Stepping off a Small Cliff: Going Back to Ninth Grade with *Romeo and Juliet*

Scott Hall and William D. Dyer

Teaching is all about "audience." Both of us have come to know this from having pressed our heads and hearts against student audiences for over forty years—Dyer in his college classes at Minnesota State University-Mankato, and Hall in a much more diverse set of audience interactions that includes high school juniors and seniors at Irondale High School in New Brighton, MN, and adjunct classes at Anoka Ramsey Community College in Coon Rapids, MN. We know that we've done our best work, had more fun (it's all about fun), and learned more when we were mindful of and attentive to our audiences. And we've been fortunate over the past few years to carry our long friendship and vigorous discussions about teaching into each others' classrooms. Those team-teaching engagements have kept the friendship and professional association alive, providing unique opportunities to meet each other on our respective professional turf, to watch and participate in each other's attempts to draw students into challenging pieces of literature, to critically evaluate the results of those interactions, and to rediscover the literature that we were teaching in the process. That is, we had always used our own classes as places to perform our experiments with audiences and literature. But this year would be different.

1. Can We Get There From Here?

"Let's try teaching *Romeo and Juliet*," Scott said. "Good grief," said Dyer, "I haven't taught that play in years, and I can't say that I remember liking it that much. Why *that* play?" "Maybe we ought to try something we don't know so well," Hall said. "And maybe, by doing that, we ought to find out how other teachers are teaching Shakespeare to high school students." "Doesn't that mean ninth grade?" I gasped. "Yep," Hall said, "but that's pretty much where Shakespeare begins for school kids, and it would be good for us to know how they like it and how they're being brought into it. That way, we might better find out for ourselves what students are bringing to our classes." "So, then, when's the last time you taught ninth-graders?" Dyer queried. "Years ago," Scott said, "and very briefly. You?" "I remember *being* in ninth grade once. And I think I was pretty much of a jerk when I was there," Dyer said. "Ok, then," Hall said, "that seals it. It's that particular lack of experience on our parts that says we have to do it. I'll talk to the ninth-grade teachers about the possibilities and make the arrangements—you re-read the play. Those teachers will want to know what we're going to do in those classes, that they'll be giving up their classrooms for a good cause, and that we won't be wasting their kids' time. And—they're gonna wanna know who the heck *you* are!"

Right. "I'll be down to get you in a taxi, honey—better be ready 'bout half-past eight."

Hall was right. There was a pedagogical adventure in the offing here. Lots to learn. But very risky. We'd be jumping into the middle of a teaching unit on *Romeo and Juliet*, and, given that three teachers were opening their classrooms for our use, we couldn't be absolutely certain of what we'd be stepping in. We'd be granted two days to do what we'd ultimately decide upon—much better than a one-day guest appearance but too brief to allow for any unfortunate miscalculations or wheel-spinning. Both of us needed to know the *play* like the back of our hands—however, because we both thrive on chewing over the layers of meaning in Shakespeare's plays, *knowing Romeo and Juliet* would be the least of our problems.

Two problems confronted us. The first was radically about "audience." Who would these young people be? What did ninth-graders know? What did they *need* to know? And what might make these students most receptive to our intrusion into their classrooms—their lives? The second problem was contingent upon the first—what could we do with six different ninth grade classes, over two days, that wouldn't squander the small blocks of time we were given? How were we going to be able to access their responses to the literature, get them to see something in the text, and get them to express that to us and to each other? And we were both concerned about what we would learn from this experience that could inform and illuminate our understanding of Shakespeare and further interactions with students in our more familiar teaching environments. We'll share some of the answers to those questions in what follows. But, let's talk about ninth-graders first, shall we?

2. I Can See the Horizon Over Yonder

Who's the audience, here, anyway? What do they know? What do they need to know? And why should they care about *Romeo and Juliet*? Well, we had to start somewhere—we knew that this was a ninth-grade audience. So what? We assumed this meant that these kids have a very limited attention span. The very real presence and attraction of the opposite sex draws away some of their attention. These kids, we thought, would be nearly feral in the way their glandular secretions would lead them. Besides the scent of young women filling the nostrils of these young men, and the equally powerful attraction that these young women feel for those young men, the culture of their friends drives them—cliques. It's one of the most important elements of "school" that impels many of them to come at all. Yet, there is something about a ninth grader that is also aggressively individualistic—even if only within a group. If they are anything like we were, we'd find some wise guys and class clowns trying to rise above the group and make the classroom a showcase for their attention-getting abilities. Things academic are just beginning to draw the attention of some of them—most see their senior year of high school light years away.

Ninth grade is about social endeavors, stretching beyond their sometimes insecure selves to connect with their peers in important ways—ways in which they haven't before: going to the football games; formal and informal dances; private parties; engagement in high school varsity and junior varsity sports teams, as well as membership in formal organizations like band, theatre, forensics, the school newspaper, student government, and academic decathlon events; and the sifting-out of kids into an unofficial, complex ladder of social identifiers. Some of the identifiers are celebratory—smart, popular, cool. Some of them are derogatory—nerd, geek, loser, froshy. There are many more derogatory terms for ninth graders than there are celebratory ones.

