

Conceptual Unit:
Working (with) Hamlet: Relays and Appropriations



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Conceptual Unit Project: Working (with) *Hamlet*: Relays and Appropriations

Short Description:

This unit is organized around creative adaptations and “relays” based on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Alongside a reading of the play, students will consider other texts that use *Hamlet* as a resource for creating their own distinct meanings, as well as visual/filmic interpretations of the play. The ultimate goal is to have students produce something of a creative portfolio, working both independently and in groups to consider issues of interpretation, visualization, and framing based on readings of the original text, while putting those issues into creative forms of their own through scene concepts and performance.

List of Materials:

1. *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. The primary text for the unit.
2. *Romeo + Juliet* (1997), directed by Bah Luhrmann. This text will prop up one of the major focuses of the unit: the translation of the text into visual forms. The film’s thoroughly modernized *mise en scene*, along with its jumpy, music-video style editing, make the film uncommonly accessible. This very accessibility may also help develop the students’ familiarity with Shakespearean dialect.
3. Excerpts from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. While the full text of this play might offer many difficulties, given its elliptical structure and language, carefully selected excerpts (particularly from the interactions between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet, with the subsequent discussion) provide rich opportunities to consider responses to the play through two of its most hapless characters.
4. Excerpts from *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Muller. A purely experimental work inserted to handle purely experimental ends, the text of *Hamletmachine* is a dense and confounding maze of references to the play and to European history. As the students consider their own projects, looking to appropriate *Hamlet* into a visual/aesthetic form of their own, *Hamletmachine* functions as something of a limit-text, sketching the farthest borders to which the text can be deformed while retaining something of its original value.
5. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” by T.S. Eliot. The poem’s citation of *Hamlet* makes it valuable as a case for considering the ways in which the character of Hamlet, in particular, has been addressed and re-addressed over the years. In a happy accident, the inclusion of Eliot’s poem opens up the opportunity

- to discuss the author's famous critique of *Hamlet*, in which he calls the play a failure for its title character's lack of an "objective correlative" – a meaningful goal that would sufficiently justify his famous lack of action in the middle acts.
6. Four film versions of *Hamlet*: the darker, more poetic Laurence Olivier production of 1948; Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 production starring Mel Gibson; Kenneth Branagh's epic four-hour adaptation from 1996; and the more recent (2000), modernized adaptation from Michael Almereyda, starring Ethan Hawke. While interesting for their distinct visual styles, more important for the discussion will be the various films' adaptations of the *Hamlet* character, with special attention to Olivier's famous dictum: "This is the story of a man who cannot make up his mind."

Rationale

In my limited experience, *Hamlet* is the closest thing there is to a universal exit requirement for high-school English classes. The play is practically a fixture of twelfth-grade English curriculum in particular, often poised at the tail-end of a three- or four-year sequence of Shakespearean plays. Such a move often allows for a long process of enculturation into both Elizabethan language and the more general structures of tragic drama. Its climactic placement in the English curriculum also tends to underscore the play's particularly monolithic place in the history of English literature, about which little else needs be said, in my opinion. As one of the most famous, most frequently discussed, most finely wrought pieces of canonical Western literature, the play seems to provide something of a "capstone" experience in which the many years of study devoted to language, character, and plot can all come to fruition.

However, these factors can do equally as much to work *against* the play's success when it comes to presenting it to students. With a wariness of literature (canonical, in particular) often enculturated over the course of several years of English studies, students can often regard the play as a monument of Elizabethan stuffiness, complete with a preconceived, built-in caricature of the mopey, poetic protagonist. Such knee-jerk responses can either be validated through an often torturous close reading of Shakespeare's masterful text, or they can be confronted through more dynamic means. Without doing violence to the play's nuanced grasp of character or its finely-wrought language, my hope is to develop a conceptual unit in which students approach the play as

material to be interpreted and applied, rather than simply read and (passively) appreciated.

Hamlet (1601) forms the first of what critics have often deemed Shakespeare's four great tragedies: a trajectory that also includes *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605), and *Macbeth* (1608). While no categorical distinction can be made between Shakespeare's earlier works and these, the works of his later, more robust period, a few distinctions can be made. In these more "mature" tragedies, relative to earlier tragedies like *Julius Caesar* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare seems more willing to experiment with the tragic mold. In the case of *Hamlet*, such experimentation can be seen in the play's long delay, in which Hamlet plots and ruminates over various courses of action, instead of immediately dispatching with Claudius, as per his father's command. Later, in *Othello* and *Lear*, Shakespeare's experiments with the tragic frame revolve around his conception of "evil" characters – Iago, as well as the wicked daughters Goneril and Regan – and his presentation of less-conventional tragic resolutions, particularly the morbidly depressing conclusion of *King Lear*, in which Cordelia's unexpected death is followed not by an act of tragic recognition and atonement (in accordance with Aristotle's notion of *anagnorisis*). By contrast with all three of these plays, *Macbeth* is sleek and pared-down; it is by far the shortest of the four, moving along with an almost classical economy. As much of *Hamlet*'s "greatness" (and, later, the greatness of all these "four great tragedies") derives from the play's sophisticated grasp of character. From *Julius Caesar* onward, Shakespeare had always developed a knack for multi-faceted characters who often fought with themselves in an attempt to resolve a problem or decide on a course of action. Hamlet himself is a monument of dramatic writing in this regard – nowhere in the history of English literature (or perhaps even world literature) had a character emerged whose interesting qualities derived so much from his "inner life." Heightening the stakes, Shakespeare also created a dramatic foil with so much "inner life" that she eventually collapses into it (Ophelia) and even a villain who suffers from a crisis of conscience (Claudius). Literary critic Allan Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, in perhaps the most grandiose statement possible about a work of art, even credits Shakespeare with "inventing human nature as we know it" through his portrayal of Hamlet. From a scholarly point of view, then, *Hamlet* is clearly a rich work of far-

reaching significance. However interesting, though, these qualities by themselves do not necessarily add up to enough to convince a crowd of teenagers, even those who have been through extensive literary enculturation, of the play's value.

