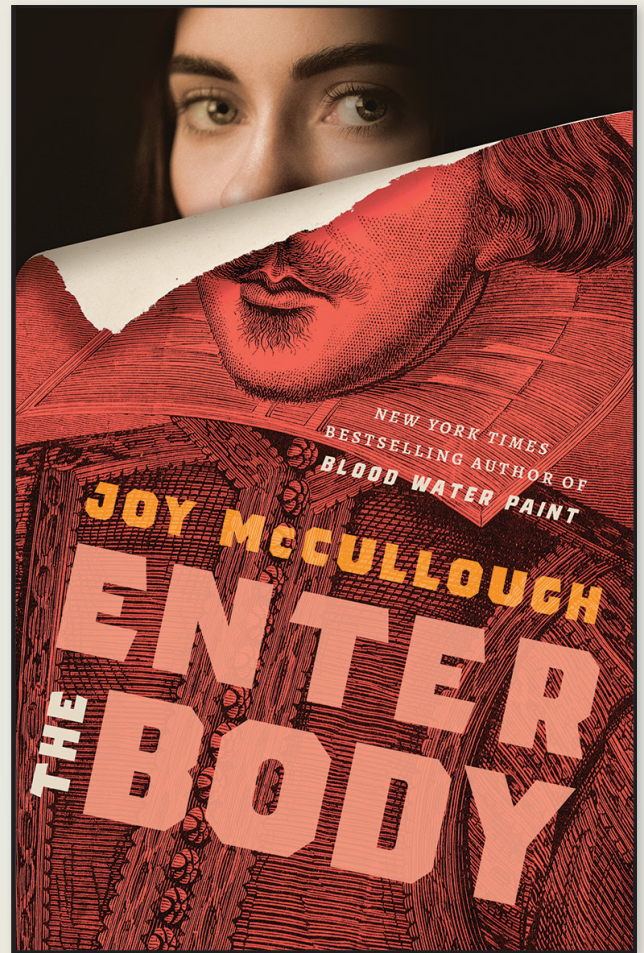
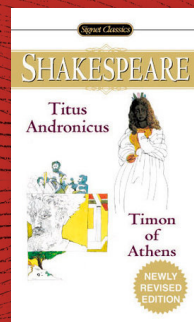
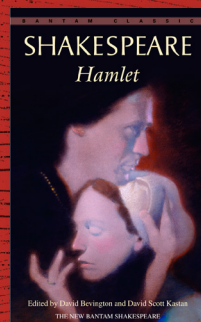
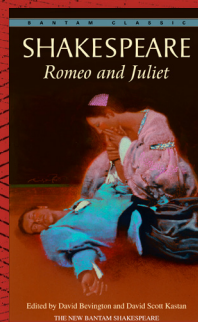




A CLASSROOM
GUIDE TO
**ENTER
THE
BODY**



**PAIRING SHAKESPEARE AND GIVING SPACE TO
CORDELIA, JULIET, OPHELIA, AND LAVINIA**



PRAISE FOR ENTER THE BODY

★ “*Body* turns Shakespeare on his head while honoring his talent as the girls retell their stories on their own terms... Truly outstanding.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

★ “By innovatively mining feminist themes of autonomy, exploitation, and patriarchy, McCullough **boldly reconceptualizes Shakespeare’s version of the female point of view** for a new generation of Bard enthusiasts.”

—*The Horn Book*, starred review

★ “This will be a **revelation for teens** seeking to claim their own narrative as a distinct and whole person outside of adult or societal input.”

—*BCCB*, starred review

★ “A strong, powerful look at the bonds women share and the power telling stories has to unburden us all.”

—*SLC*, starred review

★ “This **entrancing, fiercely feminist** examination of William Shakespeare’s tragedies gives his female characters the opportunity to tell their own stories.”

—*Shelf Awareness*, starred review

★ “Elevates and reenergizes the canon; it’s an **absolute must-read** regardless of readers’ knowledge or opinion of Shakespeare.”

—*SLJ*, starred review



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOY McCULLOUGH writes books and plays from her home in the Seattle area, where she lives with her family. She studied theater at Northwestern University, fell in love with her husband atop a Guatemalan volcano, and now spends her days surrounded by books and kids and chocolate. Her debut novel, *Blood Water Paint*, was longlisted for the National Book Award and was a finalist for the William C. Morris Debut Award.