Depending upon how their school is organized (perhaps a middle school organization in which the ninth-graders are located at the top of the pecking order, or a high school organization in which the ninth-graders are the lowest-of-low), these kids may feel even more unsure of themselves and more socially threatened than they usually do—and they usually do. For many of them—young men and women—this is the beginning of the process of their being defined and classified (and unfairly limited) by members of their sub-culture. They can't drive yet, so the imposition of social labels like "greaser" and "motor-head" won't kick in for a while. Nonetheless, they can express their difference from their peers in other ways that can have negative, and sometimes extended, impacts on them that can't be reversed easily without moving out of town.

Social cliques include the obvious ones, like folks involved in sports (jocks), or band/orchestra (band-heads), or activities and clubs with a classic academic emphasis (play-heads or chess geeks). But other groupings loom large—those determined on the basis of race, ethnicity, physical or mental challenges, socio-economic position, perceived or real engagement in drug or alcohol use, engagement in activities that are on or over the edge of criminal behavior, behaviors bordering on or well over the edge of the bizarre or unacceptable or unusual (kids overly "pierced," or "Goths" who dress in black and wear heavy black makeup, or "Satanists" who practice uncommon rituals). We've

just scratched the surface of these social siftings. And then, of course, there's the "religious" rung of the ladder—there are Christians and Muslims and more; and nearly one hundred first languages are spoken within Irondale's school district. A rung or two must be reserved for those who set the trend for the dress and behavior and manner of verbal communication—the style—for most of the rest. The social ladder has room for everyone. The leaders, the "Chosen," or privileged students on the cutting edge of determining the social ladder, will always find rungs for the perceived "outsiders": those who don't fit or don't belong or find themselves isolated from the rest or who look or talk or dress differently. And just as vehemently, the outsiders will not want to be considered on any rung that has a "preppy" or an "honor roller." The social sifting starts in a major way in the ninth grade, and ninth-grade teachers often can contribute substantially to how it progresses. If all of this sounds a little like the way things work within a prison culture, you've got it.

Having said all this, without a bit of situational grounding, it was scary to pick up the Sunday *Trib* (19 Feb 2006) and see, featured on the front page, a piece simply titled "A fresh look at freshman year." The article inferred or stated directly—sometimes by means of little interviews by those kids who should know best—what we'd been thinking. Ninth grade is a "transition" year for students. They're betwixt and between, fish out of water poised anxiously to plunge into the complex soup of high school adolescence. The article asserts that "ninth grade has become the pivotal year in American schools." Kids who do well in it gain confidence and go on to more successful, fuller high school experiences. Those "who don't can drift through high school or drop out. Kids in ninth grade feel their alienation from a middle school experience, where they weren't terribly pushed and not asked to be so nearly independent, and an upper-classman high school status, where kids are more settled into a set of social and academic roles, are older, bigger, and demonstrably freer." "'In ninth grade, the kids get lost in the crowd,' said Jay Hertzog, dean of the College of Education at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania. 'They're

the ankle-biters of the high school.'" But, as the article indicates, ninth-graders "tend to have a hypersensitivity to social standing," have a lower self-worth, and are consequently at a higher risk for suicide. That's why there's been a movement of late to configure "ninth grade centers, in the hope of insulating them from some of the rough and tumble of teen life."

But these kids are also feeling alienated from those who have anchored them thus far and made them feel secure. A substantial number of them think ninth grade "stinks": nearly one-third of Minnesota ninth-graders don't like school; a third says their teachers don't care about them. And one in ten ninth-graders thinks the kids at their school "aren't friendly." And here's the kicker:

> Perhaps friends are critical to ninth-graders because so many feel disconnected from their families. When asked how much their families care for them, according to the student survey, more than ten percent of Minnesota ninth-graders say 'some,' 'a little' or 'not at all.' More than a quarter say their families don't understand them. And nearly one-third say their families don't respect their privacy. All those responsesare higher than for sixth- or twelfth-graders.

At this point, gangs need to be mentioned. This volatile group of people poses special challenges to anyone who interacts with ninth graders in a pedagogical way. Students' peers may be members of these gangs—gangs are always recruiting new members. Boys are often drawn to these gangs for the clear social structure they provide—they join for a sense of belonging. And they'll do just about anything for that feeling of acceptance. Even young women are being drawn into the gang and rap culture and perhaps being victimized sexually by these gangs—some violent movies and videos illustrate this spin-off of the rap music culture where women are often referred to as "bitches" or "hoes." That's all arguable. But these young people are subject to the gang influence and the powerful pressures to belong to what can become a substitute for the family. And the gang culture is all over *Romeo and Juliet*.

3. The Edge Approaches

But who are *these* ninth-graders at Irondale, really? Would they make us fear for our lives? No. Would we need lots of candy to bribe them for even putting up with our antics? No. We knew that most of our preconceptions were probably off-center. And we actually knew that most of our students were going to be relatively normal, relatively middle class, and relatively Caucasian. Dyer had only to walk down the hallways of Irondale and look into their classrooms to get that picture. Nevertheless, we really needed to plan for any possibility we might walk into. Dyer *read* about ninth-graders while Hall made contacts with the ninth grade teachers[1] and asked a lot of questions. Both read, re-read, and met regularly to discuss the play for any meanings and/or possibilities within the text that might give us an "in" with our audience.