The question arises, then: why do we need to worry whether the students acknowledge the play's "value"? In designing a conceptual unit around *Hamlet*, or in recounting its placement in literary history, it is not my intention to promote a "cultural literacy" based argument that argues for the teaching of the play based solely on its location in the historical tradition. This project does work, though, under the acknowledgement that this "historical tradition" has often been justification enough for the teaching of the play, and that such a rationale still inevitably undergirds many of the play's appearances in senior-level curricula. As both an advantageous and (I will argue later) necessary tactic for working with the play, this unit seeks to frame the play not as a monolithic work of art, but as a set of problems and ideas that are, even to this day, part of an ongoing "conversation." This approach echoes Kenneth Burke's notion of "literature as equipment for living," seeking to develop a "conversation" between the students and the play itself. By understanding early on, through modern analogues (including Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and Disney's *The Lion King*), that what made *Hamlet* successful four-hundred years ago is still continuing as part of a long "conversation," the idea is to make the play more accessible from the start. In short, part of the goal of this project is to wear the play's canonicity on our sleeves – to develop and maintain awareness that *Hamlet* (or any other literary work, for that matter) is not just a work to be admired, as if it were behind glass at a museum, but rather raw material to be used to generate our own understandings in context. To continue the "conversation," though, will require more than just literary awareness.

Regrettably, the rationale for teaching *Hamlet* has often focused on the play's location in the literary tradition without considering how to approach it in such a way that makes a case for the play's more longstanding cultural importance. In making a case for *Hamlet* based on "culture," I'm hoping to elucidate two separate yet connected trajectories: one, the ways in which *Hamlet* has served a cultural "relay," a text that generates opportunities rather than serving as an end unto itself; and two, that the idea behind the "relay" is, in fact, part of a more widespread cultural logic, especially for

youth. The term “relay” derives from Gregory Ulmer’s research into electronic literacy theory; using Plato’s development of philosophical/dialectical method as a model, Ulmer proposes a process for “inventing” electronic practices that make sense of current conditions by “relaying” off of past texts, similar to how Plato developed his method using Homer as a jumping-off point. What is important in the “relay” method is that each text serves not as content, but as “a shape, a coherence... *inventio*, not *memoria*.” Similarly, while trying to maintain a certain degree of fidelity to the original play, my overall goal is to encourage a certain “relay” mentality that encourages students to make of the play some “equipment for living.”

To encourage a perspective that encourages critical reading and creativity at the expense of monolithic notions of textuality, this unit hopes to analyze *Hamlet* not in isolation, but as a text that has generated a variety of other texts. To do so, I have selected three texts closely associated with *Hamlet*. First is T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” not only an important poem of English modernism in its own right, but also a dramatic meditation of sorts on the themes of action and indecision that prop up much of the play. Incorporating the poem offers a valuable sense of perspective; not only do we see *Hamlet* updated into modern form, but we also see it in a poetic form dominated by language choices that are, by turns, prosaic and unexpectedly elegant. Second and third are two dramatic riffs on the themes in *Hamlet*. The first, and more famous, of the two, is Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. This play (which also riffs off of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*) offers a take, simultaneously melancholy and comic, on the nature of existence and consciousness from two of *Hamlet*’s most expendable characters. Stoppard’s spare style couldn’t be further from Shakespeare’s, which opens the way towards a more meaningful discussion of the ideas and themes at stake. The latter play, to be read only in small photocopied excerpts, is Heiner Muller’s experimental *Hamletmaschine*, which functions as something of a limit-text, sketching the farthest borders to which the text can be deformed while retaining something of its original value. The discussion of these texts will center on reading them in conjunction with appropriate sections of the play: how has the adaptation worked here? Are these “relays” working with ideas and values from the original, or dealing with material of their own? Such a conversation can be supported, for example,

from close readings of the Shakespearean text (a good skill to maintain in any event), and then by extrapolating those findings elsewhere.

A second set of texts that this unit will be considering is cinematic adaptations of *Hamlet*. Each adaptation selected here imports a particular set of stylistic and textual choices; each one, that is, makes use of the visual medium to present a distinct “text” of its own. The question to ask, echoing Walter Benjamin’s notion of the distinct “aura” of the work of art (now defunct in the mechanical age), is whether any of these adaptations are any longer doing the same thing. Which one is the best? Which one is the “real” *Hamlet*? By selectively emphasizing certain aspects of the text (Hamlet’s angst, the Oedipal interpretation, the fullness of the text itself), each is valuable for different reasons. A discussion of Baz Luhrmann’s visually provocative *Romeo + Juliet* will also motivate the conversation, as students can isolate particular strategies used by the film to create meaning and effects different, distinct, or altogether missing from the original text.

Motivating this desire to turn to the visual is a consideration of the culture most students are living in. Following Greg Ulmer, I see the current age as one in the throes of a transition similar to the one that occupied ancient Greece in the 4th and 5th centuries BCE: the transition from one linguistic apparatus to another. Just as the emergence writing-based communication produced widespread changes in the predominantly oral culture, so too are we today experiencing the jolt of a new emergence, that of an electronic apparatus based especially on images. A more thorough review of the literature would be needed to justify this point¹, but I’ll let it suffice for now to point out that most teenagers live in a world that is thoroughly based in the image and in aesthetics. The influence of teen-based marketing (see Douglas Rushkoff’s *The Merchants of Cool*), combined with other phenomena such as the spread of highly-specialized television

¹ Rather than attempt a full review in of the pertinent literature in the space provided, I would gesture towards some of the more important works in the conversation. Walter Ong’s watershed *Orality and Literacy* (1982) is the go-to source for analyzing the differences between oral and literate cultures. The emergence of literacy in the Ancient Greek context is given its richest treatment in two works by Eric Havelock: *Preface to Plato* (1963) and *The Muse Learns to Write* (1986). A parallel analysis, this time of the emergence of print in the Middle Ages, is provided by Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). While certainly not the only figure in the discussion, Gregory Ulmer has provided what are perhaps the most lucid and far-reaching claims regarding the emergence of a new electronic and imagistic apparatus, which he terms “electracy” in counterpoint to “orality” and “literacy.” His work is rooted in the grammatological theories of Jacques Derrida (particularly Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* [1976]), and developed in *Applied Grammatology* (1985), *Teleteory* (1989), and, more recently, *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* (2003).

