

## **SAA Seminar: Shakespeare and Belonging: Abstracts**

### **Jen Black**

#### Creating a Community of Belonging in Online Shakespeare Classes

One common complaint about online learning is that students feel isolated. Even as the demand for and availability of online courses continues to grow (especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of education), many students report dissatisfaction with both their social and academic experiences in online classes where they don't feel like they interact or build significant relationships with others. The lack of interpersonal engagement—especially in fully asynchronous classes—often translates into lower grades and less understanding of the subject matter. But research indicates that the isolation and loneliness of online learning can be decreased and even eliminated through careful course design that allows students to become part of supportive learning communities.

This need for students to belong to a vibrant learning community is especially important in online Shakespeare classes, in which learners are not only asked to engage with difficult texts written in language that challenges their reading skills but also to think about (and perhaps even experience) the performance aspects of Shakespeare's plays. Meaningful discussions about the complex topics Shakespeare's writing deals with can help students gain understanding of early modern literature as well as issues relevant to their own lives. Active engagement in collaborative analysis and performance can help students develop deeper appreciation for Shakespeare's texts at the same time that they expand their own ability to make meaning from them.

In this paper, I will explore the challenge of creating a community of learners in online Shakespeare classes and share a range of strategies that can help instructors invite students into a thriving, supportive, collaborative group in which learners help each other to grow as scholars and human beings.

### **Sarah Brew**

This paper proposes to illuminate the role of bilingualism in Shakespeare studies, and its role and potential in modern performance. Building on my recent research—which has taken the form of scholarly papers, directing the Spanish *comedia* on film, co-directing a bilingual scene from *The Winter's Tale* (*Ella se mueve / She Stirs*), and co-directing a bilingual stage adaptation of *The Winter's Tale*—this project aims to upturn Anglocentric, cultural elitist perspectives of Shakespeare and reappropriate Shakespeare as a vehicle for telling stories of non-native English speakers. As a hybrid scholar of both literature and

performance, as well as a theatre dramaturg and film director, I use here my bilingual creative work to suggest perks and drawbacks to live vs. film performance as a vehicle for disrupting the privileged spot Shakespeare still holds in the theatre canon and destabilising Anglophone dominance in Shakespeare studies, with the ultimate aim being to bring the classics to a linguistically, culturally, racially, and socioeconomically more diverse audience. Specifically, I look at the dramaturgy of language choice, the impacts that language has on meaning-making, and reception. This essay also suggests ways directors and theatres might turn to bilingualism in Shakespeare performance as a way to diversify the canon.

### **Kerry Cooke**

Working title: Exclusionary Principles

To promote belonging on a university campus that is all but defined by Shakespeare it is, of course, necessary to include Shakespeare in its standard curriculum. Or is it? In this essay, I argue that to promote belonging within a pedagogical environment that is largely centered on Shakespeare, Shakespeare can be excluded from the core components of the undergraduate curriculum. I pursue this argument by discussing and elaborating upon the curricular overhaul of the undergraduate Theatre major at Mary Baldwin University – home to the Shakespeare & Performance graduate program – completed in 2022-2023. With curricular detail, data, and anecdote, I assert that excluding Shakespeare from an undergraduate core curriculum, at an institution of MBU's profile, fosters a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging, for undergraduate students, leads to a sense of agency that – perhaps surprisingly – results in confident, rigorous, full-fledged, considerations of Shakespeare.

### **Heather Easterling**

“A hopeful map”: Reading *Twelfth Night's* Comedy of Belonging

My title phrase comes from reporting in the *Chronicle* on efforts towards increasing ‘belonging’ among undergraduates. As this Seminar's theme reflects, since 2020, students' sense of belonging related to academic success and retention has been a surging concern across higher education. Perusing recent reporting and some of the Psychology literature on ‘belonging,’ keywords emerge: developing identity; self-discovery; growth; navigating change. All important and necessary in college, and all striking for their similarity to the language often used to describe the arc or work of Shakespeare's Romantic comedies, including the play which is my interest here, *Twelfth Night*. *Twelfth*