The ninth grade teachers told Hall about their reasons for teaching *Romeo and Juliet*. There were several, but the following list should give some insight into what teachers plan for when approaching literature in high school. By reading this play, students can:

1. empathize with the play's content and characters
2. learn decision-making skills—the play offers models/un-models
3. identify consequences for rebelling against the status quo
4. see modeling by the parents in the play
5. see the cost of a propagated feud—cost of redemption
6. understand culturally universal themes
7. read a text rich in imagery/detail about another era
8. enjoy it—have fun!
9. language—how to decipher Elizabethan English
10. translate it—make it their own, ultimately
11. practice research skills and increase knowledge of the era
12. read it together—communal experience/discussion—classroom as a text

13. interpret the film as an extension of the text

Hall was impressed but not surprised by the length of the list that resulted from his discussion with his teaching colleagues. However, he was surprised (genuinely and pleasantly) at the number of skills teachers expect to teach their ninth graders at Irondale. Hall saw extensions of those skills in his own room, but assumed he was *introducing* his students to some of those skills. Ah, life in a vacuum can be so snug and self-important!

It was also important that we find out what students had done with the play before we arrived—how well prepared would they be for us? We discovered that they would have read all of *Romeo and Juliet*, taken an exam on it, watched portions of either the Luhrmann (starring DiCaprio) or more romantic Zefferilli video of the play, and researched aspects of Shakespeare's culture. Thus, the students would bring some knowledge of the world of the play that we could base our teaching upon. We then brainstormed a list of topics that might drive our planning:

1. How do Romeo and Juliet provide a lens for their/our society?
2. How does our society provide a lens for Romeo and Juliet?
3. What historical considerations should we reflect upon? Emphasize?
4. What questions do students carry away from the text concerning love? death? family obligations? authority? identity? rebellion? the status quo? rites of passage?
5. Romeo and Juliet—who are they? Are they more than just cookie cutter figures? Are they capable of change—are they dynamic?
6. Assessment—how can we assess love? What data is available—in the text—outside of text? how does that data support our opinions/views? What kind of love is found in the play?
7. *Romeo and Juliet*—Is it love? What test can be used/found within the text? Outside of the text?
8. How do the other characters help us enter the

text?

We also generated a list of "journal" questions which we could ask the students to respond to:

1. Who do you listen to/go to for advice—and why?
2. Why do you rebel against some authority figures and unhesitatingly follow the rules/directions of others?
3. Why do you follow the rules or not follow the rules?
4. What rules/templates do we impose upon ourselves?
5. What rules/templates do we try impose upon those around us?
6. What differences are highlighted when the rules/templates are not followed?
7. How do we react when our expectations are not met? are met?
8. Is family peace more important than meeting your own desires?
9. Is family identity more important than individual identity?
10. Are you really free to make any decision you want to make?
11. How do you find an individual identity within the family structure?
12. How do we become individuals within a societal structure? [race/heritage/culture]
13. Will you be able to choose your own spouse/partner without family judgment/interference?
14. What would the end of the play suggest about fate/free will? what would the end of the play suggest about love?
15. Are Romeo and Juliet just pawns or do they have an integral/individual identity?
16. Do Romeo and Juliet have an obligation to keep the peace in the community?
17. Do Romeo and Juliet have an obligation to fol-

low the family's rules/policies?
18. Do Romeo and Juliet have an obligation to maintain the feud?
19. What experience is authentic? Why?
20. Which characters in the play are authentic? why?
21. What emotions in the play are authentic? why?
22. What information do insiders have that outsiders don't have?
23. How does that information make/allow us to be part of a group?
24. What gives us a feeling belongingness to any group we are part of?
25. How do we determine who is part of which group?
26. Can we tell without knowing someone [masks] whether they belong to a group pr not?
27. What kind of role-playing is evident here in the text?—in your life?
28. Is knowing your role essential to being part of a group/acceptance into a group?

Eventually, after several phone calls, meetings, and libations, we pared our lists to a few essential topics:

1. What have you sacrificed/given up or gone without for the happiness of your family?
2. What role do you play in your family [peacekeeper, boss, non-entity, comic, hero, attention-getter]?
3. How does Romeo know that this time it's love with Juliet? How does Juliet know?
4. Is Friar Lawrence a hero or a criminal? Should he be praised or condemned? Excused or blamed?
5. How can we test/assess whether a feeling is true love [within the text—or in our own lives]?
6. Why do you follow directions? Listen to authority? Follow rules at school? At home?

It's obvious to us, when we look over the lists again, that our focus was always on our audience. Every item on every list

points directly at their understanding of the text—both what they see in it and how they see themselves in it. And, after having met with six different ninth-grade classrooms-full of these kids, we understand who our audience *really* was. They are, to a fault, polite, malleable, coachable, cooperative, friendly, and open. Most important, though, they're *smart*, and they're not afraid to seem so.

4. Grasping for the Root on the Edge of the Cliff Face

And this is where Dyer came in. Irondale was rather imposing with tones chiming to begin and end classes; there would be no going over the time limit as Dyer was accustomed to do or quitting early if we ran out of material—all had to fit into the 53 minutes we were allotted. Irondale's seven minute "passing time" was also our prep time; we ferried all of our materials on a cart from room to room through a deafening throng of students standing at lockers, digging for books and loading backpacks, hitting one another, cursing, laughing, hugging, and talking in the hallway. Somehow we managed to arrive in the next classroom to get our act underway by the time the next tone chimed. There was barely time for coffee or the restroom. Hall ran Dyer around like an athletic trainer with a vengeance.

