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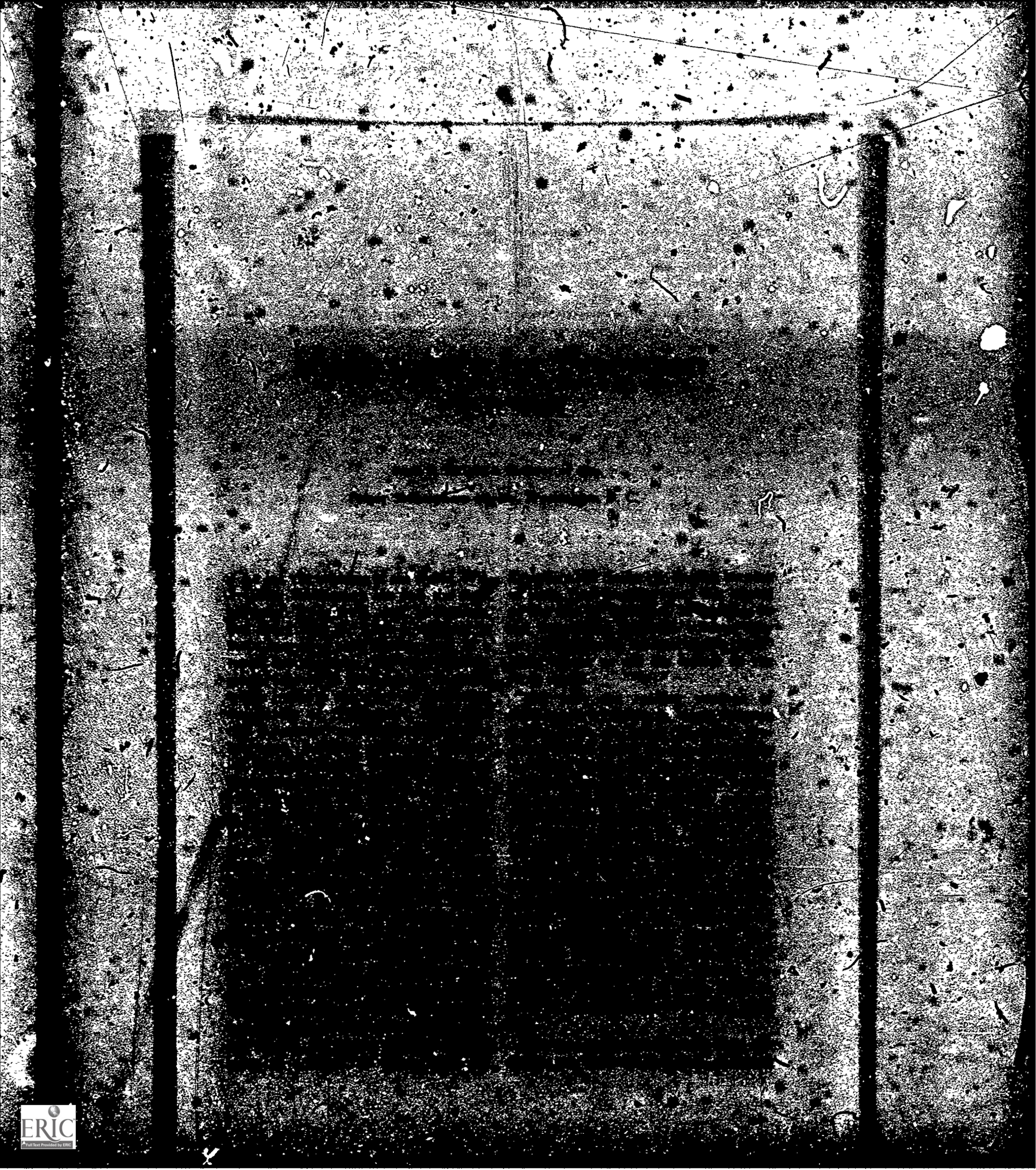
