memorization" and shows how one single drama-based assignment has the capacity to allow students to fortify the connections in and amongst them with minimal instructor intervention. Performance-based assignments like this have the potential to greatly equitize classrooms because it allows minoritized subsets of students to demonstrate their strengths in ways they often can't because of language or ability barriers. Theatrical arts rely on alternate expressional modes for success all the time – see the use of closed captioning systems to facilitate cross-hearing-capacity understanding in Brian Andrew Cheslik's recent production of *Cinderella* at Deaf Austin Theatre – in order to lift up oppressed demographics all across the world; using those same techniques, educators can gift their majority student demographics the capacity to truly learn from those with less academic privilege for the benefit of the classroom and larger school communities.

This *Macbeth* anecdote speaks directly to one of the memorization techniques points to in Hoque's paper, which he calls "Students Teaching Others": "To help our struggling students improve their working memory, try having them learn a concept in order to teach it to a classmate… This will require the student to learn it twice [once in a manner they understand, then rewording it to allow for effective explanation], which will help cement the concept into their brains" (148); this works for both concepts as well as for structures of particular modes of learning, like how to take Cornell-style notes or, in Barsanti's case, how to learn lines for

recitation. Hoque's emphasis on learning via teaching goes hand-in-hand with the types of community building that are an integral part of theatre education: actors rely on other actors for the scaffolding on which they build their individual success, whether that be for cue lines, props to be moved on and off stage, or the calmness on stage that comes with repeated exposure to the pressures of performance. Barsanti's students looked to each other for that same kind of calmness in the classroom, and those that could provide it set the groundwork for the class's successes, both on the individual and unit levels.

Further, the direct relationship between taking on high cognitive load tasks and the wide-ranging cognitive benefits Hoque outlines supports the continued inclusion of "productive struggle" in classrooms. Productive struggle can take a huge number of forms, though it is often employed in science or mathematics classes rather than in humanities ones. This is a major missed opportunity for students as Barsanti's experience teaching *Macbeth* shows: it points to the importance of reading aloud in a productively struggle-full way in building a student's capacity for classroom resilience. Memorization-centered assignments are notoriously difficult but, as he told me unequivocally, it was the best thing he could have done for his class: after his students all successfully shared their memorized selections in front of the full class, "[s]omething shifted: all of my boys were much more bought in to what we were reading, and many started participating much more often" (5:30). Once they proved that they were able to make it through one of the more difficult assignment types they had encountered so far that semester, behavior issues dropped, and quality engagement skyrocketed. This is why I strongly believe in the power of productive struggle: its capacity for changing students' minds about their own academic capabilities continually amazes me.

A further benefit to incorporating productive struggle is that it can be *fun* for students. One of the most effective class periods I've taught structured around productive struggle is an in-class conspiracy theory debate: I split my students into two groups, one defending a prolific conspiracy theory (so far, I've done classes with "the moon landing was faked" and "Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls are secretly still alive") and the other defending the accepted facts of the situation. Each group had 15 minutes to gather as much evidence and put together a compelling case knowing they would be asked to debate each other with me as a judge. The struggle component comes from the task of putting together a compelling storyline from unreliable and often ridiculous forms of evidence for Team Conspiracy and the task of trying to refute compelling storylines with boring facts for Team Reality. On both occasions that I've deployed this lesson plan, I've dedicated the last ten minutes of class to recapping what that activity accomplished. Most of the reflection from my students centered on how difficult it was to use their side's style of evidence to try to refute claims made by the other. One of my first-years from the fall semester described the near impossibility of talking back to the claim that Neil Armstrong couldn't be trusted to uphold a truthful portrayal of the moon landing because, despite being raised Christian, he refused to swear on a Bible during a Congress session about the status of space travel later in his life: shaking his head, he laughed, "Where do you even start with claims like that?" He described how his thinking about the pervasiveness of conspiracy logic had changed in that brief thirty-minute window, saying that it wasn't until the facts that he had researched and presented in full context were dismissed with "That's what they want you to think" that he understood firsthand how difficult the task at hand was. Another student from that same group picked up that thread, adding that, while she agreed that it was difficult to make much progress against conspiratorial logic in the moment, she hadn't realized how much simply

shifting the lens through which one views evidence can completely alter the aura of credibility around what likely *should* be dismissed. She said that she felt much more confident about her ability to use rhetoric to support the central claim of her final conspiracy theory project because of her experience of how hard it is to contend with, even in the controlled sphere of a classroom.

A lot of students also pointed out how enjoyable that class was to participate in for them. It was equally fun for me to watch: it's not often that I see teams of ten first-year students laughing and scribbling out essay scaffolds on a blackboard at the same time. Because this near-impossible assignment was meant to be solved creatively and collaboratively, my students let themselves buy all the way in and play together as a way of getting around the strictures of the assignment. One student in my Tupac/Biggie section went so far as to clip a photo of the two rappers from an old magazine cover and transpose it onto a beachy background (giving each man a pineapple-shaped cup to top it off) to add to her side's evidence base. In this way, productive struggle finds a good home in the alternative instructional modalities that proliferate in theatre-conscious classrooms as a way to combat disengagement among students by providing them with a better alternative: engagement via play. By continually switching the ways in which students participate – in the case of reading aloud, alternating between having students read all at the same time, with accents, with added emphasis on meter or key vocab words, by passing the baton randomly around the room, in partners, etc. – students are required to be on their toes so that they, too, can participate in the moment as much as they are willing to; often, they will rise to that occasion.

I spent an hour talking about play and its role in the classroom with Beyond the Page's Craig Maravich and Mads Middleton recently. Developing out of the Breadloaf School of English, Beyond the Page was founded by Maravich at Middlebury College in 2019 as a way to

"open up texts, open conversations about texts, and to be at the center of the ongoing conversations […] about how do we teach? How do we learn? How do we build community in classrooms?" by inviting professional actors into college classrooms as a medium for expanded inquiry (Maravich, 1:40). Maravich, the program director and lead teaching artist, and Middleton, a recent Middlebury College alumna and current teaching artist, spend time in various classrooms, professional development programs, and community organizations across Middlebury, bringing theatre-informed practice with them to every corner of the College and town they touch.

