Shakespeare in 3D: Bringing the Bard to Life through New (Old) Media

In a world of YouTube, why Shakespeare? Sure, he is as “canon” as they come, but with an endless array of multimedia available to readers today, the Bard’s work is bound to feel more two-dimensional than timeless . . . right? In middle school classrooms where every text students encounter may be the difference between a life of literacy and a lack thereof, why risk the flowery verse of a long-dead Brit?

Instead of teaching *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* this year, what if you substituted Christopher Nolan’s contemporary dream narrative, *Inception* (Brigham, Tull, & Nolan, 2010)? But rather than view the acclaimed film, you hand students a copy of its 146-page screenplay and require them to spend the next four weeks cold-reading the script, stopping every few lines to check for comprehension. Imagine the results. Students who saw the film in theaters seem enthusiastic, but those who didn’t soon despise the endeavor. They have a hard time following the dream-within-a-dream plot sequences laid out in stage directions instead of colorful, contrasting sets. They don’t feel the suspense in action scenes normally accompanied by a full orchestral score. They miss the humor in lines read awkwardly by classmates instead of professional actors. And the film’s award-winning special effects pass unnoticed when they are mere footnotes on a page.

Source material isn’t the problem. Just as Nolan’s screenplay for *Inception* was never intended for an audience of anyone other than moviemakers, Shakespeare didn’t write scripts so much as he wrote *plays*—live productions to be acted out in front of audiences with costumes and sets, music and make-up, intonations and accents. A script-only approach to the Bard deprives students of the myriad visual, auditory, and performative elements that make his plays so enduring.

As two veteran language arts teachers, we certainly have made these same mistakes. But over time, we have witnessed how multimodal approaches can be used to breathe new life into Shakespeare’s timeless texts. We have found that the Bard can engage our students in uniquely powerful ways, so the remainder of this article will discuss best practices that have emerged from our action research, engaging “new” literacies with these “old” texts.

**Kremer’s Multimodal Approach to Romeo and Juliet**

The sound of subwoofers greets my students as they enter the classroom, a ritual they’ve come to expect since we started *Romeo and Juliet* a week ago. Today’s particular flavor is an R&B rap by Poetry N’ Motion, though our “theater” has already featured a playlist as diverse as Dire Straights (rock), Taylor Swift (country), the Reflections (oldies), and Toybox (techno), with many more musical genres to come (see Appendix A).

I don’t give my students time to complain about the Bard; instead, I bombard them with his persistent legacy—in this case, modern music making allusions to his work. In fact, I preempt cynicism from the very beginning of the
unit, launching a series of engaging, student-created YouTube videos of the show’s Prologue (see Kwanjan 12, 2009; Polizardeyelash, 2009; TheRadnessQueen, 2010) before I’ve even announced we’re starting the play. The goal is more than just to hook my audience: it is to provide an intertextual approach to literacy whereby my students can improve their comprehension of Shakespeare’s narratives by coming to understand them in the context of other, more familiar texts (Scolnicov, 1995).

This pedagogy of intertextuality continues in individual journaling, occurring immediately after the last rap beat fades away. Today’s prompt asks students to engage in “soundtracking”—devising a list of songs that correspond with the themes and moods of the scenes studied thus far. Other entries will include formulating a cast list of contemporary actors, imagining alternative settings to Renaissance Verona, and reflecting upon ways that love between two people is still sometimes forbidden in society. All daily writing builds toward the unit’s culminating project: the Director’s Seat, an invitation for students to take a scene from the play and “make it their own” through radical adaptation. Some of the most interesting submissions over the years have included a satirical puppet show of “Lil Romeo and Jules” (see Appendix B), a machinima production of warring space factions (from HALO video game footage), and a documentary-style film of a doomed Jewish–Palestinian love in the Middle East. Assessing students through performance—as opposed to their recall of obscure plot details—provides a more authentic indication of textual mastery and requires an enhanced level of engagement (Gilbert, 1984).

Of course, before students can effectively take the director’s seat, they must experience the play. Unfortunately, the preferred text, a professional live performance of Romeo and Juliet, is rarely on hand when needed. As a practical alternative, my students watch a filmed stage version, a little-known 1982 production featuring Alex Hyde-White and Blanche Baker. Just as with print literature, though, we frequently pause the action to allow for class discussion and comprehension checks. We also occasionally watch multiple versions of the same scene from different productions to emphasize the power a director wields in the meaning-making process.

“Watch” is an important verb here. While giving students an opportunity to visualize their own conceptions of a narrative is productive, Shakespeare never expected his audiences to do that work for themselves. Case in point: They fight. Epic duels (and other acts of physicality) that normally take several minutes on stage are reduced to anticlimactic footnotes in scripts. But by providing a visual context alongside the language, drama can be restored to They kiss and She dies. Furthermore, the information contained in visual texts—sets, costumes, props, character expressions/posturing—provide readers with an additional “silent” language by which to make meaning (Stern, 2007). Susan Spangler writes in a recent edition of English Journal (2009), “This method of engaging with Shakespeare’s texts teaches multimodal literacy skills and critical thinking skills that the traditional methods cannot” (p. 130).

