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# L(E)arned Empowerment: Memorizing Shakespeare for First-Generation Students

WILLIAM DEAN CLEMENT

In 2002, professor of anthropology Rebekah Nathan enrolled in her own university to learn about the college experience from the other side of the classroom.<sup>1</sup> Nathan's resulting book, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Being a Student*, is full of useful anecdotes and surprising insights about student life, but one moment has stuck with me and taken on new significance as I increasingly consider the experiences of First-Generation (FG) college students. While eavesdropping on one student's phone call back home, Nathan reports "overhearing the authentic excitement in one student's voice when she exclaimed into her cell phone, 'Mom, the professor told me my essay was really good!'"<sup>2</sup> The professor's comment, perhaps even absentmindedly given, had a profound effect on the student, an effect Nathan had not considered before; as Nathan explains, "I keep that image of what is at the other end of a professor's encouragement."<sup>3</sup> Reading about this exchange has also had a lasting effect on me, and I reflect on the student's comment for a few reasons. For one thing, it reminds us of the joy that accompanies academic accomplishments. We often hear from disgruntled or disappointed students after poor performances, but this student's unguarded comments prove how much their own education does mean to them. It is also a good example of our students' desire to relay their academic successes back to their family members. For an FG student who feels the increased pressures of familial expectations, the phone call back to mom and dad perhaps means even more for student and family.

I have gone back to this moment, the moment of contact between student and parent, to figure out ways to make this excited exchange possible. Unfortunately, many of our FG students fear that they will never have good news to report to their families, especially from their Shakespeare courses. After talking with FG Shakespeare students from my former classes, I discovered that many of them were apprehensive about taking a 300-level Shakespeare class. One student said she was worried because of Shakespeare's reputation as "difficult," while others reported a combination of worry and excitement because, as one student recalled, "All of the Shakespeare I'd experienced previous had been an uphill slog."<sup>4</sup> Getting students over this intimidation hurdle is one of the most important things we can do for students. After talking with FG students about Shakespeare, I realized I needed to demystify

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Shakespeare, make his work approachable, and give those students a better sense of their classroom accomplishments. I came to the conclusion that I needed a way to *empower* those students in the Shakespeare classroom. I wanted to give them confidence, satisfaction, a reason to call back home and impress their families, and, lest we forget, some understanding of Shakespeare and literary analysis. All of these considerations led me to a project I have always wanted to try but never assigned: poetic memorization and recitation.

For some context, I teach at Cameron University, a teaching-first state university that mainly serves three counties in southwest Oklahoma. I liken teaching at Cameron to teaching in a frontier schoolhouse with first graders in the front of the room and seniors in the back. The range of student abilities, past experiences, and extracurricular responsibilities covers the entire spectrum.<sup>5</sup> While conducting research for this project, I collected questionnaires and interviewed former FG Shakespeare students to find out how best to help them in the classroom. Along with my students' universal hatred for *Troilus and Cressida*, I learned a lot about the FG experience from these interviews.<sup>6</sup>

I was surprised to learn that many of my best students, including a recent Cameron graduate now pursuing his PhD and member of the Shakespeare Association of America, were FG students. Of course, their success was not as surprising when I learned about their home lives. Becky, an FG student of mixed race, says her parents "helped me take ownership of what I'm doing and to take pride in my schoolwork," even though neither of them finished college (pride and ownership of education is something we will come back to later).<sup>7</sup> Abigale told me how her father "values education even more so because he didn't go to college," and described a home environment full of books and parental reading.<sup>8</sup> Another student explained how his mother always pressed him into taking AP courses and double-checked to make sure he had completed his schoolwork.<sup>9</sup> While these examples demonstrate how some FG students find success in the college classroom, they don't help educators in our attempts to teach that wide spectrum of student preparedness I mentioned before.

