**Focus group 4 transcription – 9.30-10.30 7/3/24**

RY: I think what we might do to start is, just - you probably all know each other already, but nevertheless you’re going to be using a different name for today, so I think a good starting point might be just to first go around the room and introduce ourselves using the name that we want to be called for today's session. So, I’ll start. I'm using my real name, so I'm Becky. I’ll also give my pronouns, so: I go by she/her. So, do we want to move around?

Muhammad: Muhammad.

Lucy: And I'm Lucy.

Richard: Richard.

Anne: I’m Anne.

Sarah: I’m Sarah.

Martha: I’m Martha.

Miriam: I’m Miriam.

Ella: Ella

Duke: Duke

Jack: I’m Jack

Christina: I’m Chistina

Jane: I'm Jane.

CF: Sorry, I was just writing everyone’s names down. Are you Dale…? [Referring to the name-tags students have filled out] Why do you write so small, everyone? I can’t see yours…

RY: Yes, we should have said – nice big letters. Nice big letters for the name-badges. Never mind.

CF: Is that Jane? Ok, I’ve got them all down. Thank you, everybody.

RY: OK, everybody – in terms of thinking about Shakespeare's plays, we’re going to start, I think, by talking a bit about Shakespeare and then perhaps move on to talk about content warnings and upsetting material at school more generally. But I think therefore it will be useful to know which Shakespeare plays you've done previously, which ones you've studied, particularly the ones that are some of the more violent ones. So could we go round and share which Shakespeare plays we've done before?

Muhammad: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard the Third*, *Macbeth*.

Lucy: I’ve studied the same.

Richard: Same.

RY: Ok, if anyone’s got any others to add, that they’re familiar with, do say, but otherwise, is it everyone that’s studied those three?

Miriam: I did *Twelfth Night*.

RY: *Twelfth Night*, ok. *Twelfth Night*’s a comedy, so not so much in terms of the violence, but yeah, thanks for sharing that. Anyone else done a different…?

Martha: We did *Much Ado About Nothing*, but it wasn’t violent.

RY: Yeah, ok, it’s going to be those three I think – *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III* – which are, yeah, the ones for this project that are the most relevant, but it's always interesting just to know in general how much Shakespeare you've read, or other experience with these plays you've had. So where I want to start in terms of asking questions is just something that came out of the survey that I came and did – I gave out some of them and the teachers give out some of them in class, whenever it was, about a month, month and a half ago, something like that - Those paper surveys that that you filled out – and, with those, I asked a question about Shakespeare’s violence and the extent to which you considered it ‘graphic violence’. And I got some really interesting responses, cause some people said, ‘It feels quite graphic to me, I think these are quite upsetting plays,’ and there were some people who said ‘it's not graphic at all’. So maybe that's a good place to start – a kind of point of disagreement among people. So, what I want to ask I think is: What does ‘graphic violence’ mean to you? Do you consider these to be upsetting plays, potentially upsetting plays? What do you think? [pause] Pretty much no right or wrong answers with any of this – I’m just interested in hearing people’s views. [pause]

Martha: I think when you read a play it’s not as graphic as, like, if you watched it or if you read a novella or a novel or a book that had descriptions about gore and blood, so it’s not as, like, detailed or need, like, for censorship.

RY: Yeah, I think that’s a really good point, that question of kind of what we actually see, perhaps the difference between seeing a play on stage or in a film and reading it - because that might be something we come back to, it might be interesting to talk later on about film versions of these that you've seen, whether the effect is different when you're watching a film. But yeah, that kind of sense of how detailed it is, it’s certainly the case in a play that you tend not to get the very detailed descriptions of what happens. What other people think about that term, ‘graphic violence’? Would anyone else describe these plays as having…?

Muhammad: Certain people have, like - graphic can mean different things to them, so for some people they could find it very graphical and on the other hand there’s others who don’t find it graphical at all. I think how people, like, interpret that is just down to their own view of it.

RY: That's interesting. And could you expand on that a bit? How do you think, what do you think are the different ways in which people are interpreting it as…

Muhammad: I think people have been more sensitive towards these violent things that Shakespeare brings into his plays [inaudible] and there’s other people may not mind as much and may be, like, more comfortable with it perhaps.

RY: Yeah, seems to bring in the idea that it depends on…perhaps not so much the acts of violence in themselves but in some ways how sensitive you are in general to *that* kind of violence, because obviously the plays do contain – you know, *Romeo and Juliet* has themes of suicide and so on, and the kind of the question of how people feel about sensitive, potentially sensitive material like that, yeah. What do other people think about these plays in terms of them being disturbing or not disturbing? Does anyone find them not disturbing at all, or particularly disturbing, or…

Ella: In regards to Shakespeare, the content itself is graphic but when you compare it with the context behind it, it isn't. Because, like, all of his plays have some element of, like, historic accuracy. And I feel like if it was watered down, it would kind of lose the point. But, I feel like if you're gonna read a Shakespearean play or watch it, you're going in knowing what you're expecting.

RY: Hmm.

Ella: Um, so, I don’t really feel like you need content warnings in that regard, cause… You know what you’re… [pause]

RY: Yeah, that’s something comes up a lot if you've read any of the newspapers’ talk about content warnings and certainly sometimes you get that idea of - well, ‘It's a tragedy. You're told it's a tragedy, probably in a tragedy you assume some people are going to get hurt and do you need to be warned about that?’ And I think we'll come back to that in a little bit, about how you guys actually feel about content warnings and whether you would prefer to have one or whether there should that kind of assumption that if it's tragic then that kind of tells you enough. What do other people think in terms of the plays?

Anne: I think it kind of depends on the emotion behind it too. You know, especially in *Romeo and Juliet* when, you know, they die at the end, it's, like, how graphic you find it might depend on how engaged you are with the story. If you don't feel the emotion behind it and you see a bit of blood, you might be a bit, like, you know, hmm I’m not too bothered. But say if you're really upset by it, and then it's quite - especially if you’re seeing it rather than reading it - depending how they choose to do it or how detailed the play you're reading, if you're really invested in the story, you might find it a bit more graphic. Same with, you know, *Macbeth*, you know there's more kind of blood associated with that. If you're really engaged with the story, it might be more impactful, maybe.

