

## Exercise 3

Identify a single word that occurs at least four times in *Romeo and Juliet*, one that strikes you as interesting and important, that comes up in a variety of contexts, and that shifts or multiplies its meanings under the pressure of its circumstance.

Look the word up in the OED, as in Exercise 2, and make a note of the range of its meanings at the end of the sixteenth century.

Write a 700 word essay that explains the importance of the word to the play: how its meanings develop or change over its several instances, and what work Shakespeare is using it to do, what it means in relation to the play's larger structures and ideas.

Exercise 2 asked you to go deep into a particular use of a complex word. This exercise asks how Shakespeare uses the recurrence of such a word, in a variety of different contexts, to think through questions that the play raises in larger structures—its speeches, its characters, its scenes, its total plot. It is among his most characteristic resources as a dramatist to revolve a small set of key terms over the course of five acts. You can explain a great deal about a given play by following such a network.

Circle some possible words as you read. Once you have found one that you think is interesting, you can be sure to catch all of its instances by searching for it in the electronic text of the plays available on our Blackboard website (under “Shakespeare Resources”).

A few questions that may be helpful as you go.

- Do the senses of the word activated by the play accumulate, deepen etc. as the action proceeds? Does the word come to carry more and more meanings as you go?
- Does the meaning of the word shift over the course of the play—i.e., does it start with one significance, but get pushed into another? (And what do they have to do with each other, these different meanings?)
- Does the word occur more in one part of the play than another? Why?
- Is the word used differently by different characters, in different senses? If so, by whom and when, and why?

- When characters use the word, do they use it in awareness of its full significance in the play? Or does the play sometimes know more about its meaning or meanings than particular characters do?
- Does the repetition of the word serve to make significant connections between lines or scenes in the play? What do those connections mean: why use the word to make them?

You are looking for a kind of a word-plot within the main plot. You may choose to concentrate on one or two instances, but be sure to refer them to larger patterns. An example from the last play we read, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, would be the complex of words beginning with “trans-” (transform, translate, transfigure, etc.): as the play proceeds, an increasingly complicated set of boundary-crossings is described, and you can tell a story of the hectic character of the play’s middle by bringing these instances together.

Feel free to choose your own word, but here are some that might be interesting to follow: “patience” (and “patient”), “affection” (and “affecting” etc.), “wit.”