

Why Front? Thoughts on the Importance of "Nonstandard" English in the Shakespeare Classroom

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Marcus Andronicus, of Shakespeare's violent Roman tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, is corny. He is so corny. At the end of the play, with Rome in political and cultural upheaval, he talks about putting "scattered corn" back together onto one Roman supercob (5.3.70),¹ and it is literally the corniest line in the play. The bloviating, moralizing, sometimes obtuse brother to the titular Titus seems to have overlooked that his grand reunification — *re* being the key prefix — includes an army of invading foreigners that his nephew marched into town with. What is with this guy? Many of my students found Marcus corny, too; somebody even called him a fool. So we bounced that idea around for a few minutes until it became untenable. "What if it's a front?" One student asked. "You know, what if he's just frontin'?" Marcus is the most political of the Andronici, and it is certainly possible that he strategically elides Rome's new foreign presence with his sentimental speech. A counterargument to our initial reading is exactly what I was hoping for. It is part of the joy of teaching this type of material to a group of incisive undergraduates: the moment when they realize that things are rarely one-dimensional with Shakespeare.

But there was another rewarding aspect to this particular Shakespeare class. An unusually high number of students of color were enrolled, adding to what is generally a limited range of vernacular and colloquialism in courses on the early modern period. That same class session, another student posited

that we think of *Titus's* Aaron — a black character who is paramour to Rome's new Gothic queen — as a side piece. And why not? Aaron certainly sees the benefit of being a kept man, so to speak. And while it is not unusual to note his romantic position, we tend to do so by using suburbanese terminology (as I have with *paramour*), and this takes the *other* right out of him. It makes Aaron sound more like Paul Varjak from Edward Blake's 1961 film *Break-fast at Tiffany's*. This is not to accuse Shakespeare experts of bowdlerizing Aaron — on the contrary, recent scholarship overwhelmingly deals with his complexity as a violent-minded villain — but when was the last time we kicked around the idea of

Aaron as a side piece?

The lack of this type of discourse is partly a symptom of classroom demographics in early modern studies. Without enough black and brown bodies in the room — as either teachers or students — rhetoric, both formal and colloquial, trends toward the bougie, often to the exclusion of a diverse range of voices. And even when an early modern seminar comprises more than one person of color, these linguistic norms are usually abided. I myself, a relative rarity in the field as a person of color, have often contributed to this near-stifling amount of Standard English by compromising many of my own modes of expression in professional settings. As other academics that naturally use so-called nonstandard iterations of English can attest, particularly those working in white-dominated fields, it is often in this compromise that we gain some place at the table but leave behind something integral to our identities; we obtain membership, in a sense, yet we simultaneously capitulate to the power dynamics that many of us otherwise attempt to challenge. And such power dynamics, at least in Shakespeare studies, have a direct impact on our students and the likelihood that they will feel included in the conversation. In their monograph on student-centered approaches to Shakespeare, Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi (2016: 5) importantly observe that the current Shakespeare classroom is generally a place where the bard's works are disconnected from discussions of difference. And indeed, this circumvention of difference is also represented linguistically, as the field produces and reproduces a prohibitively standard mode of discourse that tends to code as white and thus exclusionary to some students of color.

Such a classroom environment runs counter to both persistent and renewed efforts by institutions of higher learning to foster diversity. And as I suggest here, encouraging a diversity of voices in white-dominated spaces like the Shakespeare classroom of the typical American university actually takes aim at some of the more ambitious goals of diversity initiatives. It constructs intellectual spaces where students from a variety of backgrounds are

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more than just present; it normalizes cross-cultural dialogue such that those students see their distinct ways of speaking as valuable in a setting that, much like the standard American college in general, can otherwise seem hostile to the traditionally marginalized. And in some cases, both courting and taking seriously this range of voices might be as simple as letting our students know that standard rhetoric is not a superior way of discussing early modern texts, something we can easily model by occasionally eschewing our own standard locutions in the classroom. Here I discuss how African American Vernacular invigorated my class's understanding of Shakespeare, but I do so with the hope that my reflections at least obliquely gesture to the distinct value that other nonstandard voices bring to the college classroom.

Of course, the humanities are familiar with the argument that non-standard iterations of English are no less valuable in educational spaces than the standard mode of speaking. Studies like those of Carol D. Lee (2006) demonstrate the deep nuance of African American Vernacular in service of literary analysis. Moreover, it is no secret that Standard English is so fluid that most experts have trouble accurately adhering to it. As Anne Curzan (2009) has shown, Standard English puzzlingly admits fresh colloquialisms and neologisms, yet it simultaneously maintains particularly esoteric formulations. Indeed, nothing suggests that speaking about Shakespeare in the way that we tend to — especially with the unintentional consequence of silencing other voices — offers any analytic advantage. On the contrary, our classroom discussions remain at a disadvantage when these routinized

linguistic norms persist, if not simply because they forestall genuine and thoughtful contributions by students who are not entirely comfortable with Standard English.