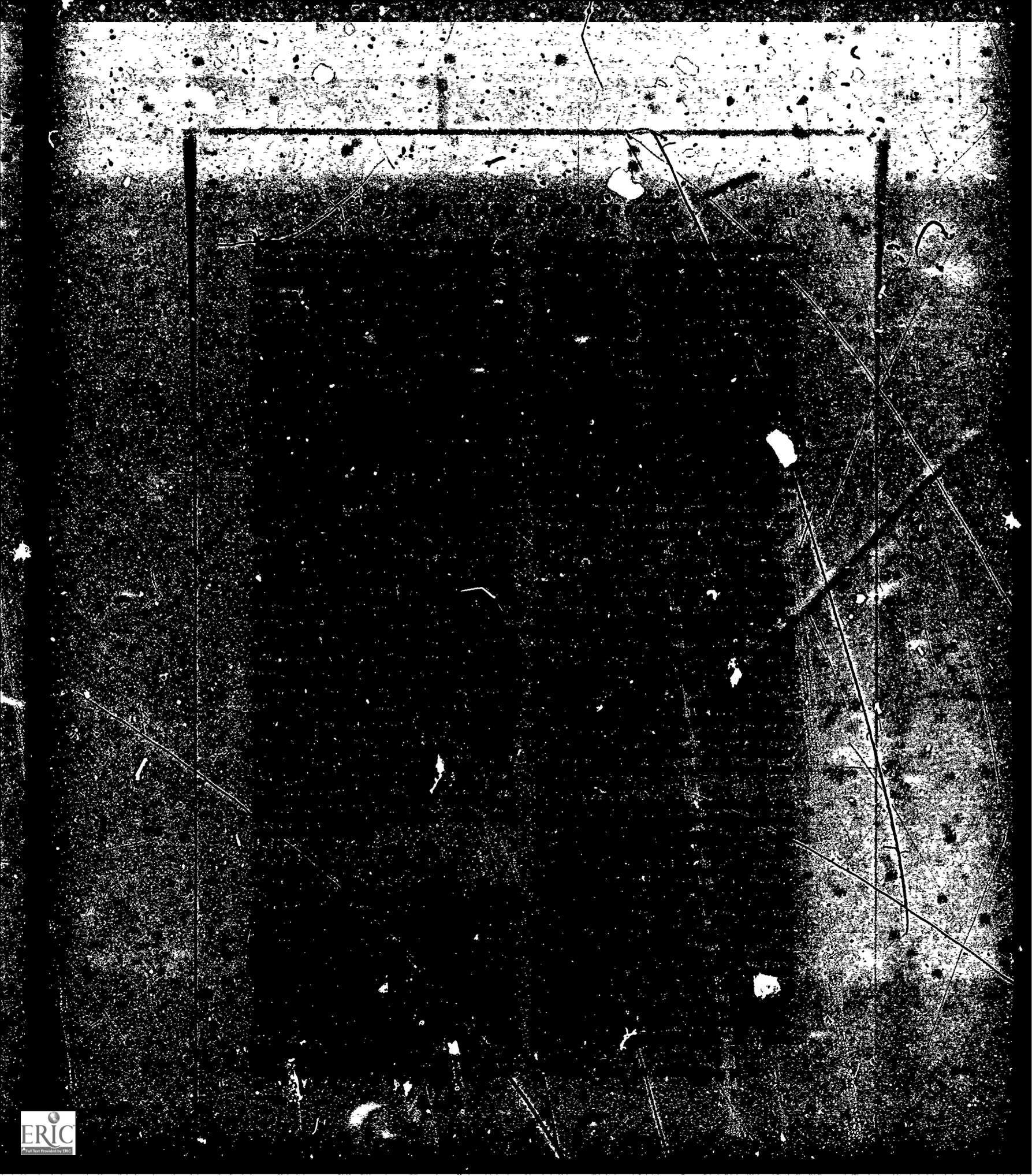
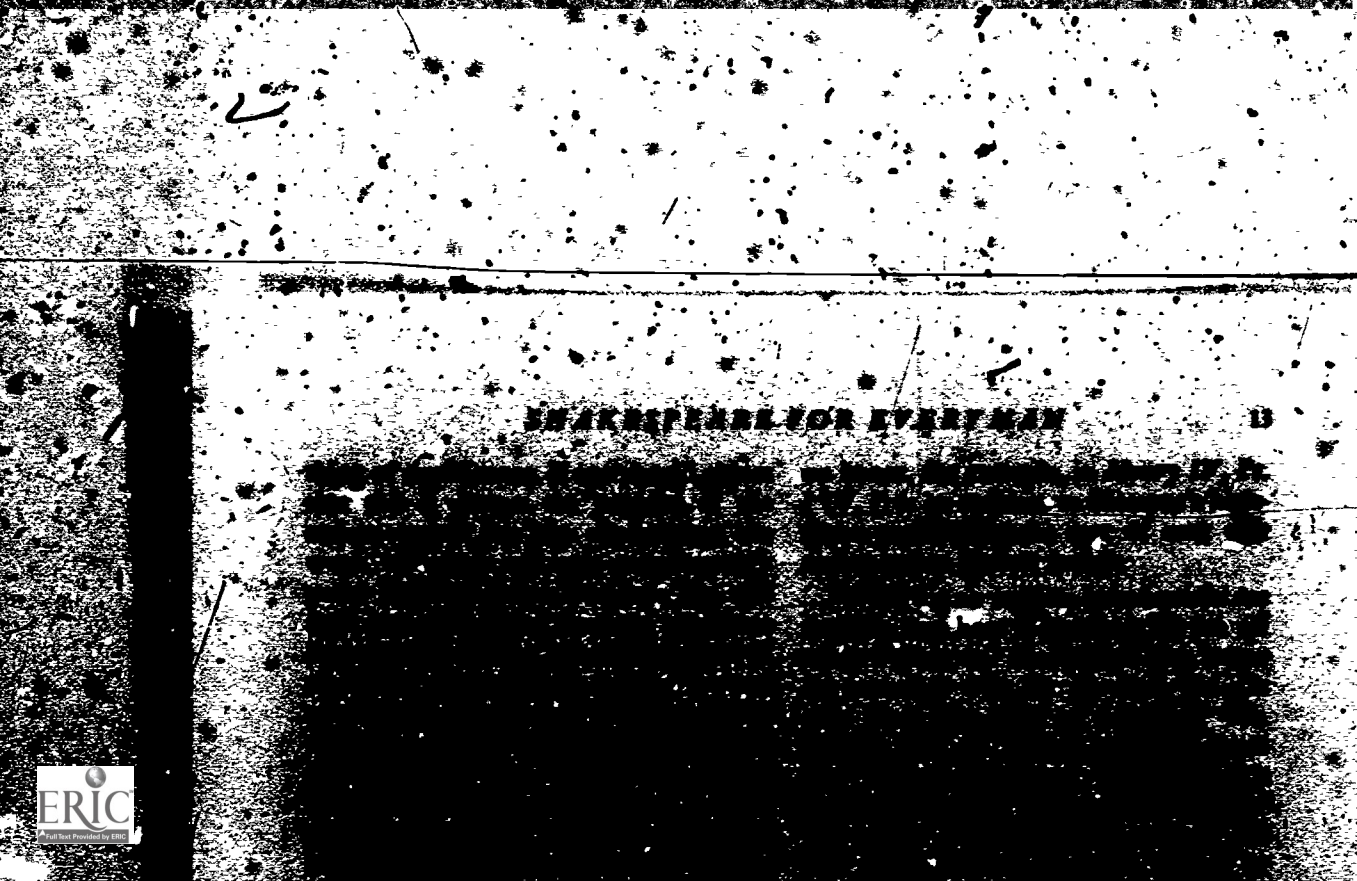
SHAKESPEARE IN SCHOOL AND COLLEGE



