



MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University
**Montclair State University Digital
Commons**

Department of English Faculty Scholarship and
Creative Works

Department of English

5-2019

"Who's there?' 'Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself' : Attending to Students in Diversified Settings"

Naomi C. Liebler

Montclair State University, lieblern@mail.montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs>



Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), [Secondary Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

MSU Digital Commons Citation

Liebler, Naomi C., "'Who's there?' 'Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself' : Attending to Students in Diversified Settings" (2019). *Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works*. 64.
<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs/64>

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

“Who’s there?” “Nay,
answer me. Stand
and unfold yourself”:
Attending to Students in
Diversified Settings

Naomi Conn Liebler

I should begin with an explanation of my title. This essay will have nothing to do with *Hamlet*, from which the lines are borrowed; it is directed instead toward the reciprocities of teaching Shakespeare’s work to diverse groups of readers—diverse in backgrounds, interests, educational backgrounds, and opportunities. I appropriate Shakespeare’s lines here because they speak to a range of experiences and responses that themselves might be said to typify—if that is even possible—how some of my students have experienced their engagements with Shakespeare. The lines from *Hamlet* open the play, and are spoken by Bernardo and Francisco, two sentinels on watch—unsure for (or against) what—on the castle walls at Elsinore. They are of course old friends, but in the dark and the cold in the middle of the night, muffled against the elements, they do not immediately recognize each other. Francisco challenges his comrade to “stand and unfold” himself. In thinking about how I have been teaching Shakespeare’s plays, and to whom, for nearly half a century, it occurs to me that “stand[ing] and unfold[ing] themselves is what I have asked the plays to do, and it is also what

I have asked my students to do. The texts and the situations represented in Shakespeare's plays often seem at best strange and alien to their own language and experiences, if not completely cloaked and unrecognizable. My challenge as their teacher has been to facilitate their requirement that these texts reveal themselves to their uneasy readers. In confronting each other—often in the cold and in the dark, so to speak, wary of an unfamiliar challenger—Shakespeare's plays and my students often seem to dance around each other, a little guarded, a little nervous, hoping that it will all turn out OK and no one will die from it.

It goes without saying that teaching Shakespeare to students at secondary or undergraduate and MA levels is a remarkably varied experience, depending, of course, on the "composition" of the class. Our students bring themselves, their distractions, their personal problems, their experiences to their reading, their seeing and hearing, and so I have found the practice of engaging them in the *utile et dulce* of Shakespeare study to be an incredibly and unpredictably rich experience, regardless of the "level" of the class or its members. We read out of who we are.

My university began in 1908 as a Teacher Training Institution; 20 years later it became a State Teachers College; 30 years after that, a "liberal arts" college with a consistently strong teacher-preparation agenda and a small master's program; by 1994 it had become a State University, and in 2016 became both a Carnegie-classified "public research university" and a US Department of Education-designated "Hispanic-Serving Institution." Increasingly we are called upon to be, if not all things to all people, then at least as many things as we can manage to as many people as we can reach.

Two growth tendencies, first toward multicultural representation in curriculum and in population, and more recently toward a consciously architected diversity in student and faculty populations representing a variously defined "America," have brought about some curious reconsiderations regarding the practice of and the reasons for teaching Shakespeare's work. We are abetted by the curricular requirements of middle and secondary schools in the

State of New Jersey that continue to insist upon the study of Shakespeare at those levels. As we train and certify a large percentage of the teaching populations in the state, accordingly we teach Shakespeare to some extent in order to prepare *our* students to teach Shakespeare to *their* (future) students. In many ways, it's been a very comfortable niche to occupy, and despite shrinking enrollments overall, courses in Shakespeare seem to remain "safe" from the scythe of deanly enrollment managers. In my department, we don't *require* our students, not even our English majors, to take a Shakespeare course, but the folks who certify K-12 teachers *do* require one course in Shakespeare, and despite a growing trend among our undergraduate English majors toward professions other than teaching, K-12 pedagogy remains a popular enough career plan to sustain our Shakespeare sections. We keep these classes small (a cap of 33) and tightly organized around discussion rather than lecture. We don't employ teaching assistants; the three Shakespeare instructors do their own teaching and their own marking. We serve around 100 students every semester at the undergraduate level. These statistics have remained constant over the 46 years I have been teaching here.

But everything else has changed, and continues to change: not *what* I teach, but *how* I teach it, and more importantly, *to whom*.

