8 Plays

Most of the activities discussed in previous chapters can be adapted to plays as well as other genres. An added element in presenting a play, however, is its particular dramatic quality, which it is important to bring out as much as possible in the classroom. Being able to take students to a performance is obviously a great help, as are films or videos. Many plays are available on records or cassettes nowadays, especially suitable for listening exercises; in the absence of curriculum or exam constraints, this would certainly be a factor in choosing a play to read with a class.

With groups that respond well to drama activities, putting on one scene, or a short play, can be both enjoyable and rewarding. Many students love planning costumes, sets, props, lights, and so on. When full-scale staging is not feasible, a prepared reading of a previously studied scene, at the front of the class and with a few props, can also be fruitful. What is not so successful, in our opinion, is asking a student to read aloud an unseen or minimally prepared role. Working in a foreign language, the learner usually has difficulty combining the simultaneous demands of comprehension and language production. In fact, good play reading is not really all that easy, even in one's own language. That is why we prefer other kinds of activities to help students deepen their understanding of the text and the dramatic situation, followed by listening periods in class, or, if cassettes are available, in the language laboratory or at home.

In this chapter we look more closely at ways of working through a whole play, or rather, two very different plays. Until now, on the whole, we have chosen to illustrate our ideas through modern texts, for the opportunities they offer both of useful language transfer and of insights into contemporary social, political or cultural aspects. But modern works, of course, rest upon and interact with a whole line of predecessors. And many students, especially if they are intending to go on to literary studies, are keen to master some of the classics they have heard about. We have therefore chosen as our example for ways of working with a complete long play, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. We have found it accessible and interesting for pre-university classes. Its theme of love in a setting torn by civil strife is universal and still very poignant today. It is a play that is often produced, so that we have been able to take students to performances, or to show them the very beautiful Zeffirelli film.

Although to avoid repetition we do not go through the play in the same

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detail as we have done for *Lord of the Flies*, we hope that these ideas will stimulate interest and help learners overcome the barriers posed by language. With secondary school pupils or non-specialist adult classes in mind, we have aimed at comprehension and enjoyment first and foremost. The various activities should also help students to a better understanding of dramatic structure, development of character, the mechanisms of tragedy, and so on. But we have not gone into questions of background: Shakespeare's life, the Elizabethan period and its theatre; nor into more scholarly issues regarding the establishing of the text. We have concentrated above all on getting classes to feel the immediacy and the pathos of the central theme, as well as the power of the poetry.

These two aims have also underpinned our work with the language of the play. Certainly, students have to be helped with sixteenth-century idioms and structures, and with the extraordinarily rich, compact expression of complex concepts. Here as elsewhere, though, we have encouraged learners to read for gist and comprehension, to feel they can appreciate a scene even if they do not understand every single thing about it.

For contrast, we then look at a very brief modern American play, Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*, where the language presents very few problems but where students may have to be helped to see and appreciate the play's full dramatic import.

Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare*

Feud for thought

The underpinning to the well-known tragedy of the two young lovers is the bitter family feud between the Montagues and Capulets which permeates the atmosphere in the city of Verona, and creates an ominous tension in the play. There is no indication in Shakespeare's text of the origin of the feud – it is just a fact.

The following warm-up activity aims to draw a class into the play's setting by asking them to speculate about the origins of the inter-family strife. These are the stages in the activity:
1. Before the students arrive for their lesson, the teacher arranges the desks/chairs into two separate clusters in two different corners of the classroom.
2. When the students enter the room, the teacher asks them to sit down without disturbing the desks/chairs. He or she then asks them to

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* References are to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, published in paperback 1984.

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speculate about what is going on. What might the two 'camps' signify? Speculation is fed by informing the students that the classroom is a city, and that they are some of its inhabitants.

3. Once it has been established that the two groups are families separated by an ancient feud, the teacher announces (if this has not already been guessed) that one family has the name Montague, while the other group are Capulets. The city is Verona in Italy.

4. Next, the teacher asks each family to brainstorm and discuss possible causes of the feud. What event(s) started it all off? A sheet of ideas can be supplied to classes in greater need of support.