Once in class, we decided to tap in to those research activities that each of the teachers had assigned their students. We were curious to know what they knew. And there were two things Dyer wanted to ask them which might, after a little discussion and some engagement of their "personal texts," make them see that this play was about them and that they were *in* it. After talking informally with them about how we believed very strongly that Shakespeare lives for us, that we're in these plays, and that every time we read one of them, that play is *different* because we re-author it with every successive read, Dyer embarked on his questions: "Did your teacher tell you about or ask you to do a little research on Shakespeare, the times he lived in, or the process of putting together his plays?" Of course, they said "yes," in response to which Dyer asked them selectively to tell him what they'd researched and what they'd learned along the way. Those easy responses greased the skids

for a question about "audience": "who would be likely to go to see *Romeo and Juliet* at the Rose or Newington Butts or the Theatre north of the Thames and on the east side of the city walls (the Globe was still a glimmer in the theatre company's eye)?" They hadn't investigated the issue of audience, they told us, and this was Dyer's wedge in. "Just about everyone," he said. "Public theatre was quite nearly 16th-century England's version of our television—by 1600, about 21,000 a week went to the theatres, almost one in every eight of London's 160,000 residents."

"But, might it have been possible for me to find any of you there?" Dyer asked. "Could 14 or 15 year-olds possibly be present among the 2300 plus attendees of an afternoon from two to five?" They were quietly skeptical about this one, maybe even a little apprehensive, but attentive. Dyer suggested that "folks as young as you could have been there—young apprentices to haberdashers or goldsmiths or glovers or shipwrights or dyers or carpenters; maids-in-waiting attending to their aristocratic female charges in the upper galleries; drawers on holiday from a tavern or hostelry, stable boys employed at local inns, day laborers, touts, pick-pockets elbowing through the pit, prostitutes, boatmen, young soldiers, young aristocrats and high-born students, young daughters and sons of moneylenders, merchants, and shopkeepers. Peter Thomson, in his *Shakespeare's Theatre*, observed that "the groundlings in the open yard, standing and jostling for their pennysworth, would be artisans, craftsmen, soldiers returning from the wars. In the twopenny galleries would be the middle-class merchant, perhaps with his family, together with the less showy and perhaps less wealthy lawyers and students from the Inns of Court. The costliest seats would then belong to those members of society who went to the theatre to be seen—courtiers, younger sons of the nobility, friends and relations of the resident company's patron" (24). And young people could well be among them. In her chapter entitled "Elizabethan Playhouses, Actors, and Audiences," from *A Short History of the Theatre*, Martha Fletcher Bellinger wrote about the public theatre's ambience: "The house itself was not unlike a circus, with a good deal of noise and dirt. Servants, grooms, 'prentices

and mechanics jostled each other in the pit, while more or less gay companies filled the boxes. Women of respectability were few, yet sometimes they did attend; and if they were very careful of their reputations they wore masks. On the stage, which ran far out into the auditorium, would be seated a few of the early gallants, playing cards, smoking, waited upon by their pages; and sometimes eating nuts or apples and throwing things out among the crowd" (www.theatrehistory.com/british/bellinger001/html).

Since "audience" is such a huge part of every Shakespeare play, and because he makes such a big and intentional deal about "audience" to those who come to the show by repeatedly framing scenes that *include* audiences of various sorts, Dyer wanted them to hold that idea in their minds. But he also wanted them to feel that *they* could be there, that Shakespeare hadn't written something that dealt them out because it was "above" them. They needed to know that this was the "television" of the Elizabethan world, the entertainment of choice for so many of the citizens of the London of 1600, and that they could very well have been among a very diverse audience who'd willingly pony up a penny to attend. They were noticeably surprised. Suddenly, for a moment, they and we were back there, in Elizabethan London, more willing to give our pennies to one of the gatherers outside the theatre.

But it was the next question Dyer needed to hook them with: "Who would have been in the show, and could *you* have been in it?" This proved a real puzzler to them. This was a "theatre company" question. If it was conceivable to place these kids on the receiving end of Shakespeare's play, was it equally possible that they could find themselves on the "delivery" end, treading the boards in support of the Lord Chamberlain's troupe or, at least, providing some valuable service to help sustain the enterprise? After some hesitation, several volunteered that none of the young women in the class would be taking acting parts. We laughed a bit over this, talked briefly about why, and shared our mutual experience with Gwyneth Paltrow's taboo-busting role in "Shakespeare in Love." But they clearly felt unable to speculate beyond that important reality, and they showed some curiosity at discovering other possi-

bilities for their participation in a 16th-century *R&J* production.

And, so, Dyer told them that, in a play company that was comprised of some thirty-two to thirty-six folks, there would have been some real opportunities for them. In addition to the share-holders of the company—maybe numbering eight, representing the major players and playwright—two or three of those folks might have been even younger than them. These kids, from twelve to fourteen or so, wouldn't have yet formerly entered their adolescence. Their voices wouldn't have changed yet, enabling them to be enlisted to play the young girl parts—the ingénues, the "Juliets." The students helped me to remember that Juliet was still a couple of months from being fourteen. The two or three high-voiced kids would have been brought to the troupe—perhaps even recruited—as apprentices, perhaps for time periods of three to seven years (but, most probably closer to the three), placed under the control of individual actors who paid for those contractual relationships. In exchange for the kids' service, the actors fed and boarded them and taught them their trade. But those young apprentices would have come to those experienced actors with skills derived from a rigorous education at an establishment such as St. Paul's School across and up the river, where, from eight years old, they would have have been taught and worked rigorously from dawn to dusk, learning and practicing their singing and dancing under tough discipline and maybe a bit of abuse. Clearly, those young kids would have learned their craft in Shakespeare's company for a few years, grown into young men and, perhaps into more mature women's roles or other tasks in the company.