A lot of Beyond the Page's classroom-focused work revolves around asking students to physically embody the types of media with which they engage, whether that is asking English students to work together to build a set for the play they are reading as a class using only their bodies, showing economics students how to integrate their lived experiences into the data trends found in the news, or showing a first-year seminar how different the experience of a poem can be just by changing the posture or position of its speaker. When asked what they see as the importance of theatre in the contemporary classroom, Middleton described their time guest lecturing in a biology lab earlier this year:

> We have this class that we've done twice with [Middlebury College] biology professor Greg Pask. We go into his entomology class, a large class of biologists mostly… When we get in there, there's this sense of, like, ravenous desire to be artistic and make things. And it's very satisfying and feels very serviceable – I feel like I'm useful facilitating that engagement because these are students who are always in highly STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] places and are always thinking in very specific patterns, the expectations for their assignments tend to follow a pretty strict regime, and the space for creativity and expression of their artistry is few and far between. So, when I leave those engagements, I feel like, 'Oh! These students have gone into a place where they've reminded themselves that their skill set is larger than they think!' And, dare I say, they could have more fun doing what they do – *and that they're hungry for that fun.* There is a true, palpable need for fun. (28:41-30:15)

Middleton raved about the pride that accompanied these visits to classrooms like Pask's because they could watch the students let go of the kinds of oppressive academic structures that have become commonplace at high level colleges like Middlebury and let themselves have fun in community. Maravich added that there have been countless times in his Beyond the Page career where students went from not even knowing each other's names halfway through a given semester to writing and performing vulnerable skits about, for example, their individual experiences of racial privilege at Middlebury over the span of a single 75-minute class meeting (32:00-33:05). One aspect of Beyond the Page's work that allows this sense of fun to proliferate in their guest lecture sessions especially is changing something central to the way the class works, whether that be the order in which students sit around the table or, at times, moving that class's meeting to a different building. As Middleton and Maravich have outlined, changing the way a classroom looks and works helps to, similarly, change the dynamics within it: students that are usually quiet have the opportunity to come to the forefront because, as an example, there is no expectation that more vocal students will dominate that day's discussion. Another is simple: the Beyond the Page actors have fun and make mistakes in the process in full view of the students and faculty present on any given day. They bring the rehearsal aspect of performance into sharp focus, their willingness to start a scene over or change locations in the room or ask for suggestions from the class giving the students permission to be imperfect as well.

As Beyond the Page's work shows, giving students the opportunity to have fun works! But, as integral as reading aloud and finding opportunities to let students play as a part of their learning experience are to building a theatre-informed classroom is, there is an additional component that needs to be present for continued success: consent. A major shift felt across the dramatic arts universe within the last decade has been a push towards consent-based performance

practices, most notably by the increased presence of intimacy choreographers on film sets and community stages alike. Dr. Amanda Rose Villarreal, an artist and intimacy professional themselves, defines the role of intimacy choreographer as the person on set whose job it is

> to uphold ethical interactions by using consent-based practices, to empower performers with the agency to assert their personal boundaries, to level power imbalances in rehearsal and performance spaces, and to craft choreography for performed intimacy – all with an *informed* and *culturally competent* approach that supports both performers and the production. (7, emphasis mine)

Villarreal notes that the biggest ways that incorporating an intimacy choreographer into productions has changed the landscape of performance art is by taking the onus of consent negotiation off of any one set of shoulders and making it a recognized part of each step of the rehearsal process. No longer were actors asked to *do* with no ability to refuse; they, as both actors playing characters and as the humans behind the acting, were brought to the table.

Consent-based practice manifests itself in as many unique ways as there are unique performance spaces. My time in Charlottesville has introduced me to two of its infinite permutations: one, taught by certified intimacy coordinator and DMR guest director Celena Cox, uses the language of fences and gates to allow actors to define what their physical and emotional boundaries are on any given day, with fences denoting “hard no”s and gates denoting “ask first”s. These conversations are had between scene and choreography partners before any scene that requires physical contact. The second, taught by The Wayne Theatre’s Lesley Larson, is what she has called “tapping in”: at the beginning of every rehearsal, all actors take a moment to connect with all other actors in the cast, make eye contact, and communicate what is safe for their bodies to do on that day. While this sounds like an involved process, it has never taken our 25-actor cast more than 3 minutes for all of us to briefly check in. After coming into rehearsal after a week on crutches following an injury, I communicated to the cast that I needed a wider

bubble around my body to protect my healing foot. After making brief eye contact with and repeating that short sentence to all of my fellow actors, we were all on the same page regarding what I needed to feel safe in our shared space as we moved from scene to scene. The knowledge that my safety was being foregrounded from the very beginning of rehearsal allowed me to perform at my best – and allowed me to feel comfortable asking my fellow actors to help me, for instance, move heavier set pieces as to not worsen my injury. An integral part of both of these systems is that at no time is any actor required to justify the boundaries they place between their bodies and the other people in the room; boundaries are respected no matter what, no questions (aside from "How can I best help you today?") allowed.

Of course, applying these kinds of consent-based practices to the classroom will not look like a one-to-one translation. I hope that my future students will not be interacting with each other physically often enough to have to implement daily "fences and gates" conversation with them. I do think, however, that the same underlying ideas have the capacity to change the way that high school classes are taught. In the classroom, "intimacy" becomes much more related to the emotional toll that certain texts and discussions can have on students rather than any sort of physical relation between them. Thus, incorporating consent-based instruction methods into my classroom works to communicate that I, as their teacher, am foregrounding their well-being rather than any sort of numerical output as the most important facet of their enrollment in my course. Classrooms, just like rehearsal rooms, ought to be spaces for students to invent and reinvent, try new things and inevitably make mistakes in the process. For that to be a feasible construction, for there to be a requisite level of trust between students and their teachers, educators must demonstrate to their students that they have the ability to say "no" and have that response be accepted without question. This gives students some level of control over their day

that has largely been constructed without any input from them over which classes they're in or what kinds of classwork they're asked to do.

