Give Up the Bard

LEARNING STRATEGIES: Graphic Organizer, Note-taking, Marking the Text, Discussion Groups

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curriculum: regular classes taught in a school or program trappings: characteristic signs pantheon: a place where heroes congregate

putative: commonly regarded as right gobbets: fragments; pieces

acute: severe uncanny: mysterious; inexplicable

Learning Targets

- Identify the essential elements of an argument in an article.
- Create a graphic organizer and a writer's checklist, in preparation for writing a synthesis argument.

Preview

In this activity, you will read an article that argues for giving Shakespeare the "heave-ho."

Setting a Purpose for Reading

- Using your color codes, highlight evidence for or against the studying of Shakespeare.
- Circle unknown words and phrases. Try to determine the meaning of the words by using context clues, word parts, or a dictionary.

Article

Why It's Time to Give the Bard the Heave-ho!

by Brandon Robshaw, The Independent

- 1 As a tribute to Shakespeare this St George's day, isn't it time we dropped him from the National Curriculum? The Bard is a national monument. Nor is there anything wrong with that. Along with a flag, an anthem, and a football team, a national writer is part of the trappings of nationhood. The Italians have Dante, the Germans have Goethe, the French have a pantheon which includes Molière, Racine, Victor Hugo, and Proust.
- 2 And Shakespeare is peculiarly well-suited to be ours, for both literary and non-literary reasons. The date of his death and the **putative** date of his birth neatly fall on our patron saint's day; he belongs to the golden age of Elizabethan expansionism; his history plays chronicle our kings and queens and contain quotable patriotic **gobbets** ("This precious stone set in the silver sea," "We few, we happy few," etc.). His output is staggeringly prolific—38 dramatic works in all the genres, several long poems and over 150 sonnets—and his plays work well enough dramatically to be constantly performed today. He had, as George Orwell put it, an amazing skill at putting one word beside another; as well as **acute** psychological insight, the largeness of mind to give great lines even to minor or unfavored characters, an unmatched ear for rhythm, and an **uncanny** ability to coin memorable phrases which, in many cases, have passed into general usage.
- 3 One might even say that appreciation of Shakespeare is the touchstone of an educated literary taste. If you don't like him, you don't get it. Voltaire and Tolstoy famously didn't, but then English wasn't their mother tongue.

My Notes

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- 4 The trouble is that most schoolchildren today don't like him and don't get it. And this isn't their fault. Shakespeare wrote over 400 years ago. Few people realize how much English has changed in just the last generation. Grammar and vocabulary have altered to the extent that teenagers tend to dismiss anything written before about 1960 as "Old English."
- 5 Besides, the large and increasing number of second-language speakers are in the same boat as Voltaire and Tolstoy from the start. We don't have anything like the unified national culture we had when I first studied Shakespeare in the 1970s. Then, most schoolchildren had at least some exposure to the King James Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and Hymns Ancient and Modern. We still didn't find Shakespeare easy, but at least we didn't need to have "thee" and "thou" explained to us.
- 6 Even the key selling point that many Shakespearisms have entered common usage is gradually losing its force as the years go by. I was recently taken aback to discover that virtually none of a class of London teenagers had encountered the expression "one fell swoop." Well, you might say, here's your chance to teach them, then. But that cannot be the justification for making Shakespeare **compulsory**—to teach outdated idioms that no one under the age of 40 uses.
- 7 We need to think more clearly about the purpose of **enshrining** Shakespeare in this manner. If it's to preserve his national monument status, this is an unnecessary and counter-productive way of going about it. If it is to teach those things that literature is supposed to teach—**aesthetic** pleasure, understanding of character, moral sensitivity, liberal humanist values, an **inkling** of the techniques by which literary texts work their magic—then Shakespeare is simply not delivering. It's like handing pupils treasure in a locked chest. More contemporary texts may not offer quite such riches, but at least the kids could open the box.
- 8 Making today's school children read Shakespeare is about as sensible as compelling them to read Ulysses or Tristram Shandy. For all but a few—the brightest and best-read—it is a form of torture. Yet it's laid down in the National Curriculum that all British children of secondary school age must study not one but two Shakespeare plays. It is, as Will himself would say, a custom more honored in the breach than in the observance—and in practice, many teachers circumvent the difficulty by teaching a fragment of Romeo and Juliet and then showing the class West Side Story.
- 9 By the time students come to choose their AS-levels [preparation for college], those with a liking for literature should be ready to appreciate the riches Shakespeare has to offer. Let them wait until then. This isn't "dumbing down." Force-feeding children Shakespeare can only **induce** nausea and a lifelong **aversion**. If we want Shakespeare to be for all time as well of an age, we must let students come to him when they are willing and able to make the effort needed to enjoy him. Surely this is a tribute our national writer deserves?

Second Read

- Reread the article to answer these text-dependent questions.
- Write any additional questions you have about the text in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
- 1. Key Ideas and Details: Why do many schools continue to put Shakespeare in the curriculum?

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