Background *In September 2008, a large freshman class gathered on the campus of the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C., to begin their college careers. As happens every September, the university faculty greeted them in a convocation. That year, the highlight of the gathering was a speech delivered by English professor* **Michael Mack.** *Mack began "Why Read Shakespeare?" with a disclosure: as a Shakespeare scholar, he was hardly objective. Still, he noted, the value of reading Shakespeare must, from time to time, be articulated.*

from Why Read Shakespeare?

Argument by Michael Mack

AS YOU READ Note each reason Mack provides to support his central argument that people should read Shakespeare.

If college is a time for asking questions, it also is a time for broadening your interests. Why should Shakespeare be one of those interests that you seek to develop at CUA? The obvious argument to the contrary is that reading Shakespeare is hard work—and not particularly rewarding, at least the first time round. I would like to begin by addressing what I take to be a perfectly honest response to a first reading of Shakespeare, namely "I don't get it; is it really worth the effort?"

Let me try to explain by comparing Shakespeare to music. We
10 all know that some kinds of music are easy on the ears. This is the ear candy that you like the very first time you hear it. And after you've heard it ten thousand times in twenty four hours, it turns into an ear worm that drives you crazy.

There also is music that you don't particularly like the first time you hear it. But, if you give it a chance, it grows on you. And you discover something new about it every time you listen. At a certain point, if you listen enough, you realize that what seemed random is

really better described as "complex." What had been annoying now instead strikes you as appealingly edgy. And what initially seemed weird now looks strangely wonderful. This is the way Shakespeare works. He gives you a serious headache the first time you try to understand him—and the second. But if you stick with him, you can expect a breakthrough, and the excitement and satisfaction of being able to say, "I get it."

The first time you listen to a piece of complex music, you hear but don't hear. Why should it be any surprise, then, that the first time people read Shakespeare they don't get it? What would be surprising—and a genuine cause for concern—would be if someone read Shakespeare and thought they'd understood him.

This phenomenon of people having difficulty understanding Shakespeare is hardly new. It predates by centuries our **truncated** attention spans and our preference for the fast cuts of modern video. It is a problem that the editors of the First Folio[1] addressed in 1623, just seven years after the death of Shakespeare. The editors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, were two of Shakespeare's fellow players and shareholders in the Globe.[2] Addressing the "great variety of readers" of the volume, they wrote:

First Folio: the first published collection of Shakespeare's plays

the Globe: the London theater at which Shakespeare was based

> Read him, therefore; and again and again.
> And if then you do not like him, surely
> you are in some manifest danger, not to
> understand him.

They did not expect readers to understand Shakespeare's works the first time they read them—and that's why they recommend rereading—"again and again." They recognize that Shakespeare is difficult, but they insist that he is worth the effort—and that if someone doesn't like Shakespeare, it's their fault, not his.

A Time for Exploring

The question Heminge and Condell don't answer—and the one I still haven't answered—is what you've understood when you've understood Shakespeare. When you get "it," what did you get?

I'd like to answer this by addressing in particular those who just don't see themselves as, well, the literary type. Some of you out there are thinking, "Reading Shakespeare—that's just not me: I'm just a normal guy, and the simple pleasures are good enough for me. Besides, what would my bowling buddies say?" I can hear others out there thinking, "I'm in a professional school, and I just want to get into my professional studies as quickly as

possible." Still others are thinking, "I much prefer something more scientific—I believe in studying "real" things: fiction is fun to read on summer break, but . . ."

In response to these serious-minded objections to reading Shakespeare, I would like to suggest that what you find in Shakespeare is as serious as the subject matter of your other courses. We think of biology and chemistry, history and politics, psychology and sociology as subjects that are focused on the real world. Well, as with these subjects, Shakespeare offers us a lens on the real world in which we live.

In Shakespeare's time, great books were thought of as mirrors. When you read a great book, the idea is, you are looking into a mirror—a pretty special mirror, one that reflects the world in a way that allows us to see its true nature. What is more, as we hold the volume of Shakespeare in front of us, we see that it reflects not only the world around us, but also ourselves. What is it that we find in Shakespeare? Nothing less than ourselves and the world—certainly worthy subjects to study in college.