There is one element of consent-based practice that I have already integrated into my ENWR teaching at UVA, one that I think has been integral to the overwhelmingly positive class environment I am lucky enough to each within. "The Button" is an idea I stole from one of my youth theatre directors from Connecticut, and the premise is exceedingly simple: if at any point a student feels too overwhelmed to continue, they press the button and everything pauses for a moment to allow them to collect themselves. After that moment, the teacher steps in to ask what kind of support would be most helpful to that student; after a next step is decided upon, it is taken and class proceeds. I introduced this idea to both of my ENWR sections I taught in the second year of my master's by saying that I, as an instructor with chronic pain and a history of migraines, may need to press the button to allow myself to grab a chair and sit for a minute to internally assess before continuing with class. Both groups of first years looked at me like I had just told them that I was hiding a third eyeball. One student from my fall section asked if I "really wouldn't be mad if someone used it [the button] in the middle of class"; when I responded that it is there as support and I had assigned zero judgement to it, she chuckled like she didn't believe me. As of yet, none of my students have ever pressed the button in front of a room of their peers. I don't expect that that will change. However, introducing the concept of the button, I think, has opened my students' eyes to the reality that I, in my capacity as their ENWR professor, am not there to beat knowledge into their brains, nor are they required to push themselves to the point of emotional distress or harm in my classroom. If a single five-minute conversation at the beginning of the semester can have that drastic an impact on the classroom

environment with no apparent drawbacks, why would we as educators not take those five minutes of open communication with our students at every opportunity?

A common question posed in regard to the integration of consent-based practices into classrooms is, “What happens if a student wants to get out of reading a required text or assignment for the class?” This situation arises in language arts classrooms around the country regardless: students are not immune to the complications of real life anymore than their teachers are, and, as much as we educators would like to insulate them from tragedy and trauma, it may happen to them anyway. Incorporating conversations about consent and the open communication between student and teacher that those conversations require will allow students to feel more comfortable advocating for their needs. Allowing self-advocacy in the classroom would not, however, mean that students could get out of work; rather, I suggest borrowing a tactic from Wall and ask that student to provide an alternate path to the same goal. She described a situation in which one of her actors felt unable to hold hands as directed in rehearsal one day and called hold – theatre speak for asking everyone in the scene to unilaterally pause--: “We stop, we pause the scene, we take a deep breath, and we ask, ‘What can I do for you?’ From there, we figure it out: maybe, for today, we hover our hands, or we elbow nudge, or something that lets us continue our rehearsal process in a way that is effective for everyone, and also safe” (49:40). Wall commented that she’s disappointed that students view the ability to change their immediate environment in order to make it safer for them is “such a novel concept, and it really shouldn’t be” (49:58).

I agree: all students, regardless of age and achievement level, have the right to a schooling experience that is productive, and they should be provided with the tools to make that happen. What does that look like in practice? One construction that I have seen to be productive in both middle and high school level classes is allowing students to pick the order of individual

activities – and even the lesson of full class topics over the course of a week – when feasible. Framing these conversations with introductions like, “We need to finish activities A, B, and C by the end of the period; where would folks like to start?” opens up a highly productive dialogue between instructor and student that allows students to think critically about the choices in front of them and decide what order serves them best in that moment. It can also look like providing multiple prompts or submission modality options for longer-term projects like essays, as I will model in my sample materials. These do require some front-loading on the part of the instructor, which may not be uniformly achievable across all classes. However, in the cases where that front-loaded preparation can occur, I have seen that students are much more receptive to the kinds of repetition or practice-based assignments often dismissed as busy work as well as the classes structured around an immutable or immovable task: because they trust that I incorporate choice in as many parts of my classes as I can, students reinforce that trust by interpreting these un-skippable assignments as integrally important or, at the very least, something that has to get done in order to transition back into more engaging classes.

It can also look like opening up one’s syllabus for modifications if requested. I understand firsthand how difficult it can be to edit syllabi mid-semester once, let alone several times in different ways for different students. However, this intellectual burden can easily be shifted from the shoulders of the instructor and onto those of the individual students by requiring that they design replacement assignments. For example, if one of my future students would like to opt out of reading one of the texts assigned for a given semester due to triggering materials, it would be up to them to find a comparable alternative that meets the same mastery targets and pose that to me. Or, if a dyslexic student is having trouble meeting the specifications for a writing assignment, they would have the ability to suggest submitting their work via audio

recording instead[1]. That takes the burden of sifting through the infinite possibilities of alternate texts or assignments off of the instructor *and* gives students language for and practice advocating for themselves in highly structured spaces like the classroom.

Letting students see the level of respect their teachers have for their voices, perspectives, and needs reflected in the construction of the class itself, I believe, has the capacity to improve the quality of work being handed in, even if it requires a decrease in the number of assignments throughout the course of the semester to accommodate these sorts of negotiations. Even if there is no demonstrable impact on the writing production of future students, the opportunities for social-emotional growth that these techniques would open up, in my opinion, may be more important, especially for high school students about to move into the "adult world". Just look at the ways that consent-based practices have changed the life of a 14-year-old DMR Youth Production Assistant, Student A, as described by Wall in our interview:

> [Student A] was a student of Melissa [Charles, DMR founder] and Claire [Chandler, YAS teacher]'s at the Village School [a private girl's middle school in Charlottesville, VA], and she was in Claire's public speaking class, and she could not do it. She was, like, major anxiety: would freak out over the simplest public speaking task, and she's now basically the lead stage manager for most of our [youth] projects here. And that's in two years! I have seen so much growth from her, both socially and internally. She has gotten such a hold on her anxiety, and it has been so lovely to see… She has really found her people here, which has been so lovely to see and has been really heartwarming. Everyone loves working with [Student A]: She is kind, she is firm, she is a strong leader, and she is now very able to *do* public speaking. You would never know that a year or two ago, this kid could not get up in front of her class of 10 people and do a basic public speaking assignment… I think something that was super important for [A] and for us was

[1] In fact, both of these situations have arisen for me in my teaching career. The impact on me was minimal as students took on the majority of the work in reframing their assignment mode, and the impact on our working relationship was huge as it reinforced my position as instructor-collaborator rather than instructor-dictator.

