

Interrogating representations of transgressive women: Using critical information literacy and comic books in the Shakespeare classroom

Susanne F. Paterson AND Carolyn White Gamtso

How can instructors and librarians collaborate to provide the interpretive scaffolds for students to critically engage with visual primary materials? The authors, an English faculty member and a faculty instruction librarian at the University of New Hampshire at Manchester (UNH Manchester), used graphic fiction as the textual basis of information literacy (IL) instruction, encouraging students to interpret primary and secondary sources using visual literacy heuristics and critical inquiry skills. Their student-centered, inquiry-based IL session for a Capstone Shakespearean Adaptations course focused on critical thinking and research question design. Using woodcuts from primary historical texts and images from contemporary graphic fiction adaptations of *Macbeth*, the instructors decentralized the classroom, empowering students to ask probing questions about illustrations of witches in early modern English source materials. Students used their questions to explore interpretations of visual depictions of powerful women in historical primary texts and contemporary graphic adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Guided by the instructors, students decoded images using the metadiscourse of graphic fiction; generated questions to inform their own inquiry into the topic; applied their IL skills to new texts; and interrogated the biases of received narratives about women who transgress societal norms and expectations, both in the early modern period and in the contemporary world.

The authors, an English faculty member and a faculty instruction librarian at UNH Manchester, built on the College's focus on hands-on education and its ethos of cross-disciplinary collaboration by partnering to teach library research and IL skills through embedded, interactive workshops in classes ranging from First-Year Writing¹ through English Capstone special topics courses.² When the faculty member incorporated graphic novels and visual literacy techniques into her literature courses, she and the librarian created IL sessions focused on primary visual images as lenses into the historical events and social contexts of the course texts. Notably, they designed a lesson for an upper-level Crime Fiction course in which students used library databases to locate primary newspaper articles about the 1886 London Whitechapel Murders. Students then discussed how 19th-century newspaper illustrations reflected prevalent biases against sex workers, immigrants and other members of London's perceived underclass.³ When the faculty member invited the librarian to her Senior Capstone Shakespearean Adaptations course, they embraced the opportunity to ask students to investigate early modern images of women considered outcasts or threats by their contemporaries.

Course content and graphic fiction

In this course, students study four Shakespeare plays: *The taming of the shrew*; *Othello*; *Macbeth*; and *The tempest*, each of which is examined in relation to at least three adaptations, consisting of plays, films and graphic fiction. Because it is a Capstone course, particular attention is paid to refining students' research and

1. Susanne F. Paterson and Carolyn White Gamtso, 'Guiding students from consuming information to creating knowledge: a freshman english library instruction collaboration,' *Communications in information literacy* 5, no. 2 (2011): 117–26, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2012.5.2.107>.
2. Susanne F. Paterson and Carolyn White Gamtso, 'Information literacy instruction in an English capstone course: a study of student confidence, perception, and practice,' *Journal of academic librarianship* 43, no. 2 (2017): 143–155, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2016.11.005>.
3. Susanne F. Paterson and Carolyn White Gamtso, 'Excavating visual texts: information literacy, critical thinking, and the graphic novel in the crime fiction classroom,' in *Comics and*

critical thinking skills. Students are required to submit a research project examining a particular theme in the original Shakespeare play and one of the adaptations, link this theme to the English early modern period through primary and secondary sources and evaluate the effectiveness of the adaptation in communicating this theme in comparison to its original. It was therefore vital to collaborate with the librarian to design an IL session which prepared students to undertake research in the early modern period and empowered them to ask questions about their research and about their own conceptions of what they were discovering as part of this research. The IL session took place in the unit on *Macbeth*, which was organized around themes of transgressive female behavior and focused on three genres of adaptations: an early modern historical source ('a pre-adaptation'); two films; and graphic fiction versions of the play.