ABOUT THE GUIDE WRITER

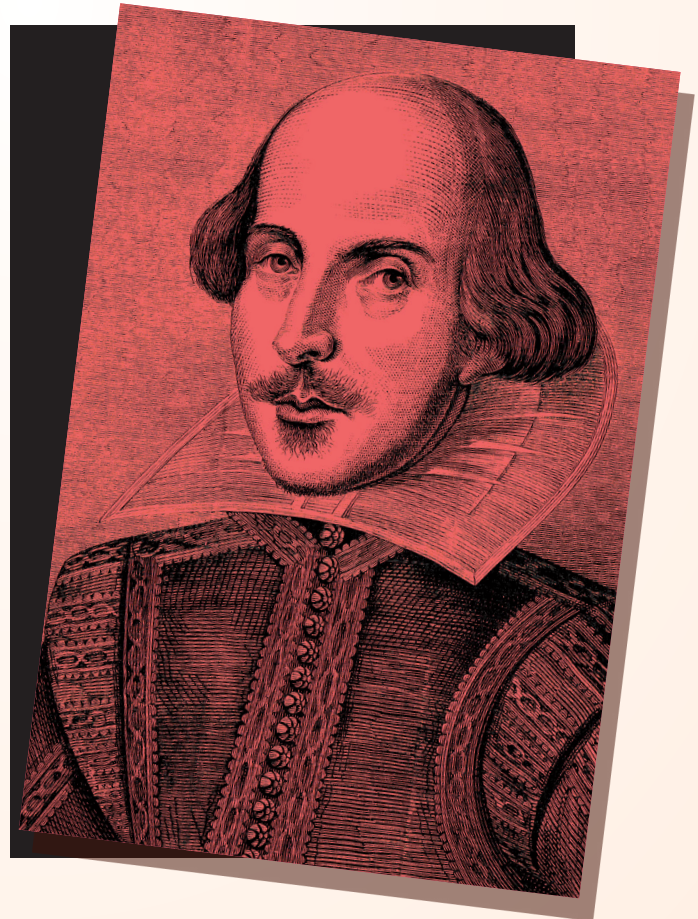
Sarah Mulhern Gross is a high-school English teacher and National Board Certified Teacher in Lincroft, New Jersey. She has a MAT degree in teaching biology from Project Dragonfly and Miami University. She is a contributor to the *New York Times* Learning Network and her writing has appeared in *Scientific American*, ASCD, the *New Jersey English Journal*, and the *Washington Post*’s Answer Sheet. Sarah has presented for NCTE, NJCTE, NJCEL, NJEA, the *New York Times* Learning Network, Fordham University’s Summer Literacy Institute, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and the New Jersey Science Teachers Association. She is the cofounder of #NerdCampNJ, past NJCTE vice president, and past faculty board member for curiousSCIENCEwriters, which provides a platform for publishing student science writing.

INTRODUCTION

Every night on stages around the world, many of Shakespeare's most famous characters die. Over and over again, we see Romeo and Juliet perish in the name of love, Caesar murdered by his friends, and Macbeth beheaded. But in his tragedies, the Bard is especially cruel to his female characters. When Shakespeare's ladies meet each night in the trap room below the stage, above which they are traumatized, they begin to compare their experiences and slowly begin to heal. In this liminal space, a trap room beneath the stage where they die night after night, the women tell their stories and then reclaim them.

PAIRING *ENTER THE BODY* WITH SHAKESPEARE'S ORIGINAL TEXTS

Romeo and Juliet, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Titus Andronicus*—for centuries, these are just some of the many works by the Bard that have become mainstays in middle- and high-school curricula. Many teens are assigned a play every year of secondary school. While Shakespeare is recognized as one of the greatest writers in Western literature, we must also recognize that overreliance on his works often crowds out more diverse voices. Shakespeare was a man of his time, and his time was full of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and antisemitism. When studying his works with students today, it's vital to draw attention to the strengths and weaknesses in the Bard's works. By pairing the original texts with *Enter the Body*, it's possible to have students dig deeper into the Bard's plays, the effects of patriarchal societies, and how our contemporary world is shaped by many of the same biases.