RY: Yeah, yeah. I think it's a really interesting point, that question of… because I suppose with tragedies, also particularly, heroes and villains in tragedies, I'm thinking also about your having studied *Richard III*, which is kind of - it's a history play, but also in many ways it’s a tragedy in terms of structure, it’s about somebody who's powerful but falls. And the question of – you know, Richard meets a not very nice end, of course, but since he is a villain there’s a question of: are we bothered by that?

Jack: I think it's worth the context around it like in *Romeo and Juliet*, say when Tybalt was killed I think most people would probably be happy with that cause Tybalt was a quite unpleasant character but say like *Richard III* when the two princes are killed, who were children, you know, say, like, more disturbing because, you know, they're, like, two innocent children and you know, like the way in which they were killed. You know, even the murderer himself is, like, disturbed by it. So, I think it depends on, like, the context around it, like, some murders aren't as, like, you know, some murders you might be, like, happy with because you didn't like that character. But then there are other ones where it's like, uh, you know, the murder of two children, which is, like, when you see, you know, quite graphic and disturbing.

RY: Yeah. Which ties interestingly into the previous points - on the one hand, there’s kind of ‘do you like the characters? Do you identify with the characters?’ and on the other hand, there’s also ‘does it feel like the violence done to these characters was justified as a kind of punishment for them in some cases?’ versus the idea of innocent victims suffering. Yeah?

Sarah: I think especially the case of *Richard III* it is based upon historical context, it’s not something that Shakespeare has created purely for, like, entertainment, so a lot of the events which have happened, have happened in real life whether it’s been dramatized or not. So,
to some extent it's just, like, a replay of history. So, it's not really something which should be massive, like can't really be avoided. Erm, it's more something that needs to be taught and, like, explained.

RY: Yeah. No, I think that's an interesting point that a couple of people have raised now about how if it feels historically accurate… - obviously *Richard III* is based on actual history, but I suppose even in some of the other plays which are fiction but nevertheless they're based on some real types of violence that did exist in the past, like *Romeo and Juliet*, all the duelling, there was a culture of duelling back then, young people fighting with swords. Do you think that makes a difference in those fictional stories - if it’s historical, it lessens the sense of violence being disturbing?

Richard: Well, with something like *Richard III*, obviously it’s a history play so people are likely going into it knowing what story’s about to play out, although it is dramatised. Obviously, we know Richard was sort of shaping, or basing his play around who he was a patriot to at the time, but because it is dramatised there is things in there that the audience might not be aware of going in, like, something like sexual violence, like with Lady Anne and Richard, could be like extremely triggering to an audience member. So, like, somebody might consider that, like, ten times more graphic than, like, than Richard, like, dying at the end, for instance. So, like, violence is sort of subjective, but how you view violence is subjective and maybe down to what experiences you've seen and what makes you uncomfortable. And though it is a history play, you've got to think about how it is dramatized, and so there might be things in there that you're not expecting and that you may really consider graphic.

RY: Yeah, which I think works as a kind of interesting counter-argument to the argument that it's a Shakespeare tragedy, you know people are gonna get hurt, that kind of point about - well, I think you're making this case that, well, there's violence and violence. There's particular types of violence that you might find - say, sexual violence – that you might find more upsetting than… Somebody being murdered is in some ways more extreme than that, but nevertheless you might find it less upsetting, somebody being actually just killed.

Richard: Yeah, I know there isn’t, like, explicit sexual violence for say with Lady Anne in *Richard III* there is certainly, like, slightly predatory behaviours, or, you know, creepy advances. So that might really be something that's sensitive for somebody. And even if it's not necessarily *visually* graphic, but the thoughts it could sort of, like, alight in their mind could be extremely graphic to them. You know, you don't know what sort of visions or memories or thoughts that a certain scene or a certain play on words might trigger for someone.

RY: Yeah, that's an interesting idea – again, the difficulty of using the word ‘graphic’ in some ways, because it does mean such different things, cause the question kind of what do we literally see - when we're reading, we just get sort of, ‘he kisses her, he stabs her’ – or a lot of the dialogue it's… the emotions are implied, but it's, I suppose the reader response is the kind of thing that that might be upsetting then. I think you were first…?

Sarah: Yeah, I think in some ways that's correct as well, like, it's a murder, it's kind of so far removed from, like, our life, like, hopefully. And that's something like that, like a subtle sexual violence or, like, it's, like, uncomfortable feelings towards that kind of situation, like people might experience, so it might be more striking to an audience than something such as, like, Richard dying, or, like, as I said before just, like, murders, which are so, more uncommon in our society than, say sexual violence which is sad but…

RY: Yes - again, I'm getting that sense of the things that are distanced from us because they're historical versus the things that, you know, might have happened in the past that still happen in the present perhaps being more likely to disturb people.

Ella: I feel like you should also take it into account *when* the plays were written because obviously a Shakespearean audience would take it from, like, a completely different perspective, like there was still public executions going on and all of that. So, I feel like this was their entertainment, although obviously it was a tragedy, a comedy. Umm, but like nowadays I feel like just our perception of what is graphic and violent has kind of altered that…Um but…

RY: Yeah, that's an interesting point, cause you’re absolutely right, yeah, there were public executions at the time; there was bear-baiting as well, which was when bears were attacked by dogs, you basically have a tied-up bear and it was attacked by dogs and people enjoyed the spectacle of these animals fighting and there was bloodshed, there was violence there, so going and seeing real life violence, sometimes ending in people being killed, for pleasure. Though I suppose in some ways now in terms of entertainment - film and TV is capable of being much more graphic than the stages of that time, with the special effects that we have nowadays. So, any thoughts about that: the effect of the plays versus the modern entertainment we have nowadays? Yeah?

Miriam: I think it’s the language Shakespeare uses is quite archaic so, like, us reading it is not as, like, we're not as familiar with reading the sort of language he uses, compared to more modern, contemporary books we read. But, um, I think that can change our perception of it and especially when it's in production, like in the class we watched the Benedict Cumberbatch version and I feel like I was able to really get, like, an understanding of the emotion and like the whole, the whole scene of it more, by watching that because…erm, how Richard was feeling, how Richmond was feeling, and, yeah, because you could visually see it.