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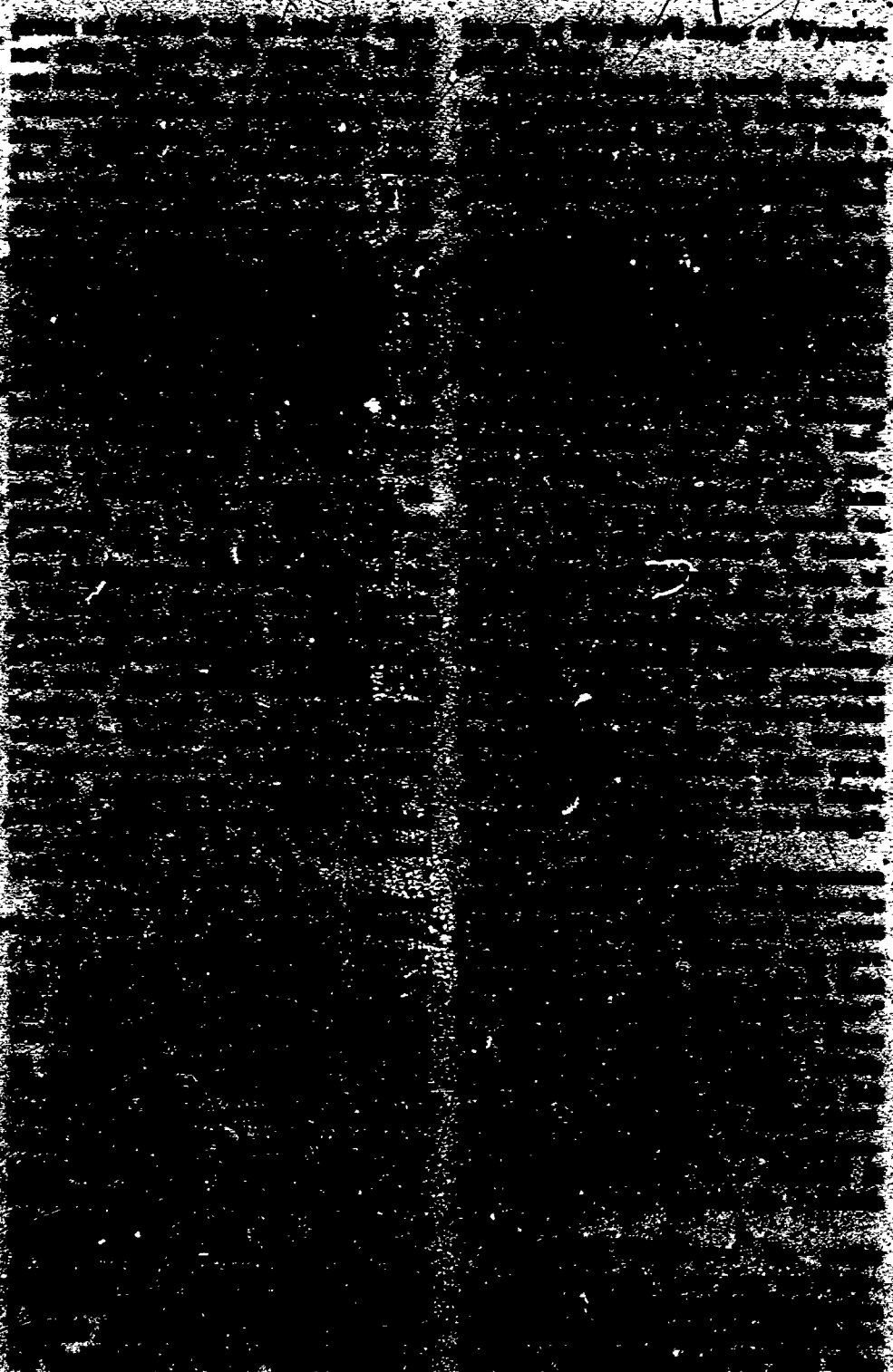
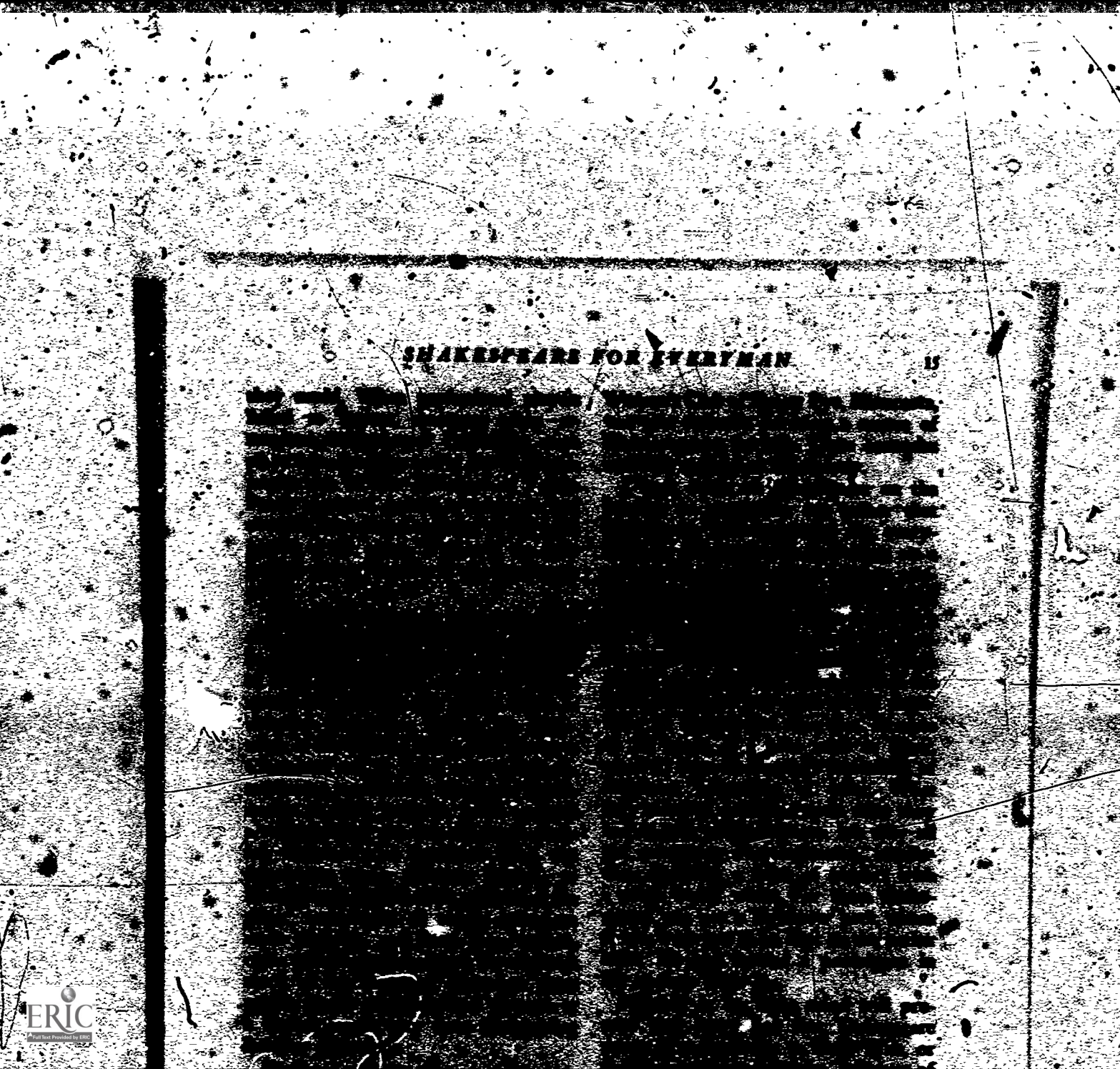