networks (think MTV) and the proliferation of mass-media through the Internet, all contribute to a world-view, a way of looking at texts that, while not totally foreign, is nonetheless distinct from the sort of mindset that would have inhered in Shakespeare's time, or even fifty years ago. The lonely poet sitting on a hill is no longer the dominant culture-maker of our age; that honor belongs to the dance-hall DJ, who mixes new music on the spot out of pre-existing materials (Ulmer 2003, 132). The texts provided show that, just maybe, we can do the same thing with *Hamlet*. (Doing so does require a knowledge of the source material – but close reading is the beginning of wisdom, not the end.) Rather than have *Hamlet* succumb to the postmodern irony, the use of associated imagistic texts, along with provoking interest, can also pave the way for more interesting kinds of work than the usual reading-interpretation-essay writing cycle mandated in most English classes.

This approach to a play will likely strike many as needlessly careless and frivolous. Substituting the rather playful and experimental tenor of this unit for the more traditional, intellectually-rigorous approach to the play (and, in particular, to the play's finely-wrought poetic language) could seem to many as a failure to do justice to one of Western literature's most cherished landmarks. Indeed, my earlier labelling of the play as a nearly "universal exit requirement" could stand as an implicit argument *against* just the approach I have suggested here, in favor of a more focused kind of critique that is more in keeping with the years of training already undergone by high school seniors. For starters, I would argue that meaningful learning, in any English context, rarely rests exclusively on the close-reading methods often passively inherited by those who teach English. While close-reading of language can often yield rich insights into the real craft of literature, such methods just as often produce an approach to English studies that is formalized, mechanistic, impersonal, and ultimately forgettable. By expanding the texts considered in this unit, and the methods used to interrogate them, my hope is to push my teaching towards encouraging a more active and creative environment for understanding literature. A second possible objection to this unit's playful tone could relate to my desire to place this unit at the *end* of a senior-level English course. At a time when most senior-level students busy themselves with culminating exams in most of their classes (and, for many, with college entrance exams), some may argue that a more intellectually

engaging approach would be appropriate, in order to provide a proper capstone experience to their formalized education in English. I would, in fact, argue the exact opposite: at a time when students are even more likely than usual to be experiencing heavy-duty distractions and mental fatigue, the more creative approach called for here can make the most of students' time by calling more selectively on their intellectual tools, while using more creative and (dare I say?) fun approaches to guarantee higher levels of involvement with the material. I can think of no better culminating experience than to ask students to develop a greater awareness of how literature functions in the world as more than mere metaphors and motifs; literature is equipment for living.

If we can stipulate that we live in a highly ironic and aesthetically charged postmodern age (and I suspect we can), then one way to do service to our students is to acknowledge that culture while providing means to respond to it. In the end, this project hopes to “spin” the understanding of Hamlet's ideas and themes into more engaging and creative projects – culminating in the development of a design/interpretation portfolio constructed by the student. To be positioned at the tail-end of a senior English course, this unit is designed to call upon many of the skills learned over that long process, putting them to use in ways that are creative and unexpected. While the use of *Hamlet* is certainly justifiable from a literary standpoint, it is the deeper considerations of the play's work as a cultural artifact that are most interesting, and it is precisely a consideration of the wider cultural environment that motivates the creative and visually-engaged nature of this project.

Works Cited

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Goals and Rubrics

Overview:

The major goal for my unit on *Hamlet* is to have students produce a comprehensive portfolio. The portfolio will combine both academic and creative materials, designed around the idea of adaptive scenework. Each student, working in groups of four or five, will produce a series of texts designed to interrogate a particular scene from the play in terms of its dominant motifs and images, contributions to both plot and subplot, and development of character. The development of this portfolio will include analytical pieces regarding the scene to which each group is assigned, pieces in which students will focus on awareness of textual elements with an eye towards the development of character and plot. Other pieces will be more creative in their bent, particularly as they relate to the short scenework pieces that the students will perform during the fourth week.

A secondary goal of the unit, one that will eventually contribute to the success of the portfolio, is the staging in class of a brief (approximately 3 minute) scene from the play. The goal in such a staging is to demonstrate a physical, performative response to the demands of the play by not just reading the lines, but by developing a staging concept, complete with limited props and costumes if possible. The scenework will proceed out of a group process in which students – self-deputized into the roles of actor, director, or designer – develop a Scene Concept based on an informed reading of both the play and secondary materials. Whether students elect to perform in a reader’s theater style (in which scripts are present, thereby placing proportional stress on movement and performative nuance) or with a more fully-fleshed out scene (shifting emphasis to the scene’s visual aesthetics), the scenework will be followed by a short Q-and-A session in which the team answers questions from the class and the teacher, defending and elaborating on certain choices. This Q-and-A process will likely include some creative reworking, in which students may be asked to re-perform parts of the scene, making slight changes prompted by the class or teacher. The scenework is followed up by a short composition, in which each student describes the scene concept, his/her role in the development of the scene product, and provides details regarding the development of

their individual contributions; this short scenework essay will be included in the Scenework-Adaptation Portfolio.

The work of interpreting and staging the scene will be scaffolded with a series of short annotation writings, in the style of reading logs (as adapted from Chapter 5 of our course textbook). Students will respond not only to certain key passages from the play (becoming alert to certain textual motifs, and the impact that the recognition of those motifs has on the reading as a whole) as well as to visual and adaptive materials, whose presence should help shed light on the whole. Students will submit a total of four reading logs, two of which will be included in the portfolio.

Unit Goals:

1. Students will keep a reading & response log, recording insights and commentary on the play (and on other materials) during this unit.