RY: Yeah, again that difference between seeing it and just reading it. I mean, could you maybe expand a little bit - you said that it creates different effect with the old-fashioned language of Shakespeare. What… how would you say the language creates a different effect from say a modern film?

Miriam: I just think cause we’re as not as familiar, like, we don't really use it, and sometimes it does just, like, go over my head, like I don’t always understand what he's trying to say… But yeah.

RY: Yeah, so I suppose that there is perhaps a potentially distancing effect through the language if you kind of have to have it explained to you, you're going more slowly, it's not going to hit you perhaps the same way as seeing something... Yeah, sorry, sorry, you were first.

Christina: Yeah, I remember when we watched the Benedict Cumberbatch film of *Richard III*. It’s like the scene where he dies is like this whole played out, like, battle scene, it was really graphic, but then we read it in the play and its really undramatic, like, just like ‘Richard is slain’ and that’s it. And so yeah, I think there definitely is a difference between - like obviously that would have been acted out on stage like back in Shakespeare's time as well - but it was definitely obviously much less graphic, um, then than it was now, mostly like how it's played on stage and stuff.

RY: Yeah, we might come back to that because I think it's a really interesting idea, that question of: it's not just about seeing it on film, it's also about what the film does with it - Does the film set in the past? Does it bring it into the modern day? How much, how kind of graphic, how much do you actually *see* in in any given film? So, we might talk in a minute, just perhaps go around the room again and see what films people have seen of Shakespeare and think about that a bit more detail. Before we get to that, though, do you want to jump in…?

Jack: Yeah, I think it is different for a film and a play because, like, in a film you can, like, see someone get, like, shot in the head and, like, blood splatter everywhere and stuff like that.
And then suddenly, like someone getting stabbed with a prop knife on the stage in a play, like, doesn't seem that graphic or violent. It just seems like, you know, uh, you know, someone watching that wouldn't be as disturbed because, you know, they see it on the film all the time. And you know, the way films are made, they’re made to look realistic, you know what I mean? So I think it is different between a film and a play.

RY: Yeah. Or at least certainly that the way you stage something that does have a big effect on it. So how much is it - so I can imagine a production, where there was a stabbing, but again you could do a Shakespeare play in a film as adaptation that was perhaps done quite graphically versus one where it was more kind of like a stage production from that point of view. Cause in general, in stage productions, say, they tend not to use too much fake blood, as they can get very messy in live performance. You don't want to get mess onto everyone’s costumes, you have to wash everything. But as I say, I think might be interesting to see -because it sounds like most of you, if not all of you, saw the Benedict Cumberbatch *Richard III* but whether you have also seen any other films, I don't know if you were shown them in class or whether you maybe watched any in your own time but again, can we quickly go around the room and share which films of Shakespeare you might have seen?

Muhammed: *Romeo and Juliet*, the Leonardo DiCaprio version.

RY: Right, yes, that's a common one. I've heard from lots of students that they've seen that one. How about you?

Lucy: Yes, I’ve seen that one as well and I also saw the *Macbeth* one. Um, and I've seen a few as plays as well, um, yeah.

RY: And do you remember which *Macbeth* you saw?

Lucy: Yeah, so, erm…no. It's a really long time ago, I can’t remember. It was quite a modern one, a modern take.

RY: Right, cause there's a Patrick Stewart *Macbeth*…

Lucy: Yes I think that’s the one.

RY: Yeah, I think it's set in the Second World War-ish, was that, something like that?

Lucy: Yeah. I think it was, yeah.

RY: So possibly? How about you?

Richard: I’ve watched the Laurence Olivier *Richard III* as well as the Benedict Cumberbatch *Richard III*. It’s quite interesting because it’s obviously an older take on things, so perhaps it’s less graphic because they didn't have the facilities to make it as graphic as they do today.

RY: And in some ways I think the Laurence Olivier film is really influenced by the stage as well, it's because he did it on stage and I think then made a film later, and in some ways it's quite a kind of theatrical version of it, more using the techniques they’d use on stage. Yeah?

Anne: I saw a *Romeo and Juliet* film that was set in Shakespearean, like when he was writing it, so yeah these horses and sword fights, and I watched the Leonardo DiCaprio one too, I think we probably all have, but I saw one that was set at the time, but I think that’s…. it yeah.

RY: Right. Thank you.

Sarah: I’ve seen the Leonardo DiCaprio version, I've seen the Benedict Cumberbatch *Richard III*, and I've seen *Macbeth* like a long time ago. I can’t remember which version; I think probably the same…

RY: You’ve just answered my next question.

Sarah: And yeah, that’s all.

RY: Right. Thank you.

Martha: And yeah, I’ve seen a *Macbeth* version, but I can’t remember it.

RY: Was that shown at school to you, was that where you all saw it?

[group mostly responds yes]

RY: Right, ok? Back in the dim mists of GCSE or something like that, yeah.

[Unknown student voice]: Further back than that.

[group mostly responds yes, with chatter]

[Unknown student voice]: Year 9.

RY: Yeah, that's a long time ago.

Martha: Um, the *Romeo and Juliet,* the Leonardo DiCaprio one and I think the other one that was mentioned as well, and yeah, that’s it.

RY: Great. Thank you.

Miriam: I remember watching an animated version of *Macbeth*, as well as the *Romeo and Juliet*.

RY: Right, great, yeah?

Ella: Both *Romeo and Juliet*s, both *Richard*s and *Macbeth*.

RY: Right. And again, with *Macbeth*, do you think it was the same one the others saw?

Ella: Yeah, it was. It was set in, I think I can remember it, it was the World War Two one.

RY: Yeah, as I say, I think that’s Patrick Stewart playing Macbeth in that one. Great, you?

Duke: I’ve watched, like, I think it’s a later version of the Macbeth movie, and I can't remember what it was called, but I know it wasn't the World War Two one. But I’ve watched that one as well. *Romeo and Juliet*, Benedict Cumberbatch *Richard III*.