> telling her she could say no. We would *prefer* her to say no. That shift alone has let her be so much more in control of her emotions.

This student changed her life through practicing saying no – and saying anything at all – in the controlled space that was the DMR rehearsal room. There is untapped capacity to change the lives of innumerable students by opening up spaces for students to assert their agency and communicate their needs.

To pivot slightly, I see an entirely separate benefit of thinking about teaching through a theatre lens, that being on the historical and political sensibilities of our students. The dramatic arts have long been underestimated as historical sites of dissent when, in actuality, dramatists have been seeding their publicly shared works with political themes since classical Greece. Aristophanes presents a version of Athens, however farcical, held hostage by the city state's women in order to force an end to the Peloponnesian War in his 411 B.C.E. *Lysistrata*. Its first production came on the heels of a disastrous attempt by the Athenian military to invade Sicily, after which nearly 40,000 Athenians and their allies were killed, left to die in Syracusean prison camps, or sold into slavery, and the 411 B.C.E. overthrow of Athenian democracy in favor of a new system of oligarchy. *Lysistrata*'s success is due in part to the unusual mouthpiece he employs to speak his deep anti-Peloponnesian War views, the play's eponymous "liquidator of armies" since those in the audience that were in favor of continuing the war, namely the oligarchic government officials and the city's wealthiest, were presented with dissent straight from the mouth of a woman who employs a sex strike as a negotiating tool – a ridiculous premise! – they could dismiss the comedy as nothing more; at the same time, those aligned with the play's author could easily recognize the intense pleas for peace hidden behind his plays' "simplicity and vulgarity" (Wasson). This pattern repeats during most periods of major historical flux: the deep anxieties about the fallout of the Second World War inspired the formally near-

unrecognizable dramatic works of Ionesco and Beckett, just as the societal upheavals of the Victorian period led to Oscar Wilde's plays with their prominent subpar socialites.

The last time I taught Wilde was at a 2023 summer teaching internship at the Northfield Mount Hermon School in Gill, MA, when I put his *The Importance of Being Earnest* in front of my eight middle schoolers, none of whom had ever read a play in a language arts class before. We read most of it as a group with my co-teachers and I stepping in to play supporting roles when needed. When we asked our students why they thought this play was so unpopular with critics when it was first produced in 1895, they were all deeply confused: one remarked that it was so funny that he didn't understand why people wouldn't have liked it while the rest of the class nodded along. I remember feeling the same when I first read *Earnest* when I was that same age: being raised on media like Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* and Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants*, two shows that are largely silly for the sake of entertainment, I couldn't wrap my head around the play's bad critical reception, like William Archer's review in *The World* that read in part, "What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions, and is nothing but an absolutely wilful [*sic*] expression of an irrepressibly witty personality?" (qtd. in Beckson 189-90). For me, media without "principle"s was exactly what I was used to and what I wanted in the material I had to read for school. I was not provided the tools to fully interrogate the dissenting capacity of works like Wilde's because my teacher used the play as a mechanism to instruct her students about literary techniques like foiling and foreshadowing. Of course, these are important formal techniques on which to instruct about in a language arts classroom – or, at the very least, formal techniques that the Connecticut state Board of Education decided were important enough to be taught to all seventh graders in 2014. However, students would receive a more holistic

understanding of why the materials they are being presented with in classrooms were written *AND* why that matters if plays like these were taught more theatrically, specifically those used in the field of dramaturgy.

Professional dramaturg Amy Steele defines dramaturgy as the process by which plays are studied "from a literary and performance standpoint" while also being "investigated [through] the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts of [its] world". It is always multidimensional and interdisciplinary, rarely neat or tidy, and, having done some dramaturgy-style research for my own undergraduate thesis on the applications of Absurdism on the late 20th century works of Sarah Kane, a worthwhile challenge. While the exact tasks a dramaturg is asked to undertake vary from one production to the next, a key element of dramaturgy is helping unite the source text's point of view with the director's vision for a given production. Thus, it requires an understanding of the play as a literary product of its original time period, full of the potential to be rife with references to other writers of that time and inside jokes for its contemporary viewers, as well as a perpetually evolving work of art that can adapt to fit the needs of any future period. As such, dramaturgs must be comfortable considering primary texts alongside contextualizing or historical and critical works in order to flesh out their understanding of the play's universe. Demonstrating how to hold the literary and historical components of dramatic works in hand at the same time through dramaturgical inquiry allows students to fully grasp the political power of literary works like *Lysistrata* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* – and gives them alternate entry points for engaging with literature: dramaturgy is also deeply concerned with the integration of set dressings, props, and costumes into the world of the play. For instance, dramaturgy is what allowed for the successful translation of *Romeo and Juliet* onto the silver screen as Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*: the juxtaposition of the Elizabethan language

against the backdrop of mafia violence keeps the stakes of the original play at the forefront of the adaptation while keeping audiences within a symbolic language they recognize from other pop culture works. Because the kinds of research it requires can be so wide-ranging, providing students with dramaturgical techniques to use in their independent research opens up avenues for students to expand the topics on which they could even think to write into realms in which they are interested, which in turn (ideally) increases the likelihood of high-quality analytical engagement. This construction is in line with the Virginia state language arts standards, which require that high school instruction is split into sub-units that consider primary and secondary texts in tandem to achieve standards RL.3 ("Integration of Concepts") and R.1 ("Evaluation and Synthesis of Information")**;** providing students with a dramaturgical scaffold – an example of which is included in the sample materials here – is an effective way to not only ensure that these types of learning and research are accomplished, but also that students have a shared vocabulary so that they can adequately communicate their thinking or findings.