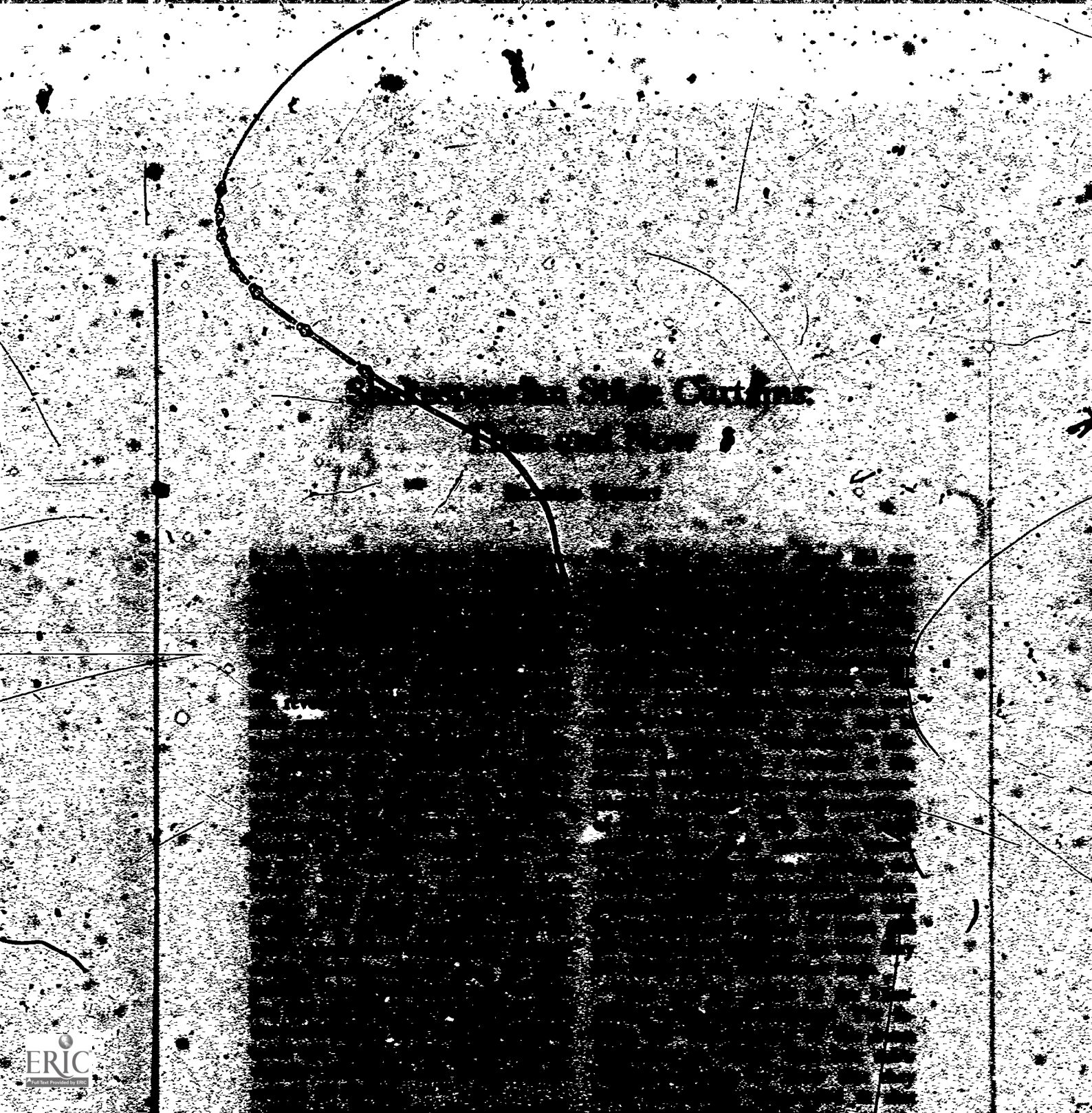
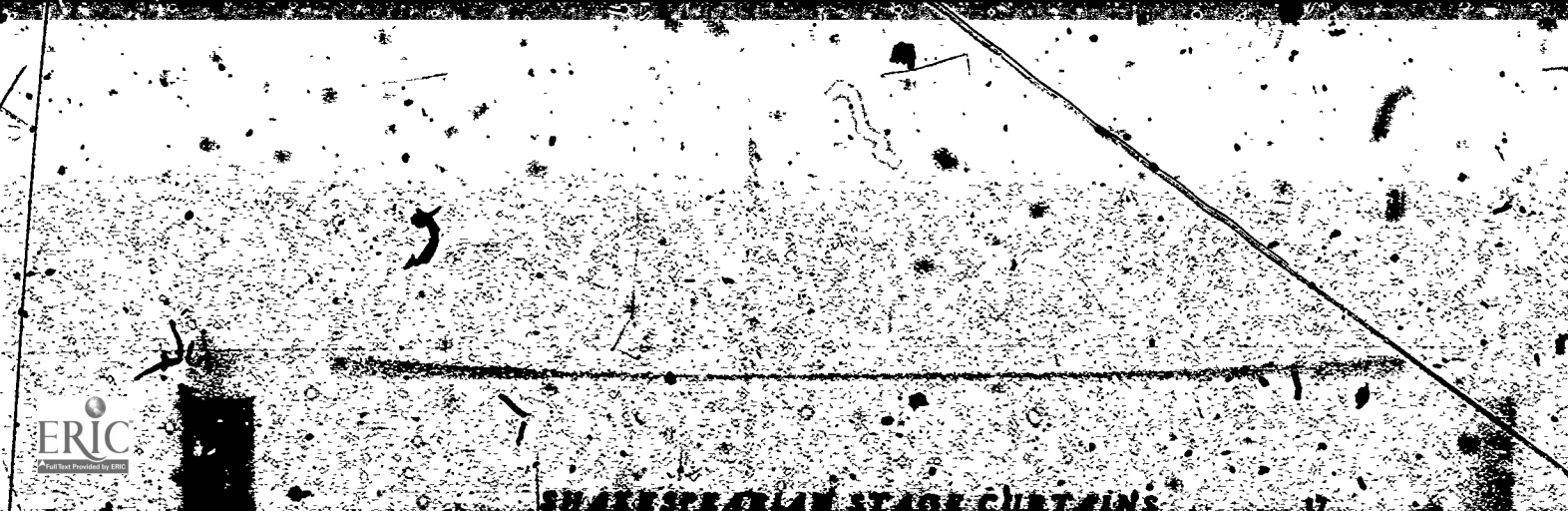
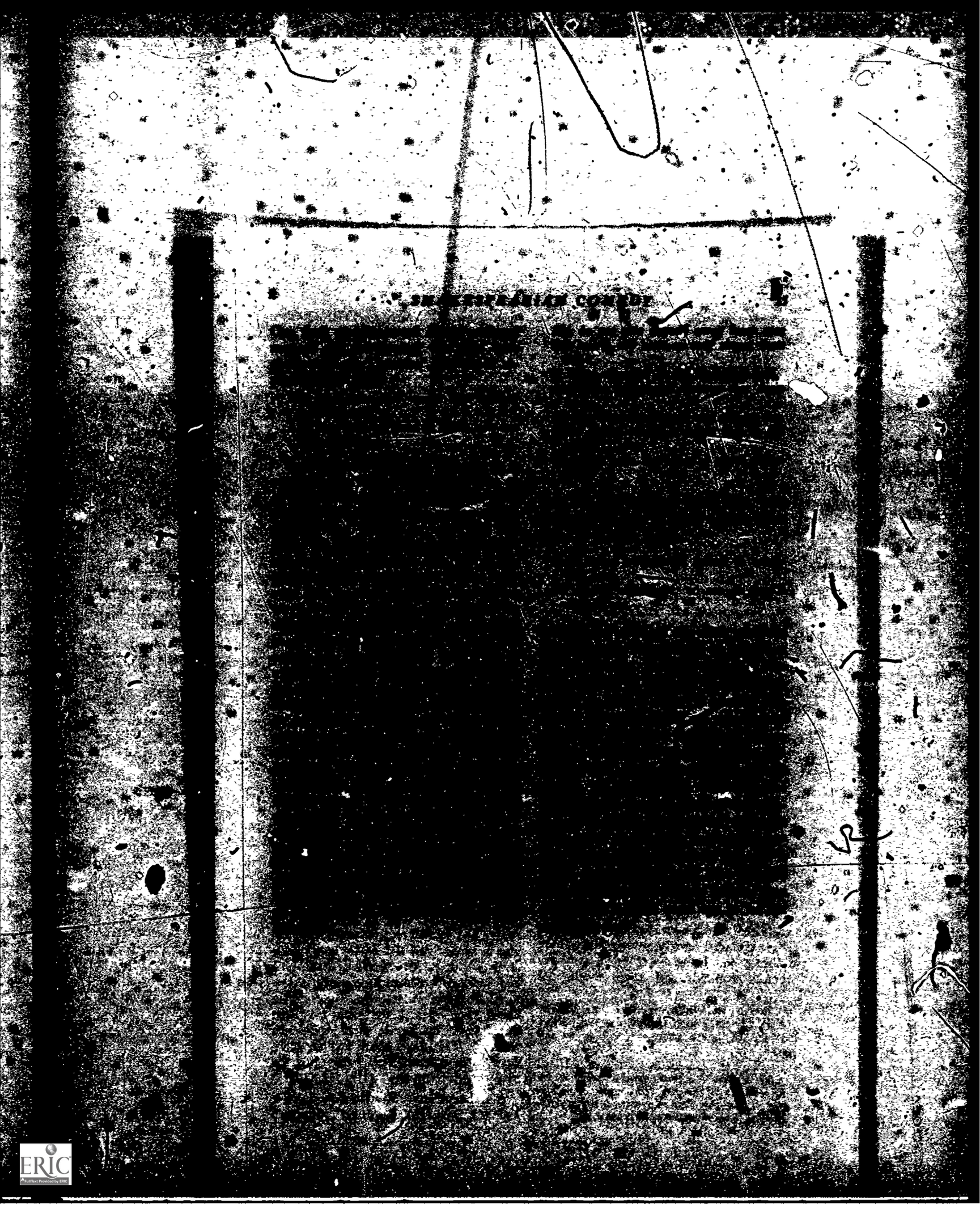