More than anything, my research confirmed something else we already know: the poor state of high school education in much of the country. Unfortunately, this is especially true of Shakespeare education at the high school level. Jessica, our former Sigma Tau Delta president and an FG student, had a representative experience of Shakespeare education in southwest Oklahoma. When asked to characterize her experience, she responded, "Terrifying. Horrible. I hated every minute of it."<sup>10</sup> Asked to elaborate, Jessica explained, "We were forced to read [Shakespeare] out loud . . . most people either had horrifying stage fright and didn't want to or just couldn't wrap their minds around how to say the language . . . we didn't really learn anything."<sup>11</sup> Other students also described round robin readings, which proved ineffective and embarrassing. A generous interpretation of this pedagogy is that it attempts to make Shakespeare's language come alive or that it comes from a belief that poetry should be read aloud. A more cynical interpretation of the exercise is that it fills class time without class prep. Given the scarce resources and overworked teachers in our public schools,

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I lean toward the latter. My FG students also described how most of their Shakespeare classes were dedicated to recapping plot summaries and watching screen adaptations.<sup>12</sup> Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* remains a staple, despite its nudity.<sup>13</sup> Becky reported, "We didn't critically examine any of the works. The teachers at the time were more focused on us comprehending the pieces over critical thinking. I really liked the pieces but didn't feel like I was pushed at looking at the text at an intellectual level."<sup>14</sup> Again, one could invoke the adage that when the TV's on in the classroom it means the students don't have to learn and the teachers don't have to teach.

With a few exceptions, the vast majority of my students, FG or not, lack preparation for Shakespeare in the college classroom. Abigale recalled acting out scenes in high school, but also recalled not learning much: "We didn't get any discussion time. We just read the play and then took tests over it and so instead of discussing the play it was just acting it out and so you got what the play was about but you didn't really discuss it at all."<sup>15</sup> This is inadequate preparation for a college-level Shakespeare course.

The impoverished state of education in Oklahoma is thrown into stark relief when we see the level of privilege that some students enjoy. Will Garland, an English teacher at The John Cooper School in Woodlands, TX, a wealthy suburb of Houston, gives us a sense of the non-FG student experience. At \$27,000 a year, his students benefit from one of the best educations in Texas. When asked about the advantages his students have over FG students, or even students from public schools, Garland explained, "They have the privilege of entering college having already spent several years studying Shakespeare, and most of those courses were taught by people with graduate degrees in English and a true passion and talent for teaching."<sup>16</sup> He went on to say his students have been performing Shakespeare since fifth grade and that many of them have seen professional performances of Shakespeare. The John Cooper School also takes yearly trips to England so students can tour Stratford-Upon-Avon and see Globe productions in London. Cameron University does not serve students who come from backgrounds like the John Cooper School, and the advantages, resources, and opportunities that privileged students enjoy help dramatize the disparity in education levels that many of us inherit in the college classroom. Even non-FG students have some of the same trepidation that FG students face when it comes to Shakespeare because of our state's inadequate public education.

One FG student I talked with stood out because of the glowing praise she heaped on her high school English teacher. An exception to the rule, Kat described classes dedicated to close reading: "We broke [*Romeo and Juliet*] down to specific lines, and sometimes it took the entire class . . . it was pretty extensive."<sup>17</sup> Kat also mentioned something that caught my attention, perhaps because it seemed so out of the ordinary for high school education in Oklahoma: "We had memorization," she told me, "and we had our take on it. You know, 'what is this saying?' . . . we had to memorize a lot. It wasn't just a few lines. For Juliet it was the whole, 'a rose by any other name.' We had to do that whole thing."<sup>18</sup>

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I kept going back to Kat's more or less ideal high school experience with Shakespeare and the memorization assignment. It is an assignment that I have always wanted to try but for a variety of reasons – practicality, outdatedness, concerns about assessment – I never did. However, after my initial interviews and research, I decided my next Shakespeare class would be required to memorize a long speech and recite it in lieu of the short close reading paper I normally assign. Thinking more about the assignment, I looked into the history of memorizing Shakespeare in English education and was surprised to see an FG connection.

Ironically, Shakespeare was introduced into the British curriculum to cater to what could conceivably be called FG students. In virtually every society, children of affluent, educated parents have enjoyed the benefits of systematized, quality educations. England, and then Britain, was no different. Over time, of course, educational opportunities emerged for more and more families. The humanist developments of the sixteenth century broadened the scope of grammar school educations even further, with lessons in Latin and Greek that Shakespeare would have encountered as a boy. In the centuries that followed, most British curriculums were more akin to Shakespeare's own. However, as the progressive education agendas, reforms, and legislation of the nineteenth century sought to make public education even more widely available, educators felt it impractical or impossible to teach Cicero, Ovid, or Virgil to these new FG schoolchildren. English literature educators therefore relied on vernacular authors, like Shakespeare, to reach the “common” student.<sup>19</sup>

