When I was a student, we learned about William Shakespeare’s life from surviving records in his Stratford church and from documents related to his theater work in London, such as ledger entries and Henslowe’s diary. The picture is slightly different now, thanks to popular books such as James Shapiro’s *A Year in the Life of Shakespeare: 1599 and 1606: The Year of Lear*. Such recent scholarship permits us to track Shakespeare’s movements down to the week, and occasionally even to the day. The question is, how does this new biographical information help secondary teachers study Shakespeare with their students?

Two problems immediately arise. One is that there are still many holes in Shakespeare’s biography. And even if we could track him more accurately, we still have little idea of what he was thinking while he was actually writing. The other danger is intentional fallacy. Even if we had a firmer grip on his process, would it be useful to bring that information to bear? What impact, if any, does it have on a *Hamlet* unit to know that the play was written not long after both Shakespeare’s father and only son died?

Scholars have speculated about autobiographical elements that may be present in the plays themselves. Many believe that the pastoral section of act 4 of *The Winter’s Tale* may be Shakespeare reminiscing about his childhood or that Prospero’s final speech in *The Tempest* may be the playwright’s farewell to the London stage scene. Many have tried to make connections between the plays and events and figures in Shakespeare’s England, from the possible nod to his Scottish-born king in *Macbeth* to his changing the opening of *Coriolanus* from its source material in Plutarch (where the citizens are rioting about usury) to riots over grain hoarding, which were happening in the English midlands, not far from Shakespeare’s home, in 1607–08. Ultimately, the use of biographical material about Shakespeare is a dead end in the high school classroom. Connections are purely speculative and will contribute little to a student’s understanding of a play.

This does not mean that there is no place for biography and memoir in a secondary Shakespeare unit. What matters are not the facts and details of Shakespeare’s life, but rather using his plays, characters, and themes as a springboard for student-created biography and memoir activities. One fun way to approach this is to use a “cutaway” exercise, based on the technique that shows such as *Modern Family* use. Students perform a scene, which we film, and then we interview the students in character (in modern English) talking directly to the camera about what was going through their minds during the scene. We then interpolate the cutaways into the filmed scene for the finished product. It’s a quick, easy way to get students inside characters’ minds and to bring the characters and the subtext to life.

Another technique is to have students write biographies of the characters they are playing that extend beyond the timeframe of the particular play you are studying. This might be prompted by the same questions actors use, such as what their character desires and what they fear in a given moment or scene. These character biographies may be written by individual students or in what the Folger Shakespeare Library (www.folger.edu/) calls “character committees.” Finally, any effective performance-based approach will entail having students keep a journal of their process as they build their characters and their scenes. These journals offer students surprising insight into their own learning styles and methods of problem-solving.
Yet another approach derives from Harold Bloom, the great Yale scholar and author of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. He makes the case that Shakespeare was the first writer to develop the modern, introspective concept of the human self. Two decades after its publication, the book's ideas are still controversial; many critics see Bloom's thesis as the product of intense literary passion and fandom ("Bardolatry") more than actual evidence. The validity of Bloom's approach is irrelevant in this case; for our purposes, it works simply as a jumping-off point for students to create introspective narrative pieces that reflect their inner lives and struggles.

For example, *Macbeth* can be viewed as one of the great literary considerations of the nature and character of ambition. In fact, when I teach the play, I always start with Tonya Harding, whose story raises a simple question: How far will you go to get the things that you want? As a path to understanding Macbeth's character, you might have students write about their own ambition and perhaps narrow that down to a moment in their lives where they may have had to do things to get what they wanted that make them uncomfortable in retrospect. Occasionally, I have had students turn the moments that they have written about into short scripts, which the class then performs in groups.

In some ways, this approach borders on reductivism; after all, *Macbeth* is no more "about" ambition than *Hamlet* is about the implications of revenge, or *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* are about being an outsider. Yet, one might argue that Shakespeare's work has been so durable because of his rich and complex understanding and expression of these universal human feelings. Whether or not you agree with Bloom, this notion of Shakespeare as the inventor of our consciousness about these ideas makes the plays a perfect way to stimulate introspective writing from students regarding how their adolescent selves are being formed.

When I was a graduate student, Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* was a beacon of New Historicism light in the darkness that was the brief heyday of Deconstruction. Greenblatt's claim was that in the West, the idea of consciously fashioning a self based on the cultural and social mores of the time was born during the Renaissance and found its greatest expression in the works of, among others, Shakespeare. We see many examples in Shakespeare of characters consciously creating a self to present to the public, from Hamlet planning his presentation of madness, to Hal choosing to slum it with Falstaff and company as a way to make his carefully planned move to being the good prince seem all the more remarkable, and even to Cordelia choosing not to dissemble as she answers her father's fateful question in the beginning of *King Lear*.

Also, there are countless gender-bending self-fashionings in the comedies. Interestingly, self-fashioning is an idea that has taken on tremendous new significance in the age of social media. We are now in the age of what commentators have come to call the "curated self." Perhaps never in our history have we been more conscious of the process and consequences of creating a self. Students are constantly shaping and reshaping their public selves and even images of their physical selves, online. It might be interesting in this context to introduce Greenblatt's ideas to students, to show them some examples of this kind of self-fashioning from Shakespeare, and finally to have them reflect in discussion and writing on how their curated selves are shaped by the rules and norms of society, and of the world of social media in particular. It might be especially relevant to focus on the strictures faced by outsider groups as they try to create selves, as Shakespeare did with Othello, Shylock, and so many others.
Facing death, Hamlet exhorts Horatio to “draw thy breath in pain and tell my story” (5.2.383–84). Othello takes a moment at the end of his life to ask the horrified onlookers to “speak of me as I am . . . of someone who loved not wisely but too well” (5.2.403–04). These moments, and so many others in Shakespeare, reflect the desire to shape one’s own story, even in death. The concept of creating a self in this manner is not only familiar to our students, but it is a fully metaconscious part of their daily lives on social media. And when, in our lives, do our selves grow and change more than in our adolescent years?

In the end, the biographical facts of Shakespeare’s life are interesting but have little pedagogical importance. From this perspective, Shakespeare serves the secondary teacher best by inspiring students to examine, in a multitude of ways, who they are as “selves” and how the process of creating and maintaining those public personae affects who they are as people.

WORKS CITED

JOSH CABAT is the chair of English for the Roslyn Public Schools and a lecturer on Shakespeare at SUNY Stony Brook. He is a founding member of the Folger Shakespeare Library’s National Teacher Corps and of the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Educational Advisory Council and was the cofounder of the New York Student Shakespeare Festival. He has been a member of NCTE since 1994.

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Congratulations to Ben Roth Shank, Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg, Virginia, for his article “Maximizing the Heuristic Potential of the Enthymeme” (107.3, January 2018), which has been selected for the 2018 NCTE Paul and Kate Farmer *English Journal* Writing Award.


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