It was important to incorporate graphic fiction into the course, as it supports students when they navigate the linguistic and conceptual complexities of Shakespeare's plays. As Marion Perret observes,

High-school and college students more accustomed to watching television than to reading often find Elizabethan English dauntingly obscure, but comic books speak visually. A well-chosen graphic version can, with the teacher's help, assist eye-oriented students not only in understanding the plot but also in becoming more sensitive to words, nuances of character, and patterns of dramatic structure.⁴

Graphic fiction adaptations also are key in fostering students' interpretive skills. Because the emphasis is on understanding Shakespeare's words, having those words presented graphically, supported by visual images, provides students with interpretive tools to decode meaning.⁵ Such works can also create meaning which may not be evident in the text itself, as

[h]igh quality visuals do not simply illustrate the action contained in the text; they also provide for much richer understandings than the text alone can provide.⁶

A further impetus for including graphic fiction in the course is that, although students generally are visually literate, they are not necessarily familiar with talking about, analyzing and explaining how visual language works, hence the necessity to provide them with heuristics to do so.⁷ Readings from Scott McCloud's *Understanding comics*⁸ and Will Eisner's *Comics and sequential art*,⁹ as well as a framework adapted from the latter, would become the backbone to students' analytical engagement with the graphic fiction adaptations of *Macbeth*, giving them the vocabulary to articulate their analyses in a coherent and consistent way.

Planning the information literacy session

The librarian and the faculty member envisioned the course-embedded IL session as an interactive workshop to help students develop research questions prior to investigating their own paper topics, using primary source images to weave visual literacy into the workshop. Because students had just finished reading Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and several of its graphic novel adaptations, the authors planned to ask students to consider how a selected image related to female witches (a major theme in the play) reflected early modern attitudes toward gender and transgression. The choice of this image was shaped by two considerations: first, it was important for students to understand that the population of early modern England had modest to low levels of literacy, depending in large part on gender and profession;¹⁰ however, they would have been *visually* literate, understanding their world through images and performance, so analysis of a graphic image would emphasize this type of literacy. Second, the topic of witches necessitated an analysis of prevailing power structures in England during the early modern period. Straveva notes,

Court records and the Elizabethan pamphlet literature building on them provide numerous reminders that witches were not just unfortunate victims or helpless scapegoats for cultural anxieties, created by a changing social and belief system. These sources describe women who, once identified as witches, contributed to a frightful dialectic of fighting words and acts.¹¹

critical librarianship: reframing the narrative in academic libraries, ed. Olivia Piepmeier and Stephanie Grimm (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2019), 275–289.

4. Marion D. Perret, 'More than child's play: approaching *Hamlet* through comic books,' in *Approaches to teaching Hamlet*, ed. Bernice W. Kliman, (New York, NY: Modern Language Association, 2001), 161.

5. Marion D. Perret, 'Not just condensation: how comic books interpret Shakespeare,' *College literature* 31, no. 4 (2004): 88.

6. Paula Woolf and Danielle Kleijwegt, 'Interpreting graphic versions of Shakespeare's plays,' *The English journal* 101 no. 5 (2012): 36.

7. Gregoire, Stafford, 'Comics and the city: writing and the new American student,' in *Lessons drawn: essays on the pedagogy of comics and graphic novels*, ed. David D. Seelow, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2019), 40.

8. Scott McCloud, 'Chapter 5: living in line' and 'Chapter 6: show and tell,' in *Understanding comics*, (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1994), 118–137, 138–161.

9. Will Eisner, *Comics and sequential art*, (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 13–24, 100–121.

10. David Cressy, 'Levels of illiteracy in England, 1530–1730,' *The historical journal* 20, no. 1 (1977): 9.

11. Kirilka Stavreva, *Words like daggers: violent female speech in early modern England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 73, JSTOR.

The librarian and teacher encouraged students to make meaning out of the primary source image by analyzing the prevailing prejudices and power structures regarding 'problematic' women during a particular historical moment and by reflecting upon how this visual representation re-imposed the contemporary social status quo. By asking students to consider 'the social, political, and cultural forces that shape and filter information',¹² the colleagues thereby infused the workshop with a critical IL perspective.