> **Possible causes of the feud between Montagues and Capulets**
> An unsolved murder.
> A theft of valuable jewellery.
> One of the families discredited the other by exposing corruption.
> An extra-marital affair between a Montague and a Capulet which ended in the suicide of one of the lovers.
> Competition for political and economic power in Verona.
> One of the families spread a rumour that the other family was cheating the Catholic church of money.

5. After each family group has discussed the origin of the feud and agreed upon their story (or stories), the two families are asked to put their desks/chairs into two lines facing each other.
    The teacher asks the families to begin to accuse each other of starting the feud and to explain the original situation. Accusations should be met by angry denials and the teacher should try to fuel the animosity between the two groups without taking sides.

6. After accusations and denials have been traded, the teacher says that he or she wants the two families to retain their identities while the play is being studied. Thus, for any play reading or enactment of scenes, Capulets will be drawn from the Capulet family and Montagues from the Montague family. Similarly, if an activity like sculpting (see p. 81) is undertaken, characters will be drawn from the appropriate camps.

Wordplay/Swordplay

The very first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* fairly bristles with puns and plays on words, and this can sometimes be rather discouraging for foreign students about to tackle the play. If warm-up activities have sensitised the class to the mood of a city deeply torn by internal strife, however, it will be easier for students to see how the language actually articulates the feud itself. Like the swordplay that follows them, these initial exchanges are full of parry and thrust. The two servants enter with their swords drawn and their wits fully sharpened. Bawdy and aggressive, their language

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builds up a highly charged atmosphere. One word sparks off another: a verbal equivalent to their barely restrained eagerness for the fray.

The following activity is a way of helping students to see how much is compressed into these apparently frivolous exchanges, designed at one level to secure the attention of the audience. It also helps clarify the dynamics of this first scene. In the first stage, the activity is done by the class as a whole. Students are given the following statements, which represent the gist, in modern English, of the first six exchanges:

1. We'll not carry coals.
2. We're not colliers.
3. If we're 'in choler' (angry) we'll draw our swords.
4. We'll draw our necks out of the collar.
5. I strike quickly when I'm moved.
6. But you're not easily moved to strike.

Students are also given the following set of definitions (worksheet, or board):

coals = a form of fuel
carry coals = a low, menial task

colliers = coal-miners
colliers = a term of abuse (for the Elizabethan audience)

choler = anger (a word no longer used in modern English)

collar = a yoke (symbol of having to work hard under a master)
collar = a hangman's noose

moved = made to feel a strong emotion, in this case anger
moved = motivated, given a reason to do something

The task is now to construct a diagram which shows how each statement relates to the others, and what its effect is (that is, whether it is intended as an aggressive statement but with no particular target, or as a particular threat against the Capulets, or used to tease each other or, in later lines, to make bawdy jokes).

In Figure 16, worked out on a white board, the statements were placed within boxes that were colour-coded for effect (black for generally aggressive, red for teasing). Links between the statements were indicated by lines:

$\longrightarrow$ an arrow = a connection in the meaning of the words
$\sim\sim\sim$ a wavy line = a connection in sound (two words sound alike)
$====$ a double line = explanation of a term or expression