While the burgeoning public-school system broke from the early-modern model of education in content, it did adopt some of the older model's assignments. Memorization had been in the curriculum for centuries, even before Shakespeare's time, when students were required to commit long passages of Latin prose and poetry to memory, again, as part of the humanist education developments of the sixteenth century. Curiously, however, it also played a role in the widening education system of the nineteenth century. With more first-time (and FG) students to educate, Britain relied on more first-time educators. Memorization and recitation worked well because it required little to no advanced training to assign or evaluate.<sup>20</sup>

Shakespeare had been a popular poet for recitation requirements as part of “the elocution movement” designed for the lower social strata.<sup>21</sup> Memorization and recitation was not some advanced assignment for overachieving students or those in higher education. Instead it was often used to teach younger pupils, and this was true until well into the twentieth century. A 1910 *Manual of the Elementary Course of Study for the Common Schools of Wisconsin* suggests that seventh graders memorize Portia's “Quality of Mercy” speech from *Merchant of Venice*, a speech I had to memorize as an undergraduate in Ivo Kamps's class at the University of Mississippi in 2004.<sup>22</sup>

As we see, then, there is a long history of teaching Shakespeare and assigning memorization for FG students particularly. In most classrooms, however, the practice seems to have fallen out of favor. The “heyday” of memorization in the U.S. ran from about the last quarter of the nineteenth-

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century to the middle of the twentieth-century, when, according to Catherine Robson, the “classroom became a much quieter place . . . The recitation of poetry had grown out of a learning culture characterized above all by vocalization; the injunction that pupils should read in their heads created another world altogether.”<sup>23</sup> Ironically, the classroom cacophony that Robson says declined in the middle twentieth-century apparently returned to Oklahoma schools in the early twenty-first, since many of my students recalled high school classes where oral reading of Shakespeare is the standard. Of course, my students also expressed dissatisfaction at the paltry learning during these classes, pointing out that much of the text was never explained and recalling the obvious embarrassment of some classmates who had their functional illiteracy exposed.

I was happy to learn that this assignment has a historical connection with FG pedagogy, and it seemed like a good project for FG Shakespeare students for a variety of reasons. First, it struck me as a good way to level the playing field, so to speak. Please recall the frontier schoolhouse metaphor I’m fond of using. I work hard to find a balance between catching up my less prepared students and keeping my better educated students engaged. Regardless of their previous experiences with Shakespeare, I am sure that few, if any, of my students have memorized passages before. The novel assignment makes FG students out of an entire class, in other words, and it will not unduly single out the FG students.

The project does not require any prior knowledge or education. As Lee Ward argues, “The key construct in the experience of first-generation students is *cultural capital*,” the wealth of terminology, prerequisite knowledge, and general college know how.<sup>24</sup> FG students often feel inadequate because of their lack of cultural capital, perceived or real, and many struggle as a result. This assignment, in theory, would handicap those non-FG students, and the cultural capital that many FG students lack would not necessarily help non-FG students. One could have never taken an English class and still succeed in this assignment. Success with Shakespeare, I reasoned, would empower those FG students.

Many of our seminar participants write about empowering students through assignments. Whitney Taylor’s ingenious assignment requires students to edit, annotate, and introduce one scene (or part of a longer scene) to get them to consider larger dramatic themes as well as the particulars of Shakespeare’s poetical and rhetorical choices. Taylor reports that her assignment gives “learners room to claim authority in their own learning,” one of the most important things we can give FG students.<sup>25</sup> Like memorization, the editorial power Taylor gives students puts them in a position of authority over the text. Especially for FG students, a sense of empowerment can go a long way toward their mastery of the material. Many FG students have difficulty with college coursework because they don’t understand their role in their own education. Similarly, Erin Kelly’s performance-based project works “to help students feel cultural ownership over the course material.”<sup>26</sup> I wanted an assignment that provided my students with a similar sense of ownership, empowerment, and pride of accomplishment.

Assignments like these also give FG and non-FG students some shared academic experience, which could potentially lead to academic friendships.

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Especially for FG students, relationships with fellow students can improve their education experience. Many of my FG students attributed their successes to strong connections with classmates. Ana, an FG student and recipient of the Lawton Shakespeare Club Award for our top student in English, explained how her close cohort prevents her from feeling otherwise alone. “I got my people,” she told me, “cooperation towards graduation.”<sup>27</sup> The experience of going through an assignment that requires them to step outside their comfort zone could give classroom strangers some common ground of complaint and/or congratulations, which could conceivably lead to more conversations, exchanges of email addresses or organizations of study groups.

