Can You See Shakespeare Now?

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When I started teaching in the spring of 2020 I, like so many other instructors, had no idea that by the end of the sixth week of the semester we would be in lockdown and unable to meet our students face-to-face. I teach a Shakespeare course in the English Language and Literature Department at Bilkent University in Turkey that focuses on the playwright’s tragedies, comedies, and histories. Soon after receiving an email informing me that we were moving to online instruction for the duration of the semester, I installed the Zoom video conferencing system on my home computer and began lecturing remotely to the twenty-five students enrolled in the course. Though I always make ample use of digital platforms in my face-to-face lectures, teaching online makes the use of databases, YouTube channels, and online digital libraries essential. Shakespeare’s works smoothly lend themselves to online teaching owing to a rich and diverse range of electronic resources. His works are also relatable to today’s world and drawing connections to such recurring themes as loneliness, nothingness, and plagues came naturally for me and my students in the era of Covid-19. Reading the bard’s plays enabled us to empathize and to sympathize in new ways with the unsettled feeling experienced by many living through the pandemic. We, too, were living in an uneasy situation that echoes those of Shakespearean characters who find their daily routines altered on short notice. At the same time, the experience was quite unnatural as we began the semester in the usual manner but then converted abruptly, almost overnight, to an online platform. In this article, I describe some of the thematic connections made in the course, a few useful digital resources for students, and two assignments I created specifically to keep my students engaged during the online learning process.

In the first weeks of the semester we studied Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in class, focusing on “nothingness,” which stems from Cordelia’s reply to her father “Nothing, my Lord.” Much Ado About Nothing has the word “nothing” in the title, alluding to “noting.” In fact, the two words are homonyms. In two plays of different genres, we saw a parallel scene unfold while discussing themes like loneliness, futility of human endeavor in the face of death, and the great losses suffered by

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characters whose flaws lead to their downfall or imprisonment in hapless lives revolving around an endless series of predicaments. In synchronous class discussions, we explored parallelisms existing between the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the plagues, pestilence, and pestis that were ever-present in Elizabethan life. Elizabethans referenced the plague in everyday speech as evidenced by Gloucester’s speech in *King Lear* when he asks an Old Man to provide his son Edgar, disguised as a naked pauper named Poor Tom, with food and clothing: “‘Tis the time’s plague when madmen lead the blind” (15.45). Similarly, people learn, accept, utter, and inevitably misuse and overuse terms pertaining to the novel coronavirus, a social fact now ever-present in, and integral to, our daily routines of life. Indeed, Covid-19 takes its pressing place in our lives like Sir Toby’s cry when he sarcastically curses “A plague o’ these pickle herring!” in *Twelfth Night.*

Exploring Shakespeare is now a more digital endeavor than ever, with implications for both sources and for pedagogy. The internet makes it easy to access digitized versions of these early modern texts that are sufficient for most readers. In addition, Shakespeare courses taught online allow more space for YouTube, video clips, and applications such as Wordle that produce a chart of names, verbs, adjectives and adverbs by using an algorithm on Shakespeare’s works. All of these parts of Web 2.0 bring Shakespearean texts into the world of appropriation for a wide range of users. Shakespeare uses complex characters in most of his plays; however, it is easier to perceive their characteristic features if they are tragic or humorous. The bard’s history plays, require more effort to understand the characters since students need to become familiar with geopolitical information that makes the diverse and compelling characters distinct according to their origins and characteristics. During the pandemic, universities, libraries, museums, and theatrical companies have opened up their resources for free. The Folger Shakespeare Library has made available play texts and select performance recordings to assist instructors through the summer. Students can also obtain materials for interpretive purposes by visiting the British Museum’s Shakespeare collection. The collection has sample drawings of Shakespearean characters, like Romeo and Juliet, and Viola in *Twelfth Night*, which are useful for comparing how specific characters are represented in different printed manuscripts of the plays. Digital resources such as MIT’s *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* prove

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3The Folger Shakespeare Library offers many services to lecturers teaching Shakespeare to students with different backgrounds and interests. See Folger Shakespeare Library, www.folger.edu/. For an open-access recording of Macbeth directed by magician Teller and Aaron Posner at the Folger Theatre in 2008, see www.folger.edu/video-macbeth-folger-theatre.

instrumental when virtual texts are in use and physical copies are unavailable. In considering all these examples, the main point is that the internet provides abundant visual and factual aids. Though a student can always check on Google to see what a historical figure looks like after a lecture, moving online has made it a part of my regular teaching practice as I can share the screen and simultaneously show images. Furthermore, even if the students do not have the slightest idea about a play’s historical context, I can incorporate into the online session audiovisual aids that provide students with a better understanding of the matter at hand. It is to the advantage of the lecturer to enhance visual education with the rich materials found on the internet about Shakespeare’s works.

Digital options for teaching Shakespeare also provide for new kinds of student assignments. Many students are social media experts, and their familiarity with the way computer-based applications work is handy when transforming educational methods used in a traditional classroom environment to a digital platform. Most students grew up with smart phones and tablets, and I find them to be dexterous and alert, as long as they are engaged in creative and practical assignments that quicken their intelligence. Some of the assignments I found effective and worthwhile in my online Shakespeare course include short research projects; three-hundred-word blog entries; checking out websites about Shakespeare’s sources, like the chronicles of Hall and Holinshed; creating a taxonomy based on the plays’ historical background; assigning lines to students for close reading; and asking them to make interpretations about character development. Below I detail two other learning activities that cultivated student engagement.