IDEAS FOR TEACHING

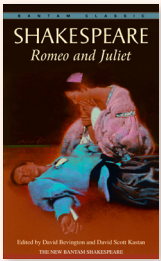
ADOLESCENT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

In *Enter the Body*, Joy McCullough focuses on four of Shakespeare's tragic teen girls:



Cordelia (age 17): The youngest daughter of King Lear in *King Lear*. Cordelia is a good and loyal daughter, but she is also headstrong and independent. When she refuses to participate in her father's game of flattery, she is punished for her

brutal honesty. In a patriarchal society, a woman who refuses to submit to male authority is seen as a threat, and Cordelia is no exception. She is banished by her father and eventually dies in battle.



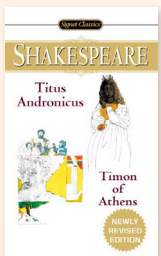
Juliet (age 13): Perhaps the most well-known of Shakespeare's tragic women, she is one of the star-crossed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*. When she falls in love with Romeo Montague, a member of the rival Montague family, she defies her family by secretly

marrying him. She and Romeo are killed in a tragic double suicide at the end of the play.



Ophelia (age 15): The daughter of Polonius, the king's advisor, in *Hamlet*. Deeply in love with Hamlet, she is kind, gentle, and understanding. Consumed by his grief and madness, Hamlet ultimately rejects Ophelia after a brief relationship. Ophelia

betrays Hamlet when ordered to by her father. She is driven to madness and eventually drowns.



Lavinia (age 19): The only daughter of Titus Andronicus in *Titus Andronicus*. A quiet and obedient young woman, she is brutally raped and mutilated in the play. She is murdered by her father.

While Shakespeare often leaves the ages of his protagonists ambiguous, readers know that Juliet, Lavinia, Cordelia, and Ophelia are younger than their play counterparts. Too often, readers trivialize the decisions made by these young women solely because they are young women. However, thanks to advances in neuroscience, we know that teen brains mature slowly, and most scientists recognize that teen brains allow for flexibility and impulsiveness. Viewing the characters' decisions through the lens of neuroscience provides opportunities for students to make connections between Shakespeare's texts and the lives of contemporary teens.

Have students spend time learning more about adolescent brain development and advances in our understanding of adolescent brains. Possible texts include:

- ✘ Kashfia Rahman's (2017 winner of the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair) TED talk "[How risk-taking changes a teenager's brain](#)"
- ✘ "[What neuroscience tells us about the teenage brain](#)" by Zara Abrams ([APA Monitor on Psychology 7/2022](#))

In a small group, have students respond to the following discussion questions:

- ✘ How do changes in the teenage brain make teenagers more likely to take risks?
- ✘ Are teenagers wired for impulsiveness? Explain.

After small-group discussions, challenge students to consider how changes in the teenage brain might have influenced the decisions made by Ophelia, Juliet, and Cordelia in Shakespeare's versions of their stories. How might those changes in their adolescent brains have influenced the decisions they make in their reclaimed stories? How do changes in the adolescent brain manifest in their lives and social groups?

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LOVE & THEIR EFFECT ON THE BRAIN

Love and/or lust can cause us to do impulsive things. As it turns out, there is a biochemical reason for the way we act when we are in love! Scientists have found that being in love involves neurologically active chemicals, not just words and desire. Dr. Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at Rutgers University, has identified three phases of “being in love”:

- ✘ Lust
- ✘ Attraction
- ✘ Attachment

Juliet is adamant that she and Romeo are of sound and mature mind when they decide to marry, despite their young age. Ophelia believes she truly loves Hamlet. Cordelia, however, makes it clear in the trap room that she views both young women as impetuous and immature, accusing them of being in lust, not love. Have students research the effects of

love on the brain and make an argument supporting either Cordelia’s or Juliet and Ophelia’s side.

Romantic love and desire aren’t the only types of love that can affect our brains. Studies have shown that children who are raised in loving and supportive homes have healthier brains than those who are not. They have larger hippocampi, which are responsible for memory and learning, and they are better able to regulate their emotions. Maternal love can also help to protect children from the negative effects of stress and trauma. Challenge students to analyze the relationship the characters have with their mothers in Shakespeare’s versions of their stories. Then, have them research Dr. Joan Luby’s work around brain development and maternal love. In discussion or writing, have students explain how a different maternal relationship might have changed the characters’ stories.

*I, Juliet Capulet,
take you, Romeo Montague*

for my husband

*to have and to hold
from this day forward*

*for better, for worse
for richer, for poorer*

*in sickness and health
till death us depart*

—Page 41, *Enter the Body*

TOXIC MASCULINITY & GENDER ROLES

According to Oxford University Press, [women make up only 16% of Shakespeare's characters and have less than half the number of lines as their male counterparts](#). In his tragedies, Shakespeare was not kind to his female characters; most of them die, and often as a result of the decisions made by the men in their lives.