So, then, other pre-adolescents might have been brought in to replace them, with some of the older boys sticking around to do a variety of things. A couple of hired boys might have been brought on board to work with the musicians, or as stage boys or helpers in the tiring house. So, along with the apprentices, perhaps four to six boys of twelve to fifteen might have been in service at any given time. And, as those kids "graduated" or matured, perhaps a couple of more kids might have been added, swelling the population of young people of twelve to nineteen year-olds to six

to nine. So it's entirely conceivable that, at any given moment in time, our ninth-graders could see themselves on the stage, in the troupe, serving an *Romeo and Juliet* production in various ways.

Then it was Hall's turn. We'd decided earlier that we had better explain to them a little bit about what we believed about readers responding to texts. Dyer had captured their attention and pulled them in, assuring us that these students were right on board with us.

Hall based much of his theory for our presentation on the work of Norman Holland, who not only studied texts (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in particular), but people's responses to texts. Holland (in "'*Hamlet*'—My Greatest Creation," *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*) says that because no two people have had the exact same experience in life, then no two people can ever read the exact same play. Each reader relies on the prior experiences of their lives when making meaning in texts, and he further states that each reader actually re-creates *Hamlet* in images, memories, and previous experience that "pop-up" in one's brain when given the stimuli of the words, singularly, or in context, on the page. People create a *Hamlet* reminiscent of their own life—*Hamlet* becomes a concoction of each reader's memories and experiences. For example, one reader may have traveled to Europe and meandered through old castles. That reader would have a completely different take on what "ramparts" are than someone who has never actually been through a castle and had only seen a castle on television. The image of Elsinore to each reader is different. Going a little further, each student has created his or her unique vision of *Romeo and Juliet*. That is the point that Hall wanted students to leave with on that first day. To illustrate that point, he gave them a little quiz. "I know we said there weren't going to be any tests," Hall told them, "but I want you to think of something. When I say a word, I want you to picture it in your mind—get a good mental image of it, so that, if I ask you about it, you could tell me about what you see—you could describe it, even." And this is how it unfolded:

> 'OK, I want you to think of a DOG—any dog—the first that comes to your
> mind—picture it completely—in detail.'

> 'OK—ready for the test? What did your dog look like? Who thought of a small dog? Raise your hands. A big dog? Raise hands. A white dog? A brown dog? A black dog? Your dog? A cartoon dog?'
>
> 'So, a lot of different answers there—do you think any of us had the exact same dog pictured in our minds? No? So, do you think any of us had the exact same Romeo, or Juliet, or Tybalt or Mercutio or even the whole play, *Romeo and Juliet,* in our minds? No? Then what are we, Bill and I or anyone else, talking about when we say that Shakespeare created this play? You just created a dog in your mind. You are creating *Romeo and Juliet* in your mind when you read it. We are the ones who make meaning of it when we read it. We create it. If Shakespeare wrote the play, but no one read it, would it exist? Or, does it only exist when we create it, or create the idea of it, in our minds? So, is there anything in life that we don't really create—or recreate—in our lives? No.'

We ended that first day with a little homework assignment for them. We posed a few questions that they were to write some short answers to in their notebooks:

> 1. Define the word "authority." What is it? What characteristics are associated with it? What kinds?
> 2. Why do you follow directions? Listen to authority? At school? At home? Why do you listen to the authority of some and not others?
> 3. Where do you find your own authority? What rules do you impose upon yourself?

The students had left the room, but still, questions remained—which *Romeo and Juliet* have they read? Will we find out what they brought to the play concerning certain issues and themes that we felt were important? We wanted to get at their interactions with the text—what they were bringing to it, how they saw themselves in it (which we felt sure that we had set up on

Thursday). For example, do 9th grade girls read the part of Romeo the same as boys or would a 9th grade boy have some different understanding of what that role of Romeo is, what that role of being a young male means—what it is to have male friends, what it means to try to impress a girl, try to get her attention, act macho, play a lover? Do girls see themselves ever as Romeo? Do they sympathize with the character, see the character in terms of what they wish Romeo to be—if Romeo was to woo them—or if Romeo was to be their lover? Do they see Romeo for himself or do they see Romeo as an extension of the boys around them? Do they judge Romeo's behavior based upon today's morals and norms? Do they judge Romeo based upon norms in their school, their community, their state, their country? The same can be asked about the reactions of the 9th grade boys. Do they see themselves as Romeo? So they see Juliet as, perhaps, someone they could love? And students' perceptions of gender boundaries could be really blurred if readers are lesbian or gay, from a non-western culture, or come from a particularly religious upbringing. There are as many factors in how we *read a text* as there in *who we are*. Then how do we learn how to socialize, how to act upon the same morals and impulses and threats and reinforcements that others do? Do we have to re-create everything? Or, is imitation enough until we can make it a habit or grow mature enough to make a rational decision to change it? What have they taken away from the text that can be applied to their own lives?