Increasingly, I find that I am not so much "delivering" Shakespeare to my heterogeneous and ethnically/racially diverse student populations as I am tapping into what they already know, experientially, in order to clear a path for them to forge their own connections. I want them to own what they read, to make it their own. They certainly can, and in a gratifying number of cases they do. The touchstone term used to be "relevance"; now it's "relatability." Whatever the word, the underlying demand is, for some reason, some justification for all the work involved in learning what is effectively a new language, certainly a new syntax and grammar, and whole new sets of backstories and metrics: what has this to do with *me*; why should I bother (or even care)? Cultural capital? This is not *my* culture and it's not *my* capital.

I have known from the very start of my teaching life that if I could not answer those questions with integrity and a good deal of respect for my students' skepticism, I should probably find some other way to pay my rent. I have not always succeeded in making the difference to my Shakespeare students that I wanted to make, and sometimes the jury stayed out for a decade or longer. I don't always *know* what difference I or Shakespeare have made to them. But I do know that those students have made a profound difference to me, enough to keep me in the classroom beyond the useful life of my paperback teaching editions inscribed with my excitedly scribbled and beloved marginalia and crumbling pages that long ago lost both front and back covers, prompting more than a few students to offer to take up a collection to buy me new copies. This essay, then, is not about the teaching methods or pedagogical practices that ease my students' way into expertise—or whatever it is that we formally hope for. It's about how the conversations among us—teacher and students—have merged and synthesized a collection of specific relationships within the shared experience of studying plays, so that Shakespeare comes to mean *something* to each of us. We are all reading the same plays, but we are all reading them differently.

I am thinking of two quite different teaching experiences that have made lasting impressions on me. One was with a group of local secondary and middle school kids brought to my campus for "Humanities in the Schools Day," a program of half-day "conferences" for secondary and middle school students and their teachers presented by Montclair State University's Institute for the Humanities, which ran some 70 sessions for 25 years between 1992 and 2017. These schools have some latitude in selecting the plays they will teach students between 8th and 12th grades, but the true constant appears to be *Romeo and Juliet*, and so, especially because the group in my charge on one December afternoon in 1999 was mainly 8th- and 10th-graders, that was the play of choice. It was not my intention to teach them "about" the play, nor to preempt the work of their own classroom teachers. I had no way of predicting or even learning what

prior work they had done or what challenges or roadblocks they might have encountered. To some extent, this was going to be a one-size-fits-all conversation, and I hoped it would fit everyone in the room, some of whom were from homogeneously white suburban communities and others from inner-city urban schools. I should note here that when I delivered this workshop, school districts in my part of New Jersey had not yet banned *Romeo and Juliet* from their curricula and removed copies from their library shelves, as some have now done because of a concern that the play might seem to be promoting teen suicide, or teen sex, or teen elopements—or “teen” rebellion of any kind.¹ The subject of suicide or rebellion was not raised that day; my own agenda was not to rehash the discussion points already available in their own classrooms but rather to suggest another perspective, one that had informed my own thinking about Shakespeare for nearly a decade at that point, derived from my reading of Victor Turner’s revolutionary explanations of liminality in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* and others of his books. This remains an important core of what I talk about when I talk about Shakespearean tragedy, and I have introduced the concept at every level of classroom discussion from undergraduate through MA courses. That day, I introduced it to these middle and high school students. The idea that tragedy occurs when one is stuck in an incomplete passage from one status (social, political, biological, etc.) to another seemed simple enough and appropriate enough for these 8th- and 10th-graders, and they absolutely “got it.” There was not an adolescent in the room who did not recognize the dangers of such a passage, or did not know that in fact that’s what adolescence *is*: *liminality*, a time and a state of transition, when identities and expectations and even “rules” are ambiguous and confusing. Liminality renders the subject confused and confusing, endangered and dangerous. They are not what they were, and not yet what they will be. While in transition, as all teenagers are, they need such protections as their cultures and communities can provide for them. This is never about blame or fault. It is never the responsibility of any individual. Because it

encompasses passages and transitions on which the survival of a community depends, seeing the principals through that transition, via rituals and practices designed by culture to protect that vulnerability, is the responsibility of the whole community: it does indeed take a village. When structures of authority can't or don't perform their responsibilities, tragedy happens. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it's not the kids' fault. This was in sum the focus announced in a flyer distributed in advance to the teachers:

The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* is above all the tragedy of Verona; at the end of the play, the two young lovers are united forever in death, but the community represented in the Montague and Capulet families has lost its next generation. As the prince says at the play's end, "All are punished." Are the two kids merely "poor sacrifices" to a community's internal war, or are they in some ways partly responsible for what happened to them and their bereaved families? The failure of the entire city to honor and protect its own rituals, designed to protect and ensure the continuation of the community, is the core of this tragedy.