Critical information literacy

Critical IL is grounded in the theory and praxis of critical pedagogy, an approach to teaching and learning 'that positions education as a catalyst for social justice'.¹³ Critical IL invites learners to interrogate the ways in which structural social inequities influence the creation, dissemination and consumption of information; it 'teaches analysis and critiquing skills around the relationships between texts, language, and power'.¹⁴ To inspire students to engage in such analysis, educators must cede control in the classroom by enabling students to drive the inquiry and the discussion. Critical IL calls for a

de-centralization of authority [so] that a level playing field is created where students are encouraged to express their own thoughts and come to their own conclusions.¹⁵

The faculty member and librarian envisioned a lesson plan that would invite students to determine the questions that would be asked and to direct the research process. The librarian identified the Right Question Institute's (<https://rightquestion.org/>) Question Formulation Technique (QFT) (<https://rightquestion.org/what-is-the-qft/>) as an ideal heuristic for achieving these goals.

The question formulation technique (QFT)

The Right Question Institute (RQI) is a non-profit centered on teaching self-advocacy to people from marginalized groups so they can become informed and engaged citizens.¹⁶ Key to such democratic participation is asking questions, 'a foundational skill, essential for thinking, learning, and taking effective action'.¹⁷ Developed by Daniel Rothstein and Luz Sanatana of RQI, the QFT teaches students

how to generate their own questions, improve and work with their questions, and strategize on how to use their questions as a part of a structured active learning experience.¹⁸

It has been applied in diverse community and academic settings, from K-12 to higher education and beyond.¹⁹

The QFT is a tightly ordered process in which students are presented with a Question Focus (a proposition, a picture, a document, etc.) related to the lesson content. The Question Focus (QFocus) should be new to the students, and it cannot be a question itself.²⁰ The discussion facilitators ask students to brainstorm questions about the QFocus using the following rules:

- 1) Ask as many questions as you can.
- 2) Do not stop to judge, discuss, or answer any questions.
- 3) Write down every question exactly as stated.
- 4) Change any statement to a question.²¹

Rothstein, Santana and Minigan note that this step-by-step process ensures that students are comfortable with asking any and all questions, thus engaging in the 'divergent thinking' essential to the first step of intellectual inquiry.²²

Students then hone their list by identifying which questions are closed (yes-or-no answer) and which are open (deeper explanation needed for a response); rewriting one closed question to open and vice versa; selecting the questions they consider most important given the classroom task or research need (convergent thinking); and deciding next steps for further exploration. The process ends with a metacognitive exercise in which students reflect upon what they learned through the lesson.²³ The authors determined that the QFT would be

12. Jessica Critten, 'Ideology and critical self-reflection in information literacy instruction,' *Communications in information literacy* 9, no. 2 (2015): 146, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2015.9.2.191>.

13. Eamon Tewell, 'A decade of critical information literacy: a review of the literature,' *Communications in information literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 26, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2015.9.1.174>.

14. Lauren Smith, 'Towards a model of critical information literacy instruction for the development of political agency,' *Journal of information literacy* 7, no. 2 (2013): 15, <https://doi.org/10.11645/7.2.1809>.

15. Michelle Reale, 'Critical pedagogy in the classroom: library instruction that gives voice to students and builds a community of scholars,' *Journal of library innovation* 3, no. 2 (2012): 86.

16. Luz Santana, 'Learning to ask questions: a pathway to and through college for students in low-income communities,' *About campus* 20, no. 4 (2015): 26–29, <https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.21203>.

17. Santana, 'Learning to ask questions,' 27.

18. Andrew P. Minigan, Sarah Westbrook, Dan Rothstein, and Luz Santana, 'Stimulating and sustaining inquiry with students' questions,' *Social education* 81, no. 5 (2017): 270.

19. Minigan, Westbrook, Rothstein, Santana, 'Stimulating and sustaining inquiry with students' questions,' 270.

20. Minigan, Westbrook, Rothstein, Santana, 'Stimulating and sustaining inquiry with students' questions,' 270.

21. Dan Rothstein, Luz Santana, and Andrew P. Minigan, 'Making questions flow,' *Educational leadership* 73, no. 1 (2015): 70.