Aside from the camaraderie and common experience, I also like how the assignment can be done early in the semester. Unlike a research paper or group presentation, which take months to put together, I can assign this project on the first day of class and have them recite it a month later.<sup>28</sup> This will ensure that students feel accomplished and empowered early on in the semester, which is especially important for FG students. It will also equip them with some important skills to use the rest of the semester, help demystify Shakespeare, and make the text more familiar. One FG student remarked how taking Shakespeare “down from his pedestal” helped make class enjoyable and how he found success in the classroom, “once I got over my fear of [Shakespeare].”<sup>29</sup> The purpose of this assignment is to alleviate some of those fears early. However, while it gives them a sense of mastery over Shakespeare and “normalizes” the poet, it does not modernize Shakespeare’s verse. Certainly, there is a place for modernizing Shakespeare’s language, but I want my students to engage, and even wrestle, with Shakespeare’s early-modern English. I don’t want them to simply watch *O* or *Ten Things I Hate About You* in lieu of reading the original language. Those adaptations have their uses in a Shakespeare course and no doubt help many FG and non-FG students, but I do want to challenge my students. I also want them to learn.

Unfortunately, one of the oldest and most persistent arguments against the memorization assignment is that it does not really teach students very much. Instead, some consider it merely rote memorization. Karen Newman tells us how this debate has raged “from the time of the ancients and into the early modern period, and they continue even today.”<sup>30</sup> The memorization assignment, as Marjorie Garber explains, “became associated with a lack of imagination on the part of the teacher and lack of freedom on the part of the students.”<sup>31</sup> Garber justifies her own use of the practice, writing, “memorization can either replace analysis and context or be combined with them.”<sup>32</sup> I understand the argument against memorization. It could lead to simple recitation, the automatic utterance of sounds with no deeper understanding of them, “no explanation, no context, just learning the poem,” as one of Cecilia Rubio’s interview subjects says.<sup>33</sup> However, I agree with Garber that when used in conjunction with other modes, this assignment can have far reaching benefits. Garber elaborates, “The more we know, the more we discuss, the more we interpret, the more familiar we become with the language, nuance, history and meanings (in the plural) of these texts, the better.”<sup>34</sup>

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When students use mnemonic devices to help remember the text, then those personal connections with the text will lead them to particular, idiosyncratic interpretations of the passage. My research has revealed the importance of these personal connections. Nicholas, my former FG student now doing so well in graduate school, mentioned how Cameron's Shakespeare class – and the professor, my predecessor – had a reputation for difficulty. After some initial apprehension, however, Nicholas discovered he was able to succeed in the class once he realized how accessible Shakespeare could be. Nicholas's epiphany came when he saw classmates working up such radically different interpretations of the same play.<sup>35</sup> Kat, another FG student, considered this one of the biggest takeaways from our class. “[A]nd this is pretty big,” she said, “how many different interpretations you can stick on one piece of work . . . that you can take this from this piece of work and I can take this from this piece of work and then there's nine other ways that you can take this.”<sup>36</sup> The fact that Shakespeare could change from reader to reader was a pivotal moment in these FG students' Shakespeare educations. That Shakespeare offers as many interpretations as readers goes back to my desire to empower FG students, not just through comprehension, or performance, but in their interpretation too. A class devoted to dedicated analysis of this speech works much better if every student has memorized and therefore internalized the speech under analysis.

Practically speaking, I also like this assignment for FG students because it gives them a tangible demonstration of what they have learned. Especially for FG students, these kinds of academic successes have tremendous impact. Research has shown how an FG student's confidence in their own ability to succeed academically and socially, what Albert Bandura calls the student's “self-efficacy,” is integral to their sustained academic achievement.<sup>37</sup> The main idea here is that “any task, large or small” affects all students, even non-FG students, since it is every student's first time in college.<sup>38</sup> However, as we know, FG students' self-efficacy is often more fragile and misperceived than those of their non-FG peers. Successfully completing this assignment should serve them well as they finish their education, and even give them something for their future selves. Garber writes about meeting former students at twenty-five-year class reunions who can still recite their Shakespeare, “long after they have forgotten what I said about the plays in lecture.”<sup>39</sup>

Also, going back to that phone call between student and parent, reciting a long stretch of Shakespeare could help those FG students connect with their parents, siblings, or extended family, since it works as a way to perform their education. A parent may be proud of a student's good grade on a critical analysis essay, but they may have a harder time experiencing the fruits of a student's education reading an essay that applies queer theory to *Twelfth Night*. Hearing their sons or daughters recite twenty-seven lines of iambic pentameter is naturally a bit more dramatic. Even if they don't understand every word, or any of the words, they can still be impressed in a unique, valuable way.

