



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2008 Volume I: Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare

---

## Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

I was delighted to lead an enthusiastic group of Fellows in a Summer 2008 seminar for the Yale National Initiative called "Race and Gender in Shakespeare," reading *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, in that order. We were a diverse group, including several high school teachers, some with AP classes, one from an arts and performance magnet school, one from a vocational and technical school, and one art teacher; several middle school teachers, one a specialist in the teaching of English as a second language; and a third grade teacher. Responding to such a broad range of interests, needs, and educational development, these teachers saw a variety of possibilities for teaching Shakespeare in the classroom, both within the mandated exposure to Shakespeare from the ninth through twelfth grades and in more surprising contexts. The rubric of the seminar, featuring "race and gender," was not of special interest to a number of teachers, though five did write curriculum units specifically on that topic and more broadly concerning character and identity. Four others took up topics involving culture, politics, and religion, topics in which identity understood as individuality shaped by group characteristics is still an important consideration. Even the tenth unit, focused on the sonnets, touches on themes that reflect character.

I have arranged the table of contents according to subject matter in the order indicated above. **Kristen Kurzawski** introduces her students to the concept of literary genre, in this case by way of Shakespearean tragedy and comedy. She cites many plays in her illuminating introductory discussion for teachers, and supplements *Macbeth* with *The Taming of the Shrew* in the classroom, where she asks her students to what extent genre shapes and delimits Shakespeare's gender roles. **Marialuisa Sapienza** uses scenes from a number of plays (including *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*) to highlight similarities and differences between concepts of race and gender in Shakespeare's time and in our own, pointing the dialogue in these scenes toward discussions of our own conventional thinking and ways in which it might become more flexible. **Barbara Prillaman** is the teacher with English Language Learners, and her unit is designed to help students whose identities are insecure in a strange environment. To this end she uses Shakespearean texts appropriate to the age and language level of her students—comic books, summaries, children's versions—to underline the identity of such characters as Othello, Iago, and Macbeth.

**Jennifer Sandoval** and **Kimberley Turner** both urge students to develop visual representations of Shakespearean characters, but with very different ends in view. Sandoval, an English teacher, wants to complicate the widely practiced teaching tool called the "body diagram" (thoughts pasted on the head, feelings on the heart, expressions of agency on the limbs) by introducing nuances: for each key character chosen (Iago or Emilia, for example), she adds color coding, body parts moved around, etc., all to indicate moments of psychological change and such complications as the difference between a character's self-

perception and the way the character is viewed by others. Turner is an art teacher, and has in some ways a different purpose: Using both costuming exercises and also the chance of a drawing lesson in oil pastels, she wants students develop an image of a Shakespearean character; but an equally important part of her well-informed unit is the teaching of the relationship between Elizabethan portraiture and contemporaneous art-historical developments on the European continent.

Turning to the units that involve cultural issues: **Catherine Boydston** has prepared a unit that teaches "Shakespeare's World" across the curriculum for third graders. A part of it is an interesting cartoon version of *Macbeth* that will anchor the unit in Shakespeare. What follows is an instructive gallop through cultural, social, and scientific topics featuring contrasts between past and present where appropriate. **Sarah Humphrey** stresses the influence on Shakespeare's plays (and the parts of *Spenser's Faerie Queene* that feature Britomart) of the reign and personality of Queen Elizabeth. This is obviously a "gender" topic too, but I choose to place it here because Humphrey's sophisticated unit trans-genders Elizabeth—using unfamiliar documents that can still capture students' imaginations—as both a feminine ideal and as an identifier with her father's patriarchal image, all of which she applies ingeniously to Shakespeare, especially to *The Taming of the Shrew*. **Ray Theilacker**, teaching VoTech students, approaches *Macbeth* in a sustained, scene-by-scene reading, together with scenes from other plays, by developing the theme of "power," understood in three ways: natural or cataclysmic power, personal or charismatic power, and authorized or state-imposed power. This unit can clarify a great deal in Shakespeare and in our own lives, and is illustrated by close readings of Shakespeare's scenes. **Pamela Ronson** wishes to teach the principles of Christianity in a contemporary and historical context, and to that end offers a careful reading, with proposed ensuing discussions, of the Christian elements in *Hamlet*, with pedagogically insightful results.

**Deborah Samuel** offers a unit on Shakespeare's sonnets. Her primary concern is to add new dimensions to the normal teaching of a few sonnets that are chosen and scripted in advance. Her unit provides an introductory account of the history of the sonnet, with its Petrarchan origins, and Shakespeare's place in that history. For teachers she provides an ingenious way of teaching meter and why that matters, together with a summary of the sonnets' main themes, illustrated by readings of particular sonnets in themselves and in clusters.

Taken together, all of these units should inspire and offer points of departure for any teacher of Shakespeare.

Paul Fry

---

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit [https://teachers.yale.edu/terms\\_of\\_use](https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use)