22. Dan Rothstein, Luz Santana, and Andrew P. Minigan, 'Making questions flow,' 70.

23. Minigan, Westbrook, Rothstein, Santana, 'Stimulating and sustaining inquiry with students' questions,' 270.

an effective tool for introducing students to a primary source image as the QFocus, to guide them in formulating questions about the image, to empower them to determine which questions would be explored in class and to reflect upon what they learned through the process of inquiry and research.

Preparing for the Information Literacy Session

In preparation for the IL session, the authors met to select the QFocus for the workshop. The authors realized that the QFT activity would be more effective if students devised questions about an unfamiliar and historically distant illustration that would challenge them to interpret coded visual messages and to interrogate the social and cultural norms at play therein. The authors selected as the QFocus a woodcut image of the seventeenth-century English self-proclaimed 'witchfinder' Matthew Hopkins, who from 1645-46 condemned to death many victims for purported supernatural activities (Figure 1).²⁴ The authors hoped that students would be intrigued by the peculiar and unsettling configuration of a standing male, two seated women and various named animals, and that their interest in the strange scenario would elicit a variety of questions and potential research avenues.

24. 'Matthew Hopkins,' *Encyclopedia of occultism and parapsychology*, 2001, Gale in Context: Biography.



Fig. 1. Unknown artist, *Matthew Hopkins*, woodcut, 1647, © National Portrait Gallery, London, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw134815/Matthew-Hopkins>.

Information literacy session preactivities

Prior to the librarian's IL visit, students read *Macbeth*; a section from the Tudor historian Raphael Holinshed's *The chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (source material for Shakespeare's play);²⁵ two chapters from McCloud's

25. Raphael Holinshed, *The firste volume of the chronicles of Englande, Scotlande, and Irelande* [1577], in *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts*, ed. William C. Carroll (New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 135–150.

Understanding comics, and chapters on Text, Imagery, Timing, The Frame and Expressive Anatomy from Eisner's *Comics and sequential art* to serve as an introduction to the analysis of graphic fiction; and a graphic fiction adaptation of *Macbeth*.²⁶ For homework, students applied Eisner's categories to a chosen panel from the adaptation, determining how effectively the original had been adapted.

The faculty member delivered a PowerPoint in class which applied Eisner's categories to panels from a variety of other graphic fiction adaptations of *Macbeth*, all of which depicted the same scene from the play, the famous 'Is this a dagger which I see before me' soliloquy (2.1.34-65).²⁷ The passage was chosen because it exemplifies one of the strengths of graphic fiction: the externalization of internal, imaginative processes in visual form. Scott McCloud highlights this process when discussing how graphic fiction uses visual techniques, such as expressionism and symbolism, to describe human emotion, noting,

when a story hinges more upon characterization than cold plot, there may not be a lot to show externally—but the landscape of the characters' minds can be quite a sight.²⁸

In this passage, Macbeth is attempting to determine whether what he is experiencing is an hallucination or is real; at the same time as the audience witnesses his psychological struggle become manifest.

Panels from the different graphic fiction adaptations of the soliloquy were selected to demonstrate Eisner's categories of Text, Imagery, Timing, The Frame and Expressive Anatomy, and students analyzed them using this heuristic. For example, students examined how the imagery of the wolf was being used to show Macbeth's gradually emerging murderous compulsion (Figure 2).²⁹

Discussion centered on the way the wolves swirled around Macbeth and seemed to emerge from him or were meshed with him, showing his descent into a dehumanized predatory animal.

While discussing Eisner's concept of text, the class analyzed the panel sequence depicted in Figure 3.³⁰

The angular nature of the 'Ding Dong' text was immediately noted by students, and a discussion arose about how the shape of the letters might communicate the actual sound of the bell, emphasizing the overall sense of menace. There were also comments made about how the sharpness of the text echoed the shape of the dagger and the nails and lips of Lady Macbeth in the surrounding panels, demonstrating her dangerous, transgressive power, and providing a cohesive visual representation of the imminent danger to King Duncan.