To ignore the misogyny and violence toward women embedded in so much of Shakespeare's writing is to do a disservice to our students. All of the characters highlighted in *Enter the Body* have suffered at the hands of the men in their lives and are forced to relive their trauma on stage night after night. Misogyny and strict gender expectations are clear in all of the characters' original stories: Lavinia is raped and mutilated before being murdered by her own father; Juliet's play opens with rape jokes made by two serving-men, and she is treated as property by her father; Cordelia is accused of being "unnatural" and "unkind" when she refuses to be subservient to her father; Ophelia is objectified, controlled, and ultimately destroyed by the men in her life.

Begin by asking students what they know about toxic masculinity. What are some of the characteristics of toxic masculinity? What are some of the negative consequences of toxic masculinity?

As students read *Enter the Body* and/or the original Shakespeare text, have them identify examples of toxic masculinity.

Once students have identified examples of toxic masculinity, ask them about the impact of toxic masculinity on individuals and society. What are some of the ways in which toxic masculinity can harm individuals? How can toxic masculinity harm society as a whole? How does it harm the female characters in Shakespeare's play and/or *Enter the Body*? What about the men in their lives—how does it harm them based on the stories we hear?

Provide opportunities for students to continue having these conversations as they read.

*A father of ideas, words, and quill,
always thinking, feet firmly fixed*

*upon the ground, deep roots.
But his mind was always moving, leaves
in the wind until he wound his branches
all the way to a spot beside the king.*

*Once upon a time
he cared*

what I thought and dreamed

—Page 72 & 73, *Enter the Body*

QUEER THEORY

Precisely because Shakespeare is so ubiquitous in schools, we must acknowledge that his ideas of identity, love, and power continue to inform how we think about ourselves and humanity. Providing students the opportunity to interrogate the heteronormativity of gender performance and gender roles in his plays honors the identities and lived experiences of the students in our classrooms.

Queer theory, which is based on examining tests for the ways that they interact with gender and sexuality, can provide students with “mirrors, windows, and slide glass doors” (Rudine Sims Bishop). Though Shakespeare never states that the women in his stories are anything other than heteronormative, students might benefit from interrogating how characters like Cordelia interact with gender and sexuality in the text.

In *Enter the Body*, McCullough explores this idea further by having Cordelia state her lack of desire for a husband or a romantic relationship with a man several times during her conversations with the other characters. Cordelia indicates a few times while telling her story that she can not imagine desiring a man, even though her husband is kind and respectful. Some readers might see this as a nod to her possible asexuality or other identity, which opens up new interpretations of the text.

Allow students the opportunity to analyze and discuss how Cordelia’s identity might influence her choices and decisions. As they read the play and/or *Enter the Body*, ask them:

- ✘ How do Cordelia’s relationships contribute to her social status?
- ✘ How do Cordelia’s relationships challenge or reinforce heteronormative norms?
- ✘ How do the other characters in the trap room and/or in Cordelia’s life respond to and relate to her?
- ✘ How does Cordelia compare to other female characters in Shakespeare’s plays?
- ✘ If Cordelia is asexual (or otherwise LGBTQIA+), how does this offer a new perspective on the play’s themes of power and oppression?

For some students, this reading of Cordelia might complicate their understanding of the play’s themes. If students read Cordelia as heterosexual, they can still consider the implications of Shakespeare including LGBTQIA+ characters in his plays. What does the lack of outwardly LGBTQIA+ characters tell us about the ways in which society marginalizes and erases non-normative experiences of the human condition?

*If I could choose, I’d choose no husband.
But that is not an option*

—Page 227, *Enter the Body*



ANAGRAMMATIC POETRY

On pages 22–23 and again on page 45, McCullough creates anagrammatic poems for Montague and Capulet. In these poems, each line uses only the letters in the title.

Anagrammatic poems are a mix of poetry and puzzle and can be a fun way to have students experiment with poetry. Because anagrammatic poetry allows poets to experiment with punctuation and syntax in unconventional ways, it can be a less intimidating way for readers to create their own poems. (For another example of anagrammatic poetry, see “Washington Crossing the Delaware” by David Shulman).

