

“Working-Class Shakespeares: Shakespeare in Class and Class in Shakespeare.”

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To be honest, we were skeptical about organizing a workshop on “Working-Class Shakespeares” because one of us is skeptical about workshops. Not all workshops, but most. The value of a workshop on “teaching scansion” or “movement on stage,” for example, is clear, but on social class? It seemed likely to go down the path of diversity training. Or “how-to-trust” exercises.

O'Dair did come up with a role-playing exercise, but we did not execute it. The role-playing exercise? O'Dair wanted to make all the participants wear a uniform with their first names on it, while we would wear suits. Kind of brilliant, don't you think? Since one glaring example of class in the workplace is the visibility of a uniform and a first name. But it was too much trouble! We would have had to ask participants their shirt sizes and that seemed improper. Still, it would have been compelling, since, like all Americans, some of our participants who grew up in working-class homes had somewhat cloudy understandings of their class positions, thinking their parents middle-class when, in fact, their parents were not.

What we did instead was ask for bits of writing—a “class profile” from each participant, which covered each person's family origin, his or her working or theoretical definition of social class, her or his current status—if you will, class position—in the profession, and so on. We also asked each participant to think about the class positions of her or his students, and of their institutions. Everyone read the profiles and then we asked for each participant to reflect upon his or her original profile in light of the others. Subsequently, we asked for a brief pedagogical exercise, too. Participants wrote about 10 pages each or what one would expect in a seminar. The “assignments” were staggered—structured to spark connections before the face-to-face session. We responded to each participant's entry with detailed comments, identified threads between the ideas, and asked participants to further meditate on these before our meeting. These assignments did cohere with the notion of a workshop, because we were able to “workshop” our once, current, and future social locations. Several participants, after reading others' experiences and ideas, shifted their perspectives on class, pedagogy, and on Shakespeare as synecdoche for literary study.

Much of value emerged in this process, in the pre-work and in the workshop, including discussion of the crucial place of higher education, and in particular of high culture, in producing and reproducing class difference—broadly and within the hierarchy of the academy. Almost all of the participants who grew up in working-class families addressed the problem: some families did not want them to attend college at all; others did but in order to make money in a professional job, not to study Shakespeare (or any literature or art) and certainly not to become a professor. Notably, of our participants who grew up in working-class homes, three were people of color and four were white (and if you include Tim and me, that's six.) One of our participants, a white man, had to drop out of the

seminar because his courses did not make at the community college where he adjuncts, and, therefore, he could not afford to attend.

In contrast, the two (white) participants who grew up in upper middle-class families revealed no such obstacles and experienced no such dissonance about art or literature: going to college, majoring in a field of the humanities, even aspiring toward graduate school and a career as a professor were assumed to be acceptable, even normal paths. Even more compelling is that those participants did not—until the workshop—really seem to understand that what was acceptable and normal for them might not be for others, that working-class kids face continual resistance to what upper middle-class kids assume to be normal. This insight, we think, is important and valuable.

In addition, participants had astute handles on the vagaries—or perhaps the politics—of teaching at non-elite institutions. One colleague who teaches at an HBCU offered some frank talk about his students' preparation and engagement, and whether they would in be better served by obtaining technical or apprenticeship training, with fewer loans. Another, who teaches at a non-selective state institution with primarily Latino students, offered similarly frank talk about the value of reaching for “accessibility”; others agreed, suggesting that the best outcome for first-generation students of any ethnicity studying Shakespeare might be the ability to grapple with what is difficult or indeed alienating.

Participants were energetic in the room and committed to working out a number of problems related to their teaching, their status in the profession, and the place and appeal of literary study for those who are, in fact, disadvantaged from the get-go. The session drew a large number of auditors, and one even followed up, a Ph.D. candidate and first-generation college student from a working class background. She wrote to say that the conversation provided the most comfortable forum for discussion of these issues that she had yet felt or experienced on her own “professional journey.”

Regarding advice about other sorts of topics that might be handled in this fashion, we're not sure—race, sexuality, access, and the increasing vocationalism of lower-tier public institutions come to mind—but we were pleased with the way this workshop turned out. In fact, we would do it again. The success of this workshop, and its afterlife that is taking several shapes still, suggests there is much more work to be done in confronting the politics of class, status, and access, and how we as academics challenge, yet also reproduce, this politics. Happily, many SAA scholars are ready to engage this important work.

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Welcome letter and assignment one:

Hello! And welcome to our 2016 SAA workshop, “Working-Class Shakespeares: Shakespeare in Class and Class in Shakespeare.” And thank you for choosing to participate in it! As you may recall, we described the workshop in the June *Bulletin* as one that will explore

Shakespeare, upward mobility, and the (re)production of social class, especially as related to college access and success. Through shared readings, participants will engage Working-Class Shakespeares from critical, pedagogical, and even biographical perspectives. They will also query, among other questions, the responsibility in teaching working-class students; the relationship between Shakespeare and cultural capital; the ways class and status in the academy influence criticism and pedagogy; and what Shakespeare's plays reveal about education's role in the formation of class, status, and mobility.

And as you probably know, SAA requires that all seminars and workshops involve advance work, which this year must be completed by 15 February 2016, when we must forward to SAA the names of those entitled to be listed in the printed conference program.

To begin that advance work, we ask first that you confirm by November 1, 2015 that you do intend to participate in this workshop. Please send along the usual contact information: preferred email address, institutional affiliation, and status (e.g. PhD student, assistant professor). See! Already we're getting into the topic of our workshop!