In the second stage of the activity, the class is divided into four groups. Two of these are given the next six exchanges in Scene 1, the other two are given the following six. Appropriate definitions are also given, or more advanced classes might be asked to find these themselves, in their dic-
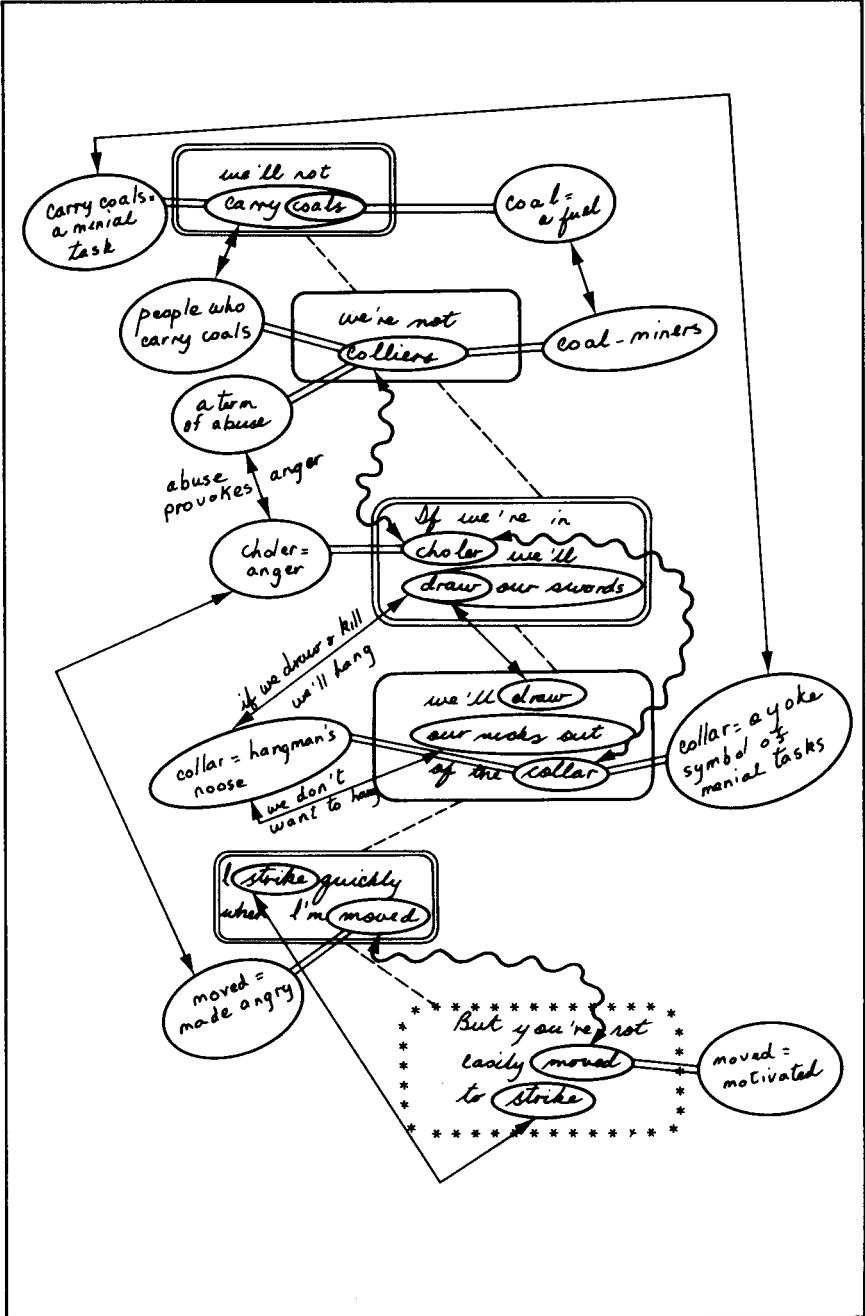
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tionary or glossary. Each group designs a diagram for its exchanges, either following the pattern already set, or devising a new one. The finished diagrams are compared and discussed, or posted up for class members to compare at their leisure. A further task could be to join the three series in a master diagram, perhaps on a large wall chart.

It will be seen that this is a means of externalising a quite conventional analysis of the text. The fact that students are given the gist, and a set of meanings, does however reduce problems of simple comprehension, allowing learners to concentrate on the dynamics of the exchanges. The visual element usually makes it easier for students to grasp the textual analysis, while they on the whole enjoy the challenge of finding a way of representing quite complex relationships in a graphic manner.

A visual snowball

With a play that carries the linguistic richness and complexity that *Romeo and Juliet* does, it becomes vital to keep the spirit of the story alive by visual means. Clearly the excellent video versions of the play could be used alongside the reading of the text, but many language learning situations do not include video facilities, and in any case it is difficult to hire video-cassettes for extended periods of time, and they are expensive to buy.

In pairs, within their family groups, the Montagues and Capulets have the task of producing a simple visual presentation for each scene. The basic visual elements should suggest the main events or the atmosphere in a particular scene. Short quotations can be woven into each design. If possible, learners should be supplied with poster card and felt pens; but the teacher should stress that simple designs are often the most striking, and that artistic expertise is not the main requirement. The fact of working with someone else also helps reduce the anxiety some students feel about their ability to draw. Each pair in turn is responsible for adding a representation to depict one scene, and pairs are likely to have more than one go, as there are 24 scenes in the play.