Additionally, high quality dramaturgical work has a direct connection to the form of particular dramas. Ken Cerniglia, the dramaturg for the original New York City Theatre Workshop run of Anais Mitchell's *Hadestown*, notes that a major part of his work on the show was working to balance creating a high-quality narrative with ensuring the audience was adequately informed: "There were some things that were originally taken for granted about Orpheus and Eurydice when we started, but we found out that not everyone knows this story so we needed to tell the myth from scratch to welcome the audience to the story" (Loria). This particular example speaks to the benefits of dramaturgy instruction for analytical essay writing and public speaking: students would see firsthand how professionals are able to maintain clarity in their work without sacrificing the compelling parts of their underlying arguments.

III.

What makes Renaissance drama an ideal genre for the incorporation of drama-informed practice? As I see it, one of the most obvious benefits of reading early modern texts in contemporary classrooms is that the literature in the plays' texts already exists in multiple forms, most notably verse and prose, usually within the same scene. Much as dramaturgy asks students to hold different disciplinary frameworks side-by-side as they concurrently consider historical and literary texts, reading Renaissance drama asks students to add the additional layer of formal considerations: what does it mean when characters from Ancient Greece speak in Elizabethan verse? Does the meaning change if the identity of the characters switches to that of Florentine nobility? How about if the form switches to prose abruptly? Can we derive different meanings by looking at the text as a poem rather than a speech? Vice versa? By foregrounding work towards fluency in multiple literary modalities from the very beginning, we would produce a generation of learners who are capable of having nuanced conversations on the implications of form on communication without them necessarily realizing it. In fact, I believe that today's students are the most equipped generation to be able to handle these kinds of formal conversations in the classroom as they are inadvertently having them all the time: their lives are saturated with multimodal forms of communication thanks to social media, and looking at similarly multimodal literatures could be especially fruitful for them. Contemporary educators should be aiming to give our students as many outlets for expression as possible so they can continue to thrive in an increasingly multimodal social ecosystem and starting with texts that are always already multi-genre that is an effective way of grounding that kind of expression in examinations of "canonical" text**.**

As I noted previously, incorporating theatre-informed practice into the classroom brings with it the capacity for much more academic equity for students of marginalized or minority demographics. Renaissance dramas open up a second avenue for equitization of the classroom by virtue of the kinds of decoding techniques students will need to learn in order to parse through the Early Modern language they will encounter in them. Reading Elizabethan English is effectively reading another language, albeit one with similar grammar and vocabulary to ours: presenting students with stanzas of verse to decode forces them to struggle through using tools like the Oxford English Dictionary – now accessible to anyone in the United States or the United Kingdom with a public library card – to ascertain what characters are actually communicating. This is a linguistically equitable reading process as all students, regardless of first language, are starting from the same position of non-expertise. Students who are learning English as an additional language are parsing through unfamiliar territory at similar speeds to their English-dominant counterparts because of the unilateral new-ness of Elizabethan language. Further, this may be the first time American students are tasks with translating from a new language into the dominant one: not all public school districts have the funding to support world language programs, and, even if they do, some like my home district in Connecticut choose to bar specific students from enrolling in world language classes so they can get the independent speech or reading intervention they need for success. One of the key benefits of teaching students how to translate texts for themselves, even if it's from one form of English to another, is that they untether themselves from the translations of other scholars and are able to interpret texts entirely for themselves; students, then, begin to find themselves able to disentangle their scholarly points of view from the hegemonic narratives attending some of these plays. Even if they end up agreeing with the commonly held view that that, for instance, the eponymous Titus Andronicus is

a deeply anti-empathetic figure because of his language use, they are able to come to those conclusions without relying on other critics' interpretive frameworks. If American students are not learning translatory skills in world language classrooms, the language arts sphere could – perhaps, should -- pick up that mantle.

As a scholar of the English Early Modern period, I know firsthand that there is a well of legitimate arguments to be made against the continued instruction of English Renaissance texts in the contemporary language arts classroom. One prolific argument centers on representative modes found within Shakespeare's body of work: most students will not be able to see their experiences or identities reflected in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature because they are not aristocrats or merchants or royalty or wizards or Roman soldiers or… The list goes on. Further, as teachers like Honolulu's Punahou School's 8th grade English teacher Christina Torres points out in her *EducationWeek* op-ed "Why I'm Rethinking Teaching Shakespeare in my English Classroom", "My kids deserve to study stories that represent and validate their experiences and cultures, something I know is important for their development. Questioning how well Shakespeare serves that goal is crucial, especially considering […] some of his stories perpetuate problematic and outdated ideas about gender roles and historically oppressed cultures", like the antisemitic portrayal of *The Merchant of Venice*'s Shylock. Further, Shakespeare's singular Black protagonist, Othello, is manipulated into murdering his wife in cold blood, and his corpus is littered with misogyny – look no further than the plot of the comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*, which sees Katherine effectively tortured by her husband Petruchio until she becomes the ideal, subservient wife. Texts that are so deeply informed by the attitudes towards people of color and women to name just a few can be uncomfortable to teach for fear of perpetuating them. Drexel University professor Paula Marantz Cohen described *Othello* as a "land mine" due to its being

"riddled with ethnic slurs and slights", which informed her long-standing avoidance of teaching it. Why would a professor teaching in Philadelphia – a city in part defined by tension between the elite, majority-white population of its plethora of colleges and the communities of color being actively relocated in favor of expanding university housing in University City or rebuilding the 76ers NBA stadium overtop of Chinatown – want to risk putting material that may add to that tension in front of her students?

My question for those that believe Shakespeare's works should be excised from syllabi for its problematic elements is, what do our students gain from being barred from engaging with difficult material? As noted earlier, I see the formal difficulties inherent in reading Elizabethan texts as key for teaching our students how to persevere in classroom settings. Putting thematically complex and uncomfortable plays in front of high school students, I believe, flexes that same muscle: I believe educators have a duty to demonstrate for our students how to exist in an imperfect society and recognize the hallmarks of bigotry as they happen *and* how to have open conversations about it with their peers. Texts like, for one example, *Othello* can be examined in the vacuum of a classroom through the lens of racial awareness and used to facilitate larger conversations about the ways that racial bigotry is used to highlight larger social inequities within the play's version of Venice. Ms. Cohen recalls that, after teaching *Othello* to a mixed class of both Drexel undergraduate students and West Philadelphia residents, her older students' ability to "separate racism from other aspects of the play", informed by their lived experience of America in the 1950s and '60s, opened the door to a larger discussion of

> how Shakespeare dramatized the ways in which racism can distort the viewpoint of both victim and victimizer. Othello's extreme language and emotion, and his paranoia and jealousy are, at least in part, byproducts of his outsider status. At one point, Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness by arguing that it was "unnatural" for her to be attracted to him in the first place. Othello accepts this argument, an indication of his "low self-esteem", my students noted.