5. Fly the Friendly Skies

So much for the first day—but what then? The first of our two-day sortie had come to an end on a pretty positive note. We could tell that, in every one of the six fifty-minute classes we taught on that Thursday, we'd grabbed their attention and interest. We hadn't actually drawn them into the text of *Romeo and Juliet* yet. We had "set the table;" now we needed to demonstrate that the play (and the act of putting it on or watching it) was about them. All teachers are promoters and car salesmen, without the cynicism or materialism. We'd set those classes up for the "sale"; it was up to us to "close," bring the play to them and with them. We told them that Friday was going

to require their direct involvement in the text, and we needed nothing more than their good-natured and willing cooperation.

We'd prepared on the fly for Friday for about an hour and a half immediately after our Thursday experience. We talked some about how Thursday had gone. We'd had to adjust on that first day—we'd initially thought that showing them the opening piece from the early-forties video of Olivier's *Henry V* might be a good thing; Olivier had determined to do the show according to 16th-century conventions, replete with Globe Theatre set, a real and responding audience sitting in the galleries and standing in the pit, the opening speech of the "Prologue" that emphasized Dyer's point to our students that Shakespeare's language created with our imagination everything we needed in the playspace between our ears. But that clip took too much time for what it gained for us. We'd scrapped it in order to concentrate on getting to know the students, allow them to get comfortable with us, and begin to understand that they could be in the audience or on the stage, and, by the third class, we'd developed a tight and involving interaction.

We'd also decided to show no video clips. We had Luhrmann's version all racked up. It contains lots of images that our students could relate to, but we knew it would take them away from the text of the play and rob us of valuable time we'd need to work some group interactions with specific scenes. The play was the thing. Too little time, too much to do. A classic and cautionary example of what the three ninth-grade teachers we'd stolen these six classes from faced every day.

So we decided to break them into groups of four or five. We'd begin quickly by summarizing briefly what we'd done together on Thursday: that they *are* in the play, that they are subject to all kinds of authority, and that they exert authority. As Hall had gotten them to proclaim just before our Thursday sessions disbanded—no one, but no one, knows *them* better than they do, and we wanted them to know how crucial that is in *Romeo & Juliet*, where issues of freedom and bondage ring like a bell through every scene. Students were to respond to specific scenes in the play. Still, we'd agonized over that fifth classroom encounter

with the students from two combined classes—so unwieldy that we'd had to herd them into the library for the encounter. How in the hell would we be able to work collaborative groups in that mess, and would they rebel against us and eat us for lunch?

On Friday morning, we dug into their homework. We felt it was important that they hear their own voices right away to let them know that this day belonged to them. They had put up with us talking "at" them for most of Thursday. It was their turn to say what was on their minds. We asked them to share some of the ideas that they wrote about in their notebooks. Hall emceed the short segment, trying to stay in the background and not judge or make the connections for them. Although the following questions seem rapid fire, we took time for answers in class. Here is some of the pattern of Hall's questioning:

> 'What authority do you have? Where do you find your authority? What did you write in your journals about that last night? Did you find that there were areas of your life that you completely control? Are there areas in your life that you don't control? What if you didn't do your homework? Who is in control of who does your homework—is your teacher in control of your homework? Do your parents make you do homework—or do you decide to do it to avoid and penalty or consequence? Maybe you always make the decision whether to act on something or not—maybe it's always you who makes every decision—but you base it on the consequences and rewards that are offered or are implicit. So, who has control over you? What did you write in your journals? Did the teacher make you do that or did you decide to do it for another reason? So, who makes decisions for you? Do your parents decide what you are going to eat for dinner? Do they make you eat it? Who tells you when to get up for school?'

The idea behind all of this was two-fold: we wanted them to help us test the degree to which Shakespeare's play is

relevant to them and their contemporary context; and we needed to prime them to begin to see how they could *be* these characters and *in* this play. We'd developed five groups, with a different scene and prompt for each one. There'd be time only for a quick and dirty and hopefully clear set-up of those prompts and the rules of the game—each group would need to choose a recorder to collect the interactions of each group. We'd have to work fast. To help move the activity along, we'd agreed to move among the groups, easily and affably answering questions and responding to their problems. We would try scrupulously, we'd decided, not to "prompt" their responses and make them our ventriloquists' dummies. What would *that* prove for us?

And what scenes did each group grapple with? Group #1 was charged with 2.2, the declaration of love scene, and we wanted them to see how and where in it the authority and power of love was expressed. Group #2 dealt with 2.4, the trash-talking scene involving Mercutio and Romeo, and, eventually, the Nurse—how does authority and power get expressed in terms of language in it? Group #3 was assigned 3.1, the all-important pivotal face-off between Tybalt and Mercutio that results in Mercutio's death and that causes Romeo, under great peer and "rule" pressure, to be drawn in and kill Tybalt—we wanted this group to look for evidence of the presence of personal and group authority in the scene. Group #4 took 3.3—one of the "Friar Lawrence" scenes, this one involving Lawrence reading Romeo the riot act and delivering some really bad advice, which included directing Romeo back to Juliet's house, a stay that he instructed Romeo to conclude before sunrise—good thinking! We wanted this group to evaluate Lawrence's authority in the scene, where he got it, and the quality of his power and advice. Finally, we gave Group #5 3.5, in which Daddy Capulet tyrannizes over Juliet in forcing her to marry Paris under threat of being disowned and thrown out on the street—it was evidence of parental authority, and the nature of it, that we wanted them to look for.