To better understand the mechanics of the plays and audience reactions in different eras, I began by assigning students short research projects on such subjects as the dramatic genre and character types used in each Shakespeare play, the places and times a play has been staged, and the frequency of its performance. Initially, I divided the class into sections and assigned one of the abovementioned topics to a group of students who compiled their findings about the relevant sources they found in topical bibliographies, which they then used to build annotated bibliographies for a later essay. We evaluated each and every entry together as a big group. Going through the sources one by one raised student interest, as some sources appeared on multiple lists, and discussing why different students found a source useful for different purposes broadened their awareness of the use of sources. This assignment was next developed into a blog entry or a short essay.

5“The Complete Works of Shakespeare,” MIT, shakespeare.mit.edu/ Amazon, of course, continues to be a mode of access for readers.

6The BBC Television Shakespeare Channel 2 has a rich collection of television adaptations of thirty-seven plays by Shakespeare. It helps to visualize the differences between what the plays on page tell and how the adaptations present them. “The BBC Television Shakespeare,” BBC, bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00v3dyz.

7PBS Shakespeare series is also very useful in incorporating the videos with the reading of the texts of the plays. See “Shakespeare Uncovered,” PBS, www.pbs.org/wnet/shakespeare-uncovered/.
depending on the interest and writing plan of individual students. All bibliographies created by the students were made easily accessible to the entire class via Moodle, an e-learning platform that I began using as a supplementary tool long before the emergence of the novel coronavirus. Moodle is a course management system that enables continuous contact with students before, during, and after the class time. I find Moodle to be an easy way to upload and organize course material on a weekly basis and a compact way to store all work accomplished (e.g., blog entries, short compositions, essays) by students for their use on later assignments. Moodle also offers students a platform for sharing group work, posting comments, and peer editing. Students found it useful after working on their individual assignments to meet in groups to assess their bibliographies and discuss source materials.

For a second activity, I used what I call picture puzzles to help students develop a fuller and wider understanding of sociohistorical norms as well as cultural attributes and interests of the audience living at the time Shakespeare wrote a particular play. I create picture puzzles that ask students to find explanatory terms related to fictive and nonfictive accounts of Shakespeare’s plays through figures, pictures, images, and photos. My primary concern with this teaching method is to help students see Shakespeare’s imagination in action. I aim to show students ways of exploring the reality behind fiction and the process by which it is altered, modified, and rewritten. This method enables students to develop an interest in the plays by tracing information provided to them in online resources and delving into a proactive exercise during Zoom sessions. In doing so, students find out how authorial intervention manifests itself. Another benefit of this practice is that the flexibility within historical fiction and projective fiction allows for Shakespeare’s plays to be seen as pieces of contemporary social commentary, which may encourage students to make a go at writing their own fictive narratives. I create two types of picture puzzles and examples of each appear below. Either I present a picture to the students and ask them to provide an explanation that highlights the significance of the picture, or I provide a paragraph-long explanation to students and ask them to find a relevant image or photo to illustrate the given explanation and tell me why they selected that image. In the second type of picture puzzle, the selected image is not supposed to be a complete illustration, rather a signifier or a snapshot as symbol of the given paragraph.

Students rarely provide similar explanations since the purpose of this assignment is not to find a dictionary definition, but to provide an explanation in a storytelling manner. Their way of elucidating the given picture or text varies, but that is the point of the exercise. I want students to write creatively about the images I present to them and/or the images they select to illustrate the text I present. In both instances I expect students to reflect upon the creative process and their particular motivations for composing their responses as they did. I remind them to consider how Shakespeare developed ideas into masterpieces that embrace universal human endeavors. Understandably, not all students felt
comfortable about these creative writing assignments, but their writing skills developed with practice and through collaborative peer-editing sessions. Indeed, many students came to enjoy the imaginative writing process. Creative writing is a complex aesthetic experience that can also aid students in strengthening their individual emotional and cognitive processes. In light of their personal life experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, students’ analysis of Shakespeare plays like *King Lear*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night* provided a working ground for an online course that differed from Shakespeare courses I had offered before the appearance of the novel coronavirus. Very unnaturally and unexpectedly students were obliged to become online learners. The psychological upheaval caused by breaking news about the numbers of lives lost in the global pandemic made attending Zoom meetings an undeniably difficult situation especially for students with heightened sensitivities. Discussing these topics, so beautifully rendered in Shakespeare’s works, became a healing activity for students whose responses to picture puzzles stemmed from the pandemic as a unique experience shared by billions all around the world.

**Guidelines for Picture Puzzles**

Find a picture, image, or drawing that best represents the given information about the play(s) we have discussed. Explain why you selected the visual you did in no more than one hundred words. Please add a link to all reference sources consulted. Then please provide a narrative that is either creative fiction or an appropriate text rewritten in your own words that highlights an interesting fact. Responses should be no longer than one hundred words and all sources consulted must be cited.

**Example 1**

Images such as this one of the Globe Playhouse allow students to compose a story about performance details of one of the plays discussed in class. Students may also choose to write on physical aspects of the Globe as well and the structure’s significance in staging the plays. Source: www.squaducation.com/blog/original-globe-theatre-burns-down.
Example 2

With this stipple engraving of Will Kempe (below) from Nine Days Wonder (1600) students are prompted to provide a narrative about this famous Elizabethan comedian in Shakespeare’s time.

![Stipple engraving of Will Kempe](en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Kempe#/media/File:Will_Kemp_Elizabethan_Clown_Jig.jpg)

Example 3

In response to “Portrait of Richard Burbage,” students will create a short story or provide factual information describing one of the greatest tragedy actors in Shakespeare’s company. Source: Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Burbage#/media/File:RichardBurbage.jpg.

Example 4

He was the official person responsible for censorship. He censored or approved a play’s content before it could be staged. Once the play was ready for the stage, it was no longer considered the possession of the playwright; in other words, once a playwright sold his manuscript, he had no personal right to it.

In response to this brief description, students will provide an image of the Master of the Revels.