Impressing mom and dad back home is important because many FG students feel intense pressure from their families. After working with the Federal TriO Program at the University of South Carolina, Will Garland learned how FG

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students “are seen as the great hope for their family.”<sup>40</sup> One of my FG students recalled a father-guided guilt trip, “He was like, ‘If I had this opportunity I would push myself a little harder.’”<sup>41</sup> Of course, plenty of non-FG students have parents who rely on this kind of “encouragement,” but Ana’s full story illustrates some of the unique aspects of these FG student/parent relationships, especially in southwest Oklahoma. “[L]iterally my tuition comes from selling goats and cows right now,” Ana explained, “My dad works really hard for me to be here.”<sup>42</sup> Ana obviously feels family support (and pressure) to succeed, and while her parents beam with pride at her excellent work (“‘Good job, *mija*’ from my dad and ‘See, you were freaking out over nothing,’ from my mom”), Ana says, “They don’t ask to see my essays, and I don’t offer my papers to them to read.”<sup>43</sup> For Ana’s parents and, I would argue, many FG students’ parents, the actual results of a liberal arts education can be a bit mystifying. Ana’s pioneering work with asexuality in *Measure for Measure* impresses academics at undergraduate conferences, but her parents may not be able to celebrate the particulars of her ingenuity. Perhaps reciting line after line of Shakespeare would prove a better demonstration of education and could be a more effective release valve for some of that pressure to succeed that many of our FG students feel.

Memorization and recitation looks more and more like a worthwhile assignment, but when it comes to which passage to assign, one faces an almost crippling abundance of choices. Here is how I decided on the particular passage for my assignment.

Robert Dodsley’s mid-eighteenth-century textbook, *The Preceptor* (1748), includes more exempla from Shakespeare than its contemporaries, which puts it toward the beginning of Shakespeare’s run as the dominant writer of English education, and although it almost exclusively features selections from his histories and tragedies, it does include one passage from the comedies: Jaques’s “All the world’s a stage” speech from *As You Like It*.<sup>44</sup> While considering which passage I wanted to have my students memorize, I too came around to this famous speech for a few reasons, both practical and conceptual.

For one thing, it fit the syllabus. I begin every semester with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and then teach a different comedy to show how Shakespeare plays with genre. This particular semester, I chose *As You Like It* as the second play. Since I wanted students to complete this assignment early in the semester, I knew it had to come from one of these two plays.

The second reason I chose Jaques’s speech is that it addresses one of Shakespeare’s more consistent themes – the theatricality of life. It is important for students to understand the meta-theater of early modern drama and how playwrights blur the line between audience and character or drama and society through the referentiality eloquently expressed in Jaques’s monologue. This referentiality is the groundwork for so many of the theoretical approaches we teach our students. As Louis Montrose has said, “Such metatheatricality prescribes the interpretive schema of much modern scholarship and theatre history.”<sup>45</sup>

Even more than the literary theory, I want my FG students to connect with the idea that everyone is playing a part – fellow students, professors,

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administrators, and themselves. My somewhat abstract hope is that my students will hear echoes of their collegiate experiences in Jaques's analysis that "all the men and women [are] merely players" (2.7.141). This realization may help them feel less intimidated by the more traditional and non-FG students, and it may help them think about their academic studies as a set of specific and manageable activities. Non-FG students have the luxury of knowing their roles as students in "the wide and universal theatre" of the college campus, while our FG students may be nonplussed at their classmates' seemingly "natural" abilities (2.7.138). I want my FG students to realize how few of their peers are naturally successful in academics, so that they will feel more hopeful about their abilities.

Moreover, the first few lines of the speech are some of the more famous and casually quoted lines in Shakespeare. Like much of Shakespeare's language and many of his coinages, the phrase "All the world's a stage" has entered the public domain of cultural consciousness. Many people know and say the line with no idea of its source. It gets bandied about all the time, in virtually all social settings. In other words, my students should have more opportunity to recall these lines later in life, should they wish to impress (or bore) others.