Building on this grammar and analytical framework, and in order to help students navigate visual language beyond the graphic fiction adaptations to primary

26. John McDonald, Jon Haward, Nigel Dobbyn, and Gary Erskine, *Macbeth: the graphic novel, original text version*, (Towcester, UK: Classical Comics, 2008).

27. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth: texts and contexts*, 23–111.

28. Scott McCloud, *Understanding comics*, 132.

29. Ken Hoshine, *No fear Shakespeare graphic novels: Macbeth*, (New York, NY: Spark Publishing, 2008), 49.

30. Adam Sexton, Eve Grandt, and Candice Chow, *Shakespeare's Macbeth: the manga edition*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, 2008), 48.



Fig. 2. Ken Hoshine, *No fear Shakespeare graphic novels: Macbeth*, 49.
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Fig. 3. Adam Sexton, Eve Grandt, Candice Chow, *Shakespeare's Macbeth: The manga edition*, 48. Used with permission of Sexton, Grandt, and Chow.

sources and to think about the cultural ramifications of these images, (including the images an early modern audience would have seen on the stage and in their day-to-day life), the faculty member and librarian developed an IL session which placed students at the center of their learning and discovery experience, helping them devise their own research questions based on what they were *seeing*.

The information literacy session

Generating questions

The librarian began the in-class IL workshop by describing the QFT process to the students and assuring them that all questions they might ask about the QFocus were valid and worthy of exploration. She then showed them the image of Matthew Hopkins (Figure 1) and asked them to write down all their questions on worksheets she provided at the beginning of the session. After the initial brainstorming, the librarian led a discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of closed and open-ended questions, including the uses of each kind of question for a research project. She asked the students to identify the different types of questions from their lists and to write one closed-ended question to an open-ended question, and contrariwise. Once the students had revised their questions, the librarian asked them to share their questions with the class while the faculty member wrote them on the whiteboard.

Prioritizing questions

After generating queries about the image, students reviewed the list on the board, chose the ones they wanted to explore and articulated why they made those selections. The questions the students prioritized fit into three overarching themes: the figures/personages in the illustration, the situation portrayed and the composition of the image itself. Table 1 presents these themes with the associated questions the students highlighted as being most important for their inquiry into the image.

Table 1. Thematic arrangement of students’ prioritized questions about the QFocus.

Figures	Situation	Image
Who is Matthew Hopkins?	What is happening in the picture?	What is denoted by the triangular and hierarchical positioning of the figures?
What is a <i>Witch Finder General</i> ?	What are the meanings of the statements in the speech bubbles?	Why is the man standing while the women are seated?
Who are the women?	What are the meanings of the animals’ names?	
What is the significance of the animals?		

Creating an action plan

Once the students had selected the questions considered essential for understanding the image, the librarian helped them strategize the next steps in the inquiry process by posing the following questions:

- 1) What do we need to *know* to move forward with our exploration?
- 2) What do we need to *do* to gain that information or knowledge?

The students determined that they needed to learn more about the people portrayed in the image and about the historical context of the woodcut (*know*), and that they could gain that knowledge by exploring the library’s catalog and databases using keywords derived from the questions (*do*). The librarian then facilitated a brief workshop in the library’s federated search box, where a query for ‘Matthew Hopkins AND witch*’ returned full-text biographical encyclopedia entries, primary source texts, e-books and journal articles on the topic of the ‘witchfinder,’ his society and his victims (Figure 4).