Jack: Um, the Leonardo DiCaprio *Romeo and Juliet* and the modern version of *Macbeth*, that’s the other one.

RY: Yeah.

Christina: Um, both *Romeo and Juliets* and both *Richards.*

RY: Right.

Jane: I’ve seen both *Romeo and Juliets* and a *Macbeth*, it was set in the past, it wasn’t the World War Two one.

RY: Right? OK, so in kind of Shakespeare's time...?

Jane: Yeah, it was.

RY: Yeah. Yeah, the trouble is pinning down the ones where we’re not sure - there are so many films of some of these plays floating around out there. But I think perhaps the *Romeo and Juliet* one particularly interests me, for those of you who have seen both versions, or maybe just seen the Leonardo DiCaprio version, because in some ways they are such different in terms of what they do with the text. One of them sets in the modern age, or certainly what *was* the modern age back when that film was made, in the mid-90s, and one is more kind of medieval/Renaissance - the ancient past, horses, chivalry, all that kind of thing. In terms of the kind of effect of the violence in the films, does anyone have any thoughts about that? Do you find the violence kind of hit differently depending on the setting. Yeah?

Sarah: I think it’s interesting in how in the more modern take on *Romeo and Juliet*, how there’s, like, guns between, like, the royal houses and stuff. I think it's more like violent in a way for a modern audience because it's more like our kind of violence, like, the violence we see in films, it's more, like, gun-based, less than like duelling or that kind of situation. And so I think to show that to, like, a school audience is kind of in a way, even though more common, kind of more, um yeah, effective in a way. Umm, so I think maybe in that sense as well and also seeing that kind of even though it’s still using the language, seeing it in a more modern context helps to really, like, relate to an audience now, like, um, kids can kind of imagine it more easily instead of it being kind of such a medieval, like, far gone prospect, a lot of children who aren’t really engaged with such old language or old settings. It’s more interesting and more engaging, but also more violent in a way.

RY: And like, yeah, it's interesting because it does keep the language, it's still the same language, it is Shakespeare’s play but, but yeah, changing the setting, the costumes, the forms of the weapons does make a big difference. I think you were next, yes?

Martha: I think the Leonardo DiCaprio *Romeo and Juliet* was *less* violent than the medieval setting one, because I think the modern weapons like guns removed the personal, like, warring between them. I feel like duels are more intimate and required, like, more bloodshed on stage which could have been more, um…could require more censorship.

RY: Hmm, that's an interesting point, can you remember… cause I absolutely take your point about duels in some ways feeling somewhat more personal, being right there at sword’s length from somebody, versus guns working over longer distance. I mean, do you remember - How did you actually find the violence of the films when you were watching? Were you disturbed by any of it, in either film?

Martha: Umm, I think in the Leonardo DiCaprio one, it was a bit far removed when they were fighting, especially in the cars and going by and it was shooting the guns. It wasn’t really aimed at specific people. But in the one where it was set in Shakespearean times, the duelling even between, like, in the opening scene between like the two lower ranks of, like, each houses was more personal, more invasive, than the gunshots.

RY: Yeah, that's interesting. So I think there can be that tendency to kind of assume if it's in the modern day it kind of relates to us. But I suppose in some ways, you know, certainly in this country, there isn't a big problem with gun violence. We're not constantly surrounded by people shooting each other, so you could argue that in some ways that's *not* particularly close to our own experience. But yes, I think that's an important point. Yeah?

Lucy: Um, I think definitely it’s interesting when you see a play that was done so long ago, and in a time and society that’s so far detached from what happens in modern day, you can still keep the principle and put it into a modern context, I think that's quite interesting that there’s still, like, scenes and principles and things that happen that are still mirrored hundreds of years later that you can still put into a modern context, I think that’s quite interesting. And then I don't know, it almost gives a bit of insight into Shakespeare, his take on society, and still, even though it's done differently, it's done with guns and things like that, it still, can still keep that, like, hate between people and how that still happens and conflict and just the basic principles are still common and happen today.

RY: Yeah, perhaps telling us something about Shakespeare, and also perhaps telling something about violence, the way in which certain kinds of motivation for violence… - so, we may not have kind of kings murdering their way to the throne in the way that was more common in the past, but nevertheless some of the things, the kind of fears like status, rivalry, jealousy, all those kinds of things…

Lucy: Yeah, all those basic things are still happening.

RY: Yeah. Interesting. Yes?

Richard: Um, it’s kinda building on what Jack…?

Jack: Yeah.

Richard: On what Jack said earlier on, but especially today, like, present day, we're exposed so much violence like through our screens and you can literally, like, search up a word and see really, really graphic images or even, like, half of the films you go to the cinema and go and watch are likely to have, like, quite graphic images in them. So, like, I'd say, we evolved to a point where the kind of violence that’s present in Shakespeare plays are quite…weak in comparison to what we’ve been exposed to, or even what you can just go turn on the news and see. Um, in terms of, like, bloodshed and…violence and weaponry, like that kind of violence, we’re quite heavily exposed to nowadays. So, Shakespearean violence is sort of weak and…pathetic in comparison almost. But it depends if you, how much you feel the violence in his plays, I guess, if you, uh, like, how climatic it is for you, like how engaged you are in the play, I suppose it depends on how much how much of a climax there is for you when you watch the violence in Shakespeare plays.

Anne: Yeah, I agree and I think our definition for graphic’s has changed and like, depending what we're exposed to, we’re exposed to now a lot more violence now, like, graphic, like bloody violence quite easily. And so I think our definition of it has changed, what we - obviously it’s still personal - but what we find, yeah, extremism, like our generation has changed. Especially with, you know, films and video games like and now I think it's…we’re more resilient. So what we can deal with, as a generalisation, obviously everyone is different, but as a whole I think it's changed from even, like, you know, 30-40 years ago, over a short amount of time I think it’s changed.

RY: That’s interesting. Do you want to…?