Teaching *Hamlet*

Robert Crossan

[illegible]

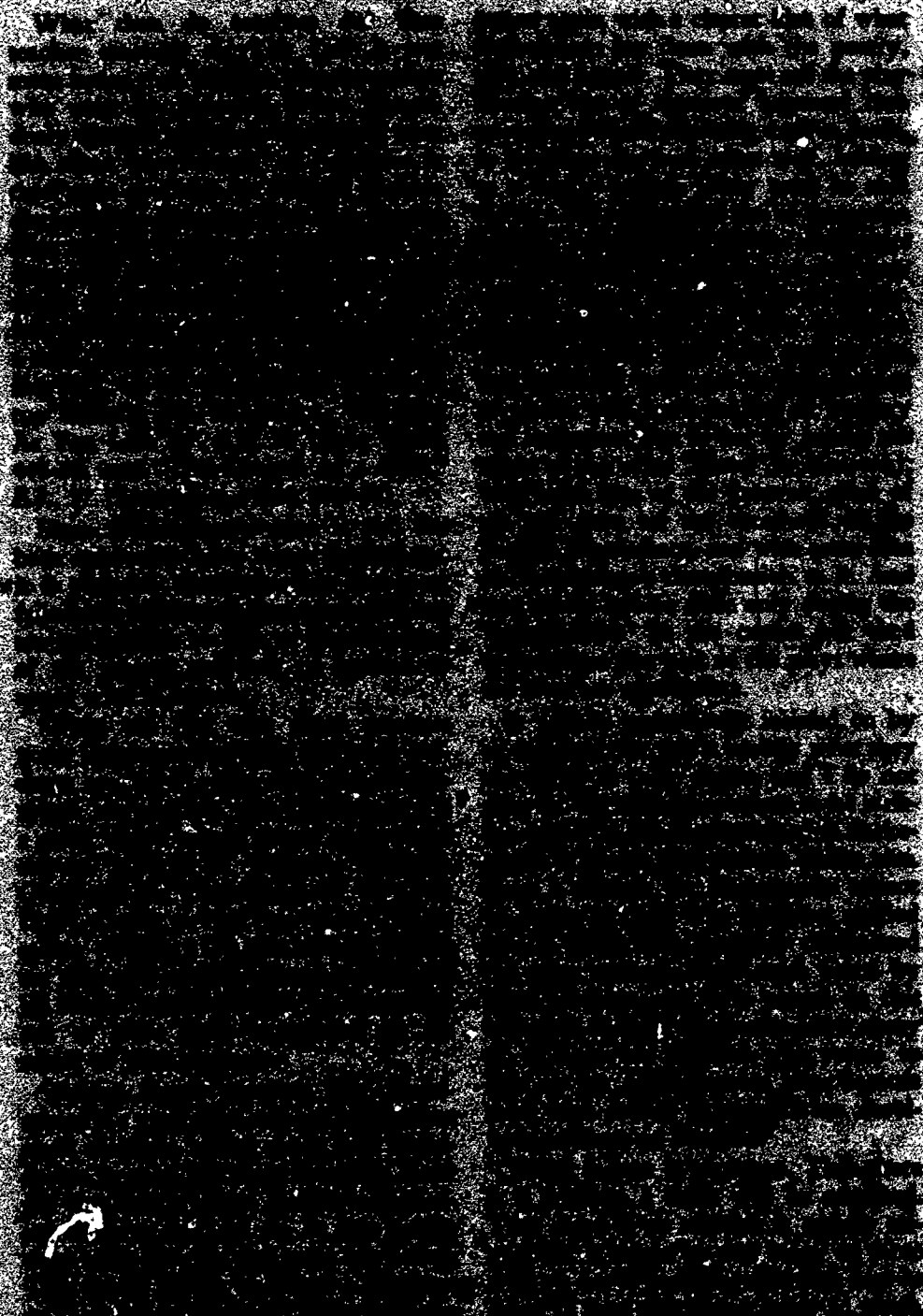
The Appearance-Reality Theme in *King Lear*

Robert Dyn

Teaching Shakespeare: Is There a Method?

Lois Nilsen

TEACHING SHAKESPEARE: IS THERE A METHOD?



TEACHING SHAKESPEARE: IS THERE A METHOD?