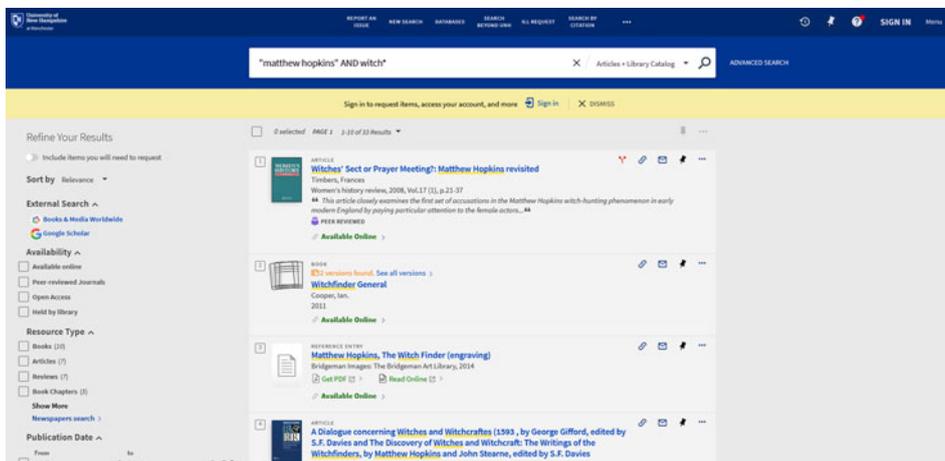


Fig. 4. The first page of results of a federated library search in Ex Libris’ Primo for ‘Matthew Hopkins.’

The students were drawn to a scholarly article by Frances Timbers that offered an historical analysis of Hopkins' witch hunts through a feminist lens (Figure 5).³¹ Together the class discussed how the article provided a critique of the misogynistic attitudes that pervaded early modern discourses about non-conforming women.

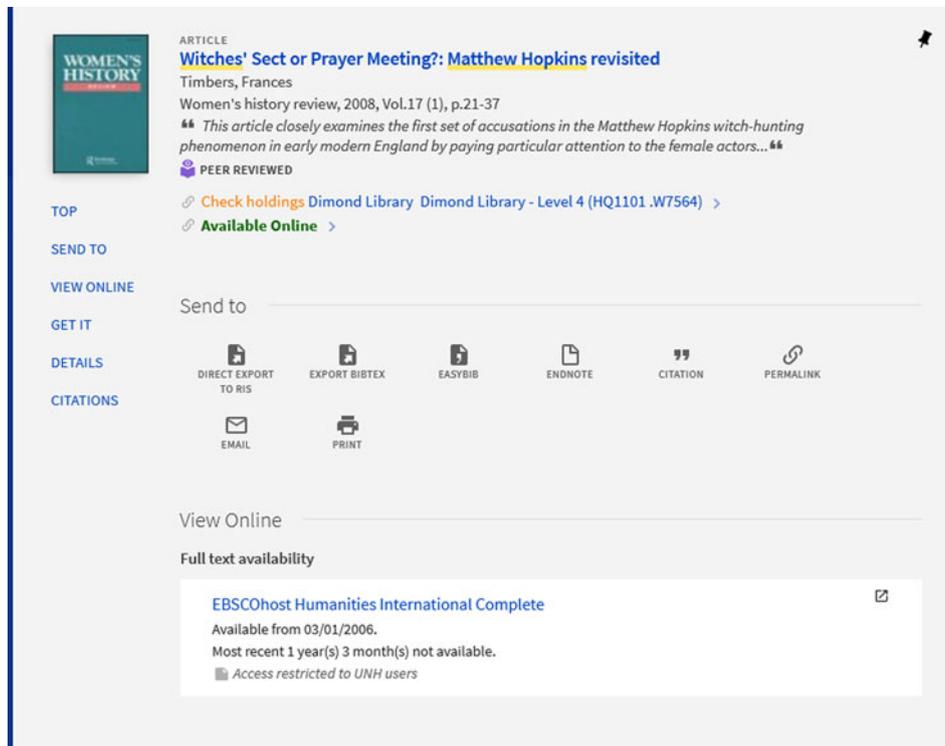


Fig. 5. Ex Libris' Primo item record for scholarly article about Matthew Hopkins' witch hunts through a feminist perspective.