To keep your log:

- Fold a single sheet of paper down the center.
- On the left side of the page, record a significant passage (or passages) from the literature.
- On the right side of the page, across from the passage(s), do any or all of the following:
 1. Ask *questions* that would help you understand the passage better
 2. Give your personal *evaluation* of the passage
 3. Offer an *interpretation* of the passage in the light of the play's themes
- Record enough observations and feedback to fill the page.
- Remember that this reading log does not need to follow the conventions of textbook English.
- Keep in mind that *I am required to share any thoughts or suggestions of violence, suicide, substance abuse, family abuse, or any other harmful behavior with the school counselors.*

Reading logs will be due no later than Friday of every week (with the exception of the fourth week, in which we'll be doing scenework). Keep in mind also that two of these four reading logs will be submitted along with the final Scenework-Adaptation Portfolio.

2. Students will write a short (700-800 words) paper, analyzing an assigned scene or long passage from *Hamlet*.

The essay should include the following:

- A well-stated *thesis* that makes a strong claim for the importance of this particular scene/passage to the play as a whole.
- An account of important *language* motifs in the scene/passage. Identify one important theme occurring at the level of the play's language. Where else in the play has this motif occurred, and what is the purpose of the motif in the play as a whole?
- An account of how one *character*, central to the scene/passage, can be shown to develop over the course of the text. What traits or tendencies does the character demonstrate, and are these traits and tendencies consistent with how the character behaves elsewhere? What does the scene ultimately establish about the character, and how does this fit in to the play as a whole?

The short essay should include clear and appropriate citations of the text. The essay should also be written in a formal style, following the conventions of textbook English.

3. Students, arranged in groups, will perform a short scene from *Hamlet*.

We have been studying how Shakespeare's text is loaded with "implicit" directions, as well as how the play is very open-ended: so much of the final result depends on unique "choices" to be made throughout the play. Working in groups on a particular assigned scene, read the text carefully and discuss where you can make such "choices" that might impact the play as a whole. Then, sort yourselves out by assigning roles:

- some scene members can serve as Actors, who will be responsible for performing the lines in the text;
- some members can serve as Designers, who will think of how to "translate" the scene using costumes, sets, and props;
- and some members can serve as Directors, who are responsible for determining the composition of the scene by deciding on issues of movement (where the actors stand, where they move, and why) as well as coordinating the contributions of Actors and Designers into a whole.

These scenes will be short (no longer than 4 or 5 minutes), so the group can make choices about whether or not to memorize the lines for the performance. Also, groups can choose whether to work in costume, or with props. In the end, students can approach the scene however they like, as long as those "choices" about how to interpret the scene come out clearly. After a scene "concept" emerges, and some of those "choices" become clear, the group can work out how

to best achieve those choices based on the materials we have available. Some things to keep in mind:

- The best scenes won't necessarily be those with perfectly-memorized lines or fancy costumes.
- Take notes as you go; you will ultimately be putting together a short composition on your scene-work experience, so you'll want to have a record of what you were thinking as things progressed along.
- Have fun. Not everyone is comfortable being an actor; so you don't have to be one if you don't want to. Same goes with designing or directing. If a group can't reach an agreement about who takes what job, I'll step in to make the peace.

4. At the end of the section, students will produce a Scenework-Adaptation Portfolio.

Designed to reflect on our six-week trip through *Hamlet* and some of its major adaptations and reflections, this portfolio will showcase your understanding of the play, your ability to read and evaluate texts critically, and your creativity in adapting the text to suit your own needs.

Each portfolio will contain the following:

- A title page, including name, date, and names of your group-mates.
- A short Synthesis, where you introduce your scene and all the elements of your portfolio, indicating how each of the pieces contributes to your larger understanding of the play.
- Two of the four reading log assignments done earlier in the class.
- A finalized, polished version of your short analytical essay.
- A Scenework essay (1000 words or so), in which you reflect on your role within the scenework group and the scenework process as a whole. How did your scenework make particular choices about the scene and about the play? Did those choices come out clearly? How did your work mesh with that of your group-mates?
 - Actors will submit a short paper detailing choices made during the process; possibly writing down an internal monologue to accompany a scene
 - Director will submit movement diagrams, detailing choices made for stage movement, set up, coordination of elements
 - Designers will submit visual layout concepts, details of how the scene was realized with the materials at hand.
- A Wild Card piece. This can be critical, creative, or whatever. Use this piece to put your own final touch on the portfolio in the form of a personal monologue, poem, drawing, animation, or whatever you like. Or, demonstrate your development as a scholar by offering a review of one of the texts in this unit; use the "lens" of a film, art, theater, or literary critic to write the kinds of reviews you'd read in the newspaper or in magazines.

The only requirement is that it needs to be somehow connected to the play or to your experience in this unit.

Rubrics:

Reading Logs will be graded on a Pass/Fail basis. Logs will be given a “pass” if they are complete to the specifications given, and if the comments produced therein show reasonably thorough interface with the play and its major themes and concepts. Logs will be given a “fail” if they are incomplete, offer summary or restatement in the place of meaningful response, or demonstrate a seriously flawed or incorrect understanding of the text.

The Short Essay will be graded on the standard A-E scale. To qualify for full credit, the essays must be submitted in a timely fashion by the specified date. Further, all papers must pass a required checkpoint – a day in the schedule allotted for peer-based review of the papers before the final due date. Failure to abide by either condition will result in the loss of one-half of a letter grade.

A grade of A will be awarded to papers that:

- Provide a well-articulated thesis that establishes an interpretation of the scene in the context of the play as a whole.
- Demonstrate thorough and thoughtful analysis of the scene.
- Cite appropriate evidence in support of the argument.
- Contain few to no major errors in spelling, grammar, mechanics, punctuation, or usage.
- Meet the minimum material expectations for the paper (submitted in a timely fashion in the appropriate medium, etc.)