Indeed, some of Shakespeare's **contemporaries** justified the seriousness of literary fictions by pointing out that Christ Himself used them. Take the parable of the prodigal son:[3] in this fiction you learn about sin and forgiveness. And you also learn about yourself. You realize that the story is about you—you are the prodigal son. The problem is that you are not only the prodigal son but also the resentful, self-righteous older brother. As you interpret the

parable of the prodigal son: a New Testament story about a father who celebrates the return of a son who has squandered his birthright.

> **What is it that we find in Shakespeare? Nothing less than ourselves and the world.**

parable, you find that it interprets you—and in multiple ways. As you discover the true meaning of the parable you discover the truth about yourself.

In the case of *Macbeth*, we have a supreme reflection of ambition. But what makes the play terrifying is not that Macbeth looks like a fascist dictator[4]—a popular staging these days—but because he looks like us. If you don't see your own overreaching in the **phantasmagoric** restless ecstasy of Macbeth, you need to read again. Either you don't understand the true nature of Macbeth's ambition or you don't know yourself. Or, quite possibly, both.

fascist dictator: authoritarian ruler of an oppressive, nationalistic government.

What we see in these examples is a fairly complex interplay of life and literature. Literature teaches you about life, and the better you understand literature, the better you understand life. It also is true, though, that the more you know about life, the better equipped you are to understand what you find in literature. This two-way mirroring means that learning about literature and learning about life go hand in hand. And it means that finding beauty and meaning in Shakespeare is a sort of proving ground for finding beauty and meaning in life.

Indeed, as you learn to read Shakespeare, you are learning to read the world. As you interpret Shakespeare's characters, you are practicing figuring out life's characters. Struggling with the complexities involved in interpreting Shakespeare is a superb preparation for struggling with the complexities of life. Shakespeare offers a world of **vicarious** experience—a virtual reality, a sort of

flight simulator—that gives you a great advantage when it comes time to venture out into the real world.

So Shakespeare isn't just for literary types, he is for anyone who is interested in navigating the real world. . . .

There is Knowledge and there is Knowledge

As I conclude, I would like to remind you that college isn't just about your head, it's also about the heart. And, returning to Shakespeare, I can say that he can be particularly helpful in understanding the heart. Read Shakespeare and spare yourself a world of bad dates.

Shakespeare shows how the head and the heart need each other. One of the most important things for you to come to understand is your own emotional life. Why do you feel the way you do? Have other people felt this way before? What have they done about it, and how has it turned out?

By reading about the heart, your head and heart become more fully integrated. This integrity, when you understand what you feel and you hear with an understanding heart, is the mark of an educated person. . . .

So, again, "Why read Shakespeare?" I've proposed a link between getting to know Shakespeare and getting to know the world and ourselves. I encourage you to test out this hypothesis and to see if in becoming better at the art of reading Shakespeare, you become better at the art of living—to see if through reading Shakespeare you become someone better equipped to find happiness in life, someone who more highly values what is truly valuable in life.

Review Mack's argument:

"Why Read Shakespeare?" is an **argument** in which the author attempts to persuade an audience to agree with his point of view. Michael Mack states a **claim,** or thesis, and supports it with valid reasoning and relevant evidence. He also makes these rhetorical choices, which appeal directly to his audience of college freshmen.

- The author directly addresses his audience's **potential concerns.** "Some of you out there are thinking, 'Reading Shakespeare—that's just not me: I'm just a normal guy, and the simple pleasures are good enough for me. Besides, what would my bowling buddies say?'" How might this question appeal to his audience?
- The author uses **comparisons** that his audience will relate to. He begins the speech by comparing Shakespeare to music. What assumption is the author making about his audience by using this comparison?
- The author appeals directly to the audience's **self-interest.** He explains that reading Shakespeare can ultimately help students understand matters of the heart: "Read Shakespeare and spare yourself a world of bad dates."

Consider the following questions in order to review the article:

- **Identify** Why did Shakespeare's contemporaries recommend rereading his works, and what might this information suggest to current readers?
- **Infer** Mack uses the term "ear candy" in line 11. What does he mean by this term? How might the term appeal to his audience?
- **Cite Evidence** What evidence does the author provide to support the claim that Shakespeare's works reflect the world and ourselves?
- **Analyze** The author concludes the speech with a kind of challenge to his audience. Review lines 125–132, and then explain why he included this content.

Look up the definitions of the bolded vocabulary in the article, and review their meanings in context.

These questions are intended for your thoughtful review — not as prompts to actual written responses.