> Similarly, Desdemona's father could not imagine that Othello would fall in love with – and be loved by – his daughter. Thus can prejudices blind us to what's happening in front of our eyes. (Cohen)

Dismissing texts that do not align with contemporary viewpoints on, in the case of *Othello*, Blackness removes our students' ability to learn how to engage in these difficult conversations outside the classroom. Often, our students are much more capable of having these sorts of discussions within controlled spaces because the unfortunate truth is that they are likely being exposed to the same types of discourse in their extracurricular lives. Further, it revokes our students' access to a space in which they can ask the kinds of questions that could lead to social ostracization in any other social space. Where else can a student ask if Iago is meaning to be racist? Or if Othello is really a victim? Teachers are the best equipped to both answer those kinds of questions and to open up larger conversations among students to see what their reactions to those potentially inflammatory remarks are. Just as students should be encouraged to make brave choices in their in-class readings and their polished argumentative writings, so too should they be allowed the space to take stances that are unpopular, not fully informed, or both.

Beyond that, I personally think it is remarkable that William Shakespeare was able to construct plays in which Jewish and Black characters – and, depending on one's reading of *The Tempest*, a visibly disabled character – feature so heavily *and* get them in front of Elizabethan audiences. During her reign, Elizabeth I commissioned her Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, to crack down on any artistic forms that could be read as seditious, leading to the "transmutat[ion of] his office from purveyor of royal entertainment to dramatic censor" (Clare 169). After the passing of the 1581 "Acte Against Sedicious Wordes and Rumors Uttered Against the Queenes Most Excellent Majestie" which allowed those convicted of circulating such materials punishable by public execution, playwrights including Shakespeare and many of his

collaborators were forced to rewrite sections of plays in order to appease Tilney and his cohort. This act also allowed the Privy Council, Elizabeth's most trusted advisory group, to seize control of all sixty printing presses across England, allowing for a holistic crackdown on printed medias as well as performed ones (Clare 169). In a historical moment when book bans have been revived by state governments and individual school boards across the country in order to protect a homogenous view of a white, cis-normative, conservative United States, I cannot think of a more appropriate set of texts to assess than Elizabethan dramas.

Pairing older censored texts like Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the printed copies of which bear the scars of several rounds of Privy Council mandated edits across its iterations, and novels like Orwell's *1984* would allow for an extended examination of the ways in which governments of different historical eras use bibliographic censorship in order to protect their best interests, something I hope to demonstrate in my later sample materials. Pairing dramas and novels in this way also allows for a direct translation of the techniques students use to analyze dramatic constructions – the use of stage directions and explicit versus implicit characterization, to name a few – onto the novel genre. Too often are skills learned for one genre-based unit, in my experience, left in that unit when the next one begins, something that I feel is exacerbated by mastery-based curricula that can be so hyper specific. Students of mine, especially the section of high schoolers I taught at Northfield Mount Hermon, felt a tremendous amount of trepidation about using frameworks they were told only worked on, for example, short stories and relocating them onto short plays because previous teachers told them not to. This pattern of hyper-division of skills by genre, whether self- or authoritatively imposed, reflects the same patterns I have observed previously with my students struggling to hold literary and historical analytical frames

in mind at the same time that I hope to address via incorporating dramaturgical skills and techniques into the classroom.

Opening a drama-informed semester by reading a Shakespeare play also formally foregrounds a discussion of canon formation and the process by which certain works become canonized socially and academically. Too often are students told to read an assortment of what may seem like entirely random novels without being given a peek behind the curtain as to why specific texts are being put in front of them – as well as in front of thousands of other public-school students around the country. Starting an academic year with the English Renaissance and Shakespeare also starts the year off with some of the most widely canonized English-language texts. In fact, scholars including the University of California at Irvine's Robert Folkenflik have argued that the Renaissance saw the first attempts by English writers to formalize a national canon, tracing the first "explicit call for a secular canon of English writers to William Covell in 1595: 'take the course to canonize your own writer, that not every bald ballader to the prejudice of Art, may passe current with a Poet's name". Language arts curricula are so often dominated by the very canons that began developing at this point in history, and, as more educators are attempting to dismantle any inherited canon-dominant syllabi, it may be worth making the constructed nature of these cultural inheritance transparent for our students. Starting at Shakespeare, few secondary students are aware that many of his works were written in honor of aristocratic patrons or that the continued existence of his troupe of actors was financed first by the Lord Chamberlain, then by King James himself after his ascendance to the throne in 1603 (Nelson 280, 277). The contributors to Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells's *The Shakespeare Circle: An Alternative Biography*, including Alan Nelson in his chapter on patronage, heavily suggest that this sort of patronage directly led to the popularity of Shakespeare's work in western

canon construction at the detriment to many of his contemporaries, most notably Ben Jonson. Examining the constructions of canon and the long-lasting implications of variables like patronage in classroom spaces allows for the inclusion of texts that are often left off of syllabi, like comedies including Jonson's *The Alchemist* or Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize*, the latter of which serves as a continuation of *The Taming of the Shrew* wherein the wicked Petruchio, having killed Katherine, is finally made to suffer the consequences of his misogyny. Exposing students to the confounding factors, like patronage, publicity tours, or manufactured public outrage, that still exist to manipulate the popularity of various literary works will open eyes to just how many other authors have been left in the wake of literary canonization.