Jack: Yeah, on Richard and Anne’s point. Uh, I think as well with, say, our generation, and like the next generation, uh, like because of the amount of, say, internet exposure we've had from, like, such a young age, you know…say the videos you could have watched when you were, like, eight years old and would have been different to say what my parents saw when they were eight years old. You know, like, you can see such, like, violent graphic things like from such a young age, you know, just with unrestricted internet access. I think the violence is different now then say it was 30 or 40 years ago, just due to, like, say, obviously video games, films and obviously, like, what Richard was saying, er, with like, you know, just one, like, search on the internet you can find things that you know a hundred times worse than what you'll ever read in, like, you know, a Richard play or you know, see, even in a film or, you know, on stage, you know.

RY: Yeah. So, I think - I know the couple of people have got their hands up, but think this actually leads to something, I actually want to move the discussion on a little bit, to think about schools as a setting particularly at this point. So, if you don't mind, those people, I think maybe if your idea can be repurposed to fit this further discussion - because I think absolutely that kind of point about - violence is so available to us if we want to look at it nowadays. There are a lot of violent films, things on the internet and so on. But I suppose one of the things to think about here is that studying things in school is of course a rather different environment. Because when you're at home and you’ve got the internet, you can choose what to look at. You can choose, do I want to see something really violent? Do I enjoy that? Is that something that is fun for me, exciting or whatever? Do I want to play a violent video game? Whereas in school we kind of give you these plays and say, ‘well, you are, here's a play, it's very violent.’ And then you're forced to engage for it in that kind of school setting, there's less element of choice. So I think that's kind of where I want to take the conversation next, kind of how you feel about studying these plays when you don't have that decision about whether to study them, and perhaps also to think about kind of how your teachers prepare you for the violence in the plays, I mean, whether you get given content warnings generally. So any thoughts on any of that: how you feel about studying the plays at school, how your teachers prepared you? Yeah?

Anne: Um, I think we can kind of trust our teachers and our school to not give us maybe something that would affect everyone as a whole. You know, I don't think I've ever massively come across something where everyone's been like, you know, ‘I wish I hadn't seen that’. But I think it depends what the content is, like you were saying, we’ve all become a bit more desensitised to violence, but especially things like extreme emotional violence maybe, or sexual violence. I think…not even in Shakespeare, in everything. Cause I do agree with, um, Ella’s point, that if you're reading or seeing Shakespeare there has to be some element of, OK, especially if it’s a tragedy, I know there's probably going to be some sort of violence in there. And maybe shouldn't read something, and if you see someone being stabbed and be like, ‘Oh my God, like I didn't, you know, I can’t believe that's in there’, but,
if there’s things, like, more sensitive things, emotional, it’s good to have - even if your teacher just says, ‘OK, there might be something that someone finds a bit upsetting here’ just so you have a bit of warning. But, I mean, just speaking for myself, I feel like we can trust our teachers just to not give us something that would be really upsetting, or they'd warn us about it, which I think is a good thing.

RY: I think you are next, am I right or…?

Sarah: I feel like in a way I agree. And I think, like, for a lot of us, we are all trusting of our teachers and they do usually bring, beforehand, saying like there might be a bit of sex and violence, kind of when you're overviewing the play itself, whatever it may be, before you start reading, they're usually, you get a gist of the kind of themes that will come up. But I also feel like for a lot of, like, children in schools, like, maybe not the younger years but as you get a little bit older, not that the violence seems exciting, but – and definitely not the kind of, like, the sexual kind or the emotional kind – but maybe, like, the duels seems quite engaging because obviously we are so immune to it so seeing a little bit of conflict might help, like, motivate years which aren’t so motivated to read Shakespeare into kind of finding interest in something they can relate to, like video games, or - not necessarily in a good way, but it seems something that we are more engaged with. As long as it's not incredibly…explicit, or in whatever way, yeah.

RY: That’s an interesting point. Cause obviously this project is in some ways focused on the disturbingness of violence, but I think the *appeal* of violence, the fact that people often do enjoy the violence and it can make things exciting, particularly when you've got kind of – sometimes the Shakespearean language, as we said earlier, it's old, it's difficult, it's dense and sometimes having scenes of action in that, it's kind of…it’s easier to follow and kind of does bring it to life in various ways.

Ella: Um, I feel like, in a school setting, normally the way the plays are presented to us are in a very, like, in a grouped atmosphere, like either the teacher will pick on people to read and, like, that kind of really brings down, like all of the violence if you’ve got people mumbling through the lines and things like that. But also a lot of teachers like to show film adaptations before that. And I feel like in a school there's a very heavy reliance on certificates for movies, and I feel like the more, like, progressing, like - our generation becoming really desensitised to everything. Like, I feel like violence in films and movies is so much more graphic than, like, ten or fifteen years ago. Like content warnings and certificates get raised if there are, like, drug substances involved, but, um, violence tends to be very, um, like, present in everything. So, I feel like in that regard people, like, say, if they see if they see a film adaptation before they read it, they do have a sense of what's going to occur. Um, because I feel like everything is heightened because of, like, a director’s perspective on a movie or a play, like, they can either take in a comedic thing like the DiCaprio version of *Romeo and Juliet* or, like, a very serious and, like, a tragedy basically, like the other one, um, and, like, it just relates to that. Um, because you can get multiple things that are portrayed in different ways. So, you can get students to expect different things on what you’re reading, and I feel like that can just either shock people or impact people. So yeah, I think it's just about how teachers kind of portray what they’re going to be teaching.

RY: Hmm, yeah. So because, just you bring up the, um, the ratings that films have - in some ways those kind of work as a form of content warning, in some ways, that everyone, if you buy a film, it’s got a 15 on it or whatever, you get a sense of the kinds of extremeness - even if it contains scenes of violence, how graphic will those be? How detailed will the film be in its treatment of those? Yeah, do you want to come in at this point?

Martha: Yeah, education is like a setup for the real world for students and I feel like the introduction of violence through literature such as Shakespeare, um, that still is relevant to contemporary audiences and readers in the modern era. It prepares them for, not like the real world, but I think being shown violence, which is inevitable in the future because it's such a central part of society, whether it's good or bad, I feel like students should learn about it through a less extreme way than say what Ella was mentioning - um, violent movies and ratings that they could see when they were younger. And so, just not being sheltered from it and having open conversations about it.

RY: That’s interesting. Do you want to jump in?