This is not to say that every black student that walks into a Shakespeare seminar is a font or even a puddle of African American Vernacular. Nor is it to suggest that only black students will be interested or able to bring nonstandard rhetoric to the early modern classroom. What is often so valuable about a dialect like African American Vernacular English, which resists strict attachment to any homogeneous racial, cultural, or socioeconomic group, is that it is often a comfortable point of access for a broad range of undergraduates. Thus, if and when this type of language is available, it can sometimes offer the best means of parsing a text. For example, when my class dove into Shakespeare's iconic tragedy *Hamlet*, we homed in on one of Hamlet's myriad fears by transmuting the Dane's rhetoric into what we surmised was the best modern cognate. The significance of Hamlet's "you cannot play upon me" speech (3.2.334 – 41) — which he angrily delivers to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, friends whom his uncle, King Claudius, has sent to spy on

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him — was made vivid once we recognized that Hamlet does not want to get played. Full stop. Consider the multivalent connotations of "played with," the standard iteration, and it is evident why our class chose against it. No serious adult wants to get "played with," but if you are organizing a pickup basketball game or trying to start a garage band, you do. On the other hand, getting played is never good — trust me.

Getting this type of rhetoric on the table is difficult, especially because, as teachers and scholars of Shakespeare, we are deeply invested in the bard's language. Thus, we often see ourselves as careful translators of Shakespeare's phrasing. We want our students to understand that *Romeo and Juliet*'s famous "Romeo, Romeo, / wherefore art thou Romeo?" is certainly not a moment in which Juliet is questioning Romeo's whereabouts (Liston 1997: 17; Thorpe 1967: 188). But we also do not want them to feel entirely satisfied by the more accurate but markedly pedestrian paraphrase: *why* are you Romeo? The methods that we employ to traverse these subtleties often draw from years of training on the topic, and that training stems from a long legacy of institutional practices that overwhelmingly excluded those outside the white upper and middle class. A tension between accommodating changing classroom demographics in even the broadest terms and maintaining traditional routines of early modern study still persists in the Shakespeare classroom. William T. Liston's (1997) thoughts on the use of paraphrase continue to demonstrate this. His suggestion that we should ask students to paraphrase Shakespeare's language enables students to access texts with their own terms, yet for Liston these paraphrases primarily allow us to see student deficiencies, specifically those linguistic misunderstandings that derive from a lack of foreign language study. Certainly, race is not an indicator of one's academic skill set, nor is it a factor Liston correlates with student limitations, but we most certainly skew away from inclusivity on myriad fronts — most notably class — if we privilege one's academic pedigree as an indicator of their dexterity with archaic language.

And inclusivity is precisely what we need when, as teachers, we cannot possibly grasp every linguistic inroad to early modern rhetoric. As much as we must attend to student deficiencies, we should also occasionally attend to our own. Of course, many of us now know that, at times, our students stand to teach us more than we might teach them, so it is essential that we listen even and especially when their rhetoric ostensibly conflicts with what our standard educations have inured us to. Most anyone

traditionally trained in early modern study has learned rich terminology with which to explicate Shakespeare's material, but student language that reaches across cultural,

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class, or generational divides is often just as critically meaningful, if not more useful in the classroom setting. When my class's discussion of *Hamlet* turned toward the much-maligned Ophelia, my students engaged her ostensible concern for a rude and misogynistic Hamlet with a locution that I did not fully grasp. When I asked them to give their impression of her, one student immediately offered that she was "basic." I knew this was a derisive statement; it was shade. Not everyone seemed to agree, so I pushed the students to contend with the label. Another student spoke up: "I mean, she's basic, but so what?" Suddenly, I found myself confused. To my knowledge, "basic" was strictly pejorative, a way of indicating that something or someone was beneath you. But as I soon learned, we are all basic sometimes, particularly when we filter our photos or #nofilter; when we watch bad television or only listen to NPR; or when we overindulge in sweets or resolve to regularly eat kale salads. Especially with regard to women, it is an almost inescapable paradigm, easily mapped onto anything that too easily sublimates into one set of stereotypes or another. Many people actually claim their own basic behavior — like getting excited about a seasonal Starbucks latte — even though they may be just as likely to use the term later to debase the behavior of someone else. As we grappled with the term's instability, it became clear to me that we were engaged in a necessary dialogue about the incoherence of gendered conventions. And this discussion helped the class critically engage their own knee-jerk sense about Ophelia.