For similar reasons, I give my students a graphic novel version of the play rather than just a script. There are two good options available—one with manga-style art and modernized language published by No Fear Shakespeare (SparkNotes Editors, 2008), and one classic adaptation with original language by John McDonald (2009). Research has shown that the visual nature of graphic novels significantly improves comprehension in language learners (Cary, 2004), and Elizabethan English is very much a second language to most students. Graphic novels also help retain reluctant readers (Smith & Wilhelm,
2002) and increase both functional literacy skills (Jacobs, 2007) and multimodal understanding (Schwarz, 2006). Dr. James Bucky Carter (2007) writes that the more graphic novels and other visual texts are used in the classroom, “. . . the more transformed English will become, moving away from ‘one-size-fits-all’ literacy instruction” (p. 52). Shakespeare would have it no other way.

**Sanders’s Multimodal Approach to *Hamlet***

Sackbuts (a trombone from the Renaissance and Baroque eras), rather than subwoofers, greet my students on day one of our *Hamlet* unit, but they’re not shocked by the antique music. Shakespeare’s plays are filled with cues for music, though no scores survive. Fortunately, other written compositions by 16th- and 17th-century English composers do survive, so we know what Elizabethan music sounded like (see Appendix C). My students get an authentic, aural taste of the Bard’s world just by walking into the room. And should any of them express an interest in playing some of this sublimely modal repertoire, I “book” them for a future date, sheet music being readily available online (e.g., http://earlymusicchicago.org/sheet_music_scores.htm).

As the bell rings, I fade the volume and ask my students if any of them believe in ghosts. Almost every hand goes up. Personal anecdotes ensue, after which I offer an oral synopsis of Act 1, Scene 1. Then, without further ado, I play an audio recording of the scene. We are rapt as we listen to the 10½-minute excerpt featuring the voices of Kenneth Branagh and company.

The actors exit the imagined stage, and I ask my students if they understood the dialogue. Somewhat surprised, they insist they did; nevertheless, I probe. Sure enough, the stuff about Fortinbras’s “resolutes” is a bit murky, but that’s to be expected, regardless of our approach. Feigning confusion, I ask the class why Shakespeare has been difficult for them in the past. Almost in chorus comes an agonized, “It’s that *Old English*!”

Shakespeare’s Early Modern English (EME) can be difficult even for educated adults. To minimize the intimidation in our *Hamlet* study, I’ve prepared a PowerPoint of the first dozen lines of *Beowulf* (c. AD 750): “hwæt, we gar-dena in

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**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK**

**Bridging the Gap between the Bard and the Digital Age**

The authors shared how they brought new life to the studies of Shakespeare in their classrooms. ReadWriteThink.org has some additional examples. In the lesson plan “*All’s Well That Sells Well: A Creative Introduction to Shakespeare,*” students compare attending a performance at The Globe Theater with attending a modern theater production or movie. They then create a commercial for an Elizabethan audience promoting a modern product.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/well-that-sells-well-1120.html

Explore the modern significance of an older text, such as Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet,* in the lesson plan “*Star-Crossed Lovers Online: Romeo and Juliet for a Digital Age*” by asking students to create their own modern interpretation of specific events from the drama.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/star-crossed-lovers-online-857.html

After reading Shakespeare’s *Hamlet,* students identify, analyze, and explain how elements in Botticelli’s painting *Birth of Venus* and examples from the play illustrate the philosophy of Renaissance Humanism in the lesson plan “*Renaissance Humanism in Hamlet and The Birth of Venus.*”


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“This, I tell my students, is Old English. They’re incredulous, so I call up a modern scop (an Old English minstrel) performing the epic on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y13cES7MMd8). Slowly, they begin to recognize a word here and there.

Next, I show them the opening to Chaucer’s “General Prologue” (c. 1400), announcing it as Middle English: “Whan that aprill with his shoures soote . . . .” As I read it aloud, more of the text begins to seem familiar. (Alternatively, use http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE0MtENfOMU.)

Then I show them the first 12 lines of Hamlet’s famous soliloquy: “To be, or not to be, that is the question . . . .” Suddenly, the Bard’s EME looks shockingly normal. With apprehensions abated and imaginations enlivened, we are now prepared to read the text aloud, continuing the ghost story in Scenes 4 and 5 (skipping Scenes 2 and 3 temporarily). And as our post-reading discussion attests, they understand it. But to take this budding “old” literacy a step further, I hand them a fresh copy of a 30-line excerpt (see Appendix D) from the Ghost’s account of his “murder most foul” and ask students to “translate” it, with a partner, into the English they speak. My unabridged Merriam smolders the next morning as volunteers present their versions to the class. Here’s an example from two students who relished sharing their new vocabulary:

Yeah, that sister-marriyin’, wife-taking beast,
With witchcraft and cleverness, with his skill of betraying—
Oh, wicked cleverness and gifts. He has the power to persuade her
To be his lover!

