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# Shakespeare, My Sparring Partner

Response by AYANNA THOMPSON

I was a reluctant Shakespeare learner in college. Although I was not a first-generation student, I was a working-class student of color who was highly skeptical about the value of my school's two-semester Shakespeare requirement. I left those two dreaded classes until my senior year in the hopes that the requirement would magically go away (this was at the height of the culture wars after all). I was much more interested in my post-colonial and African-American literature courses, which seemed to be addressing all the hot-button issues of the day. The Shakespeare course, on the other hand, did not promise to address any hot buttons.

Because we were expected to read all of Shakespeare's plays over the course of the two-semesters, something unexpected happened right at the beginning of the first semester—*Titus Andronicus*. When I read it, I was immediately struck by its timeliness. Here was a 400-year old play about race, class, power, gender, and sexuality, AND there was a bi-racial baby and puns about interracial sex. Who knew?!? Well, not my professor who pronounced *Titus Andronicus* to be Shakespeare's juvenilia and moved on to lecture on another play.

I knew Shakespeare was grappling with the same issues of empire and race that my beloved post-colonial and African-American authors were; he was just doing it from the vantage point of the first British Empire in which the terms and ideologies were only beginning to come together, congeal, and solidify. While my professor was happily lecturing about Shakespeare's universality, I was reading an entirely different Shakespeare, one who was readily engaging with the issues, and yet one who was also circulating and endorsing deleterious ideologies (e.g., "And Sylvia—witness heaven that made her fair / Shows Julia but a swarthy Ethiop"). It was a contradictory experience, hearing my professor intone about Prospero as a stand-in for the artist, and thinking to myself about Prospero as a proto-imperialist. I knew my Shakespeare professor would never read the way I was reading, but I *could* imagine a different Shakespeare professor and a different Shakespeare class precisely because I had all those post-colonial and African-American ones. I realize now that I entered that Shakespeare classroom with a certain amount of privilege—intellectual privilege—that many of my first-generation students may not have.

I start with this anecdote because it was in this coincidence that Shakespeare became my sparring partner. I did not feel like I had to venerate him or his work; rather, I felt like the plays invited, indeed required, a robust engagement. I circle back to my experience learning Shakespeare after studying

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post-colonial and African-American literature whenever I teach a Shakespeare course because I did not feel like an imposter reading Shakespeare; I felt like an equal who had knowledge and tools that I could bring to my encounter with Shakespeare. Each semester I ask myself how I can recreate that experience for my students. I want them to know that they too can grapple, wrestle, and spar with Shakespeare.

The essays in this special edition remind us that an attention to place matters in our pedagogical practices: where we teach, whom we teach, and why those students are in our classes must factor into our syllabi, course designs, and outcome assessments. My students at Arizona State University are incredibly diverse in every way (race, income, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, ability, age, and native language), and most of the students in the large-lecture Shakespeare course are NOT English majors. When I have conducted informal polls at the beginning of the semester about who is taking the course against their will, about one-third raise their hands. They are education students for whom the Shakespeare course is required, and they are reluctant learners of Shakespeare.

Because of them, I always start my semester with *Titus Andronicus*. I start there not only because *Titus Andronicus* was the door into Shakespeare for me, but also for several other important reasons. First, because *Titus Andronicus* is not a canonical play, 99% of my students have never heard of it, read it, or seen the 1999 Julie Taymor film. I have found that if I start with a more canonical play, there is an uneven distribution of prior knowledge about Shakespeare that can disproportionately negatively affect first generation students, working class students, and students of color. No one comes with prior knowledge of *Titus Andronicus* so the first day starts on a level playing field with regards to prior knowledge of Shakespeare. Second, this play allows students who do have prior knowledge about race, rape, and the military (ASU has a large veteran student population) to feel as if they can take the lead during portions of the discussion. The students feel that their non-Shakespearean knowledge brings something incredibly relevant to bear for discussion of this particular Shakespeare play. And third, the play is bonkers: it is uneven, its politics are ambiguous, and some of it is simply ludicrous (e.g., when Titus's sons fall into the bloody pit). Because of this, the students feel empowered to grapple with Shakespeare. The play does not inspire veneration; it inspires wrestling!