There are a variety of ways to have these and other essential conversations in a Shakespeare course, but we certainly serve our students best when we enable various points of access. An early modern text is daunting enough to an undergraduate. If our classrooms defer to a linguistic hierarchy in which the only available means for discussing those texts is itself another intimidating iteration of English, we only stand to construct more obstacles than we remove. This is not to suggest that this result is at all intentional on our part, but it is quite easy to forget that not everyone has been conditioned to speak about Shakespeare in the way that we have. If our classrooms do not acknowledge that Standard English is not superior and demonstrate this by sometimes employing or fostering alternative parlance, our classroom culture will inevitably prove stifling. In such an environment, students that are unversed in standard rhetoric are faced with limited options: speak up and risk overt or tacit ridicule; keep quiet and remain uninvolved; or learn to code-switch. But code-switching is not for everyone. And according to Rebecca Moore Howard (1996), even encouraging a code-switching classroom culture reinducts the perceived lack of value in dialects other than

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Standard English. Of course, there are also students that can code-switch but are hesitant to do it in front of peers, choosing instead to remain silent. For those students, the very real fear exists that they will sound something like Kanye West in his 23 August 2013 interview on Kris Jenner's short-lived Fox network talk show *Kris*. The Twitterverse nearly collapsed after West spoke on national television in Standard English, rife with debates concerning the rapper's authenticity. Later that year West explained that he sometimes uses his "white voice" to avoid the "dinner for schmucks" situations that he feels he

has been victim to in the past,² but social media judgments persisted. And if Yeezy can't get away with demonstrating linguistic inconsistency, what chance does an undergraduate have at doing so?

For me, code-switching was an essential social tool growing up. As an urban-born suburban transplant, I navigated increasingly white spaces through linguistic assimilation. But although I reflexively use that voice in professional and scholarly venues, being in front of a class in which I was not so obviously in the minority adjusted that impulse. I found myself deferring to the most immediately available language, and that had me bouncing along a range of linguistic registers. Sometimes I would point out how a character's histrionics were actually deeply moving, and sometimes I would show why they were extra. I ended up talking about Shakespeare in a way that I never had, and my students reciprocated with more willing and genuine participation. Of course, being a black instructor, I still worried that employing more casual vernacular would only emphasize my perceived cultural distance from Shakespeare; I feared that being myself might undermine my credibility as an instructor. Every teacher's struggle for a healthy level of authority is unique, and different teachers encourage different classroom environments. Much of this is informed by the ways that students react to an instructor's identity. Along with race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age, other myriad facets of a teacher's personhood often dictate the strategies necessary and available for the creation of a respectful and productive space for both student and instructor. In this case, a few of my students' anxieties about credibility mirrored my own. In turn, the gradual erosion of those concerns was mutually empowering. As they began to put Shakespeare into their own terms, they emboldened me to continue doing the same, and this cycle continued through the end of the course.

Indeed, when our classroom culture took seriously otherwise devalued forms of rhetoric, most everyone saw the worth in their distinct locutions. On the best days, students from different backgrounds with different experiences created a new linguistic standard, recalibrating the traditional rhetorical

cal expectations of the early modern classroom. I knew things were headed in a favorably different direction when a discussion of the Machiavellian archetype sublimated into a short but earnest question from a student about Tupac. Among a diverse group of undergraduates, the topic offered a far more alacritous cultural bridge than Shakespeare. And sharing some cursory understanding of rap music as a class modeled cross-cultural conversation for our primary material.

These types of conversations are not widely available in many branches of the English field. And for better or for worse, a college Shakespeare course is one of only a handful that tend to represent the academic field of English — or at least English language literature before the novel — to our students. For this reason, it is crucial that we make that space an inclusive one, and not simply for the vitality of our own classrooms. Our courses are points of access in which students learn how their talents and intellect might apply to ours and other canonical fields of English that desperately need diversification on myriad fronts. Experiencing a positive attempt at inclusivity in a Shakespeare class might encourage students to pursue courses — or even dedicated study — in other ostensibly standard literary periods, perhaps in some small way bolstering the diversity of voices circulating in broader realms of the English field. Students will almost certainly face some form of resistance in such pursuits, but they may just proceed if they are able to draw on at least one experience from a seemingly unwelcoming space in which their voice — and not just their importance to a departmental demographic survey — was valued.

All of that said, I am hesitant to call what happened in this class a success, for fear that doing so might signal a quick fix to the deeply complex obstacles that stand in the way of inclusion. As Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann (2007) have demonstrated, when we defer to “happy talk” about diversity, we often unintentionally reinforce unseen privilege. There were certainly tangible victories in my Shakespeare course, but what this class fostered required more than just a critical mass of students from underrep-resented backgrounds; it took the entire class’s cooperation, and it required work from all of us up to our last day. The crucial element to all of this was a classroom full of intelligent, courageous, and considerate students. In many ways, their group dynamic demonstrated some of the best practices for fostering a more level forum for discussion. They approached each other’s contributions with respect, genuinely engaged with the alternating parlance of their myriad backgrounds, and saw the intellectual value in unpretentious constructions. They took the university brochure fodder of aesthetic diver-

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sity, and they made it into an occasion for less biased intellectual exchange. Moreover, they treated my more casual rhetoric — and my increasingly dated cultural references — with the same generosity that they afforded one another’s. As a class, we kept it real — a simple way to begin discussing Shakespeare with a broader American voice.

Notes 1. Quotations from Shakespeare come from Greenblatt et al. 2008. 2. Kanye West, interview by JV et al., *The JV Show*, 94.9 KYLD FM, 22 October 2013.

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