



Takes on Romeo and Juliet Curriculum

Created by Rebecca J. Ennals from a concept by Chris Steele
with assistance from Ella Francis and Edmund Campos

© San Francisco Shakespeare Festival 2020

For teachers and homeschooling parent-teachers:

How to Use this Curriculum

Takes on Shakes was developed for virtual distance learning during the 2020 pandemic, but we hope it can be useful for schools, teachers, and parents for years to come. The 30-minute video can be used in multiple ways: shared in a virtual or in-person classroom by the teacher or viewed asynchronously at home with a parent or caregiver. Teachers can work through the curriculum live virtually or in-person, or students can record their responses in text or via audio or video, then upload them to a shared learning platform such as Canvas, Seesaw, Flipgrid, or Google Classroom.

Because each school's learning platforms are different, we are providing curriculum as a pdf, expecting you to cut-and-paste into your platform or share on your screen in whatever way works best for your classroom and your students. The video and curriculum are divided into three approximately 10-minute sections, which can be viewed back-to-back or on separate days, and self-led lesson plans to be completed at the end of watching each section. It's possible to complete the whole curriculum in 1-2 hours, or to expand it over the course of multiple days.

Because California 9th graders study *Romeo and Juliet* as part of the common core, we have designed this lesson with them in mind, though we feel it can also be used with younger or older students. If you are teaching the whole play and would like a longer curriculum with lesson plans for more than one scene, we are happy to provide access to our 3-week lesson plan indexed to state standards. (Please note that it was created in 2017 to accompany our in-person tour, and has not been adjusted for distance learning, but much of the material will still be useful.)

Each lesson plan includes a discussion of gender and performance, the major theme of this episode, as well as a close read of some of the text of the scene. We haven't provided an "answer key" because we believe there are no "right" answers to the questions we've posed. With this curriculum, we have identified three major learning goals. Students will:

- Think critically and develop personal aesthetics, using self-reflection to create ownership of the material. We believe this is the best way to inspire a lifelong love of Shakespeare and poetry.
- Challenge heteronormative assumptions about this tragic play by exploring different performance norms throughout history, including Shakespeare's own day.
- Interrogate gender roles in Shakespeare's England and better understand the surprising performance history of this play.
- Use textual clues in verse structure and word choices to better understand how actors use language to create characters.

We haven't included a glossary of unfamiliar words since the internet is readily available for that purpose: we recommend referring your students to <https://www.shakespeareswords.com/>

This is a new program for the San Francisco Shakespeare Festival, so we value your feedback and look forward to serving your needs with future episodes of Takes on Shakes. If you have any questions or suggestions, you can reach out to us at sfshakes@sfshakes.org.

Very best -
The Takes on Shakes Team

For students:

Introduction

Welcome! Today you're going to have an experience with Shakespeare. Whether or not you've ever read or studied Shakespeare before, you've probably heard his name – he has a very strong hold on English-speaking cultures.

You may be looking forward to this class, or you may not be, based on some things you've heard about Shakespeare – that his plays are boring, hard to understand, or only interesting to scholars. We hope to change your mind.

At San Francisco Shakespeare Festival, we believe that the best way to appreciate and relate to Shakespeare's stories, language, and themes is to watch them in performance, not just read them off a page. We hope that by watching the scene and not just reading it, the performances and choices of the actors will help you better understand what's happening in the scene.

We also believe that Shakespeare only matters if the plays matter to you, and if you find meaning in them now, whoever you might be. So we're not very interested in the "right" way to perform Shakespeare, or the "right" answers to the questions in this curriculum – there are none! What has kept these plays vibrant over 400+ years is that people from many cultures, backgrounds, and levels of education have discovered in them something about what it means to be human. If, as you watch the scene today, you make a discovery in a way that applies to you and your experience, no one can tell you their discovery is more correct.

Today's lesson will cover just one scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. You're going to watch a video and pause a few times to reflect on what you're seeing and hearing. Your teacher may provide additional assignments based on other parts of the play, but for now, we're just going to focus on one scene – a scene that has traditionally been called "the balcony scene" – although, as you're about to learn, even that name is misleading.