The final reason I chose the speech was because even though it's a little long, it has some internal footholds. Most passages for memorization run between a sonnet length and twenty lines. The entirety of Jaques's speech is twenty six and a half lines long. To offset that slightly longer line count, the speech features an internal mechanism for easier memorization in its enumeration. Jaques states early that he will list "seven ages," and then proceeds to run through the discreet stages. Students thus have a readymade mnemonic device for the architecture of their memory castles. I know that keeping track of Jaques's "and then"s and "then"s helps me make my way through the speech.

After deciding on the text to assign, I turned my attention to crafting the assignment itself. However, even though I had to complete a few recitations in my own education, I could not recall the details, like how much time to give students to prepare or to recite. I considered the best method for testing their memorization and determined that classroom recitation would take time and could add a layer of performance anxiety that may hurt some shy students, although it could also be good for students to get out of their comfort zones and get used to public speaking. Conversely, I reasoned, some students may relish the performative aspect of recitation. For my FG students, I considered this possibility as a boon. Again, this is where the assignment works to level the playing field between FG and non-FG students. Still, I did not want a cripplingly shy student to suffer from the assignment and get nothing out of it for fear of standing in front of a class.

Ultimately, I decided to give my students the option of publicly reciting the speech or of privately transcribing it. I reasoned that there were positives and negatives to both. If a student opted to transcribe the speech, then they should have to accurately recall punctuation marks and even line breaks, whereas a reciting student, who must contend with the attention a transcribing student evades, need not worry about those details. Even though I explained these points to my class, I did try to push them towards recitation. For one thing, I do

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think it is good for them to try things that may frighten them. I also hoped that they would actually have fun with it, and that it would build classroom rapport. To encourage recitation, I also pointed out to them that I would be more forgiving of a flubbed line if they threw themselves into the performance.

Overall, I only had two students opt to transcribe the speech (both students did exceptionally well, only missing a few commas or coordinating conjunctions). I was pleased that most wanted to perform. As with any assignment, student performance varied. Some otherwise quiet students were emboldened by their audience and took command of their physical space, leaving and entering the classroom in accordance with Jaques's claim that everyone has "their exits and their entrances" (2.7.143). I glimpsed moments of what Erin Kelly saw in her classes, which she describes, via Lamm Pineau, as "performance enable[d] . . . imaginative leap[s] into other kinds of bodiesm."<sup>46</sup> One of my students dramatized her poetic recitation and performed a complex layering of identity through creative wardrobe changes, like a military uniform for the soldier, and even a homemade shirt with a picture of roast chicken and the word "capon" under it to teach the class what she learned while memorizing Jaques's description of the justice.<sup>47</sup> Of course, some mumbled their way through, one took about three times as long as his classmates in an excruciatingly tedious recitation, and one only made it three lines before giving up.<sup>48</sup>

The project was an overwhelming success, however, and for the rest of the semester students alluded to parts of the speech, often through direct quotation, to help illuminate aspects of other plays on our syllabus. They were quick to point out, for example, that the justice's "eyes severe and beard of formal cut" would suit *Measure for Measure's* Angelo just fine, seeing that problem play as a dramatic exploration of Jaques's description (2.7.156). And when we covered *Antony and Cleopatra* they heard echoes of the "strange oaths" that soldiers make in Octavius's speeches (2.7.151). Furthermore, when scansion of Shakespeare's iambic pentameter was required, they readily found the poetry's rhythm.

While researching and reading for our SAA seminar, I became frustrated with the imprecise and manifold classifications of FG students. For some, a student is FG if neither of their immediate family attended any postsecondary education. For others, postsecondary graduation is the criteria. Still others would consider a student whose parents graduated with an associate's degree and who had siblings who graduated with a bachelor's degree to be FG. I tinkered with my own, trying to differentiate between "true" and "technical" FG students, but came to a larger conclusion. At least at Cameron, where so many of my students went through the public education system of southwest Oklahoma, I consider all my Shakespeare students FG Shakespeare students. I take nothing for granted and approach each semester as if each student was starting from scratch. David Onestak gives us a useful analogy for the FG experience when he asks that we think of the FG student as an athlete who's always playing an away game.<sup>49</sup> This is an apt metaphor for FG students and, considering the paltry state of high school education in southwest Oklahoma, of most of my Shakespeare students at Cameron University.