A grade of B will be awarded to papers that:

- Provide a thesis that establishes an interpretation of the scene in the context of the play as a whole.
- Demonstrate a thoughtful, though perhaps occasionally illogical or unsupported, analysis of the scene.
- Cite appropriate evidence in support of the argument.
- Contain a handful of minor errors in writing-level technique, though few to none that seriously impact the meaning of the paper.
- Meet the minimum material expectations for the paper (submitted in a timely fashion in the appropriate medium, etc.)

A grade of C will be awarded to papers that:

- Provide something of a thesis, though one that fails to meet the guidelines suggested.

- Demonstrate awareness of the scene that favors repetition of details over analysis of the scene itself.
- Provide evidence of limited usefulness, or no textual evidence at all, relying instead on broad paraphrase.
- Contain sufficient errors in writing technique that the meaning of the paper is rendered obscured or incomplete.
- Meet the minimum material expectations for the paper (submitted in a timely fashion in the appropriate medium, etc.)

A grade of D will be awarded to papers that:

- Lack any sort of a central thesis.
- Fail to provide sufficient or appropriate evidence to support the claim.
- Is difficult or impenetrable due to multiple major errors in writing technique.
- Fail to meet the minimum material expectations for the paper.

A grade of E will be awarded to papers that:

- Are fundamentally incomplete in one or more of these areas, or have been submitted in a fashion that is incomplete or illegible.

The Scenework will be graded on a scaled version of the pass/fail scale (including high and low pass/fail grades), a choice that will allow for flexibility in the grading process, as well as the establishment of the scenework component as a stepping stone to the portfolio, rather than as a high-stakes outcome in and of itself. The purpose of the scenework is to provide more of a laboratory environment, making the assignation of official grades somewhat inappropriate for the context. Additionally, the pass/fail scale recognizes the anxieties that may very well occur from the performative environment, as well as the proportional stress placed on the performers during the process, whose work may or may not serve as an adequate reflection of the group's other members.

- A "High Pass" grade will be given to groups whose scenes demonstrate meaningful implementation of dramatic "choices" whose meaning impact the scene as a whole. Upon questioning and workshopping, group members will be able to adequately identify these "choices" and to defend their significance in context.
- A "Low Pass" grade may be given to a group whose performance is largely successful, though lacking in one of the two major categories established above.
- A "High Fail" grade may be given to a group whose scenework encounters problems in both the presentation and subsequent awareness of the effective "choices" included in the scene, or may be missing a sense of those "choices" altogether.
- A "Low Fail" grade may be given to groups whose performances are incomplete or unprepared, or who demonstrate a thorough lack of

awareness regarding the play as a whole or the function of the scene within the play.

The Scenework-Adaptation Portfolio grade will be given on the 100-point scale. While I dislike this approach, viewing the assignment of a numerical grade to be somewhat inconsistent with the creative tone of the unit, I have resolved to offer numerical grades in order to accomplish two things. First, by doing so, I hope to allay any administrative fears that the creative approach used here is too subjective, based on my own aesthetic judgements rather than on a concrete scale. Secondly, I feel the assignment of a concrete grade will be useful to help allay student anxiety, giving them a mark of their performance more concrete than a simple letter grade. However, the “authentic” nature of this assessment also demands that more holistic approaches be taken to grading; it seems inappropriate and inconsistent to impose a harsh numeric scale on such an assignment. To compromise, the portfolio will be given a grade on the 100-point scale, mediated through the use of a holistic rubric. Each individual piece of the Portfolio will be assessed individually on an A-E scale. These letter grades will translate into numerical point values which, taken together, will form the basis for the final numerical grade. Additional points may be assessed for external factors such as the presentation of the portfolio, or as punishment/reward for extraordinary classroom participation.

The total 100-point grade derives from the following:

- 25 points: Synthesis Essay
- 10 points: Reading Logs
- 15 points: Polished Essay
- 35 points: Scenework Essay
- 15 points: Wild Card

The Synthesis essay, which introduces the portfolio and provides a summation of the works that follows, will be assessed thusly: A grade of A (25 points) will be awarded to essays that:

- Produce an effective and thoughtful synthesis of the adaptation experiences accounted for in the portfolio.
- Specify the importance of each individual part of the portfolio, demonstrating how each reflects an understanding of both the source material and an awareness of the pressures that attend adaptation.

- Are written in a largely error-free style.

A grade of B (22 points) will be assigned to essays that are less successful at the work of synthesis, or that miss reference to a particular facet of the portfolio. A grade of C (18 points) may be given to essays that are partially incomplete, missing reference to or discussion of more than one work. A grade of D (15 points) may be given to essays that are drastically incomplete, or are difficult to understand due to their style. A grade of E (anywhere between 0-12 points) may be given to essays that are either entirely missing, off-topic, or that lack meaningful engagement with more than 3 elements of the portfolio.

The Reading Logs, which provide a record of the student's engagement with close textual readings, will be graded on a 10-point scale, with A (10 points) representing reading logs that provide full engagement with the texts provided, making interesting links to issues and other passages from the play. Given the "pass/fail" nature of the assignment, these 10 points are designed to be low-stakes "giveaway" points. Points may be lost for incomplete or insubstantial readings in one log (B – 8 points) or in both (C – 6 points), or if logs are missing or illegible (resulting in a grade of C or lower).

The Polished Essay comprised two texts: students will submit both their original Short Essays (see above), along with a copy that has been corrected and polished after the fact. Rather than re-assess the quality of the essay itself, this exhibit will be graded according to the level of apparent changes made. Assuming that no essays are unproblematic to begin with (even A papers will be asked to make adjustments and changes), full credit (A – 15 points) will be given to essays that make all the changes necessary to produce a fully readable work. Students will be expected to not only correct technical and grammatical issues, but to pursue more fully and thoroughly a critical understanding of the play. A grade of B (12 points) will be given when changes have not been fully or finally prosecuted, and in which the final version remains difficult to understand. A grade of C (9 points) is the default grade for essays that are turned in with only superficial corrections to punctuation or grammar. A 5-point penalty will be automatically assessed for Essay exhibits that are missing the original version.

