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# Annotated Table of Contents

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## Introduction

### *Chapter 1. Shakespeare Anxiety*

Introduction to my interest in Shakespeare and to these techniques.

## Understanding the Text: Discussing, Responding, Acting

### *Chapter 2. The Cast List and Opening Episodes: Hamlet*

A ready way into the text is to have the class read the cast list out loud, pausing to discuss each seemingly related group of characters. This exercise helps students to become familiar with the strange-sounding names, and to note relationships, ranks, and potential conflicts. A second technique is to do dramatic readings of the opening episodes, stopping at the introduction of each new character to discuss what the episode accomplishes.

### *Chapter 3. The Quiz Revisited: Hamlet*

This chapter presents six brief questions on Act I of *Hamlet*, designed to test not merely fact but also understanding—of motive, language, and event. The chapter also describes the process of designing a quiz and its goal of putting the teacher in the position of new reader.

### *Chapter 4. Mime as Meaning: Hamlet*

This chapter describes two pantomime exercises that bring out the subtext—the understanding of character that some students might feel but have trouble expressing in words. The first asks everyone to mime a particular emotion that one of the characters is feeling—e.g.,

for Hamlet, depression; for Marcellus, terror; for Claudius, triumph. The second, more complex exercise asks volunteers to pair up and mime opposite sides of Claudius's nature: his public and private faces.

### ***Chapter 5. The Live Sculpture: Hamlet***

This is a more complex mime exercise, in which the student “sculptor” casts classmates and then arranges them in a group sculpture of some key moment in an act—e.g., the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, Oswald's attack on the blind Gloucester in *King Lear*, or Claudius's first public audience in *Hamlet*. The rest of the class serves as audience and, when the arrangement is complete, as commentators on these silent scenes.

### ***Chapter 6. Speaking the Speech: The Sonnet and the Dramatic Monologue—Antony and Cleopatra***

Each student memorizes and presents to the class a brief passage—sonnet, soliloquy, or monologue. Performing a speech gives students a stake in understanding each word—you can't say convincingly what you don't understand—as well as a chance to occupy the spotlight.

### ***Chapter 7. Acting the Short Episode: Othello and The Taming of the Shrew***

This chapter describes the acting of short (20–40 lines) episodes, cast by the teacher and memorized, blocked, and presented by the students.

## **Writing About Shakespeare: Five Kinds of Papers**

### ***Chapter 8. The Critical Essay: Hamlet***

This is a description of several prewriting techniques for discovering a thesis and beginning a rough draft. First, the teacher offers a list of suggested topics, organized by category. Next, the student chooses a topic, brainstorms, and devises a thesis statement. Then the student presents a draft of the statement for the rest of the class to critique. The chapter describes several kinds of faulty thesis statements, as well as means of strengthening them. Next, the student learns how to break the writing process into stages, to separate the stage of generating ideas from the stages of organizing and expressing them. The first of these stages,

also described in the chapter, is a conference with the teacher on a short section of the rough draft.

### ***Chapter 9. The Invented Diary: Othello, Macbeth, and The Taming of the Shrew***

This is a paper written in the voice and from the point of view of a key character—e.g., Edmund from *King Lear* or Kate from *The Taming of the Shrew*. It lets the student describe moments that take place offstage and supply motives and thoughts for characters who do not confide everything to the audience.

### ***Chapter 10. The Parody: King Lear***

Like the diary, this is a chance for the student to look at the play from a new angle, this time the oblique one of Monty Pythonesque whimsy. Through exaggeration or understatement, it takes a different view of the original and yet is entertaining in its own right.

### ***Chapter 11. Director's Choices: Branagh's Henry V***

This is a critique of a scene from a videotape, based on the choices that the director has made in casting, lighting, costuming, blocking, setting, and editing. It is an exercise in comparison—written after students have read the play, seen the rest of the videotape and, if possible, compared it with another performance.

### ***Chapter 12. The Student as Director: Antony and Cleopatra***

This assignment asks the student to describe how she or he would direct a key episode from a play that the class has studied. It may be a scene that is not staged in the original, such as the opening or closing moments, before the first line of dialogue or after the last. Or it may be a climactic moment—a duel, a proposal, a trial. As with the critique of the videotape (Chapter 11), a key aim is for students to realize that there is no one “correct” interpretation of the play, that in every production, including their own, the director must make crucial choices.

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## Chapter 1

# Shakespeare Anxiety

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Why another book on Shakespeare? The answer was implied in the comic strip *Crock* a few years back. The fat harem girl is flirting with a member of the Lost Patrol. “How do you feel about me, Maggot?” she prompts. “You ain’t too awful bad,” he manages to say at last. “It ain’t Shakespeare,” she beams, “but I’ll take it.” If it were Shakespeare, she implies, Maggot’s response would be poetry: Just the name represents the standard of eloquence and culture. But a lot of people lack her rotund complacency. Shakespeare seems to them up there in the airy reaches with ancient Greek and calculus—abstruse, scary, and boring.