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When I asked one FG student what educators should consider when teaching FG students, she initially demurred. “I don’t really know,” Becky said, “because situations are different from student to student.”<sup>50</sup> Elaborating a bit more, she said, “I think sometimes students who are FG students their families just aren’t as conventional . . . so there will be times where these weird situations occur and so sometimes there has to be flexibility.”<sup>51</sup> After speaking with students like Becky and researching the unique struggles of FG students, I do now have a better understanding of the challenges they face. To this point, Kat offers some of her characteristic candor: “My upbringing was chaos. It was total chaos.”<sup>52</sup> Many of our FG students have little control in their lives. At the least, successful memorization of Shakespeare gives them control over the poet’s iambic pentameter and its meaning.

My long-term hope is that this project will give my students Shakespeare’s “memorized remains” for the rest of their lives.<sup>53</sup> In her introduction to *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem*, Robson recounts a 1995 *New York Times* solicitation of readers’ experiences with poetic memorization in school between 1917 and 1950. One respondent commented, “I have been waiting all my adult life for someone to ask the question you pose.”<sup>54</sup> This response illustrates the kind of life-long pride and empowerment I believe this assignment can engender. As Taylor’s project reiterates, footnotes “are not neutral spaces.”<sup>55</sup> It is important for students to realize that the plays themselves are not neutral spaces, that there is no “authoritative” Shakespeare edition, nor is there a “real” or “authentic” staging, interpretation, or reading of these plays. Each individual student contributes to his or her own piece of the Shakespeare puzzle. This contribution can come from FG and non-FG students alike, but adding to it takes confidence, encouragement, and sense of power. It also takes active participation in the learning process. After completing assignments like the ones we have explored in this issue, it is hard to imagine any student ever passively reading a Shakespeare play again.

Describing the genesis of her film *Remembering Shakespeare*, Cecilia Rubino recalls an impromptu moment of audience participation after one of her talks at the Jefferson Market Library in Greenwich Village. “If any of you have lines of Shakespeare that you have memorized, would you consider sharing them?” she asked the crowd.<sup>56</sup> Impressed with the number of respondents, Rubino points out that what surprised her most was that participants wanted to do more than dramatically recite the lines, “they also wanted to *tell the story* of why the words were important to them over time.”<sup>57</sup> I hope this is the lasting effect of this assignment. That after the research papers, presentations, and final exams are completed, after the grades have been permanently etched in their transcripts, after those transcripts have helped them get into law school or study abroad, after my students have forgotten my name or face, that they will be able to recall, even if it’s just a fraction of the speech, some of Shakespeare’s poetry. More importantly, I hope by then they realize that the poetry is no longer Shakespeare’s but their own, colored by their own experiences, amplified or adumbrated by their lives, and ultimately that they disagree with Jaques’s cynical

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conclusion that life ends in “mere oblivion / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” (2.7.166-7).

### Notes

1. “Rebekah Nathan” is a pseudonym for Cathy Small, professor of anthropology at Northern Arizona University, stylized as “AnyU” in her book, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Being a Student* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
2. *Ibid.*, 134.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Nicholas, “Shakespeare Survey,” correspondence with author, October 26, 2017; Jessica, “Shakespeare Survey,” correspondence with author, October 31, 2017.
5. Cameron is located in Lawton, OK, which is also the site of Fort Sill, one of the largest military bases in the country, so I regularly have army brats who grew up in Germany sitting next to locals who have never left southwest Oklahoma.
6. “[R]eplace *Troilus and Cressida* on the reading list,” one student advised, unhelpfully adding, “I’m not sure with what exactly, but replace it.” Timothy, “Shakespeare Survey,” correspondence with author, October 22, 2017. Another piece of blunt advice: “Get rid of *Troilus and Cressida* and call it a day.” Kat, interview by author, October 30, 2017.
7. Becky, interview by author, November 2, 2017, Lawton, OK.
8. Abigale, interview by author, November 2, 2017, Lawton, OK.
9. Nicholas, interview by author, December 2, 2017, Lawton, OK.
10. Jessica, interview by author, October 31, 2017, Lawton, OK.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Nicholas, interview by author. December 2. 2017; Ana, interview by author, November 15, 2017, Lawton, OK.
13. One student described the lengths a teacher went through to keep showing the famous adaptation, “after our class [the teacher] started getting a piece of paper and covering [the nudity] for the rest of the classes”; Ana, interview by author, November 15, 2017, Lawton, OK.
14. Becky, “Shakespeare Survey,” correspondence with author, November 2, 2017.
15. Abigale, interview by author, November 2, 2017, Lawton.
16. Will Garland, “First Gen Students,” email received by author, October 26, 2017.
17. Kat, interview by author, October 30, 2017, Lawton, OK.
18. *Ibid.*
19. The concern was not just over whether or not lower class could learn more “refined” material. Clyde Chitty describes concern over the effects of that education on the masses’ psyche, that educating the laboring class, “would simply make the working poor discontented with their lot”; Clyde Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.
20. I was also surprised to learn that, in Britain, memorization emerged as an assessment artifact, a standardized test that helped determine a school’s operating budget. See Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), 50.