The balcony scene happens in the first half of the play, in what modern editors have chosen to call Act Two, scene two. We've learned that Romeo is a Montague, and that his family has a long-standing feud with the Capulet family. He's also in love with a girl named Rosalind, and he finds out she's going to be at a party thrown by the Capulets. He and his friends decide to crash the party in disguise. Also at the party is young Juliet Capulet, who we've learned is about to become engaged to County Paris, another nobleman. Once Romeo and Juliet see each other, Rosalind is forgotten and Paris doesn't have a chance. The two flirt and kiss, before Romeo's cover is blown and he has to leave quickly with his friends. But he can't resist trying to see her one last time - he slips away from his pals, sees Juliet at her window... and the scene begins.

If there are words you don't understand as you're watching and completing the lessons, we suggest using <https://www.shakespeareswords.com/> to look them up. Remember that Shakespeare invented a lot of words, so his audience may not have known them either - they figured out the meaning from the context and even the sound of the word.

PART ONE (0:00-9:10)

Watch the first part of *Takes on Shakes: Takes on Romeo & Juliet*, through 9:10 (you'll be given a chance to pause.)

THEMES

Gender and performance in Shakespeare's time

At SF Shakes, we're big believers in looking at William Shakespeare and his work from a historical perspective – in the context of Elizabethan England.

When *Romeo and Juliet* was produced in 1595, Queen Elizabeth I was the ruler, and had enjoyed a long and prosperous reign. At the time, gender roles were very prescribed, by both medicine and religion. Medical science of the time relied heavily upon the work of Greek and Roman philosophers like Plato, Hippocrates, and Galen to understand and treat the human body. This medical tradition held that female humans were essentially incomplete or unfinished males; supposedly caused by a lack of heat that would have otherwise resulted in the formation of male genitalia. It followed that women were understood as being weaker, more prone to psychological and physical ailment and in need of supervision, control and at times restraint by the one true sex, men.

Curiously, biblical ideas conflicted with secular ones about sex and gender; the Bible made room for two distinct yet unequal sexes: Adam and Eve. Though there are conflicting messages about sex and gender in the Bible, it was deployed by Early Modern English society to enforce the idea that women were in need of domination and stewardship by men.



Elizabeth I on the Field of Tilbury.

Queen Elizabeth very shrewdly manipulated the signs of femininity and masculinity to consolidate her royal power. She never married, partially to avoid submission to the gender hierarchy of the time. On the field of Tilbury, fighting against the forces of Spain, she famously said “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too...” The paradox of a mighty and powerful female ruler leading a culture in which women were considered lesser beings was the backdrop of Shakespeare’s early playwriting career.

In the 1590s, Shakespeare wasn’t yet an international brand, widely accepted as the “greatest writer of all time.” He was a single shareholder in a company of actors called the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. He wrote *Romeo and Juliet* pretty early in his career – it was one of his first hits, based on the number of pirated versions being sold in the local bookshops after its debut - but it wasn’t even the first time the story had been told. He based it on a poem by Arthur Brooke written in 1562 - and THAT was based on an Italian novella published in 1554.

As director Chris Steele tells you in the video, professional actors in Shakespeare’s time were all male. This is because it was forbidden for women to appear in professional theatre. (Women were allowed to appear in amateur private productions, and often did at court. Read more: <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/women-performers>). Teenaged boys played roles like Juliet, while an adult male likely played the comic role of Juliet’s Nurse.

While only two genders were recognized in mainstream culture at the time, Chris proposes that the stage nevertheless provided a space for gender fluidity. One of the things we most identify with Shakespeare’s plays is boys playing women disguised as boys. In plays like *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare is somewhat ambiguous about whether the male lover has fallen for the woman or the boy - or perhaps both. Gender ambiguity was certainly one of the concerns of the era’s Puritans. Conservative churchmen who preached against the cross-dressed theatre felt that young men dressed as women on stage incited lust in everyone in the audience, regardless of gender.