Sarah: I think the problem as well is with when, say you go to a movie and they have, you know, the rating or whatever and it says, like, drug use or violence or this kind of, it’s very broad and especially in schools where teachers try to give an overview without giving away the plot, it’s quite difficult. And sometimes it’s such niche scenarios which students would find triggering which they may have experienced but you’re not necessarily going to know until we've actually started and by then might be a bit too late, you know, if it's already triggered like an emotional response it's too late and that's already kind of impacted that person. So I think it's really difficult to actually find the line between, um, giving a warning and making sure that warning is kind of not too specific to give away what's going on, but also specific enough to like, prevent…um, I don’t know how you describe it… um, like discomfort to the student if there’s like a past trauma which might be triggered by an action in a play.

RY: Yeah, right, I think those two responses together are so interesting, cause in some ways it's just this complexity of thinking about violence. On the one hand, the idea that there *is* violence in real life, we don't always get a warning for it, that sense that in some ways school is place where you learn about coping with reality and life beyond school, as well as just learning books, learning texts, learning about Shakespeare and all of that. But then also your point about, within that, we want to kind of enjoy these as literature. So on the one hand, you want not to have spoilers, you want not to tell people exactly what's gonna happen, you want people to be moved and engaged by what they're reading, but also there will be people perhaps who’ve had genuine bad experiences, who will be triggered by things. And the question of how do you find that balance between preparing people for the real world, where sometimes there aren't content warnings, versus spoiling the fiction for them, versus finding some way of protecting the people who do need to be protected. Yeah?

Ella: I remember in lower school when we were doing *Macbeth*, um, they sent out consent forms to parents to ask them if we could watch and I feel like as a parent, you know your child and what they can, like, handle or if you don’t want them exposed to certain things. So, like, that's a barrier that will always be there to prevent things like that. Um, I mean, as a consensus, like with these two answers as well, people should be exposed to these things because our world is violent and you can't really escape that. And I feel like you should be exposed to in a setting that is secure with, like, authoritarian figures that can help you rather than learn it by yourself through, like, straight Google search or something.

RY: And from that point of view, it makes me wonder: to what extent, if at all, when you've been taught these plays - we've obviously talked about in some ways these are 400 year old plays with quite old language, difficult in some ways, in some ways quite different from our own world although some of their themes may kind of carry through - I suppose the question is: have you teachers ever directly linked to any of the violence in these places to the kind of violence that people might really encounter in their everyday lives? So I don't know, obviously, gang violence of the kind in *Romeo and Juliet* is still a thing nowadays; of course, suicide is an issue that is still very much around; um, mental illness comes into some of these plays and kind of violence linked to that – Is that something that that teachers have ever brought up, the kind of talking about real violence as well as fictional violence?

Richard: Um, well, with, like, specifically with that question, like, for instance the question we do on *Richard the Third* is ‘explore the dramatic effects in language in this text’. And I think in most cases when people are studying Shakespeare at school, it's to look at dramatic effects of language because that is really what Shakespeare was all about. And with some of the novels we read, or maybe like the other play we do, *A Doll’s House*…we're often looking at themes, and when writing essays, it’s really talking about themes, but I think most people are looking at Shakespeare, you're looking at how he did his plays, why he did certain effects, why did he use certain effects. You're looking at his language because it's so uncommon to what we have today. It's not, it's nothing like what we have in the present day. So with Shakespeare…I don't think that we usually link it to, like, you know, things we feel today or themes… present in like current society, because it’s really about Shakespeare, like his genius, what he did. And also, I think with, um, Shakespeare's plays, like you said, about 400 years ago, the language is completely different. I think sometimes that can be comical to, like, high school audiences, like, some of the phrases, they seem really abrupt or, like, senseless, they don’t, you know, we sort of laugh at the fact that we have no idea what's being said sometimes and so sometimes when you imbed violence in, like, language that nobody can quite grasp or nobody’s familiar with, it sort of takes away from the violence and so that makes less of a need to prepare us for that violence because we're sort of busy trying to figure out what the last line just said and what it actually was supposed to mean. And then you see some sort of stage direction which says ‘Richard is slain’ and you're like, oh, I’m still trying to grasp what this scene even means to be honest. And you have to go over it multiple times to really understand.

RY: Yeah, I suppose from a teacher's point of view, again, on the one hand, you want these plays to move people, to excite people, to be effective as drama. But on the other hand, you don't want ideally the plays to upset people, so kind of finding that balance also between how do I help somebody get through the words - which are or can be a little bit of a barrier if you're not familiar with Shakespeare -, how do I convey the ways the plays are exciting - your point about spoilers again comes at that point - but also, how do I not tip too far into ‘now this is just upsetting everybody’?

Sarah: I feel like in other, more modern texts, like, um, if violence was presented as um, like, as it sometimes is in Shakespeare’s plays just in modern language, um, students would kind of, it would be more kind of... I can’t think of the word again, more, yeah, more impactful. But I think, as Richard was saying, the way that it's kind of, when you're reading a Shakespeare play or piece of writing, like, you’re constantly in a process of trying to translate and trying to figure out what's actually going on. So, like, the impact is, like, hugely removed, it's only till after and someone says right let's debunk like this chapter, what happened and you kind of figure out that this has happened or this person’s been captured or there's been this kind of battle, it's not always obvious, so once someone explains it to you or the way they explain it to you can be like massively, um, informative in the way that you view the scene or the way that you felt the violence.

RY: Yeah, I think, certainly teachers’ framing of things, how do they approach these issues…? - in some ways, you know, this goes back to that original question about – say, that *Richard III* scene with Richard and Lady Anne, and there is no actual sexual violence in that scene but it is a really uneasy scene in various ways, where he is trying to manipulate her and control her and there is clearly a sexual undercurrent in that scene. I mean, do you feel with that, do you think it would be useful… - I don’t want to put too much pressure on teachers, they are doing a lot teaching these plays, they're difficult plays for anyone to get to grips with - but do you think it would be something you'd value, if teachers could find some way of maybe linking that discussion to thinking about kind of sexual control and coercion in the real world or something like that?