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21. Karen Newman, "Memorizing Shakespeare," *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* (2017) : 6-7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4000/shakespeare.3905>.
22. Robson, *Heart Beats*, 34-5.
23. *Ibid.*, 81.
24. Lee Ward, Michael J. Siegel, and Zebulun Davenport, *First Generation College Students: Understanding and Improving the Experience from Recruitment to Commencement* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 6.
25. Whitney Taylor, "The Pedagogical Possibilities of Editing a Digital Text in the Shakespeare Classroom," in this volume.
26. Erin Katherine Kelly, "Mutual Meaning Making: Dramatic Staging and Student-Led Discussion in the Shakespeare Classroom," in this volume.
27. Ana, interview by author, Lawton, OK, November 15, 2017.
28. Group work is notoriously difficult to assign at Cameron since so many of our students are FG and nontraditional. Students find it nearly impossible to juggle work and family commitments with their regularly scheduled classes. Asking four or five of them to all carve out time on the weekends or at night is simply untenable.
29. Nicholas, interview by author, December 2, 2017, Lawton, OK.
30. Newman, "Memorizing Shakespeare," 5.
31. Marjorie Garber, *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (New York: Pantheon, 2011), 75.
32. *Ibid.*, 76.
33. Cecilia Rubio, "The Making of *Remembering Shakespeare*," *Altre Modernità / Other Modernities* (2017): 173, <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/9196>
34. Garber, *The Use and Abuse of Literature*, 77.
35. Nicholas, interview by author, December 2, 2017, Lawton, OK.
36. Kat, interview by author, October 30, 2017, Lawton, OK.
37. Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, *First Generation College Students*, 25-6.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Garber, *The Use and Abuse of Literature*, 75.
40. Will Garland, "First Gen Students," Email, Received by author, October 15, 2017.
41. Ana. Interview by author, Lawton, OK, November 15, 2017.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Ana, "Quick Question," Email, Received by author, January 19, 2018.
44. Newman, "Memorizing Shakespeare," 6.
45. Louis A. Montrose, "A Kingdom of Shadows," in *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Critical Essays*, ed. by Dorothea Kehler (New York: Routledge, 2001), 231.
46. Kelly, "Mutual Meaning Making," this volume.
47. "In fair round belly with good capon lined," according to the melancholic malcontent par excellence (2.7.155).
48. My future assignment sheets will include a time limit to mitigate some of these complications, although I still have no idea how to handle those unprepared students who publicly bomb.
49. Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, *First Generation College Students*, 13.
50. Becky, interview by author, November 2, 2017, Lawton, OK.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Kat explains how her biological father abandoned her family when she was born, "because I was a female." Perhaps this explains her perverse fascination with *Taming of the Shrew*. "I was surprised at how much I liked *Taming of the Shrew*," she

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confessed, “I mean I knew the story but it’s kind of a . . . well it’s horribly sexist, I mean over the top sexist, but I really enjoyed it.” Kat goes on to describe how she’s coopted and defused “shrew” as a misogynist insult, and in another instance of relating academic success to family members, she adds “my mother thinks it’s hilarious” (Kat, interview by author, October 30, 2017, Lawton, OK.

53. Newman, “Memorizing Shakespeare,” 8.

54. Robson, *Heart Beats*, 3.

55. Taylor, “The Pedagogical Possibilities,” in this volume.

56. Rubio, “The Making of *Remembering Shakespeare*,” 169.

57. Ibid.

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