



**SHAKESPEARE-VR**  
*virtual reality in humanities education*

## Worksheet 1.1

# “TO BE OR NOT TO BE”: SPACE, MEDIA, PERFORMANCE, CHARACTER

In this lesson, you will study the physical aspects of Elizabethan theater with the goal of learning how to identify and assess the functions of space, medium, and performance choices in Shakespearean drama. The lesson centers on a virtual reality tour of the American Shakespeare Center Blackfriars Playhouse and three different productions of the “to be or not to be” soliloquy: a film, a filmed theatrical production, and a virtual reality production.

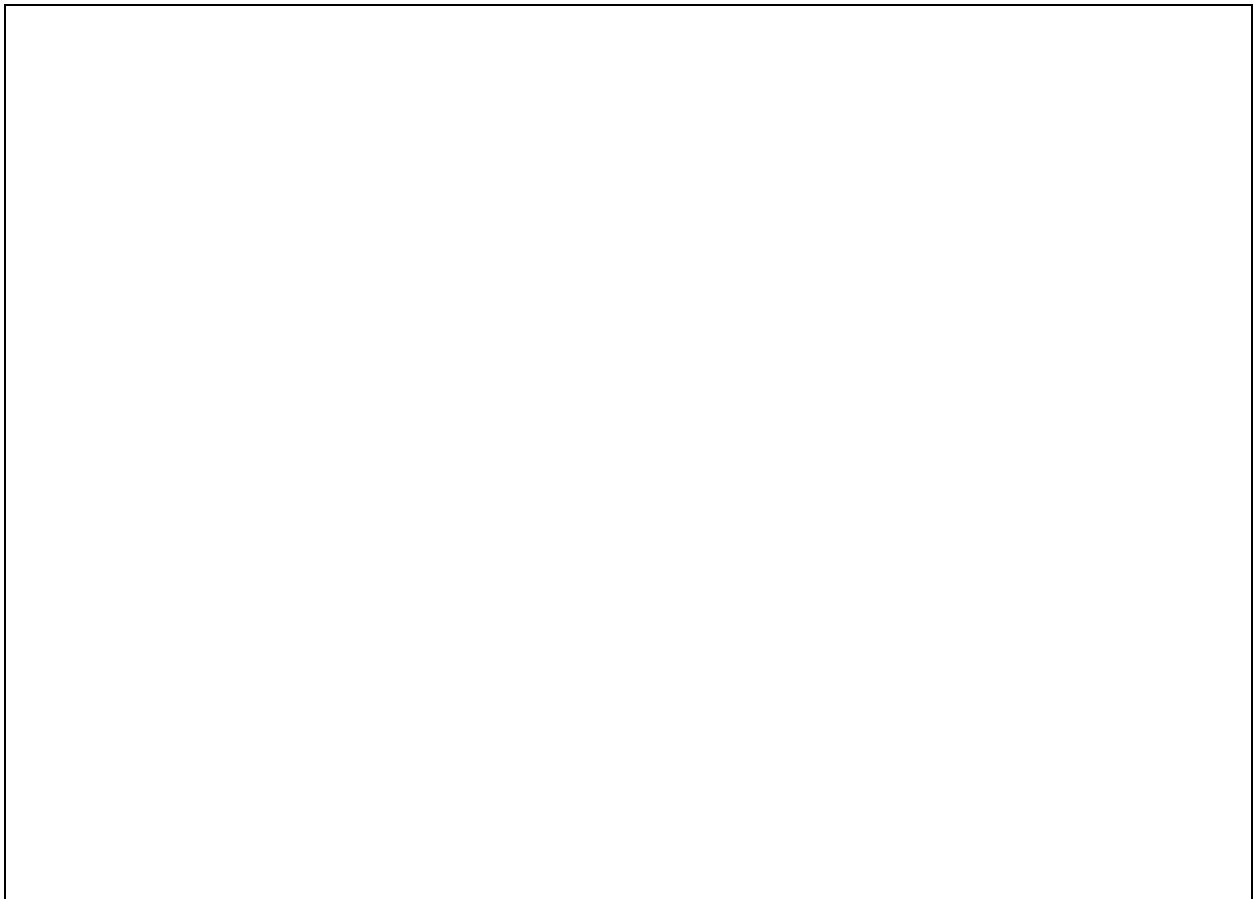
### PRE-ACTIVITY EXERCISE: “PSYCHOLOGICAL VERISMILITUDE”

The appeal of Shakespearean drama hinges in part on the dramatist’s talent for developing psychological verisimilitude: the illusion that his characters are thinking, feeling beings with complex emotions and rich interior lives—just like us. One of the techniques he uses to achieve this effect is the introduction of gaps, sentence fragments, or sudden shifts that interrupt the normal flow of speech. In the same way that the tip of an iceberg suggests a much larger structure beneath the water, these gaps invite readers and spectators to imagine an organizing consciousness that runs beneath the words the characters are actually saying. Over the next 10 minutes, please read through Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy (below) and identify specific instances where Shakespeare’s techniques for developing psychological verisimilitude are apparent. Note your observations in the space provided.

To be, or not to be; that is the question:  
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep –  
No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to – ‘tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep.  
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
Must give us pause. There’s the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life,

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,  
When he himself might with his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin? Who would these fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience makes cowards of us all,  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action. (Hamlet 3.1.57-89)

RESPONSE



## RESPONSE QUESTIONS FOR STATION # 1: VIRTUAL REALITY

Virtual reality production of "to be or not to be," (Zoe Speas, Blackfriars Playhouse, 2018)

1) How do the following aspects factor into this representation of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy?

-Audience

-Facial expression and bodily movement

-The space of performance

-Your angle of view and proximity to the performer

2) At the outset of the lesson, you identified a specific technique that Shakespeare uses to develop psychological verisimilitude. Consider how the technique you identified becomes apparent (or not) in this production. What difference does performance make in terms of meaning and interpretation?

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS FOR STATION # 2: FILM

Kenneth Branagh's performance of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy from the film, *Hamlet* (1996), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjuZq-8PUw0>

1) How do the following aspects factor into this representation of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy?

-Audience

-Facial expression and bodily movement

-The space of performance

-Your angle of view and proximity to the performer

2) At the outset of the lesson, you identified a specific technique that Shakespeare uses to develop psychological verisimilitude. Consider how the technique you identified becomes apparent (or not) in this production. What difference does performance make in terms of meaning and interpretation?

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS FOR STATION # 2: FILMED THEATRICAL PRODUCTION

Benedict Cumberbatch's performance of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy from a filmed theatrical production of *Hamlet* (RSC 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EV4fF3rqWqQ>

1) How do the following aspects factor into this representation of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy?

-Audience

-Facial expression and bodily movement

-The space of performance

-Your angle of view and proximity to the performer

2) At the outset of the lesson, you identified a specific technique that Shakespeare uses to develop psychological verisimilitude. Consider how the technique you identified becomes apparent (or not) in this production. What difference does performance make in terms of meaning and interpretation?

POST-ACTIVITY EXERCISE: "PSYCHOLOGICAL VERISMILITUDE"

Using your notes from the foregoing exercises, discuss the ways in which the meaning and overall effects of dramatic artworks relate to the physical conditions of performance (the type of theater, the lighting, proximity to the audience, etc.). Your answer should focus on a specific passage (or passages) from the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, drawing examples from the adaptations you have viewed.