Sarah: I think it would be important, kind of, because, um, trying to convey these topics to children can be quite difficult. So, if you kind of do it in a way that, like - present all the literature, read through it, and then explain it, it kind of starts the debate and kind of starts a conversation around, like, um, societal problems which can be really helpful because it's sometimes difficult to kind of tackle those and just be, like, very straight up, like, we need to talk about sexual violence – instead it’s kind of, right, take this in its historical context and then if we try and think about this in a modern context, like, is this still relevant? Is this still an issue? and if it is, like, how can we help prevent this? It’s kind of more of a kind of ethics than so much just the story, kind of. That could be a way for teachers to try and help educate students on the issues instead of - That's a whole different topic, I guess, because it's whether you want to just look at the literature as it is and its historical context or if you want to try and turn into something which is more beneficial for kind of the knowledge around that, and definitely I think depends on the kind of pastoral help you have in school. If you already – like, we have wider curriculum. So we kind of learn about issues such as like sexual violence or racism and all those kind of difficult topics in school which I think is probably done to a good standard. It depends if you wanna kind of introduce that idea or if you’re happy with the way that it's all kind of being conveyed in school already.

RY: Yeah, it’s kind of an interesting question. Do you want to use the plays as a kind of jumping-off point for: ‘these are the ways in which the plays’ violence relates to the violence of our own world and the sexual violence and other kinds of violence, self-harm and so on’? Or is that something better kept in its own area, of specifically talking about self-harm, suicide, as topics in some ways separate from fiction?

Anne: Yeah, I think that's the thing, like, when you do Shakespeare like, you're never studying Shakespeare by itself. You always have, with GCSE and A-level you’re always studying other novels or plays, so I think for me Shakespeare anyway is something that I leave in its own time. I don't massively relate it to modern day. As, like, Richard said, it's about, um… what he was doing in his time, what’s his…what’s he trying to convey and then I can take things that relate to modern day from the other texts we’re doing. So whether it’s about feminist movements or, you know, patriarchy, like in *A Doll’s House* or in *The Great Gatsby* that we're doing at the moment about the twenties in America or, like, the wider curriculum lessons we do. I find we take our life… lessons from other things rather than Shakespeare, even though there is things that if you want to interpret things for modern day, obviously at the time, but I don't think it's massively, well, as important to teach - to take things from Shakespeare and then interpret them into modern day lessons, as I think that stems from other things we do, whereas in the text or in, like, other completely separate lessons which you know, everyone does at GCSE and then carry on to A-Level. But yeah, I think you can take those things elsewhere rather than Shakespeare cause I don't think they’re that clear in Shakespeare.

RY: Hmm. Do you want to jump in there? Oh, so sorry, you’re first, sorry.

Martha: While our school does provide wider curriculum lessons, less privileged areas may not have the resources to provide those lessons. So having English literature as a subject has these lessons about sexual violence and violence as a whole in them, and it would allow for students from less privileged areas to recognise these, especially younger students that don't really have a lot of knowledge on these events, recognise them in these plays and have a basis, despite it being hundreds of years ago, it's still relevant to contemporary audiences about how it happens and what happens in it. Um, so I think it's important to have, um, lessons, having, like, dual accomplishments on the issues on the wider society while also learning about literature as well.

RY: Yeah, it's I suppose…yeah, the question of…if you're getting it from elsewhere, from other texts - though I suppose you could argue that, you know, with Shakespeare, showing the ways in which Shakespeare isn't *just* about people 400 years ago who were very different from us, showing the ways in which it is relevant, might be good for people being engaged with Shakespeare, seeing why it matters, why we're still studying these plays. But I think your point about, particularly perhaps in schools where they don't have so much direct discussion of students’ own experiences with violence or issues related to violence, that they could be kind of a good way into that. Shakespeare has to be on the curriculum anyway, everyone has to study Shakespeare, regardless of where you go to school. So, potentially finding the places in these plays where it could introduce a discussion of those topics would be good. What was your point?

Miriam: I’m just adding on to what Anne was saying about how we should, I think, leaving reading Shakespeare and *Richard III* and, like, in his time, because the whole, the whole play of *Richard III* is just the fulfilment of the Tudor myth for an Elizabethan audience. Like from their perspective it was, it was all mainly based on religion, and it was just God's plan, whereas if we look at it from our knowledge, for example, of mental illnesses now, we could say, oh Richard was, I don't know, like, a narcissist or, um, he had like a breakdown crisis with the scene of the dreams. And you know, you can kind of, really maybe go far away from what Shakespeare was actually trying to portray in his play.

RY: Hmm, so there’s a sense of, on the one hand, you want to preserve the fact that these are - this is not the present day, these are, of course, fictional characters as well - but they're fictional characters dealing with some things that were much of their time, but finding again the balance between that and wanting to talk about the ways in which, if this is Richard’s personality, this is how they thought about it at the time, this is how they interpreted it, but this is also how we might interpret somebody like that in the modern day. I think you are next?

Sarah: I think it’s less about like trying to dominate it with, uh, ethics and more about trying to have a conversation alongside, more kind of brushing upon the point and then starting the discussion if need be, less about taking away from what Shakespeare has obviously crafted. Erm, and obviously in some of the texts like, um, which is like historical so it's more than talking about context and obviously like Shakespeare’s dramatic effect because obviously that's already an event which has happened and the way that Shakespeare has kind of portrayed it is, like, a completely different, like, argument. You know, like that the way he has like, how Richard was saying, like, the way he's, like, he's kind of a genius and he’s put it together, like that’s more of a discussion that’s relevant to literature. I think it's just more of a cycle, and of course if you’re studying a text which is a little bit controversial, a little bit heavy on the themes of violence, it's always gonna be, or there should be, a kind of discussion on, is this OK? What do you think? Erm, but not so much to take away from what Shakespeare has written, it's kind of two different things with kind of the structure of the way it's been written and the way it’s been crafted and kind of the story in itself are two different things. And I think first should always come the way it's been crafted, because obviously that’s the main focus on, erm, kind of the way…erm, of genius and obviously at A-level I feel like that's more kind of the stress is on how he has created it, but also important to bear in mind the story and its relevance especially to, as Martha said, on, like, younger audiences, they might not be so much kind of knowledge on and it's hard to bring in the theme of like sexual violence as well to younger years, I think, I do feel like, because it's such a sensitive subject but you can kind of, well not enlightenment, but, view it in a way, an interpretation of the past and how, um, hopefully things are getting better or if they're not, how can we help with this in in our school? It’s more of a kind of expression and help, more helpful than kind of ignoring it or not going into depth with it when reading it. I feel like if you brush past it, maybe it's saying that it's, not that it’s OK, but it's important to kind of delve deeper into it as it is an important part, but also not forgetting about the actual structure and the dramatic effects, which is obviously the whole reason we study Shakespeare…

RY: Yeah, all the things you need to do to pass exams.