Application

After the IL session concluded, it was important for the faculty member to build on the students' visual literacy skills and critical inquiry experience. The class returned to Holinshed's *Chronicles*, beginning with the most famous woodcut in the work (Figure 6). Though most of the woodcuts were commissioned for the book, they were reused at different points in the text, suggesting that there was a more fluid understanding of the relationship between image and narrative, character and words. This particular woodcut, however, was only used once,³² thus the image clearly carried a visual and narrative potency which needed to be explored. Using the QFT process again with the students, the faculty member encouraged students to report any questions they had with the image, without judgement, and to speculate on possible answers to the questions. These inquiries yielded comments about the costumes of the women—how they appeared wealthy and of high status and how their clothes (and those of Macbeth and Banquo) seemed contemporary rather than Medieval; their positioning in the image—men on one side, women on the other, a tree acting as a divider (one student noted that the division could signify the difference between reality on one side and imagination/fantasy on the other); their varied ages—young, middle-aged and elderly; and how they did not look like the description Banquo provides in the play:

What are these,
So withered and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th'inhabitants o' th' earth
[...]
You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so. (1.3.39-42, 45-47)

31. Frances Timbers, 'Witches' sect or prayer meeting?: Matthew Hopkins revisited,' *Women's history review* 17, no. 1 (2008): 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020701447558>.

32. British Library. 'Holinshed's chronicles, 1577.' Accessed April 2, 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/holinsheds-chronicles-1577>.



Fig. 6. Unknown artist, 'Macbeth, Banquo, and the Three weird sisters,' woodcut, 1577, from *The firste volume of the chronicles of Englande, Scotlande, and Irelande*, British Library, London, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/holinsheds-chronicles-1577>

The value of entering into a primary text—a 'pre-adaptation' of Shakespeare's play—using students' developing visual literacy skills coupled with the QFT inquiry model became clear in the discussion of this particular woodcut. Students felt empowered to ask questions, regardless of their relevance or importance. Pivotal to a meaningful and robust research process is the ability to ask questions based on the evidence that lies before the researcher's eyes, and to then cue the research process from there.

Reflection

In an end-of-semester survey, student respondents indicated that the QFT workshop helped them jumpstart their own academic investigations by providing an effective heuristic for developing researchable questions and conducting exploratory research. As one student noted:

[f]rom the outset, the research process can be daunting due to its initially directionless nature. The QFT workshop provided a handy bit of structure with its procedure.

Another recognized the technique's utility in guiding researchers from the divergent thinking of the initial brainstorm to the convergent thinking of clarifying and narrowing the topic, observing that they applied the skills honed through the QFT in course assignments and projects:

Developing guided questions and then gradually narrowing their focus verbalized a procedure I had already implemented in my studies. I was undoubtedly more conscious and directed in my readings, sourcing the course texts for general research topics and then narrowing that focus as my understanding of the work's themes became more pointed.

One student respondent indicated that the QFT could be beneficial in many academic settings, suggesting to the authors that

[i]ts implementation would be better realized with multiple research assignments . . . That way, students could really get a handle on how the procedure works in various scenarios.

Based on student feedback and their own experiences, the librarian and faculty member implemented a similar IL approach the following semester in the latter's

upper-division Shakespeare course, even though the content did not include graphic fiction. The value of visual literacy in fostering critical thinking when conducting primary and secondary research was evident, particularly in the context of teaching texts (such as plays or films) which rely on visual interpretation. The procedure followed the same QFT scenario, this time coupled with a woodcut depicting a 'shrew' to be analyzed after students had read *The taming of the shrew*. When students have a stake in their own research practice; when they are motivated to analyze a visual text which is engaging and thought-provoking; when this text is meaningfully tied to course content; and when the means of analyzing the text (QFT) open up a series of pathways to robust research, the experience and process speak clearly to the benefits of including such IL presentations across the curriculum, particularly (but not exclusively) when the course content includes graphic fiction.

Susanne F. Paterson
Associate Professor of English
University of New Hampshire at Manchester
88 Commercial Street
Manchester
New Hampshire 03101
USA
Email: susanne.paterson@unh.edu

Carolyn White Gamtso
Associate Professor/Library Director
University of New Hampshire at Manchester
88 Commercial Street
Manchester
New Hampshire 03101
USA
Email: carolyn.gamtso@unh.edu