

SHAKESPEARE AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

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Shakespeare & VIOLENCE PREVENTION

A Practical Handbook for Educators

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To Holden and Baxter

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Prologue

A MEMORY FROM 2011

As I sat down at the gleaming table in the conference room, my palms were sweating. The building was brand new (or, at least, newer than the one-hundred-plus-year-old stucco cottage that housed my office down the street). The windows were immense and offered a breathtaking late-afternoon view of Boulder sprawling below: the bustling grounds of Boulder High School, the tree-canopied Boulder Creek Path, the muted browns and greys of campus housing. I felt, in this sealed-off, glassy space above Boulder, like I had been invited into a special place, a room of wisdom, numbers, facts, and a room in which people held the answers. This was my first visit to the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV), housed in a giant building that was a parking lot when I moved to Boulder. I can't quite remember who was in that room for that very first meeting, but if I had to guess, it would be Linda Cunningham, Jane Grady, and Del Elliott, three movers and shakers at CSPV, who would become the early supporters, champions, and collaborators who helped me shape the program that I now write about more than thirteen years later.

At that first meeting, with my nerves vibrating, my voice shaking, and my face reddening as it often does when meeting with authority figures, I began to explain an idea my colleagues and I at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival (CSF) had about pairing Shakespeare plays with

an anti-bullying lesson for children. We wanted to tour an abridged performance of *Twelfth Night* to local schools, and we thought it would be a good opportunity to tie it into a conversation about bullying. When I had mentioned the idea to my colleague Jeanne McDonald in CU Boulder's Office for Public and Community-Engaged Scholarship, she had encouraged me to sit down with Dr. Del Elliott, who ran the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence. I had never heard of the center, even though it was, as I learned on my brief walk to the building, a mere half block away from my own office on the CU Boulder campus.

I assumed that these violence-prevention experts, who spent their days researching trends and thinking about how to reduce violence, would listen with kind smiles and then send me on my way with a fact sheet or an article to read. But that spring afternoon in 2011, as I started to explain *Twelfth Night's* subplot about the prank involving Malvolio, a letter, and yellow stockings, the CSPV staff members seemed truly interested in the story. They pointed out the connections between the anonymous letter and cyberbullying; they noticed that the story Shakespeare wrote aligned with what they knew about the cycle of violence. By the time I'd finished explaining what happens in the play, and Malvolio's final promise to seek revenge, these violence-prevention experts were genuinely excited about the overlaps between our disciplines, and so was I. Shakespeare's play, it seemed, aligned with their research into how bullying works in the cycle of violence. And I was learning a lot about the definition of bullying, as they jumped in with explanations and anecdotes. They wanted to partner with CSF to shape this program. They believed that a play might offer an engaging way to share research with young people. That was the birth of the Shakespeare & Violence Prevention program.

By the end of the meeting, my sweating palms had cooled, my nervous system had settled, my eyes sparkled with connection, and I felt at ease with this supportive group of collaborators; I felt that I had value, and that I was no longer an outsider in this building but that I belonged.

I begin with this personal story because it highlights one aspect of this book: the ways in which two disciplines may seem to have nothing in common, but when there is an opportunity for the

knowledge from different disciplines to come together, the overlaps become clear. I was nervous to reach out to another discipline outside the familiar territory of theatre-making, but I am so glad I did. Theatre-based knowledge and violence-prevention knowledge have much in common, and combining these disciplines has resulted in innovative programming that neither discipline could accomplish independently. And while this book is about bridging research with practice, it is also, like most stories, about human beings, gathering together, and connecting their shared experiences.

NOW

Shakespeare seems to be everywhere these days, not only in classrooms, rehearsal halls, and performance venues worldwide but also in daily life. We might see Shakespeare's work as the topic of a Final Jeopardy answer, featured in a magazine ad, analyzed on a podcast, or appearing as a film on a streaming platform. Despite the plays' origins in a particular time and place, Shakespeare's work has myriad applications beyond its original early modern English context. Cultures continually remake Shakespeare in their own images and reinterpret the plays through the lens of the present day. No matter the topic, Shakespeare's plays, it seems, have something to say. Esther Cloudman Dunn, a Smith College professor in the 1930s, noted Shakespeare's ability to connect with any time period: "The genius of Shakespeare is extraordinarily sensitive to the hour and the age. Into his book, each age has peered, as into a mirror, to see its own face. The images in that mirror fade and are replaced as the decades go by. But the mirror is not discarded" (Dunn 1939, 247–48). Dunn is not alone in the observation that Shakespeare's meaning is ever evolving and dependent on the times. Jonathan Bate, author of *The Genius of Shakespeare*, offers that "Because he was hardly ever narrowly topical in his own age and culture, Shakespeare has remained topical in other ages and cultures" (Bate 1998, 221). The openness and subjectiveness of the plays invite readers and audience members to step in as meaning-makers. As scholar Emma Smith writes in *This is Shakespeare*, Shakespeare's "works hold our attention because they are fundamentally incomplete and unstable; they need us" (Smith 2020, 4).

There is a growing interest among practitioners, educators, and scholars to explore how Shakespeare's plays inform other areas of

study outside their traditional homes in literary or theatrical disciplines. Theatre companies continue to produce these plays, and students continue to study these plays in classrooms, but more and more, thinkers, educators, artists, and citizens are pushing back against the inherited boundaries about how Shakespeare's works might serve our world now. What other applications might these early modern plays offer? What elements within the plays are best discarded? What wisdom within Shakespeare's plays might be applicable to other disciplines? How might interdisciplinary approaches to Shakespeare help tackle practical twenty-first-century problems?

At my home institution of the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder), a professional certificate in applied Shakespeare draws teachers, professionals, artists, and enthusiasts together to learn about the way Shakespeare intersects with their own disciplines. Although the field of applied Shakespeare is still in formation, one might define it as *an application of Shakespeare's plays to another field, discipline, or topic to address a particular issue, question, or problem*. As burgeoning applied Shakespeare programs continue to develop, experts in the field are investigating the ways in which Shakespeare's plays resonate with other areas, and often reinforce the wisdom of many disciplines.

Just as Shakespeare practitioners are applying the work to other fields, a similar phenomenon is underway in contemporary violence-prevention research. As violence grows in the United States, prevention scientists call for multidisciplinary approaches to addressing the public health issue, relying on knowledge from a range of disciplines (CDC 2024h). This is not the time for siloed knowledge, and experts agree that violence is a complicated issue that will require innovative and collaborative solutions. How can violence-prevention researchers harness knowledge from other disciplines to translate research into practice, and how can we bridge the gap between research and the daily lives of real people?

Enter Shakespeare.