My final note on the criticality of continuing to utilize Renaissance drama in public classrooms regards the financial precarity of public education nationwide. In a country where the amount of federal funding per public school student per year ranges so wildly from $4,369/enrolled pupil in Alaska to a meager $1,311/enrolled pupil in Utah, who continually fails to meet UNESCO education spending benchmarks, and whose public education budget has dropped by almost $40 billion since 2010 – and will likely continue to plummet given the current presidential administration's attempt to destroy the Department of Education entirely --, it is integral to the survival of high quality public education for instructors to share materials that can be accessed in any district at any funding threshold. The beauty of studying the Renaissance at a middle or high school level is that is can be almost entirely free: Shakespeare's texts, for example, can be accessed for free online via sites like the Project Gutenberg archive or the Folger Shakespeare Library, both of which provide high quality glossaries and images alongside scholarly editions of the plays. Scholarly editions of Stephen Greenblatt's *The Norton Shakespeare*, third edition, are accessible via a free account with the Internet Archive, which

include prefacing essays and extensive critical bibliographies for each included play. Companies like SparkNotes have created student-focused study guides for nearly every Shakespeare play and poem for additional support. For those instructors who would like to incorporate filmed versions of plays into their syllabi, they needn't look further than a free subscription to Tubi which has, among plentiful others, Kenneth Branagh's award-winning 1996 adaptation of *Hamlet.* While reliable internet access is the primary barrier for equity in this case, government initiatives headed by the USDA are working to increase broadband access in rural communities across the country, with a total of $1 billion invested as of 2024 ("Broadband"). Open-source materials like Renaissance dramas will continue to be accessible for students and instructors alike regardless of the continued destruction of educational infrastructure being undertaken at the federal level – and their access will continue to be equitable. High level language arts education can be just as accessible to Title I students as those attending elite private institutions, and utilizing free and open-access resources is, as I see it, one of the keys to ensuring equity in English education.

IV.

Using communication-, consent-, and dramaturgy-centered practices in the classroom ultimately will serve both students and instructors greatly by recentering the classroom around trust and openness rather than arbitrary standardized benchmarks. There is not much any individual educator can do from within the classroom to dismantle the standardized practices put in place by federal acts, like those that linger from 2001's No Child Left Behind policies, or by national curriculum-development companies like The Common Core. However, these practices will help students gain a more nuanced understanding of how the kinds of tools they learn in a language

arts classroom can serve them in other parts of their life: a theatre-centered classroom becomes a space to rehearse the difficult conversations in which they will have to engage later down the line, whether that be asking a boss for a day off or sparring with a friend about the role of race in the contemporary political landscape.

If absolutely nothing else, centering a language arts curriculum around the theatrical arts works in opposition to the trend of continued disembodiment in the classroom. Generative AI tools – especially large language models like OpenAI's ChatGPT --- pose an existential threat to students' ability, not just to read and write well enough to reach state benchmarks, but to think for themselves. One thing those models can *never* approximate is the experience of feeling a text move through a student's mind and body in the present moment or the electric crackle of connections forming between students in a shared scholastic space. Maravich ended our interview with this comment on the power of "embodied practice[s]" in his classrooms:

> One of the things that was identified from our faculty partners that we were working with, even in our first semester [Fall 2020] […] was the way our visits were not just creating an opportunity for students to depend or expand their intellectual connections to material, but it was just as much – if not more, sometimes – about the way that our visits created this opportunity for connection between the human beings and the community of the classroom. Some of that was about […] an embodied practice: theatre practices in the classroom can open up a type of witnessing for students, can create different access points for learning, can create this sense of belonging, can allow a classroom to feel experimental and playful and fun. (36:22-37:10)

I am dedicated to preserving the art of studying literature and the joy that can come along with it in public classrooms across the United States. As I hope I have demonstrated, I view the continued presence of dramatic works in such classrooms and the techniques that attend their study as paramount to the success of future generations of students as fully formed communicators and thinkers, in arenas both academic and rodeo.

V.

Example 11th grade materials with associated VA state education standards

*A note on rubrics: the rubrics I have included are tri-column: meets standards, partially meets standards, does not yet meet standards. The middle is blank to allow for more tailored feedback on work that is partially in both other categories. My rubric use is simply to communicate to students whether they are meeting the formal benchmarks, not to critique the content-level critiques. Theatre is about individual expression within the bounds of a show, and I treat my rubrics the same way. This organization has yielded great results at a college-level, and I hope to experiment with the same system at the high school level as well.

- 50-minute lesson plan for language decoding using Shakespeare sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold") **[Standards: RL.2 – Craft and Style, RI.3 – Integration of Concepts]**

  - Start with reading poem aloud, at least 3 different voices – what do we immediately notice aurally? What is the energy of this poem?
  - Individually, students will take 2 minutes and go through and mark any words that they are unsure of within the context of the poem or generally
    - Each student invited to mark one word from their list on the projected copy, duplicates allowed
  - Using an example word, model use of OED.com to find ***appropriate*** definition for unknown words by going through provided definitions, narrowing down by part of speech, then by eliminating options by context clues
    - There may be multiple good definitions! If this is the case for a word, have them spitball about what this could mean, especially if it's intentional
    - Caution against reading with modern vocabularies: if there's a word that you *think* you know what it means in 2025 but it doesn't fit the rest of the poem, give it a quick look-up anyway
    - Make sure to mention that this is a method of close reading. Though this exact method is best suited for texts with a majority-unfamiliar English vocabulary, these techniques, namely being familiar with how to navigate a complex dictionary, will be helpful in the future.
  - Assign each student to a word brainstormed on the board and 2 minutes to try and find the best definition – after 2 minutes, add a list of definitions on the board [20]

- Group students in pairs: using the definitions we've found as a class, rewrite Sonnet 73 in contemporary English
    - Each group finds a buddy: pair and share, see where the main differences are, resolve differences if any appear [30]
- Repeat this process with Sonnet 99 ("The forward violet thus did I chide") [40]
- 3 volunteers to share their modernizations – using these modernizations, what do we think Shakespeare actually means? What is the purpose of this poem? [50]