SHAKESPEARE IN SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

SHAKESPEARE IN SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

Shakespeare in the High School Classroom

Gladys Veidemanis

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During the years I have been teaching English, I have had many occasions to remember an experience with my warm-hearted Norwegian landlady of college days, whom I found one day skeptically leafing through my Shakespeare anthology. Almost despairingly she sighed to me, "Vy you vant to read dis Shake-es-peer for anyhow? I vust can't make ups nor downs out of it!" Unfortunately, neither one nor many of our students, however vigorously we may try to transmit our enthusiasm and to minimize reading difficulties, igniting the flame of lasting interest in and appreciation of Shakespeare is actually a more demanding, complicated, and elusive undertaking than most of us would like to admit.

The testimony of English teachers in various educational journals, however, conveys quite a different impression. The typical article is a glowing success story, presenting, for example, enthusiastic accounts of eighth graders or sophomores who have adeptly avoided the major reading pitfalls, gone off independently on their own into *Lear* or *Othello*, and produced penetrating discussions on Shakespeare's psychological insights and contemporary symbolic value. All these articles also manage to imply (rather implicitly), that the writer has found a sure-fire way of avoiding all the teaching techniques that dance around the study of Shakespeare for him such a nightmare hour when he was a student in some more enlightened English class. After reading of such achievements, we may, like Brutus, feel compelled to abandon our stars and suffer indictment for personal inadequacies and unimaginative teaching. These blithe success stories, however, frankly leave me skeptical. In all honesty, it is impossible to avoid the recognition that both the teaching and studying of Shakespeare are exacting, often frustrating tasks, necessitating thorough, perceptive, informed study, for which there are no painless shortcuts or easy formulas. Lasting appreciation can never be won by merely trying to "unbury the bard" or "get a kick out of Will."

Yet, while some of our teaching problems are patently inherent in the task itself, surely others we manage to bring upon ourselves either by burdening our units with gimmicks and substitutes for the actual work at hand, or, on the other extreme, by a pedantry that crushes the endeavor before it gets under way. Knowledge of the layout of the Globe Theater, the facts of Shakespeare's life, or the clothing, customs, and history of Elizabeth's reign can indisputably enrich a student's background; yet, these considerations, overemphasized, can also become obstacles for and barriers to genuine reading and analysis of the play itself. It is also not uncommon for the Shakespearean unit to become the vehicle for a teacher's extended virtuoso performance, surely highly relaxing for stu-

dents, since they are left almost nothing to do but sit back and admire, but hardly educating. Indeed, disproportionate or inappropriate emphases, poor timing, and over-popularizing tactics, such as those listed below, are perhaps responsible for most of our frustrating and unsatisfying teaching experiences:

1) Too much time spent on unrelated art and literary projects; too little concentrated attention on the written text itself.

2) Overexhaustive study of a single play—bleeding it dry. (Would we not do better to adhere to the maxim: "Better to underteach than overteach"?)

3) Too much attention to footnotes, criticism, emendations to the extent that the play becomes burdened beyond the difficulties it already presents of itself.

4) Too much "rapture" or virtuousness surrounding the venture—the feeling that "at last we are on something really worthwhile, and even though this is painful, it's good for you!"

5) Too much teacher reading and explication with too little endeavor to teach students to read and comprehend Shakespeare for themselves.

6) Too much popularizing or trying overhard to make Shakespeare "hep" or "a swap"; using comic books or cheapened editions which eliminate the flavor of the original style.

7) Pushing Shakespeare on students who are too immature to handle it or are incapable.

Somehow, the way must be found to an approach that is mature, yet not stuffy; scholarly, without being pedantic; dramatic, yet also literary; thorough, but not exhausting; contemporary as well as universal. In view of these demands, it should be apparent at once that, in the study of any Shakespearean play, we can only hope to make an introduction to what requires a lifetime's intimacy for full savoring and appreciation. Further, we might do well to remember W. H. Auden's pronouncement that every one of Shakespeare's works is unique, and to get a proper idea of the Shakespearean world, the reader must experience them all. He further admonishes that "No one is less a writer for the young, for persons, that is, under the age of thirty."[1] Difficult, indeed, demanding Shakespearean dramas calls upon the full resources of a teacher's creativity, perseverance, and careful planning if it is to become something more than a time to read out loud or stoically endure. In particular, the classroom teacher must come to some decisions about the following teaching problems: 1) where to place the focus of attention; 2) how to teach students to [illegible] the verse for themselves and perceive its variety and [illegible]; 3) how, or if, Shakespearean study into the curriculum and in what detail.

Since there is such diversity in philosophy and approaches to the teaching of Shakespeare, it is a risky matter to try to lay down any definitive resolutions of these problems; clearly, obviously, what works for one teacher may not necessarily work for another. The following discussion is thus viewed primarily as a statement of personal belief, which, hopefully, may prove helpful for others in determining the direction and pattern of classroom activity.

The Problem of Attention

While Shakespeare fills his plays with considerable attractions for the "groundlings"—swordplay, spectacle, suicides, duels, intrigue, slapstick comedy, patriotic fervor, and spectacle—his essential appeal is to the ear, to the mind, to refined perception. The problem, or struggle, then, is basically that of being sufficient beyond basic plot concerns to an examination of (1) character, (2) ideas, (3) language,

[1] W. H. Auden, "Tales Measuring as the New Arden Shakespeare," *The Hill Century*, No. 21, (January 1961), p. 1.

and (4) structure—and perhaps in that order of priority. To begin with, students must learn that a play can be enjoyable even when the plot is known in advance. Like the more sophisticated members of the Greek or Elizabethan audience, they must learn to anticipate and enjoy the subtle expansion of a previously revealed action, and to be intrigued more by the qualities and subtle workings of their imaginations and emotions. Robert Gunkler has well observed that ". . . the relatively bare Elizabethan stage was perfectly suited to the drama of great personalities which Shakespeare created," for his heroic characters dwarfed their background and shaped their worlds and their own destinies.[3] Dominant attention, thus, should be concentrated upon the inner conflicts with which these characters struggle and the consequences of their actions—and especially upon the language which they use to define these conflicts. So organized, the unit on Shakespeare becomes, above all, a humanistic study, an exploration of his view of man—"the paragon of animals," capable of hypocrisy, evil, and superficiality, yet redeemable through suffering and the painful passage to self-knowledge.