Sarah: Yeah.

RY: There’s the sort of practical engagement with Shakespeare in terms of you need to know the kind of things that you can write about for assessments. But I think, yeah, that kind of question of then… I think your point about approaching the plays in different ways at different stages is a really good one because a younger school group perhaps not wanting to go into certain things in as much detail, but especially – I suppose if they're doing *Romeo and Juliet*…that's really interesting for structure, for *Romeo and Juliet*, because it ends in two suicides for love. And I think sometimes that idea that suicide for love is romantic *is* an idea that people have. And the question is obviously, do you want to engage with that? Do you want to address this idea of: is this a romantic play? In some ways, it *feels* like a romantic play, is Shakespeare wanting us to feel this is romantic or does he want us to feel this is actually kind of really problematic that these people are doing this?

Richard: Like, I think, arguably, Shakespeare had no intention of sort of creating discussions on whether or not things are OK, uh, raising awareness about certain kinds of violence when writing these plays. So in that case, we shouldn't really use Shakespeare to teach about those topics. Like Shakespeare's, like, again, arguably, Shakespeare's violence and his plays’ scenes with violence, scenes with certain themes are put there as a dramatic effect and for the structure of the play, and to send maybe a message but maybe not the kind of message we’re talking about here. So in that case we shouldn’t be using Shakespeare to teach about issues of violence when his intent wasn't necessarily to convey the damage of violence or the effects of violence. And also, if we're going to warn about violence in Shakespeare, then you've got to start thinking, do we have to warn about ableism in *Richard III*? which is, well which was Shakespeare’s… doing. He portrayed ableist views which today people will find very offensive, and rightly so. And in that case, if you're going to warn about the violence Shakespeare wrote about, are you gonna warn about the sort of ableism the perhaps other controversial things Shakespeare intentionally put in his plays, and not as a message, but just as a thing of the time, a contemporary, like, social thing that was OK? Like, that today we wouldn't view was OK.

RY: Yeah. Again, I think that sense of historical context has come up a few times. The kind of importance of…the importance of saying that these were attitudes that were OK at the time. But I think, you know, the idea of acknowledging that we don't think in the same way does feel like - yeah, Shakespeare had whatever he was thinking when he wrote the plays. But we, as modern readers, I think what we feel about them matters too. It's not just about going ‘well, whatever Shakespeare did was right, he was a genius’; it’s also about kind of, well, we have to engage with - in some ways, Shakespeare was a great writer, but the same time he was sometimes racist, and he was sometimes sexist, and that was just - everyone at his time was. But I suppose the question of again, how much is this kind of appreciating Shakespeare and how much is it thinking about what does this have to say to us in the modern age?

Sarah: Yeah, I agree, because it’s arguably less about taking away from his intentions when he was writing and using it more as springboard to kind of, especially in less advantaged schools where they don't have that support around certain topics such as, like, our wider curriculum lessons which are kind of beneficial for that. I think it's more keeping that and using it as, like, just a kind of conversation starter, just to briefly go over it, and not taking away from like the historical context or, like, the intent behind it, because obviously Shakespeare wasn't intending for his writing to be used as, like, ethics lessons, but kind of more in a way to use it as kind of lessen the blow and kind of the exposure to difficult topics for years, which, younger years, which just don't understand, like how to maybe like bring that up in a conversation or having an example, even if it wasn't an intention, helps kind of relate to an audience, like, not an audience, relate to like a class more, I think, in a way.

RY: Because as you say, Shakespeare wasn't intending the plays to be kind of used for ethics lessons, but he wasn't really intending us to sit around in the classroom, he wasn't expecting that, wasn't expecting us to study the plays either. Shakespeare would probably been astonished to find that 400 years later, we are all here in a classroom, right now, talking about how to think about what he wrote to entertain the crowds of the day. [pause] I think we’re almost out of time. Are there any final things – is there anything anyone wanted to say that they haven't had a chance to in today's session, that they would like to bring up, about Shakespeare, violence, content warnings, any last points, last issues that we haven't unpacked? I just want to make sure that nothing gets left out as we finish. [pause] Ok, in that case we can finish up with that. Thank you so much for all of you for contributing. I really enjoyed this, it's been a really interesting discussion. Just a couple of things I need to say before we fully finish: just to say hopefully you enjoyed this, hopefully you found it interesting, hopefully nothing that was said has upset you or bothered you in any way. If it has done though, please do speak to somebody at the school, a trusted teacher or a parent or guardian, if there is anything from today's session that is bothering you. Or of course you can come and talk to me if you'd like, you can talk to me as we finish up the session or you've got my email on the information sheet. So just get in touch if you’re unhappy with anything, and there's also a free - you probably know about this - but a free advice and support line for under 18s at ChildLine and you can always contact ChildLine if you want to speak to somebody anonymously. As I say, also, we will keep everything anonymous. We will keep your name out of - um, I don't even know your real names - but we will keep your real names out of any published work from this. One thing also is that if you, after today’s focus group, if you go away and think, ‘actually I don't want to be included in the focus group anymore,’ even though you've participated, you can still withdraw from the group. What you can do at that point is just contact me at my email address, for the next two weeks, you can contact me and say, ‘I would like to have my contributions removed from the transcript’ and we can do that. We can't absolutely guarantee that we can remove everything you said, but we'll certainly have a go, we can go through the transcript and just try to remove your contributions, if there is anything that you’re not comfortable having shared. OK, is that is that okay, alright with everyone? Fantastic and thank you. Just thanks again so much. It's been really useful to us.