- DBQ set-up for in-class timed writing to be competed in one, 75-minute period

In an argumentative essay, incorporate details from four of the following speeches to address the following prompt: How does William Shakespeare frame the issue of class in his comedies? Does he align the viewer with the interests of the aristocracy or the commonfolk? What does this tell us about his class understandings or the wider class politics of Elizabethan England? You may also consider any materials we have looked at in class thus far in the unit. **[Standards: Textual Evidence K-12, RV.1 – Word Analysis, RL.2 – Craft and Style]**

Selections to consider:

***The Winter's Tale*, Polixenes (beginning IV.iv)**

Mark your divorce, young sir,
Whom son I dare not call; thou art too base
To be acknowledged: thou a sceptre's heir,
That thus affect'st a sheep-hook! Thou old traitor,
I am sorry that by hanging thee I can
But shorten thy life one week. And thou, fresh piece
Of excellent witchcraft, who of force must know
The royal fool thou copest with, —
(Shepherd: O, my heart!)
I'll have thy beauty scratch'd with briers, and made
More homely than thy state. For thee, fond boy,

If I may ever know thou dost but sigh
That thou no more shalt see this knack, as never
I mean thou shalt, we'll bar thee from succession;
Not hold thee of our blood, no, not our kin,
Far than Deucalion off: mark thou my words:
Follow us to the court. Thou churl, for this time,
Though full of our displeasure, yet we free thee
From the dead blow of it.

***The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio (beginning I.i.124)**

'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
How much I have disabled mine estate,
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance:
Nor do I now make moan to be abridged
From such a noble rate; but my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts
Wherein my time something too prodigal
Hath left me gaged. To you, Antonio,
I owe the most, in money and in love,
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburden all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe…
In my school-days, when I had lost one shaft,
I shot his fellow of the self-same flight
The self-same way with more advised watch,
To find the other forth, and by adventuring both
I oft found both: I urge this childhood proof,
Because what follows is pure innocence.
I owe you much, and, like a wilful youth,
That which I owe is lost; but if you please

To shoot another arrow that self way
Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
As I will watch the aim, or to find both
Or bring your latter hazard back again
And thankfully rest debtor for the first.

***The Merchant of Venice,* Shylock (beginning I.iii.88)**

“Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances:
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help:
Go to, then; you come to me, and you say
'Shylock, we would have moneys:' you say so;
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold: moneys is your suit
What should I say to you? Should I not say
'Hath a dog money? is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?' Or
Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness, Say this;
'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;
You spurn'd me such a day; another time
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys'?

***The Tempest*, Caliban (beginning I.ii.396)**

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' the island.

***Two Gentlemen of Verona,* Launce (beginning IV.iv.1)**

When a man's servant shall play the cur with him, look you, it goes hard: one that I brought up of a puppy; one that I saved from drowning, when three or four of his blind brothers and sisters went to it. I have taught him, even as one would say precisely, 'thus I would teach a dog.' I was sent to deliver him as a present to Mistress Silvia from my master; and I came no sooner into the dining-chamber but he steps me to her trencher and steals her capon's leg: O, 'tis a foul thing when a cur cannot keep himself in all companies! I would have, as one should say, one that takes upon him to be a dog indeed, to be, as it were, a dog at all things. If I had not had more wit than he, to take a fault upon me that he did, I think verily he had been hanged for't; sure as I live, he had suffered for't; you shall judge. He thrusts me himself into the company of three or four gentlemanlike dogs under the duke's table: he had not been there—bless the mark!—a pissing while, but all the chamber smelt him. 'Out with the dog!' says one: 'What cur is that?' says another: 'Whip him out' says the third: 'Hang him up' says the duke. I, having been acquainted with the smell before, knew it was Crab, and goes me to the fellow that whips the dogs: 'Friend,'

quoth I, 'you mean to whip the dog?' 'Ay, marry, do I,' quoth he. 'You do him the more wrong,' quoth I; 'twas I did the thing you wot of.' He makes me no more ado, but whips me out of the chamber. How many masters would do this for his servant? Nay, I'll be sworn, I have sat in the stocks for puddings he hath stolen, otherwise he had been executed; I have stood on the pillory for geese he hath killed, otherwise he had suffered for't.

	Meets Standards	Partially Meets Standards	Does Not Yet Meet Standards
Thesis	The student frames their essay around a central thesis that is concise and arguable.		There is no thesis present in the submission.
Evidence	The student includes evidence from at least four of the provided selections.		The student includes evidence from fewer than 3 of the provided selections.
Analysis	The student includes analysis on each of the pieces of evidence that ties directly back to the thesis; the analysis is grounded in the text and any applicable background knowledge from class.		There is no analysis, OR the analysis provided is not grounded in either text or background knowledge from class.
Conclusion	The student includes a conclusion that relates to the thesis and uses it to present their thoughts on the topic as a whole and any relevant wider implications.		There is no conclusion.

- Multi-modal dramaturgical final summative assignment on alternative canons

In a final product equivalent to 5-6 pages written OR 12-15 minutes spoken, present me with your suggestion for an alternative syllabus that includes NONE of the authors we have read this year. You may use any medium you wish: an essay, a website, an online or physical presentation – if you can dream it, you can use it. The final product should include five texts and an attending rationale of at least 300 words and a concluding section on the importance of switching the texts

that are taught at the eleventh grade level for students. Beyond that, you have total control over this project. **[Standards: RI.3 – Integration of concepts, W.2 – Organization and Composition, C.2 – Speaking and Presentation of Ideas, C.3 – Integrating Multimodal Literacy]**

	Meets Standards	Partially Meets Standards	Does Not Yet Meet Standards
Text Choices	The student includes at least 5 alternative texts.		The student includes fewer than 4 alternative texts.
Analysis	The student includes a fleshed out rationale for each chosen text and relates them back to the units explored in class.		There are no rationales provided.
Conclusion	The student includes a concluding section in which they outline the importance of alternative canon construction.		There is no conclusion.
Format	The final project is formatted appropriately for the given genre. I.E. a submitted paper looks and functions like a paper.		The formal constructions are inappropriate for the chosen genre.

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