Because boys and men played all genders in Shakespeare, they relied on visual and vocal signals to convey the accepted ideals of femininity. We know this primarily because of the way the male character Francis Flute is told to perform the female role of Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – “Make your voice as small as you will.” Shakespeare names physical and vocal features the audience is meant to read as feminine when his characters speak about boys playing women - such as in *Twelfth Night*, when Orsino describes his new boy page Cesario, who is actually the young woman Viola in disguise (played by a boy actor):

“Diana’s lip is not more rubious. Thy small pipe
Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman’s part.”

Shakespeare’s audience knew Cesario was a boy playing a girl playing a boy. The fact that both Orsino, a man, and Olivia, another woman played by a boy, are both attracted to Cesario gives permission to everyone in the audience to experience the same confusing attraction. Gender ambiguity is center stage, with a subtle acknowledgment that gender is about performance and perception.



Samuel Barnett as Cesario/Viola and Mark Rylance as Olivia in Tim Carroll’s 2002/2012 all-male production of *Twelfth Night* at Shakespeare’s Globe. You can see Barnett perform a speech from the play at <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/theater/in-performance-samuel-barnett.html>

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- I. Consider both versions of *Romeo and Juliet* that you just saw. Which version of the scene most met your expectations about Shakespeare? How was it different from your expectations?
- II. How did Charlie’s performance as Juliet make you feel? Did you recognize any of his behavior as “feminine”? Can you name what physical movements seemed feminine to you? What vocal qualities seem “feminine” even in a deeper male voice? (Return to the video as needed to watch Charlie’s performance again.)
- III. Whatever your gender identity, make a video of yourself giving a “feminine” reading of the line:

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?

How did that feel to you?

If you like, read the line in a way that feels more natural to you. What changed?

- IV. Respond to Chris' question about which character you relate most to in this version of the scene, Romeo or Juliet. Do you relate to them in a way that's connected to gender, or because of something in their language or personality?

LANGUAGE

Verse Structure and Word Choices

At SF Shakes, while we often use edited versions of the plays from the Folger or Arden for their useful notes, we like to start our script work with the First Folio. This was the first complete book of Shakespeare's plays, published in 1623. While it probably differs somewhat from the texts that Shakespeare's acting company used in performance, it was compiled by a group of his friends and fellow players, so we assume it's reasonably close to what the playwright intended. As actors, we like to keep the original punctuation, line breaks, and capitalization in our performance scripts, because they offer useful clues for actors.

<https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare/first-folio>

Romeo and Juliet was also published in several unauthorized "quartos" (smaller books) during and after Shakespeare's lifetime. Some are considered "bad" because they were likely recreated from memory, but the second quarto, from 1599, is considered a reliable source and often used to correct what appear to be typesetting errors in the Folio (we've used it to correct some Folio errors in our performance text). <https://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/romeo.html>

Take a look at the text that Romeo spoke in the first short scene:

ROMEO

He jests at Scars that never felt a wound.
But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the East, and Juliet is the Sun.
Arise, fair Sun, and kill the envious Moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou her Maid art far more fair than she:
Be not her Maid since she is envious,
Her Vestal livery is but sick and green,
And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.
It is my Lady, O, it is my Love, O, that she knew she were...

We're going to look at this very famous speech in two ways - the verse structure and the word choices.

1 – Verse Structure

Shakespeare wrote large parts of his plays in “verse,” which is poetic language that has a formal rhythm.

- A. Count the number of syllables in each line. How many are there?
- B. Try saying each line with a very even “duh-DUM duh-DUM duh-DUM” rhythm.

He JESTS at SCARS that NE-ver FELT a WOUND.

Can you make the number of syllables in each line even by squishing together, or eliding, some of the sounds?

It IS the EAST and JU-liet (elided) IS the SUN.

Her VES-tal LIV-ery (elided) IS but SICK and GREEN

- C. What's happening on the last line? Why do you think it's so different from the others?

It IS my LA-dy, O, it IS my LOVE, o THAT she KNEW she WERE...

A lot of edited versions try to make that last line conform to the rhythm by breaking it in half after “Love” - but the Folio has it all as one line. Try speaking it out loud with a pause after “Love” and again with no pause. What's the difference? What tells you more about how Romeo feels seeing his love at the window?