*Night* long has been acknowledged for its "festive" staging of change, release, and the generous power of mirth. Such festivity also has been reconsidered, in recent years: this is a play of and about the elusiveness of interpretation, according to Keir Elam, whose important essay in his Arden edition claims indeterminacy as the central concern of the play. Feste's famous line about Orsino's changeability anchors Elam's further argument that, "the clown's opalescent image is a powerful trope for the comedy as a whole" (38). With such unreliability fundamental to Illyria, Elam's reading finds only in Viola and Feste the skills – of flexibility, curiosity, improvisation – to navigate this world, create change within as well as find a place in it. In this paper, I seek to re-assess such unique comedic characters and skills in *Twelfth Night* in terms of the current challenges of belonging on campus. Bringing together recent critical formulations of the play with contemporary sources on belonging, I read *Twelfth Night* as a play centrally concerned with belonging and featuring two characters, Viola and Feste, whose performances of belonging as an ongoing process of flexibility and improvisation can offer a 'hopeful map' to college students navigating new strange worlds, themselves.

### **Sean Lawrence**

#### Belonging and Identity in *The First Part of Henry VI*"

In my paper, I want to argue that in the first part of *Henry VI*, Shakespeare establishes themes that continue to drive his drama for the rest of his career, around the reciprocal relationship of belonging and identity. The two Talbots die rather than fail in an identity inseparable from belonging to a family of warriors. Richard, Duke of York, undertakes a feud which begins the wars of the roses (and therefore the rest of the tetralogy) rather than give up his identity as a nobleman, an identity tied to the honour of his family and which, in his interview with the dying Mortimer, becomes inseparable from his claim on the English throne.

While this play shows the extremely tight relationship of belonging to a family or a class and identity, however, it also shows the opposite: Talbot's identity can be questioned, and calls for repeated proof. Even in death, it is unclear how he should be addressed. Burgundy's recall to his French identity appears simultaneously essentializing and arbitrary; "Done like a Frenchman," Joan comments, "turn and turn again" (3.3.85). Joan herself, however, is perhaps the best example of a purely arbitrary identity, belonging nowhere, really. She declares herself to be "by birth a shepherd's daughter" (1.2.72), then disowns that shepherd when he appears onstage (5.5.7-8); claims both virginity and pregnancy; and enjoys the patronage of both the Virgin Mary (as she claims; 1.2.76-83) and a troop of rather unenthusiastic devils (who appear onstage; 5.3.*passim*). While Shakespeare shows some of the dangers of tying identity to a

group, he also, and perhaps more relevantly for us, openly mocks the attempt to eschew fixed identity altogether, in recourse to what is increasingly called "alternative facts" and even (following Harry Frankfurt) "bullshit."

### **Rhonda Lemke Sanford**

Gloucester's Bastard Son, 'Edmund, the UnBelongingest'—and His Quest for Belonging

Whether they are bastards by conception, by personality, or both, Shakespeare's bastards seldom have inconsequential roles and often steal the show. The plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* goes awry, in large part, because of the machinations of the bastard Don John and the "use" he makes of his bastardy. But if Don John "uses" his bastardy to great effect, Gloucester's illegitimate son, Edmund, absolutely weaponizes *his* bastardy in ways that affect both the plot and the subplot of *King Lear*. The kind of merry-making in which Gloucester indulges in his discussion of the conception of his son, at whose making there was "great sport," echoes the controlled anxiety often found in Shakespeare's plays around touchy subjects. And in the case of frequent jokes about illegitimacy and ubiquitous gibes at cuckoldry, what is at stake is not just pride, but also title and inheritance.

Using legal and religious texts, as well as cultural assumptions about illegitimate, "natural," or bastard progeny, this paper traces Edmund's various attempts at belonging in a society that has excluded him from the patrimony that he so desperately wants and the recognition he feels he deserves.