It is important, too, not only to raise the usual questions about characterization—how the characters are revealed, what functions they fulfill, and how they change throughout the course of the play—but also to point out the sources of their continuing fascination and appeal. In the first place, the Shakespearean hero is a genuine colossus, humbling the narrow world, surrounding his environment, and affirming the worth of man. Further, he is invariably a paradoxical figure—either dazed, circumscribed, or disastrously troubled—and therefore capable of engaging our continuing interest and diverse examinations. With heroes of the complexity of a Hamlet, Lear, or Othello, students will have to learn to abjure easy black and white classifications and automatic pigeon-holding. In addition, Shakespeare's characters are extremely real and human, unknown of good and evil, the lovable and the unlovable, wrestling with and clarifying problems which most of all grotesque love-engaged humanity, according to Margaret Webster.[4] The reality of Shakespeare's people is what has made them last three hundred and fifty years. The cardboard figure and the manufactured joke do not last three hundred and fifty days."[5] The appeal of his characters and plays is perhaps particularly intense in our modern age because of their testimony to the worth of life and the need for the restoration of goodness and order in human affairs:

> What does Shakespeare say to an era that feels that the times are out of joint? He does not renounce the world or wallow in self-pity. He is the poet of this-worldliness; he celebrates love, food, drink, music, friendship, conversation, and the changing, Chaplinesque beauties of Nature. Though life is time's fool, Shakespeare posits the ideal of the mature man ("Ripeness is all") who distills his experience into condign grace and uncommon wisdom.[6]

Travis Bogard has eloquently commented that no one better understood human nature or saw man more clearly both without and within. As he has suggested, "it would be a more brutal people had Shakespeare not lived, for he told us who and what we are and reminded us that man's actions are capable of integrity and grace."[7]

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[3] Robert Gunkler, *Shakespeare in the Classroom*, (Dubuque, Ia., Educational Illustrated, 1960), pp. 3-4.

[4] Margaret Webster, "Shakespeare in Our Time," *The Living Shakespeare*, Robert Gloster, ed., (London, 1960), p. 22.

[5] "To Hear from Macbeth's Heart," *Time*, Vol. 76, (July 4, 1960), p. 71.

[6] Travis Bogard, "Teaching Shakespeare," paper read at the NCTE annual convention, San Francisco, November 22, 1963.

The Problem of Verse

Once Shakespeare has become part of ourselves, absorbed in the resonance of our speech and the contours of remembrance, it becomes very easy to forget the problems we once faced in our own first encounters with his verse and language. In fact, we come to depend on [illegible] to [illegible] the [illegible] of [illegible] things we need [illegible] [illegible] scholar. T. S. Eliot, in "The Three Voices of Poetry," reminds us that the poetic line in drama bears the weight of three responsibilities: conveying plot and character while retaining its poetic form. Students must thus be helped to develop a series of reading skills that work together. First, they need to learn to read blank verse without halting at the end of each line or being tripped by occasional archaic expressions or unfamiliar figures of speech. Some passages are surely better left unexplained, while with others the rhythm and feel should be left to communicate for themselves. Students must also be brought to perceive how particular passages reflect the character traits of individual speakers, advance plot, and suggest the tone of a specific scene. For example, they should begin to discern how Polonius' mishandling of language parallels his misinterpretation of human affairs, how Laertes' lapses into a strain of superficiality by indulging in florid hyperbole or Ophelia's garrulity, or how Hamlet's shifts from introspection and depression to passionate grief with himself and the world are precisely reflected by the variety of his discourse, the quality of his diction. Similarly, the student should become skilled enough to detect that Orsino and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, in their love and grief, obviously "protest too much," as the basic conceit of the play confirms, or that Brutus and Antony, in their funeral rhetoric, not only eulogize Caesar and sway the mob, but unconsciously reveal themselves and their highly contrasting personal values and political philosophies.

Students must further be taught to discover how richly Shakespeare uses imagery to enforce mood, emotion, character, thought. For example, how repeatedly throughout the history plays he [illegible] [illegible] to emphasize the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] upon [illegible] [illegible] the crown. Using the images of disease, plagues, diseased animals, and weeds in *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Lear*, Shakespeare succeeds in conveying the very atmosphere of states whose social organization has suffered violent change and upheaval. When Macbeth speaks of "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury," he is transmitting at once a capsule life-view of a man who has gambled wildly and indiscriminately—and lost; who has come full circle and must face at last the consequences of his actions. Elder Olson comments that, by contemplating the imagery of Macbeth's language in this major scene, we most profoundly comprehend what at last Macbeth himself must despairingly concede: "The man who murders his own nature becomes a ghost, a walking shadow; the man who builds on vain hope is a poor player in a mere pretense of action, whose very noise is soon silence; the man who takes folly for wisdom and falsity for truth makes his life an unmeaning tale."[1] For Shakespeare, imagery is never just decoration, but the mirror of meaning.

Shakespeare's verse also needs to be studied for its own sake as poetry, particularly for its precise word choice, skillfully suggestive overtones, and unified construction. Rather than wearying every line with extensive interpretation, however, we need to vary discussion and assignment procedures, letting one par-

[1] Elder Olson, "Tragedy and the Theory of Drama," *The English Leaflet*, LXI, No. 3, (Fall 1962), p. 11.

age, for example, serve as a reflection of an inner state of mind, another as revealing specific character traits, yet another to show conflict and irony. The following assignments work particularly well to develop these kinds of reading proficiency:

1) Hand out a series of statements based on a soliloquy and ask students to check those which correctly correspond to statements in the text. Students are surprisingly insecure in close reading and need occasional exercises like this where they must defend their contentions.

2) Give out two or three isolated passages and ask students to make as many charitable inferences as possible from the given material. Then extend the passages to context, exploring further their multiple implications within the specific scene and for the total characterization.

3) Before assigning the reading of a play, read over the following list of expressions, asking students to identify where they have heard them before:

it was Greek to me	wear my heart	he has eaten me out of house and home
an itching palm	the crack of doom	in a pickle
a dish fit for the gods	the milk of human kindness	sink or swim
every inch a king	a sorry sight	long and short of it
What's in a name?	merry as the day is long	too much of a good thing
a fool's paradise	with fear and trembling	flaming youth
the green-eyed monster	give the devil his due	in my mind's eye
pomp and circumstance	dead as a doornail	plain as the nose on one's face
the seamy side	little pitchers have big ears	

It will come as a surprise that so many that we term common usage and even cliché were first introduced by Shakespeare. They should be glad, too, to watch for Shakespearean allusions in ads, articles, cartoons, news headings or columns. The bulletin board will be quickly filled! Use of amusing passages, like "Shakespeare at the Ball Park," can also illustrate how widespread and assimilated are the expressions Shakespeare originated.

4) Give out a short passage for paraphrase, for example the following from *Hamlet*:

> Horatio, if thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity a while
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> To tell my story.

The likelihood is that students will find their paraphrases longer and far more clumsy than the original, surely a commentary on Shakespeare's economy and facility of expression!

5) Try the exercise suggested by Clardi in *How Does a Poem Mean?* of studying a specific soliloquy primarily for its series of word choices and images, particularly its use of verbs. Students will probably quickly learn, as Clardi declares, that ". . . the passage certainly gives off a sense that English cannot be better executed than this."[1]

6) Ask students to memorize! It is very popular to condemn memorization as the bane of English students, the curse of the pregnant. Yet, those persons who most vocally deplore the assignment are also most proficient in delivering the very lines which they purportedly resented having to commit to the treasure-house of memory and the enrichment of their oratory. Surely it is through Shakespeare, above all, we acquire the sound of great poetic language and acquire the standard by which to measure our own limited rhetorical range.