The kind of rhythm Shakespeare used the most was called “iambic pentameter.” This is a very technical way to describe what you just did. “Iamb” is the name for that duh-DUM sound, while pentameter refers to the number of stressed syllables in the line. This is a cool thing to know, but practically speaking, it's more useful to scholars than actors. For actors, it's more useful just to note that this repetitive rhythm is very natural to the English language – and to the human heartbeat.

Sometimes Shakespeare broke the steady rhythm of his verse to do something different – like in that last line. Why do you think he would do that?

Verse can be pleasant to listen to – and to read. But there are good reasons why a playwright, writing for a company of actors who had to perform a lot of different plays, might use it. It's easier to memorize! Also, there were no directors in

Shakespeare's time. The actors got all the information they needed from the play itself - and Shakespeare excelled at giving them clues in his writing.

2 – Word Choices

Shakespeare not only used verse to write large parts of his plays, he also used what is sometimes called “heightened language.” This kind of language uses figures of speech, like metaphors, to help characters express big emotions.

In the speech above, highlight any of the words that have to do with light or the sun in one color. Then highlight any words that have to do with sickness or the moon in a different color. (The Folio capitalizations can be especially useful when pulling out important descriptive words.)

What is Romeo comparing Juliet to?

What is Juliet better than?

Why would Romeo talk this way? What do we learn about him based on the way he's speaking?

Chris Steele, the director, tells you in the introduction that Romeo's accent isn't accurate. This is true! The English accents of the 16th century probably sounded a little bit like American accents do today, with hard “r's,” not like the fancy English accents we sometimes associate with Shakespeare. There have been some shifts in vowel sounds as well, so that some words that rhymed in Shakespeare's time no longer do. The British father-son team David and Ben Crystal have done some wonderful research on this topic: <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/original-pronunciation>

Activity One

Record yourself speaking Romeo's lines with a very heavy duh-DUM rhythm. What sounds natural and what doesn't? Try it again, and this time take away some of the heavy rhythm to make the lines make more sense.

Guess what? This is exactly the way many Shakespeare actors start working on their lines – first with a heavy rhythm, then more naturally so that just a trace of that rhythm is left.

3 - Structure + Word Choices = Character

Let's take a look at the next big speech in the scene - from Juliet this time! You may have heard of this one, even if you've never seen the play.

JULIET

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy Father and refuse thy name:
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my Love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

ROMEO

Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

JULIET

'Tis but thy name that is my Enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague,
What's Montague? it is nor hand nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O be some other name,
What's in a name? that which we call a Rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself.

As we learned in the last section, actors use the rhythm of the language to learn things about the character they are portraying. Try using your “duh-DUM” rhythm on these lines. What do you notice? How many syllables are there (even if you “squish” the “eo”s)?

o RO-meo, RO-meo! WHEREfore ART thou RO-meo?

What about the rest of the speech? What does this make you think about her emotions on the first line, and then how she might change as the speech goes on?

Now look at what Juliet is actually talking about. What words get repeated more than others? Why is Juliet so focused on the issue of Romeo’s name, as far as you can tell?

Compare this speech to Romeo’s first speech. What kinds of metaphors are used here? Does Romeo use more metaphors, or does Juliet?

Based on this speech, and on Charlie’s interview about playing Juliet, what three adjectives do you think best describe Romeo? How about Juliet?

Activity Two

As you did before, record yourself reading the lines with a very heavy duh-DUM rhythm, then again with a more relaxed natural rhythm. Do you find yourself changing which words you emphasize, or do you tend to stick more closely to the original rhythm?

Shakespeare directors and actors all have different opinions about what actors should do with the iambic pentameter structure of Shakespeare's verse. Some think it should be ignored completely, and spoken like prose (language without a formal rhythmic structure, like what you're reading right now.) Some think actors should stick as closely as possible to the rhythm - and even breathe at the end of every line, whether there is ending punctuation or not. The truth is, we don't actually know how Shakespeare's actors did it, so we get to decide for ourselves!

PART TWO (9:10-18:28)

Watch the video up to 18:28, the second pause, after the interview with actor Bidalia Albanese.