The Scenework essay will be assessed thusly:

A grade of A (35 points) will be given to essays that:

- Enunciate, develop, and defend an overall “reading” for the given scene.
- Provide thorough explanation of the individual’s contributions to the Scenework project.
- Defend the worthiness of those contributions by relating them to the overall “reading.”
- Defend both the reading and the contributions by making reference to the source play, adaptations of the play, and the work of other group members.
- Reflect on the actual performance of the scene and the subsequent response from the instructor and the class.
- Are written in a clear and error-free style.

A grade of B (31 points) will be given to essays that:

- Provide an overall “reading” of the scene, though one that may lack sufficient awareness of the play’s themes.
- Provide sufficient explanation of the individual’s contributions to the Scenework project.
- Defend the worthiness of those contributions by relating them to the overall “reading.”
- Reflect, though in too brief or minimal detail, on the actual performance of the scene and subsequent response from the instructor and the class.
- Are written in a clear and style, largely free of major errors.

A grade of C (27 points) will be given to essays that:

- Fall substantially short of the word count requirement (650-800 words).
- Provide an overall “reading” of the scene, though one that is unjustified by either lacking reference to the source material, or by interpreting that material in grossly incorrect or inappropriate ways.
- Provide sufficient, though often undetailed, explanation of the individual’s contributions to the Scenework project.
- Make unsubstantiated connections between the individual’s contributions and the overall “reading” of the scene.
- Fail to reflect on the in-class Scenework, or do so in minimal detail.
- Are written in a difficult-to-understand style.

A grade of D (23 points) will be given to essays that are highly problematic in two or three of these areas, are that are largely incomplete based on word count (500-650 words). A grade of E (0-18 points) will be given to essays that are problematic in three

or more areas, that fall substantially short of the required word count (<500 words), or that are missing altogether.

The Wild Card is assessed primarily on the basis of completion, and on demonstrating some form of engagement with the play. A grade of A (15 points) is given to exhibits that demonstrate awareness of the play's themes and pressures of adaptation, and that produce interesting and creative responses. Lower grades may be assessed for a lack of legibility or accessibility (in the case of electronic supplements), but more likely, points can be taken off for demonstrating only a superficial engagement with the play. This is largely a holistic judgement call; so to reduce the potential for subjective error, students are asked to defend and justify their Wild Card in the Synthesis Essay. If the exhibit delivers on what is promised, it will receive an A. If it fails to do so, a lower grade may be assessed at the teacher's discretion.

Lesson Plans

Note: This schedule is being written under the assumption of a standard, non-block schedule under which students meet 5 days a week, for 50 minutes a day.

Week One:

Day 1: Monday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 5 m.: Introducing Unit Introductory Activity, sorting students into groups and passing out assignment sheets.
- 2 m.: Explaining & Modelling Activity
- 25 m.: Students working in groups on activity
- 12 m.: Discussing activity results.
- 3 m.: Explaining nightly reading, next day's activity

Day 2: Tuesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 10 m.: Discussion of the “surprise” opening (1.1), prompting reflection on Shakespeare's choice of a non-traditional first scene
- 22 m.: Working through the first half of 1.2. Prompting the class to break down Shakespeare's grammar and word usage. Diagramming sentences on the board to get a feel for Shakespearean diction.
- 10 m.: Pausing to take stock of the characters and their relationships to one another by graphing them on the board.
- 5 m.: Reviewing and Modeling Reading Log Assignment

Day 3: Wednesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 2 m.: Collecting first Reading Log Assignment

- 20 m.: Discussing Hamlet’s first soliloquy (1.2) by prompting for close reading of language. Establishing and developing themes, linguistic motifs, and dramatic conflicts.
- 15 m.: Discussion of 1.4 and 1.5: the appearance of the ghost. How is this like or unlike a traditional ghost story?
- 5 m.: Reviewing and revising character “graph,” with additions of Hamlet Rex, Ophelia, and Laertes.

Day 4: Thursday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 5 m.: Students give quick scene-by-scene plot summary of Act 1.
- 5 m.: Discussion of the long scene (2.2) begins with a review of Hamlet’s motivations. What has he been asked to do, and how does he intend to go about doing it?
- 15 m.: Finding examples of wordplay in the exchanges between Hamlet and Polonius, and then between Hamlet, Rosencrantz, & Guildenstern. What language motifs is Shakespeare still playing with? Why is language so important to Hamlet?
- 12 m.: Film clips from two versions of scene 2.2: the first from Zeffereilli, the second from Branagh.
- 10 m.: Discussion of the film clips. How does Hamlet appear to be “handling” his interlocutors? What different qualities about the character are emphasized most? What are the different “moods” of the scene?

Day 5: Friday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 9 m.: Review of previous day’s film clips, with attention to the impact of the visual on the “meaning” of the scene.
- 35 m.: Scenework Workshop. With a group of volunteers, the instructor works through a short scene from 3.1. The goal is to cover the fundamental aspects of stage craft in play (character positioning, movement, voice, gesture) by working

over a short section of the scene. Students will be reminded that this is a model for their scenework project to come.

- 3 m.: Concluding class, prompting class for weekend reading (through the end of act 4), assigning second Reading Log.

Week Two:

Day 6: Monday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 2 m.: Collecting second Reading Log assignment.
- 5 m.: Brief plot review from the last week, leading into “To Be or Not to Be” soliloquy.
- 10 m.: Prompting for student feedback on the soliloquy. What’s Hamlet talking about? Why is he talking about it? What are you learning about the character? Is he “acting”?
- 25 m.: Two film versions of the “To Be” soliloquy: Olivier and Almereyda. After showing clips, prompt for discussion. What aspects of each are most important? Students will be asked to describe the “mood” of each version.
- 3 m.: Wrapping up, assigning third Reading Log.

Day 7: Tuesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 7 m.: Plot discussion, through the end of Act 3, including the play-within-a-play and the murder of Polonius.
- 25 m.: Activity: What if the play-within-a-play were a movie-within-a-movie? Grouped in bands, each group will be assigned a particular “mood” (tense, playful, surreal) and will be asked to develop a concept for *Hamlet*’s play-within-a-play scene based on that mood. Groups will have to cite at least one outside visual source as an influence, and account for how their scene concept will present the characters and situation present.