### **Laura B. Turchi**

Drama, Literacy, Justice, and Student Voice: Curriculum Frameworks that Support Shakespeare's Works as a Vehicle for Classroom Community

In 2021 the Assistance to Arts Education program of the US Department of Education awarded a five-year, \$2 million grant to the Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles (SCLA) to establish the Shakespeare and Social Justice Project (SSJ). The project built on 30 years of *Will Power to Youth* programming at SCLA, begun in the 1990s in response to the Rodney King beating and riots. *Will Power* offered workforce development to young adults through arts-based teaching strategies: its centerpiece was intense collaborative study of a Shakespeare play and the creation of a performance where students blended the original text in an adaptation that offered their social justice-infused commentary (Thompson, 2011).

The project developed a model that incorporated literacy practices, theater-based active learning strategies, youth perspectives on teaching and learning,

and the four pillars of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice framework: identity, diversity and community, systems of justice, and action (see [learningforjustice.org](http://learningforjustice.org)). The SSJ project curriculum approached Shakespeare sonnets and plays in four instructional phases: 1) Activate connections, 2) Notice meanings, 3) Paraphrase together, and 4) Make art.

In August 2025 the project's initial proposal (not its results) was deemed "in conflict with Administration policy and priorities, and ... not in the best interest of the Federal Government," and its funding was stopped; the Shakespeare Center of LA feared for its donor base and erased the project from its website. However, the work lives on through partner arts organizations.

This paper focuses on Shakespeare and student *belonging*, specifically the Shakespeare-centric strategies for building classroom community that the SSJ curriculum created. It argues that Geoffrey Cohen's idea of *situation crafting* for student belonging is evident in the Shakespeare approaches the project designed for secondary school ELA teachers and teaching artists. This paper will examine in detail how four example activities explicitly support – even demand – collaboration for learning through and about Shakespeare comedies (possibly *The Taming of the Shrew*).

1. ¿*Quiénes somos?* as an icebreaker and more, introducing the variety of perspectives in a classroom, connecting to Shakespeare ideas, and supporting students as social scientists;
2. Choral reading and student presentation/performances as an experience of close reading Shakespeare passages;
3. A "divide and conquer" approach to paraphrasing for collaborative ownership of the meaning of a Shakespeare text;
4. Design concept work for imagining productions, casting, and more.

The paper will provide teacher-reported evidence of student engagement and enhanced classroom community. While the SSJ project was secondary-school focused, these materials can be usefully adaptable to undergraduate Shakespeare teaching.

### **Dawn Monique Williams**

This paper investigates the mobilization of Shakespeare as a site of belonging when shaped through Black artistic intervention and culturally responsive pedagogy. Although Shakespeare is frequently positioned as a repository of "universal" human experience, dominant performance traditions often rely on interpretive norms that marginalize or erase the embodied knowledge of Black performers and students. This study challenges the presumed neutrality of the

canon by treating performance as a primary pedagogical and epistemological practice rather than an illustrative supplement to the text.

Drawing on my dual perspective as a theatre scholar and practitioner, I examine how intentional artistic choices by Black theatre-makers function within Shakespearean production. From textual adaptation, directorial approaches, casting, to movement and voice, these choices are not decorative or corrective; they operate as forms of culturally relevant pedagogy that reposition Black performers as central agents in the meaning-making process, rather than as exceptional or supplemental presences (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The paper centers case studies of recent Black-led Shakespeare productions to trace how rehearsal and performance become spaces of historical recovery, collective authorship, and community formation. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Black performers in the rehearsal room and on the stage, these productions resist models of Shakespeare that privilege textual mastery and aesthetic restraint over embodiment and relationality. Instead, they cultivate rehearsal practices that support self-recognition, critical inquiry, and shared ownership of the work.

Grounded in critical race theory's emphasis on experiential knowledge and counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), this paper argues that belonging in Shakespeare is achieved through specificity, intentionality, and embodied practice, not through claims of universality. Ultimately, it proposes a performance-based pedagogical model in which Shakespearean drama becomes a site of cultural affirmation—one that invites Black performers and students to belong rather than merely participate.