THEMES

Gender and performance in the Restoration, Victorian, and Edwardian eras

In 1649, 33 years after Shakespeare's death, there was a civil war in England, during which the Puritans, led by Oliver Cromwell, overthrew the monarchy and executed King Charles I. The Puritans were religious conservatives who objected to theatre in general and women on stage in particular, and completely shut down the theatres. In 1660, King Charles II was restored to the throne, and the period known as the "Restoration" began. During this time, women first began to act, direct, and write for the professional theatre. Some of the best-known female playwrights of the period were Aphra Behn (1640-1689), Susanna Centlivre (1669-1723), Mary Pix (1666-1709), and Catharine Trotter (1674-1749).

As the desire to see women on stage grew, women began to achieve more financial power in the industry. At first, many co-managed companies with their husbands, but the 19th century saw the ascent of female theatre producers like Lucia Elizabeth Vestris (1797-1856) and Sara Lane (1822-1899) in England.

America also developed a thriving theatre culture in the 1800s. Most famously, the American theatre manager Catherine Norton Sinclair (aka Kate Forrest, 1817-1891), traveled west after her scandalous divorce from actor Edwin Forrest. She played to small gold rush towns until she arrived in San Francisco, where she ran the wildly successful Metropolitan Theatre.



Catherine Norton Sinclair

In the 1800s, one popular trend was for women to take on famous male roles, such as Hamlet and Romeo. At first, this was very much for the male gaze – in a period when showing an ankle was erotic, a woman in breeches and tights definitely sold tickets. But as women started to gain bargaining power, they increasingly played male roles on their own terms. In Europe, the French actor Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), after achieving international fame in female roles, began to play traditionally male roles like Hamlet to enormous acclaim.

Despite Bernhardt's enduring reputation, the true 19th-century ground-breaker in traditionally male roles was American actor Charlotte Cushman (1816-1878). You can read all about her here: <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/romeo-charlotte-cushman>



(l-r) Thomas Sully. *Charlotte Cushman*. Oil on canvas, 1843; *Mrs. Young. Charlotte Cushman's Eye*. Miniature on ivory, 19th century; *Miss Cushman and Miss Susan Cushman in the characters of Romeo and Juliet*. London, 19th century.

Rather than playing male roles for men's enjoyment, Cushman famously played the characters as realistically as she could. But as the article above makes clear, while Cushman wasn't necessarily stigmatized for her homosexuality in the 1800s, since women were not considered to have sexual desire, by the turn of the century, there was a homophobic backlash. In the 20th century, well-know productions and films featured cis-male actors as Romeo and cis-female actors as Juliet - the gender fluidity of earlier eras all but vanished.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- I. Did you relate to the same character in this version? Why or why not?
- II. Take a moment to consider actor Bidalia Albanese's performance. Did you notice anything about her Romeo that felt "masculine"? What seemed "feminine"? Why? In what ways did her performance seem neither masculine nor feminine?

- III. Compare Charlie's performance of Juliet to actor Carolina Morones' performance. What was different about Juliet in this scene versus the last?

LANGUAGE

Shared lines

We've looked at how the rhythm and word choices in Shakespeare's lines can tell us a little bit about the characters. Now let's look at another tool Shakespeare used to give tools to his actors and help us understand the characters.

Read the lines below, keeping in mind the duh-DUM rhythm and noticing anything unusual.

ROMEO

Lady, by yonder blessed Moon I swear,
That tips with silver all these Fruit-tree tops--

JULIET

O swear not by the Moon, th' inconstant Moon,
That monthly changes in her circled Orb,
Lest that thy Love prove likewise variable.

ROMEO

What shall I swear by?

JULIET

Do not swear at all;
Or, if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the God of my Idolatry,
And I'll believe thee.

ROMEO

If my heart's dear love--

JULIET

Well, do not swear...

Did you notice what happened at the 6th and 7th lines, and again at the 10th and 11th? Try reading each of those two sets of lines as one continuous line - how many syllables are there?