Realizing now that Shakespeare’s every syllable is charged with matter, my students can take the leap of faith, trusting the Poet to make meaning well worth their pains.

We’re far from finished, however. The students’ next challenge is to apply the visual composition techniques they learned in an earlier graphic novels unit and storyboard the passage they’ve paraphrased (see Appendix E). The process of creating graphic images from a verbal text organizes students’ thinking. It taps into their working memory and refines it as it incorporates the new information (Woolley, 2010; Van Meter, Aleksic, Schwartz, & Garner, 2006). In short, students’ comprehension of the verbal text is significantly improved. Additionally, storyboarding flexes the imagination of the artist and the viewer, both of whom must supply closure to “fill in the gaps” between frames of the narrative (McCloud, 1994). Using their paraphrased texts in their storyboards extends the remix of literacies even further, as students must assimilate Shakespeare’s verse in greater depth to “translate” it into their 21st-century vernacular (Kletzien, 2009; Meijer, Veenman, & van Hout-Wolters, 2006; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). But the ultimate medium for students’ exploration of the text is still a verbatim performance.

Edward Rocklin (2009) lays out a near-comprehensive method by which teachers can sensitize their students to the subtle textual details so crucial to a successful Shakespearean realization. Why does Barnardo ask, “Who’s there?” What would be his state of mind, and tone of voice, as he asks? My students’ intertextual approach—hearing, reading, paraphrasing, and drawing the text before performing it—leads them to discover many of these critical details on their own (Bruner, 1977; Dewey, 1910; Piaget, 1952). But as Rocklin (1999) points out, Shakespeare wrote in two languages: that of the script, with its speeches and stage directions; and that of the stage, whose medium is the actor (p. 50). Shakespeare wrote plays.
Conclusion

Literacy today cannot be exclusively defined by print media anymore than it could be in Shakespeare’s lifetime. The Bard incorporated a wide range of visual, auditory, and performative modes of expression; to strip him, and our students, of these important means of communication does a disservice to all involved. When teachers tap into the vast multimedia resources available to them, Shakespeare will come to life in their classrooms, and will prove—in three powerful dimensions—why his work has stood the test of time. *Avatar*, eat your heart out.

References


Appendix A. Allusions to *Romeo and Juliet* in contemporary music

- The Killers/Dire Straits—“Romeo and Juliet” (Rock)
- Taylor Swift—“Love Story” (Country)
- Poetry N’ Motion—“Romeo and Juliet” (R&B/Rap)
- Toybox—“Romeo and Juliet” (Techno)
- Drop Dead Gorgeous—“Love Is Murder” (Punk)
- Blue Oyster Cult—“Don’t Fear the Reaper” (Classic Rock)
- The Reflections—“Just Like Romeo and Juliet” (Oldies)
- West Side Story—“Tonight” (Musical Theatre)

Appendix B. Excerpt from “Lil Romeo and Jules” script

Lil Romeo: Cuz, why you gotta be all up in my Kool-Aid? You ain’t gonna figure out my flavuh.

[A beat while Benvolio talks back]

Lil Romeo: Fine, you wanna know what’s eatin’ me? It’s my girl, Roz. I can’t get no lovin’ from her. She treatin’ me like I got the plague.

[A beat while Benvolio talks back]

Jules: [aside] Romeo, Romeo, where you be, Romeo?

Lil Romeo: [jumping forward] I be right here, girl!

Jules: Who are you, playuh?

Lil Romeo: Your new boyfriend. Do you believe in love at first sight, or should I walk by again?

Appendix C. Audio recordings of Elizabethan music


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Appendix D. Excerpt for paraphrase assignment

Hamlet
Act 1, scene 5: The platform, Elsinore Castle

GHOST

‘Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard¹, A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forgèd process of my death
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father’s life
Now wears his crown.

HAMLET

O, my prophetic soul! My uncle!

GHOST

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast, With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts— O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.

But soft², methinks I scent the morning air. Brief let me be. Sleeping within my orchard, My custom always of the afternoon, Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole, With juice of cursed hebona³ in a vial, And in the porches of my ears did pour The leprous distilment, whose effect Holds such an enmity with blood of man That swift as quicksilver it courses through The natural gates and alleys of the body, And with a sudden vigor it doth posset And curd, like eager droppings into milk, The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine, And a most instant tetter barked about, Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust All my smooth body.

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother’s hand Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched[.]

¹ orchard: palace garden
² soft: “enough,” or “wait a minute”
³ hebona: a poison

Appendix E. Storyboarding

Student storyboarding and paraphrasing example from Hamlet:

Online resources for storyboarding:
http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/storyboarding.html
http://accad.osu.edu/womenandtech/Storyboard%20Resource/
http://multimedia.journalism.berkeley.edu/tutorials/starttofinish/storyboarding/

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