- 10 m.: Reviewing responses, with an eye towards the value of the scene in the context of the play as a whole.
- 3 m.: Wrapping up, reading assigned through Act 5.

Day 8: Wednesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 2 m.: Collecting third Reading Log assignment
- 12 m.: Discussion: Hamlet with (and without) Fortinbras. Considering that so many adaptations leave Fortinbras out of the picture, what do we gain or lose? How does Fortinbras serve as an important foil for Hamlet?
- 15 m.: Close Reading of Hamlet's "What a rogue and peasant slave am I" soliloquy in Act 4. Attention, again, to language and character motifs.
- 15 m.: In groups, students will briefly discuss the impact of the Fortinbras subplot, speculating as to the impact of the subplot on one of the three film adaptations discussed so far. The operative question is the same: based on what we know so far about these adaptations, and besides from cutting length from the play, what would each of these adaptations have to gain from cutting Fortinbras out of the picture?
- 3 m.: Assigning fourth Reading Log.

Day 9: Thursday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 25 m.: Scenework Workshop, revisited. As before, the goal is to work with a scene from the play (this time, a good candidate is 4.4), developing the fundamental aspects of stage play and how those aspects effect the play's ultimate "meaning." In this iteration, the focus will widen to include concerns over intonation and the use of props.
- 15 m.: A discussion of Ophelia and Laertes. How do we understand them as foils for Hamlet now? How do we imagine they look and sound, and what impact do those choices have on how they serve as foils?

- 7 m.: Some brief remarks, introducing the students to Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Day 10: Friday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 2 m.: Collecting fourth Reading Log assignment
- 10 m.: Plot review and discussion, covering through to the end of the play. (May reserve the right to assign a short reading quiz.)
- 20 m.: Taking a particular look at the "Yorick" scene from 5.1, as well as Hamlet's somewhat bizarre change of character (from intense to serene) in 5.2. Can students account for the differences in Hamlet's mood?
- 10 m.: An open-ended question: why is it important for Horatio to "tell [Hamlet's] story"? One implicit connection to seize on is the link to Shakespeare's "meta-theatricality," as seen earlier in the play.
- 3 m.: Assigning Essay (handout)
- 2 m.: Assigning Weekend Reading: Eliot's "Prufrock," and section from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Week Three:

Day 11: Monday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 5 m.: Reading aloud "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."
- 10 m.: Discussion of the mood of the poem, with a particular eye towards its citation of *Hamlet*. Situating the poem in literary history as a work of modernist poetry, with that movement's concerns over psychological realism and often-extensive use of literary allusions and allegories.
- 10 m.: Introducing students to Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative" – the famous criticism that indicts Hamlet's lack of action in the early acts. Do

students find Eliot's criticism convincing? Based on these images from Eliot/Prufrock, what sort of idea do you have about the protagonist?

- 19 m.: Working with some visual sources, to square our images of Hamlet with those in Eliot. Particularly interesting is Olivier's introduction: "This is the story of a man who cannot make up his mind." For counterpoint, a scene from Zefferelli's adaptation (starring Mel Gibson), might ask us to reconsider, looking at Hamlet as an action hero instead.
- 3 m.: Reminder about essay assignment.

Day 12: Tuesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 8 m.: Watching a long excerpt from Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*.
- 12 m.: Discussion of the film's style. First, a comparison between *R+J* and Almereyda's *Hamlet* – which of the two "modernized" adaptations do you like more, and why? (Attention paid to use of costumes, sets, etc.) Second, students will be asked to consider the influence of film editing, after an explanation as to how film editing works. (The issue with all filmed versions of *Hamlet*, I'd argue, is that they remain very theatrical rather than taking advantages of film's visual flexibility.
- 8 m.: Reviewing portions of *R+J* clip, with attention to editing choices, information inserted, cut-away shots.
- 5 m.: Assigning Scenework scenes and handing out information on the Scenework requirements, as well as the requirements for the Scenework essay – an ingredient in the final portfolio.
- 10 m.: Students gather in their scene groups to discuss the scene and assign roles.
- 3 m.: Wrapping up. Students are reminded about impending essay assignment, and asked to bring materials to work on tomorrow in class.

Day 13: Wednesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping

- 5 m.: A brief reminder: using Branagh's film to review Hamlet's interactions with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 2.
- 3 m.: Briefly introducing *Ros&Guil* – its style and its use of *Waiting for Godot* as an intertext.
- 22 m.: Discussion of *Ros&Guil*. What aspects of the two characters do you relate to? What sort of different perspective do we get on Hamlet, and why is that perspective on the character important? What are we getting here that we weren't getting from a regular reading of the play? Discussion will hinge, in part, on Shakespeare's metatheatricity – Stoppard responds with more metatheatricity of his own. (It's turtles all the way down!)
- 15 m.: Separating into Scenework groups, to work on essays.

Day 14: Thursday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 45 m.: Students work in groups, rehearsing Scenework.
- 2 m.: Reminder: essays due tomorrow.

Day 15: Friday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 2 m.: Collecting Essays
- 37 m.: As before, students will break into their groups for Scene Rehearsal.
- 7 m.: Brief remarks introducing *Hamletmachine*. Assigning a modified reading log assignment to accompany the reading, which will be discussed on Monday. The modified reading log will ask students to read the excerpt as a whole, speculate as to its purpose (assisted by a capsule description on the handout), and to locate how references to the play work in context.

Week Four:

Day 16: Monday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 5 m.: Reviewing modified reading log assignment, based on Muller's *Hamletmachine*.
- 10 m.: A sort of close-reading demonstration of Muller's play, designed to show its combination of historical and literary themes, while taking into account the incoherent quality of its language. Taking the time to situate the play in the experimental tradition.
- 30 m.: Experimental "cut-up" project. Working in their scene groups, students will be handed a photocopy of their assigned scene and a few blank pieces of paper. Each group will volunteer a distinct "genre" of music, theater, or television, and attempt to develop a short scene, using the text as raw material. If Muller uses *Hamlet* to do commentary on European history, students can use the play to recap a football game (in the style of ESPN's SportsCenter) or do a nightly news broadcast. The blank pages can be used to compile a script, or to contain visuals. Either way, the goal is to have fun while using the text and the ideas from the text to the best advantage.
- 2 m.: Gathering experimental documents. Reminders about the week's performance schedule.