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[1] John Clardi, *How Does A Poem Mean?* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1959), p. 788.

Of course, verse analysis must never become so laborious that students feel they are making no headway in the play. Assignments of close paraphrasing and analysis should therefore be carefully varied and spaced, but never omitted.

The Problem of Emphasis

Those who have taught Shakespeare over a period of years know how rewarding [illegible] experiences have proven to be, for each rereading with different classes brings new insights and values. On the other hand, how dangerous it is to assume that every student will gain as much from a first contact. The solution, then, is to suggest, not exhaust, the possibilities of a particular play, to make it rewarding enough that the student will want of his own accord to return to it for rereading or to go out of his way to attend an actual performance. Most teachers spend perhaps too much time on a single play and do too much for the student, so that they fail to acquire the skills necessary for independent exploration in other Shakespearean works. Three to five weeks is ample time for most works used in high school and is actually all that can be reasonably afforded in the already overcrowded English program. And [illegible] to eighteen weeks on Shakespeare throughout the high school years is perhaps a maximum allocation in view of other demands. However, since the major themes of Shakespeare's play recur in literature of all periods, the teacher has the opportunity frequently to refer back to the works studied earlier and thus revive their significance and applicability. Not without warrant has it been said Shakespeare's plays were "for all time."

Some Practical Considerations

Theorizing is always pleasant, implementation more painful. A few practical considerations might then be in order, even though controversial, to suggest some ways to save time and cope more directly with the problems previously discussed:

1) The injunction "The student's first contact with drama should not be Shakespeare" [illegible] The teaching of [illegible] be done [illegible] the [illegible] drama program [illegible] as so often occurs, be only [illegible]! Using comparative classics, incorporating plays in units other than those dealing exclusively with drama, and devising a sequential drama program in which Shakespeare forms a significant but not exclusive part are some ways of restoring Shakespeare to the mainstream of the dramatic tradition.

2) Biography, textual studies, history, psychology, literary criticism and history, philosophy and sociology should be kept subordinate to study of the play itself. Surely it is important to perceive that Shakespeare adapted his material to the stage he was working with, that he perhaps catered to the Tudor family in his view of monarchy and the Yorkist/Lancastrian feuds, that he reflected the superstitions and world view of his time. Yet, the play itself should come first, with other knowledge brought in to enhance and illuminate, never replace.

3) Those Shakespearean works requiring greater maturity and sensitivity for appreciation should be left to college classes. *Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, probably fall in this classification, both requiring a particularly adult perception of the experiences of parenthood, married love, old age, disillusionment, cynicism.

4) While it is surely not the role of the high school to sample the full Shakespearean range, perhaps the concentration on tragedy is a little overheavy in the high school curriculum to the neglect of the comedies, histories,

and history plays. Some publishers of late have very helpfully begun to combine contrasting types in a joint edition, for example *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*, or have provided a Shakespeare "sampler." In the anthology or survey collection, [illegible] be sacrificed, however, it should not be the tragedies.

5) The teaching of Shakespeare must not be cheapened by simplified texts or comic-book adaptations, just as the appreciation of a symphony cannot be won by studying the score of a popular song based on a movement's dominant theme. We may, indeed, have to concede that Shakespeare is "caviar" to some and forever beyond reach. Students who can't handle the regular textbook surely will not gain edification from Shakespeare, however earnestly and dramatically the teacher attempts to spoonfeed it line by line, and would do better to study something else.

6) Assignments should be planned to develop reading, writing, and speaking proficiencies, skills being developed in other courses. As English teachers, our primary goal must always be to confront students with the English language in all its richness and diversity. Creativity can be cultivated as well through written and oral assignments as through artistic projects.

7) Students should surely be given opportunity to read passages aloud and perform sections, but not to the endless boredom of other class members or to the desecration of the given text. Perhaps too much classroom time is presently given over to indifferent or unprepared student reading. Students might be better assigned to prepare "key scenes" from contemporary plays and work up gradually to the Shakespearean scenes, which can be best illustrated at first by professional actors on record and film as by the teacher himself.

8) The drama program in the high school should be planned sequentially, so that the same activities and problems are not repeated year after year. While [illegible] done in grade 11. The first encounter with Shakespeare probably requires more attention to background—the nature of the theater, the playwright, and the dramatic conventions of the period in which he wrote. Repetition of the same material in succeeding years, however, is wasteful when a brief review could suffice. While the sophomore encountering *Julius Caesar* will have all he can do to come to grips with blank verse, soliloquies, asides, character change, and application to contemporary political and social life, the junior, perhaps in his study of *Macbeth*, should be expected to concentrate more on characterization, dramatic structure, metaphor. In turn, the senior, probing the mystery of *Hamlet*, should be ready to explore more deeply the concept of tragedy, the humanistic view of man, the paradoxical oppositions of good and evil, reality and illusion, "beauty and the bestial." However elementary it sounds, we need to be reminded that an effective drama program builds upon, deepens, and extends the work of preceding years.

9) The study of Shakespeare, as much as possible, should be combined with trips to actual productions. With the current renaissance of Shakespearean productions, on TV and in community and college theaters, opportunities are surely not lacking, even if a field trip has to be arranged to a nearby city. Of course, recordings, colorful bulletin boards, and pertinent books and articles should be

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"To Man from Macbeth's Heart," p. 68.

made carefully, and generously available, not only to illuminate the particular play under study, but to extend interest to other Shakespearean works as well. Some schools have very effectively arranged a course reading of many plays by professional actors, which has proved for them one of the most valuable parts of the [illegible] the high [illegible] those on College and University.

10) The study of a Shakespearean play is perhaps best preceded by some concentrated study of poetry, both Shakespearean and other. Passages from various Shakespearean plays as well as the one under study could be effectively allocated for study, thus developing some of the reading skills needed for the best work. In addition, specialists of Elizabethan should also be encouraged and enabled in advance, rather than [illegible] up only at the time of discussion. For too often, students complain of Shakespearean talk oblivious of the fact that they have been dealing with some of the greatest poetry in the English language, [illegible] particularly because of the way it has served the multiple purposes of the play.

However, strong our background and scholarship, we often forge ahead in our teaching of Shakespeare with ambitious curriculum-building purposes in our education. The guilty of our failures and ugly stuff [illegible] that the effort is really worth our while. We would do well to remind [illegible] any spoken word [illegible] in our work assumed that Shakespeare is a very great artist, that if he does not touch us it is not his fault but our own, that he is now beyond judgment, and that he is worth a good deal of the concentrated and prolonged attention reserved for greatness."[1] To be sure, we shall often end our unit with understanding recognition that some students will never make "eye rest dearer" of Shakespeare. Yet, our work will be rewarded by those students who have caught, if only incompletely, a sense of the complexity, variousness, richness, and universality of this drama which transcended its age and indeed all time.

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[1] Robert B. Heilman, "Bardolatry," *Yale Review*, 39 (December 1949), p. 265.