We call these sets of lines a "shared line." Editors sometimes space the lines on the page to make this more clear, as follows:

ROMEO

What shall I swear by?

JULIET

Do not swear at all;

Using our duh-DUM iambic rhythm, the shared line could sound like this:

ROMEO

What SHALL I SWEAR by?

JULIET

DO not swear at ALL;

Why do you think Shakespeare might want to have two actors share a line? What does this tell the actors about how quickly the lines might need to follow each other?

In this particular instance, the first shared line is started by Romeo and finished by Juliet. What does this tell you about their relationship - who is calling the shots here?

The second shared line is reversed - Juliet starts and Romeo finishes... but doesn't get very far before Juliet begins a new line. What does this tell you?

Activity One

If possible, work with a partner on a video chat platform, and record yourselves! Read the short exchange above with one of you as Romeo and the other as Juliet. How well can you complete each other's lines, while still keeping the duh-DUM rhythm going? What happens if you leave a big pause in the middle of the shared line instead?

Activity Two

Write out a list of at least three adjectives to describe Romeo, and three to describe Juliet, based on what you've learned about them so far through their language. Would you describe any of these traits as stereotypically "feminine" or "masculine"? Write an "F" or "M" next to your words if so. How much do these traits align with the gender of the characters?

PART THREE (18:28-END)

Watch until the end of the video.

THEMES

Shakespeare Now - Gender

Throughout most of the 20th century, even in productions considered groundbreaking, heterosexual takes on *Romeo and Juliet* reigned supreme – for example, in Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 film, still considered the gold standard by many, and in Baz Lurhmann's modern take in 1996 (shout-out to that Mercutio, though). One notable exception is *Shakespeare's R&J* by Joe Calarco (1998), which returns the play to its 1590s origins by having four teen boys discover and perform the play.

<https://howlround.com/eroticizing-gender-shakespeares-rj>

Now, in the 21st century, as Chris notes in their narration, we're having new conversations about gender and acknowledging what Shakespeare seems to have always known - that gender is not a strict binary. We're seeing Shakespeare's plays being cast in more gender-inclusive ways that honor their original gender-bent nature - from Tim Carroll's original practices production of *Twelfth Night* at Shakespeare's Globe in 2002 (below) to Phyllida Lloyd's trio of all-female productions set in a women's prison (2012-2016).



Sheila Atim as Lady Percy and Jade Anouka as Hotspur in Henry IV, directed by Phyllida Lloyd. Photograph: Helen Maybanks

As non-binary and trans directors and actors bring their own “takes” to Shakespeare, we’re seeing the genderfluid world of Shakespeare’s own sonnets finally taking center stage:

A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change as is false women’s fashion;
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she pricked thee out for women’s pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love’s use their treasure.

(Sonnet 20)



One candidate for the young man in Shakespeare’s sonnets, the Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesley, as a teenager c. 1590–93, attributed to John de Critz

Assuming Shakespeare’s sonnets were addressed to a real lover, we have strong evidence that the playwright himself was queer (though he likely would not have identified as homosexual or pansexual at the time - those words weren’t in use.) We have some theories as to the identity of Shakespeare’s lover, but we’ll never know for sure who they were. In this sonnet, the male poet is praising a young man for possessing traits that might be described as feminine, like a “gentle heart”, but also

for stereotypically masculine traits like loyalty (“not acquainted / With shifting change.”)

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- I. How does this sonnet acknowledge the gender binary even as it subverts it? What other “feminine” characteristics of his lover does Shakespeare appreciate, and which is he glad his lover does not possess? What other “masculine” traits?
- II. Does this lover seem more like Juliet or Romeo, and why? (The sonnets were likely written in the early 1590s, right around the same time as the play.)
- III. While watching Akaina’s performance, did you notice any choices that seemed “masculine” or “feminine”? Did you find yourself paying attention to gender as much as in the earlier two scenes, or not as much?
- IV. What have you learned about gender and performance from watching *Takes on Romeo and Juliet*?