6. Free Falling

And things went on Friday just as we had planned it.[2] Dyer didn't know that he should have been surprised, but he

was. There was no time-wasting, no deviation from the task that, once we'd delivered it, took them about ten minutes to process and left us another ten to facilitate discussion and then a final five minutes to connect them to what they'd written the previous day and to the play for the final time. One of these interactions provided a totally unexpected feeling of success—it was that huge double class, so high-spirited and so full of energy on a Friday after lunch that we thought we'd never get their attention or anything but a smart-assed response. And this is where having no expectations rewarded us. Surprisingly, they'd liked us on Thursday—there's no accounting for taste—and, despite their high spirits, were ready to walk off a short cliff for us. We'd decided that, against our better judgement, we'd run the same group exercises with them. There'd be ten groups instead of five this time, totally unworkable and probably unlikely to enable us to process the work and do anything but set them to work and leave the enterprise unfinished and without conclusions drawn. But they fooled us. Hall worked the left side of the library and those five groups while Dyer worked the other five on the other side of the room. Fortunately, the librarians had watched us working interactions with the crowd of students the day before and liked what had unfolded; they'd provided us tables that eased the task of separating the crowd into groups.

But the kids were terrific and exceedingly bright. They jumped all over their responsibilities. And, although we were more directive than we'd been with the other classes—we had to be in order to get them through it to the point of discussion—the discussion that ensued was more vigorous and enlightening than what had occurred in the other five smaller classes. Thanks to their focused and insightful work, we were able to lead them to the conclusion that earned them a piece of the play. And they even gave us an impromptu ovation at the end. Was it because they were glad to see us go?—we don't think so. What an unexpected pleasure!

7. The Old Account Was Settled Long Ago

So, what did we get out of all of this? No small number of things. As Dyer had labored to tell each class the day before, we'd come before them because, as teachers, we both

believed we needed to place ourselves outside of our usual comfort zone. Dyer had informed his twenty-five upper-level university students in his "Shakespeare's Tragedies" class that he'd be going to Irondale, and, when several of them asked him "why ninth-graders," he'd said the same thing—we all get comfortable, maybe even complacent, dealing with the same audience every day. We both always tell our students that we expect to learn stuff we never knew in the process of working with them, but the chances of that happening diminish if we're not challenged and pressed. However, interacting with a group of students far out of our comfort zone exposes us to risk, the unknown, and the prospect of failure. That prospect puts us back in the place we occupied when we began teaching—the need to really *know* the play we're teaching, think out our objectives and the kinds of activities that might best help us to fulfill them. Teaching 101. It's all about audience. We couldn't fall back on our old stuff; we had to throw our assumptions about audience out the window. And that, and that nervous boiling in our bowels before that first class, is a good thing. Show time.

So we were bound to learn from our audience, and to see *Romeo and Juliet* anew. We both had to work at knowing and reading and re-reading the play and to really know where all of the bodies were buried in it before we could stand before them. Take nothing for granted. And the experience, and our fevered and careful and collaborative preparation for it, refreshed us.

And what about them? We think they learned plenty. And not just about the play. They learned a little about themselves, about how literature is life with training wheels mounted on it, about how they, in spite of what they thought going into the play, are inscribed upon it, as should be the case with any wonderful piece of literature they enter. But they also got to meet and work with us, teachers that they won't get to work with until sometime in the future. They'll know Hall now, how he goes about his work, and will look forward to that engagement.

Hall was greatly impressed with both the staff and students at Irondale. Nothing would have been possible without the willingness and cooperation of three ninth

grade teachers, a couple hundred ninth grade students, and his principal who allowed him the time to visit other classrooms. Collaboration is highly supported at Irondale.

But what about Dyer? While this wasn't a recruiting trip for MSU, his presence there made the reality of college and college teachers more palpable and approachable for them. They'd learned that college teachers were truly interested in them and what they had to say and felt that they were bright. Although college won't happen for them for another four years, and never for some of them (of the five classes, we dealt with one honors class, but our students represented a true cross-section of the ninth-grade population), we'd bridged the gap, brought college closer to them, de-mystified a little of that future prospect, placed a name and three-dimensional presence to the label of "college professor," and made them feel important, valued, and worthy. And it doesn't get any better than that.

Appendix:

Samples of Student Responses to In-class Prompts

The ACTUAL Prompts (that we did use with students):

1. Define the word "authority." What is it? What characteristics are associated with it? What kinds?
2. Why do you follow directions? Listen to authority? At school? At home? Why do you listen to the authority of some and not others?
3. Where do you find your own authority? What rules do you impose upon yourself?
4. How do you see YOURSELF in this play? Has this <u>changed</u> since the beginning of the unit on *Romeo and Juliet?*

What is <u>authority</u>?

"having power or someone or something" [many students used this exact phrase]
"power over people"
"power to enforce a set of laws or rules"
"related to author—who writes or controls some-

thing"
"a right to make rules or laws"
"someone with more experience or dealt with difficult situations"
"a kind of expertise in one area or another"
"someone who is able to take the lead and teach others"
[several student responses listed ideas such as respect, control, knowledge, and confidence]

Kinds of authority:

"There are authorities from high to low, from God to plankton."
"The public gives authority to people—therefore, authority truly lies with the public—we are all equal"
"God"
"President Bush"
"bullies"
"*given* authority and *taken/forced* authority"
"having the right words or actions or thoughts"
[one student listed Osama Bin Laden—perhaps I should contact the FBI or CIA??]
[several student responses listed teachers, counselors, principals, and other school officials]
[several responses listed police, fire, elected officials and others who serve communities]
[several students cited parents, older siblings a authority figures in their families]

Why do you follow directions (at home, school, community)?