Many of the essays in this special edition remind us that community building can be an important part of our Shakespeare course design. Although we may not have as much say (if any at all) in the physical layout of our classrooms, I would like to advocate for rooms that allow students to self-select, or self-create groups and mini-communities.

I taught a large-lecture class in a room that had a "café style," that is, large round tables that seated about six to eight students each. Some students came to class already knowing a few classmates, but many came without knowing anyone. By the end of the first month, the students were self-segregating into tables that were grouped by race, ethnicity, and native language. This surprised me, but then I remembered the important research conducted by social psychologists and developmental psychologists that proves the benefits of self-segregation for

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knowledge acquisition. Beverly Tatum's classic 1997 text, *Why Do All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, for example, tracks how and why these self-segregated spaces can aid in learning.<sup>1</sup>

My favorite group of students formed an unofficial Latinx table in which they read Shakespeare in early modern English, discussed the plays amongst themselves in Spanish, and then contributed to the overall class discussion in contemporary, American English. They were my favorite group not only because they were tri-lingual, but also because their use of Spanish allowed them to grapple and argue with the texts and themselves in a more direct and immediate manner. They modeled for the class the fact that Shakespeare's plays do not simply reside in the past; they have implications for the ways we think about our world and the people in it today.

This collection of essays provides a wealth of classroom exercises that I will borrow and steal from shamelessly, but I wanted to echo and amplify one that I have found particularly useful with first generation students, working class students, and students of color—the editing exercise. Although I have not done the extensive editing exercises that are outlined in this collection, I have allowed and at times encouraged my students to bring different editions to class. Around week two or three in the semester, we will inevitably encounter passages that vary significantly. That is when I pause and tell them about early modern printing practices and the history of the Shakespeare editing machine that developed subsequently. Then I give them the first 20 pages of Stephen Orgel's book, *The Authentic Shakespeare*, which consistently shocks students (the first three chapters are called, “What is a Text?” “What is a Character?” and “What is an Editor?”).<sup>2</sup> While most college and university students will find the history of editing Shakespeare entirely new, I have found that it is particularly empowering for my first-generation students. They seem to get that the power resides in the editor, who may be making things up (!), and they wonder how they too can grab that power. In an attempt to bridge my classroom activities with my scholarship, I have also talked about my experiences editing *Titus Andronicus*: punctuation matters in meaning making, and I show them exactly where I have made things up!

I will end by saying that it is important to acknowledge openly the imposter syndrome effect in the Shakespeare classroom. There is no reason that students, first generation or otherwise, should feel comfortable reading texts written 400 years ago. The differences between early modern English and contemporary American English are real and significant. It is hard, and it takes a while to get into the rhythm and swing of Shakespeare's language and verse. Our students need to know that it is okay to struggle, and they also need to know that struggle can sometimes be pleasurable. Reading Shakespeare can feel like figuring out a puzzle, and attempting to solve puzzles can be fun. Therefore, I try to acknowledge each day how difficult the texts are; that I do not have all the answers; that I learn from my students every day; and that we all learn better (that is, both more knowledge and retained knowledge) collectively. For me, then, that is the point of teaching Shakespeare to first generation students—to model the power and effectiveness of collective puzzling, grappling, wrestling, and sparring.

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### Notes

1. Beverly Tatum, *“Why Do All the Black Kids Sit Together in the Cafeteria?”: And Other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
2. Stephen Orgel, *The Authentic Shakespeare: And Other Problems of the Early Modern Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

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**Ayanna Thompson** is Director of the Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies at Arizona State University. Her recent books include, *Shakespeare in the Theatre: Peter Sellars* (2018), *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose* (2016), and *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (2011). She is editing a collection for Cambridge University Press on Shakespeare and race, and is collaborating with Curtis Perry on the Arden4 edition of *Titus Andronicus*.