Second, we ask that by December 1, you compose an approximately 3-4 page (or 750-1000 word) "class profile" about your experience and understanding of social class. We ask that you identify your social class, whether you've changed classes in your life, and what criteria or definitions you use to determine your class position(s).

Other questions we hope you will answer:

When and how did you become aware of your class position(s)? As a child? College student? Graduate student? Professor?

Does your institution have a discernable class or status 'marker' (i.e. highly selective, selective, access, open admissions, etc.)?

Does your institution require a Shakespeare course for English majors? For any other majors or programs?

Do you teach students whose class differs from yours? If so, how do you negotiate that difference? Does such difference affect your, for lack of better terms, learning expectations and outcomes for your students? Your pedagogy? Or are you simply aggrieved about their automobiles?

Alternatively, in your experience, do your students' interest in and expectations for Shakespeare differ depending on their class backgrounds? In other words, do working-class students want something from Shakespeare that their upper middle-class peers do not? And vice-versa?

Do you experience “class difference” or distinction within the profession? In what ways? Alternatively, is it legitimate to talk about distinction within the profession as “class difference”? If so, why? If not, why?

Has your social class affected your theoretical or critical practice? How, specifically?

Third, and also by December 1, please send us the names and authors of a couple or several texts or essays about social class that you have found particularly useful. These can be theoretical, empirical, critical, that is, specifically about Shakespeare, or pedagogical.

Please note that we would like to circulate these responses, along with a select bibliography drawn from the group’s suggestions, which will allow us to develop and refine our responses for our workshop.

Once we receive your preferred email addresses, we’ll send out another email, so that we’re all on the same email page.

Finally, if you have additional specific requests regarding our work, please let us know. We’re thinking about pedagogical tactics, for instance, which we allude to generally in the above. But what else?

Thanks so much for your interest in this workshop.

Best to each of you,

Sharon and Tim

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Assignment Two:

Everyone,

Thanks so much to each of you for writing your class profile.

For your next assignment, we’d like you to read all the class profiles (and take a look at the assembled bibliography), all of which I attach to this email, and to re-examine your own in perhaps a **one-page essay**. Do the other class profiles cause you to adjust your understanding of class, or your own class position? What issues and problems arise from the class profiles that you did not consider? Or that you chose not to consider? Do these issues differ for those among us who were raised in working-class homes and those among us who were raised in middle- or upper middle-class homes?

In addition, however, we want you to address both parts of our workshop’s subtitle: “Shakespeare in Class and Class in Shakespeare.” Taking the latter first, we would like you to consider the following question: What do Shakespeare’s plays tell us about the

purposes and meanings of education as they relate to class, status, and mobility? Please be specific in writing again a **one-page essay** on this question, a short close reading or two of some bit of the Bard's work.

Thinking about Shakespeare's take on education leads nicely into the question of pedagogy now, how we teach. And so we'd like you to please read the attached essays by Ed Pechter and Stephen Booth. Both appeared in *Shakespeare Quarterly* in Summer 1990. This issue was the third that *SQ* devoted to teaching, following issues in 1984 and 1974. Since 1990, *SQ* hasn't returned to the subject, although the journal did publish a cluster of short essays in Winter 1997 that originated in an SAA panel and a follow-up essay by Karen Cunningham in Fall 1998. According to Ralph Cohen, who edited the 1990 issue, the 1974 issue was eclectic in focus and the 1984 was almost exclusively about teaching through performance. His issue in 1990, perhaps unsurprisingly, addressed "the upheaval in Shakespeare criticism—from deconstruction to new historicism" as well as the variety of institutions where Shakespeare is taught—from high schools to elite graduate programs. A quick look at the cluster from 1997 (and at Cunningham's 1998 essay) indicates the continuing effects on teaching of "the upheaval in Shakespeare criticism"—as well as the brouhaha, which you may or may not recall, over the elimination by many elite colleges and universities of Shakespeare as a requirement in the undergraduate curriculum.

Cohen assumes that teachers' goals vary, "ranging from the practical (making students better playgoers) to the educational (making students better thinkers) to the value-laden (making students better people)" and that these goals reflect "the differing perspectives of the students they teach." This seems quaint, in particular the assertion of causality—that our goals reflect our students' differing perspectives—and the implication that any one group or class of students would have homogeneous perspectives, needs, desires, aims. (This seems quaint, too: that Cohen speaks of teachers' goals instead of students' learning outcomes.) That said, one of the reasons we are gathering for this workshop is to think through the challenges and rewards of teaching working-class students.

So, in a **two-page essay**, can you address some of the following questions, offering explanations and justifications?

What are your goals (not your students' learning outcomes) in teaching Shakespeare to your students? If applicable, do those goals differ for working-class students and for upper middle-class students? Do your students in your current position differ from those you taught in graduate school? If so, did you adjust your pedagogy? Do you think you have a particular responsibility in teaching working-class students? Do you think pedagogy should take into account the academic, financial, and cultural hurdles faced by working-class students? And how? Should pedagogy take into account the stated desires of working-class students for upward mobility? Do you consider it important to articulate for working-class students the intersections and divergences between social or cultural capital and 'actual' or financial capital? How do such formulations influence our understandings of the 'purposes' of Shakespeare and literary study?

Thank you for reading this far! To sum up, a **please send the group and us a total of at least 4 pages by 15 February.**

For the workshop itself, among other tasks, we would like to explore possible “lesson plans” or pedagogical strategies and tactics for use in classroom with working-class students. Would you share one or another of these plans, strategies, or tactics with the group after 1 March but prior to our meeting in NOLA?

Thanks so much, and please ask us questions if you have any.

Looking forward to seeing and meeting you all. We’ll bring beads, well, Sharon will.

Sharon and Tim