As each scene design is completed, it can either be displayed on a Montague wall or a Capulet wall, as appropriate; or scenes as they accumulate are put into a family folder until the end of the play, at which point they are exchanged as a sign of the end of the classroom feud.

When the entire play has been read, the visual snowball can be used for revision purposes. Each scene design cues the students' memories of events, atmosphere, and language. In addition, the quotes on each visual can be used as the basis for a quotes team quiz. Figure 17 shows how this activity could be started.
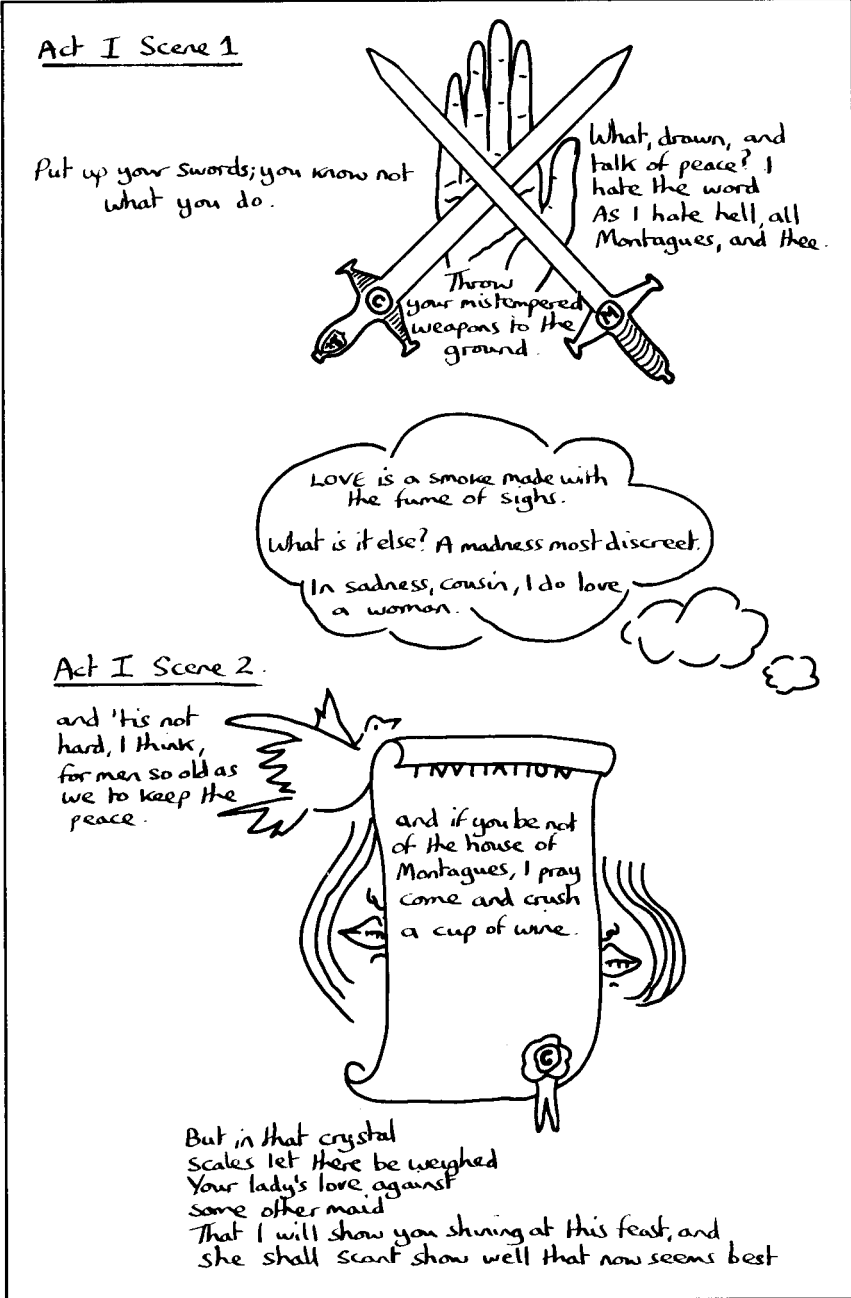
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Figure 17

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A language snowball

The object here is to allow students to examine in depth one particular aspect of the language of the play, as reading progresses. Groupwork also lets them draw on each other's knowledge and resources so that they are helped to a better understanding of the play.