What do the Montague and Capulet poems tell us as readers? Why might McCullough have chosen this constrained form for these three poems?

Challenge students to create their own anagrammatic poems using their own names. Students can use their first name, last name, or first and last name. They can use the poems on pages 22–23 and 45 as mentor texts.

Montague

*a name meant
to augment an ego
an age ago*

*a mean moat
man get gone
ante unmet*

*a mate not man
gent to mount
mute a moan
untame a tongue*

one man a gem

—Page 22, *Enter the Body*

Capulet

*a petal teacup
cute lace pleat*

leap

a plea acute

let a pale pact cut a tale

—Page 23, *Enter the Body*

Capulet + Montague

*a couple
a couplet*

*a pageant, a glance
put palm to palm*

*name an omen
an open plea*

*molten tongue
open petal*

*plot plan
moan alone*

*a poet gone
plunge atone*

complete lament

—Page 45, *Enter the Body*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1** Much of the interaction between the women in the story takes place in the trap room, a liminal space that seems to serve as a threshold between reality and the stories written by Shakespeare. Trap rooms are often used to store scenery and props, and can also be used for special effects on stage. Why do you think McCullough chose to have Shakespeare's female characters meet in this space?
- 2** How do Juliet, Ophelia, and Cordelia differ in their relationships with their fathers? What about Lavinia, who is unable to tell her own story in the book?
- 3** What role do mothers play in the stories Shakespeare created for Cordelia, Juliet, Lavinia, and Ophelia? What role do mothers or maternal figures play in the women's rewritten stories in the last part of the book?
- 4** Throughout the book, the reader learns more from and about Cordelia, Juliet, Lavinia, and Ophelia. However, there are other women in the trap room, too. They flutter about the edges, listening and watching in some cases, wrapped up in their own stories. We know Cordelia's sisters are on the periphery, but who else might these women be? Which female Shakespearean character would you add to the conversation?
- 5** How do societal expectations of femininity limit the agency and autonomy of female characters like Juliet, Ophelia, Cordelia, and Lavinia in Shakespeare's stories? What examples can you find in the book of the female characters challenging or conforming to these expectations?
- 6** In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes the point that the concept of gender tells us how we "should" be in society. What messages do you see in Shakespeare's stories about how women "should" behave versus how men "should" behave? How do you think those expectations affect the characters? In the last part of the story, the characters retell their stories and change them—how do they subvert patriarchal expectations?
- 7** On pages 164–166, Juliet asks Cordelia about her sisters and points out that the version of them Cordelia paints for the reader is one-sided. While Ophelia points out that the sisters do "gouge out a man's eyes and cheat on their husbands and kill each other, basically," Juliet pushes Cordelia to consider what might have made them that way. How do you imagine Goneril and Reagan ended up the way they did?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

- 8** In a patriarchal society, a woman who refuses to submit to male authority is seen as a threat, and Cordelia, Juliet, Lavinia, and Ophelia are no exception. Discuss how the women's original stories, as written by Shakespeare, reflect the social and political conditions of Elizabethan times. How do their rewritten stories upend the conditions of these times?
- 9** Juliet repeatedly pushes back when Cordelia refers to her love for Romeo as “teenage stupidity.” Cordelia sees the younger female characters as immature. Do you agree with Cordelia or Juliet? Why?
- 10** On page 212, Ophelia points out that:

Hamlet dies too, but no one paints his corpse. They analyze his thoughts and words—so many words. So many more words than I get. They clamor to play Hamlet, and then Lear. Who also dies. Dying isn't the problem. Being remembered only for our deaths and the moments they gave to the men onstage with us—that's what I'm over.

Do you agree with Ophelia? Are the women in Shakespeare's tragedies only remembered for the “moments they gave to the men onstage” with them?

- 11** Lavinia is the only named character in the story who never speaks. Her tongue is cut out on stage each night, so she is unable to tell her story in the trap room, but she listens intently and the other women include her in their conversation. Why do you think the author included a silent character in the story? If you are familiar with *Titus Andronicus*, how do you think Lavinia would change her story if she could participate in the final act of the book?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ✗ [To Teach or Not To Teach: Is Shakespeare Still Relevant to Today's Students?](#)
- ✗ [Using Queer Pedagogy and Theory to Teach Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*](#)
- ✗ [Daughters in Shakespeare: dreams, duty, and defiance](#)
- ✗ [What We Mean When We Say, “Toxic Masculinity”](#)