"because I have respect for the people who I listen to"
"so we don't get punished or have to do extra work"
"you can get expelled or suspended, or even just yelled at"
"so you don't feel embarrassed or ashamed"
"From birth, we as humans are trained to follow the directions of and respect those in authority"

"if we don't, we will face consequences in the future"
[several students mentioned future plans like college and careers]

Why do you listen to some authority and not others?

"if you don't listen, you either get in trouble or get a bad grade"
"because I feel they don't have authority over me"
"because I don't think they will follow through [with consequences]"
"I fear repercussions"
"when it is demanded or unkind, or disrepectful"
"when I think someone is right and wouldn't lead me into something wrong"
"they are older than me"
"I don't respect when someone acts as if they're better than us or if they don't demand any respect"
"It's hard to follow and respect someone who has no confidence or respect for themselves"
"Sometimes I don't obey my parents—but only when I know they are 100% wrong"

Where do you find your own authority?

"I find authority within myself" [several students began their responses within this idea]
"I find authority in the things I do well"
"I don't find it—it's kind of always there"
"where I teach pre-school"
"within my own friends, because they give it to me"
"in my room"
"Inside me—I make choices that benefit me"
"when I'm looking after young children, babysitting"
"when people need advice" "looking at what others (in authority) have done"

What rules do you impose upon yourself?

"I must always do my best"
"I must obey the rules that God set up for us"

"stay on task and not be disrespectful"
"watch what I do and ask myself first—will this get me in trouble?"
[several responses included exercising, sleeping enough, eating healthy, following/setting my own goals, getting good grades, doing homework, not doing drugs, not drinking]

How do you see YOURSELF in this play?

[note: answers to this question varied from naming a character to giving some general principle]
I see myself in the play . . .
"during the situations that Romeo and Juliet go through"
"but I would never let my friends get hurt or get into any trouble"
"I am bound in my house by my parents' wishes, like Juliet"
"because of impulsive decisions—I have found how quick I can make stupid decisions"
"I'm a little bit like a lot of characters in this play—sometimes keep the peace—sometimes want to fight"
"but I wouldn't be the spotlight, I'd be off on the sides helping"

I see myself as _____ because:

Romeo: romantic, gets crushes, sometimes loses out on love, he has no control over anything
Juliet: not always in control of her life, finds love, loses love, falls too hard/too fast for love, innocent, a little girl, thinks about "the one" all day long
Nurse: has to follow orders, is a peacemaker, cares about others' lives
Mercutio: always talking, loves to have fun and make jokes, exaggerates
Tybalt: is bad, too tough to deal with, doesn't take anything from anyone his age, quick to action
Benvolio: peacemaker, helps others and mediates

between arguments, compromises, calm
Prince: has the ultimate authority
L. Montague: wants to make peace for her son
F. Lawrence: tries to bring peace to his friends, is quick to take up a challenge
Citizen: "I don't get involved in other people's problems"
Best friend: "cause one of my friends falls in love really easy and I always have to stand up for her"
"I have friends like Romeo and I'm always there for them—help to forget about crushes"
Bystander: [several students responded with these ideas: as if I am watching/reading the play, or standing in the streets or at the party watching the characters go through the actions that they talk about in the play]

Has how you see yourself in the play changed? Examples of students who answered "Yes":

"I now know more about the play—I was ignorant before, but am not as ignorant now"
"I just read the play at first—now I can draw insight into human ways and personalities"
"I felt a lot less connected to the story and found the language and antics difficult to understand, but as the play progressed, I got more into it and was able to compare myself to the characters."
[many students who answered YES talked about the language, how as they got through the play they got more and more into it, they became different characters as the play progressed—thought they were a Romeo, but found later that they were actually more like Benvolio or Mercutio]

Has how you see yourself in the play changed? Examples of students who answered "No":

"I really don't see myself in the play—I wouldn't have done well in that time period—women didn't have many rights—I like my freedom too much"

"I was not able to connect on a deeper level with any of the characters"
". . . and I am not a fool for love"
"I used to think that me and my boyfriend were like Romeo and Juliet, but we are nothing like that at all"
"Me personally no—Juliet seems to stay the same too, and gets what she wants—to be with Romeo"
[students who answered NO either saw themselves as Romeo or Juliet (or other characters/bystanders) and it continued that way throughout the play.

Notes

1. Ruth Kinney, Lou Worsley, and KyleAnn Christian teach ninth grade English at Irondale High School. Hall is lucky to have peers that believe enough in camaraderie—and respect and trust him enough to let Hall and Dyer "commandeer" their classes for two days. We could not have done any of this without their cooperation and support. We thank them mightily.

2. Please see the Appendix for student responses to the actual writing prompts we used.

Works Cited

"A fresh look at freshman year." *Sunday Minnapolis Star Tribune*. Section 1, page 1.

Bellinger, Martha Fletcher. *A Short History of the Theatre*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927, 207-13. Rpt. in www.theatrehistory.com/british/bellinger001.html

Holland, Norman. "Hamlet: My Greatest Creation." *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Ed. Charles E. Bressler. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999. 80-86.

Thomson, Peter. *Shakespeare's Theatre*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.