It *is* hard not to be wary of Shakespeare, or at least of his reputation. The great name is evoked constantly in political speeches, novels, even TV sitcoms. The plays have been a mainstay of theater companies for 400 years. In any given week, some group, amateur or professional, in New York or London or Tokyo or Bucharest, is sure to be staging something by Shakespeare. The leading roles—Hamlet, Cleopatra, Shylock, Rosalind—remain the most coveted in the repertory, the pinnacle of an actor’s career. A new film of one of the plays, such as Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* or Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet*, can be both a classic interpretation and a hit. Not only is Shakespeare famous; he is the most famous author in the world.

Not surprisingly, Shakespeare continues to be the author most frequently taught in American high schools. That fact is not always greeted with enthusiasm by our students. Even those of us who love reading and seeing the plays may be susceptible to Shakespeare anxiety when we’re asked to teach them. A major cause of this anxiety is that most of us have been given so little guidance about how to go about it. The college lecture model doesn’t work with squirming high school sophomores: Talked at, they tend to tune out, like the glazed-over class in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. Nor is the large body of criticism much help: While the scholars are pondering a possible medieval analogue for *The Merchant of Venice* or the Folio lineation of a scene, students are trying to distinguish Antonio from Bassanio and wondering whether “blank verse” isn’t just a fancy name for prose. We teachers are left with the Prufrockian quandaries: “So how should I presume? And how shall I begin?”

*Shakespeare: A Teaching Guide* is meant to answer both questions. It describes techniques for reading and writing about Shakespeare that have evolved in my own classes. I have taught on several levels, from ninth grade through graduate school, and to students with

a wide range of sensibilities—jocks and poets, remedial readers and National Merit finalists, underachievers and perfectionists. Shakespeare, I have found, can appeal to them all—but not in the same ways or through the same means. This book recounts what my own teachers and students have taught me about how Shakespeare can speak to us.

I know from personal experience that Shakespeare can be taught well in high school. In the eleventh grade, at a public school in Detroit, I was introduced to *Macbeth*, and to his creator, by a master teacher, Leo Cierpial, Ph.D., aesthete, lover of words and ideas. He made us see that the witches are both eerie and entrancing, the Macbeths repellent and vulnerable, the verse melodic and understandable. He took the play seriously, but he was confident enough of its greatness to treat it playfully. One day the class rebel challenged the claim that Shakespeare wrote in blank verse. He refused to believe that the lines had a regular rhythm, that they were anything more than oddly spaced prose, that any playwright could sustain iambic pentameter for five acts. Dr. C. replied coolly, “Oh, it’s just a question of practice. The meter acts like a metronome—get it going in your head and out come the words in the right rhythm.” And he launched into a spontaneous parody of the dagger soliloquy, turning it into a cigarette ad: “Is this a Camel I see before me, the filter toward my face?/Come, let me puff thee. I have thee not and yet I taste thee still.”

I laughed in sudden understanding. The strange rhythms of the lines had enchanted me from the first scenes. Long before I could understand what the Macbeths were inflicting on others or suffering themselves, I simply enjoyed the sounds of the words. At sixteen, my memory was quick and supple. The weird sisters’ spells entered into it effortlessly. Dr. Cierpial’s requirement that we memorize one of the long passages made me hear Macbeth’s voice. The “tomorrow and tomorrow” soliloquy touched my imagination—made me see the dusty passage, the flickering candle, the bellowing idiot. It was a revelation to imagine Shakespeare himself tapping out the lines—and to realize that making fun of them did not diminish their intrinsic worth.

The following year, the same teacher taught me *Hamlet*. Almost from the prince’s first appearance, I was smitten. He sounded so bright and funny and unhappy—more fascinating and more screwed up than my brightest and most neurotic friends. I read my favorite scenes over and over. The week we finished studying the play, Olivier’s *Hamlet* happened to be on television. I do not come from a family of readers, much less Shakespeare fans. When I told my dad that *Hamlet* was playing, he said, “Yeah? Third base or shortstop?” The night of the broadcast, he was off bowling and the younger kids were asleep. I tried to explain the plot to my mother, who had gamely joined me. But after a few polite “Oh, really” ’s she dozed off, too.

I sat in front of the flickering screen, transfixed by Olivier’s resonant voice, Jean Simmons’s delicate prettiness, the bleak, magnificent castle. Even Sir Laurence’s chopped-off bleach job and the bathtub sailboat staging of the pirates’ attack could not spoil the illusion. I was furious at Ophelia. How could she be such a Daddy’s girl? Didn’t she know that Hamlet needed her? It was like the fantasy I’d had at ten, before I learned that girls couldn’t become major league baseball players: the Detroit Tigers were down two runs in the bottom of the ninth and the manager gave me the nod to pinch hit—move over, Ophie, I’m coming into that