Shakespeare Now - Virtual Performance

For SF Shakes, producing this video series in the middle of a pandemic (in October of 2020) brought a number of creative challenges and opportunities. This “take” on the scene removed the idea of the balcony completely - we don’t even see the lovers looking through a window! The use of smart phones, so much a part of the way we are all connecting during shelter-in-place, provides a new way to look at Romeo and Juliet’s relationship.

In their interview, actor Akaina Ghosh reflects on theatrical intimacy during the pandemic, when actors cannot be together physically. This is analogous to the obstacles that prevent Romeo and Juliet from being together - it’s a matter of life and death, although for different reasons. Without the ability to physically touch, they use language to, in one night, fall in love, woo each other, and become engaged. In filming virtual theatre, where often the actors can’t see each other, it has been absolutely critical for them to hear each others’ voices. You can find out more about some of the ways SF Shakes makes virtual theatre at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E0ul0X9zM>

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- IV. How did the use of smart phones affect your understanding of the conversation between Romeo and Juliet?

- V. Who would you want to play - Romeo or Juliet? How is the character you chose similar to and different from you - in a way that doesn't have to do with your gender or sexual orientation?
- VI. Which version of the scene felt most compelling to you and why? Which felt the most intimate?

LANGUAGE

Parallel structure and gendered language

Throughout this lesson, we've looked at ways that Romeo and Juliet's language gives us clues about their personalities, their relationship, and the way that they do and don't conform to gender stereotypes. With those thoughts in mind, take a look at this passage close to the end of the scene:

JULIET

I have forgot why I did call thee back.

ROMEO

Let me stand here till thou remember it.

JULIET

I shall forget, to have thee still stand there,
Remembering how I Love thy company.

ROMEO

And I'll still stay, to have thee still forget,
Forgetting any other home but this.

JULIET

'Tis almost morning, I would have thee gone:
And yet no further than a wanton's Bird;
Who lets it hop a little from his hand,
Like a poor prisoner in his twisted Gyves,
And with a silken thread plucks it back again,
So loving-Jealous of his liberty.

ROMEO

I would I were thy Bird.

JULIET

Sweet, so would I:
Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing.

Take a look at the first 6 lines. Shakespeare uses a device called “parallel structure” to have these lines reflect each other - notice the bolded, repeated words:

JULIET

I have **forgot** why I did call thee back.

ROMEO

Let me **stand here** till thou **remember** it.

JULIET

I shall **forget**, to have thee **still stand there**,
Remembering how I Love thy company.

ROMEO

And I'll **still stay**, to have thee **still forget**,
Forgetting any other home but this.

This is near the end of the scene - and the lovers have become engaged and plan to marry as soon as possible. How does the rhythm of these lines differ from the energy of the first two speeches in the scene, before the two characters speak directly to each other? What is the effect of the parallel structure - how does it show the characters' emotional state and even their breathing?

Look at the second half of this section:

JULIET

'Tis almost morning, I would have thee gone:
And yet no further than a wanton's Bird;
Who lets it hop a little from his hand,
Like a poor prisoner in **his** twisted Gyves,
And with a silken thread plucks it back again,
So loving-Jealous of his liberty.

ROMEO

I would I were thy Bird.

JULIET

Sweet, so would I:
Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing.

While this is often altered by editors, in the Folio it's notable that Juliet uses a masculine pronoun for the wanton (young child) to whom she compares herself. With this image of the wanton and the bird, who has more power? How is that consistent with the dynamics between the two characters throughout the scene? In what ways do Juliet and Romeo both maintain and subvert binary gender expectations with their behavior?

Activity

Once again, find a partner who will record the above lines with you. Experiment with a very even rhythm, and taking a breath at the end of every line. Share with each other how that makes you feel!

IN CONCLUSION

If this was your first experience with Shakespeare, we hope it inspires you to watch more, read more, and play more. Remember, Shakespeare was meant to be performed! Reading out loud with friends or watching a performance are the best ways to understand the language and follow the story.

One of the amazing things about Shakespeare is that we're always discovering new ways to perform the plays. You'll probably think of your own - and if you do, we encourage you to go right ahead and create your own version of the balcony/window/cell phone scene! Share it on social media - if you like - and tag #sfshakes and #takesonshakes. We can't wait to see what you come up with.