In pairs or small groups of three or four, students are given one topic to look into as they read the play. Since each group is to work on a different aspect, one way of explaining the task is through the use of individual worksheets for each group (an example is shown in Worksheet 42). Or the teacher can explain what each project entails, and let students choose the one they prefer. Groups have a notebook in which each member can

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Puns – language project work

A 'pun' is a play on words that depends on the fact that one word, or two words that sound exactly alike, can have very different meanings. For example, in Act I of *Romeo and Juliet* (I.1.65), Tybalt says that Benvolio, who is standing with his sword drawn amongst the fighting men, is 'drawn among these heartless hinds'. 'Heartless hinds' means 'yokels without a heart', that is, cowardly. But 'hinds' also means a female deer, so that Tybalt is making a pun, saying the men are like female deer without their male deer ('hart').

Many people disapprove of puns, and it is often said that they are 'the lowest form of humour'. Doctor Johnson, the famous eighteenth-century critic, thought puns (or 'quibbles' as he called them) marred Shakespeare's style: 'A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth'. Some readers still think puns are distracting and trivialise the language of the play. Others think that they can produce, like metaphors, a sudden overlap of two unexpected spheres of experience so that they are both arresting (as when the Prince tells the men to throw their 'mistempered' weapons to the ground) and moving (as when Mercutio can still jest on the brink of death: 'Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a 'grave' man'.).

In this project, try to gather as many puns as you can from your reading of the play. Jot them down in your group's notebook. For each one, state what two meanings are being played upon. As a group, try to decide whether any special purpose is served by the pun, and what the effect of each one is.

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jot examples noticed as they read, as well as their thoughts and comments upon them.

Topics could include: puns; paradoxes; various kinds of imagery – of light and darkness, of flowers, of birds and animals, of celestial bodies and the spheres, imagery used to foreshadow the tragic outcome; rhetorical questions; use of ribald language; the language of violence; language that has a performative aspect: that is, of politeness, command, mockery, etc.; epithets and images used to delineate old/young or love/hate.

One effective way of ensuring that each group's work produces feedback for the whole class is to ask the groups to prepare a poster or wall chart to display the results of its project. When the entire play has been read, a date is set for completion, followed by a poster exhibition in the classroom, hallway or common room. The requirement for a visual presentation can tap quite considerable creative resources in many students, and it makes the whole endeavour more memorable.

For classes preparing exams, the material gathered during the project can be used to support the writing of an essay on any of the particular points studied, or on the language of the play as a whole.

The Prince's speech

Worksheet 43 is a home reading worksheet for Act I Scene 1.

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The Prince of Verona arrives while the Capulets and the Montagues are fighting. He stops them and says he will no longer tolerate such behaviour in his city. Read the following statements. Some of them have a meaning that is the *same* as, or is *similar* to, the Prince's. Mark these S. Others have a *different* meaning. Mark these D, and then rewrite the sentences so that they reproduce accurately what the Prince says.

S	D	
		1. You are citizens who do not obey laws; you shatter our peace and shed your neighbours' blood.
		2. I am glad you are willing to listen to me at last.
		3. You fighting men are like beasts.
		4. The only way you have of calming your anger is through bloodshed.
		5. Put down your weapons and listen to me, or you will suffer torture.
		6. I am so angry with your fighting that I intend to move away from this city.
		7. This is the second time that Capulets and Montagues have fought in the streets of our city.
		8. These brawls have great and serious causes.
		9. You have forced ordinary citizens to take up arms to stop your fights.
		10. If any of you ever fight again, you will be banished.
		11. I order everyone to leave. If anyone remains, he will be put to death.
		12. Old Capulet and Old Montague must both come with me now to the place of judgment where I shall pass sentence upon them.

Worksheet 43

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