Day 17: Tuesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 20 m.: Performance from a Scenework group, followed by workshopping and Q&A.
- 5 m.: Transitional time, while second group prepares.
- 20 m.: Performance from a Scenework group, followed by workshopping and Q&A.
- 2 m.: Wrapping up, reminding groups of due dates on scenes, encouraging work to continue on portfolio ingredients.

Day 18: Wednesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 20 m.: Performance from a Scenework group, followed by workshopping and Q&A.
- 5 m.: Transitional time, while second group prepares.
- 20 m.: Performance from a Scenework group, followed by workshopping and Q&A.
- 2 m.: Wrapping up, reminding groups of due dates on scenes, encouraging work to continue on portfolio ingredients.

Day 19: Thursday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 20 m.: Performance from a Scenework group, followed by workshopping and Q&A.
- 5 m.: Transitional time, while second group prepares.
- 20 m.: Performance from a Scenework group, followed by workshopping and Q&A.
- 2 m.: Wrapping up, reminding groups of due dates on scenes, encouraging work to continue on portfolio ingredients.

Day 20: Friday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 20 m.: Performance from a Scenework group, followed by workshopping and Q&A.
- 5 m.: Transitional time, while second group prepares.
- 20 m.: Performance from a Scenework group, followed by workshopping and Q&A. [This slot is scheduled to allow for flexibility, given the possibility of some group being unassembled or unprepared when assigned. If unused, students will be allowed to work quietly in groups on their portfolios.]
- 2 m.: Wrapping up, reminding groups of next week's work.

Week Five:

Day 21: Monday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 5 m.: Essays handed back to students.
- 30 m.: Students working in groups, responding to essay feedback, and making notes for alterations and polishing to follow.
- 10 m.: Discussing the portfolio: what ingredients are involved, setting the stage for the coming week.

Day 22: Tuesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 7 m.: Reviewing portfolio components, specifically the Scenework essay.
- 35 m.: Students working in groups on assembling portfolio: polishing essays, composing Scenework essays
- 5 m.: Wrapping up class. Students instructed to draft Scenework essays, and bring in a copy to work on in class the next day.

Day 23: Wednesday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 3 m.: Checking for Scenework drafts.
- 35 m.: Students peer review Scenework essays.
- 5 m.: Announcing plan for Friday: an end-of-the-unit Movie Day. Students submit ballots, voting for which version of *Hamlet* they'd like to view at greater length.

Day 24: Thursday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping

- 7 m.: Discussing remaining portfolio pieces: the Synthesis essay and the Wild Card. Students advised to use time in-class to work on Synthesis.
- 35 m.: Students working in groups on assembling portfolio: finalizing Scenework essay, composing/reviewing Synthesis essay, composing Wild Card.
- 5 m.: Wrapping up. Students reminded of portfolio due date (next Monday).

Day 25: Friday

- 3 m.: Housekeeping
- 45 m.: Movie Day, viewing a film interpretation of *Hamlet* as voted on by the class. Students may work independently during that time if they choose.
- 2 m.: Wrapping up. Reminding students of Portfolio due date (Monday).

Appendix A:

Introductory Activity

This unit will begin with an activity designed to capitalize on the students' initial reading of the first two scenes of *Hamlet* in a way that develops both the comprehension and creativity skills required for this unit. The activity is a variation on the "scenario" method recommended in the course textbook. Instead of considering an external scenario related to the themes of the play, though, students will be constructing an imaginative scenario of sorts based on the play itself.

To begin the activity, students will be grouped into workgroups of 3-5 students; four would be the ideal number. After a brief verbal summary of the first two scenes from the instructor, students will be handed one of three pre-prepared questionnaires, each questionnaire focusing on a particular sequence from the play. These three "sequences" will include:

1. The confrontation between guards Francisco and Bernardo at the very opening of the play.
2. The conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude, in Act 1, Scene 2.
3. Hamlet's "Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt" soliloquy, following the departure of Claudius, Gertrude, and the courtiers in that same scene.

First, to demonstrate comprehension of the scene, students will collaborate on a paragraph-long summary of the "action" of the scene, using a copy of the text at hand to re-read and review. What characters are present? What are they talking about, and to whom are they talking? What do we learn from this scene?

Second, students will be asked to brainstorm a series of adjectives, describing the "mood" of the scene. Is the feeling tense? Joyful? Celebratory? Nervous? Does the mood change in the scene, and if so, how? The goal of this question is to encourage students to start thinking beyond the straight "textual" reading in order to learn to "visualize" the scene for themselves.

Third, as the crux of the exercise, students will be asked to imagine a setting for the scene that departs from the literal setting of the play. For example, Shakespeare's scant directions at least indicate that the initial moments of the play happen in or around the guard posts at Elsinore Castle. Rather than offer details like "stone walls" or

“defensive fortifications,” students will be asked to re-imagine the setting of the scene in a more modern context, based on the responses given in the first and second questions. So, if the group had decided that the mood of the scene was “tense” and that the characters were “confrontational,” acting in their positions as official guards or lawmen, a solution would be to imagine their confrontation as two police officers meeting in a blind alley. (This process will be briefly modeled, using a different segment of the first two scenes of the play, after the groups have completed the first two stages of the activity.)

To conclude the activity, students will report their ideas to the class, comparing and contrasting the results, both against the “classical” staging of the play and against one another’s. The goal of the process is to demonstrate as much creativity as possible, both applauding that creativity where we see it, and prompting other groups to fill in ideas of their own. (The instructor can facilitate the process by hazarding some variations – such as the police example, above – on the theme, the value of which students can assess on their own.)