Some of the teachers were visibly unsure about this idea—they had not come across it before—but it was absolutely clear to me that the kids understood exactly what I was talking about. One 8th-grader within earshot stage-whispered: "She way cool!" The play unfolded for them. They recognized the crucial issues laid out in text and performance. Ours was a "class" with an unconventional and for the most part unanticipated structure, but teaching and learning got done that day.

The second circumstance involved a young graduate student named Marcos Vargas who came to us to find the answers to a question put to him as he introduced his own inner-city secondary classes to *Othello*. Mr. Vargas was teaching English in a high school in Newark (the state's largest and most diverse urban center). When one of his students, unfamiliar with the term "Moor," asked him whether Othello

was a black man, Mr. Vargas said he didn't know but would find out. That promise brought him to my university and to my graduate class on Shakespearean tragedy. (Because we did not allow auditors in our graduate classes, he had to enroll in the MA program in order to take the course!) He went on to write a thesis under my direction on negotiations of race in Shakespearean drama titled *Mending the Moor on the Early Modern Stage: The Rise of Shakespeare's Black Tragic Hero* (2007). Even while the thesis was in progress, Vargas brought his lessons to the Newark and Irvington (NJ) schools of which he was himself a graduate.

I was the fresh grad student. I had already been a teacher by trade for several years ... While I never struggled with getting the words out in an academic setting, in fact I relished the opportunity, [studying Shakespeare] made it clear to me that precision and substance must always accompany verbosity. As the realization that this would be no easy "A" began to take hold, so did my fiery resistance to mediocrity ... For myself, I expected more and resisted settling for less. For my students, I demanded their best and by doing so demonstrated my respect for them ... I no longer lead classrooms; I lead school districts now.²

Marcos Vargas became chair of the English department in the Newark public school where he taught, then District Supervisor for English Language Arts 6–12 for Irvington, a community next to Newark that has been classified by the State Department of Education in the lowest of eight levels of socioeconomic opportunities for education. He is now the Director of Secondary Education for the Montclair, New Jersey, Public Schools, where he oversees curricula encompassing English Literature, English Language Arts, and English as a Second Language. For Vargas, the lessons learned from studying Shakespeare, from engaging closely not only with the language but, perhaps more importantly, with the perpetually knotty and urgent questions of living vibrantly in a threatening world, have created a

legacy of continuing educational influence that he passes on to his students, to the teachers under his supervision, to their students, and so on. The lessons retained and passed along are the things that matter now—not plots of plays or character analyses, and probably not speeches memorized (though that can still happen by choice and resonance). Heroic models, inspirations toward persistence and resistance and to deliberative thought and reflection are what my students, and Marcos Vargas's students, find engaging and meaningful.

There have been and doubtless will continue to be other examples of how a life informed by reading, hearing, seeing, and thinking about Shakespeare shows a number of high-water marks over time. I'm sure that everyone contributing to or reading this volume has them. For me, there was one more (so far) very recent event that will remain a high point in my Shakespearean career. The extraordinarily gifted director Karin Coonrod brought to our campus last fall (September 2017) her radical and unforgettable production of *The Merchant of/in Venice*, and the university made a two-week celebration of it, capped by an evening of conversation among two colleagues—David Kastan of Yale and James Shapiro of Columbia—and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I had the pleasure of introducing their conversation by explaining to a select audience of donors, local luminaries, politicians, a State Supreme Court Justice, and a few members of the general public why this production mattered—why Shakespeare mattered. These were not, in the main, our students; they were members of a public whose taxes support what we do, and who had every right to wonder what they were paying for. Here is the last part of what I said, in trust that it will also serve to conclude this essay:

The Merchant of Venice is a play that looks closely at issues of inclusion, diversity, and the consequences to a community that scapegoats and bullies and would homogenize those it *allows* to live in it. It's obviously a play for our time, and it is very much a play for our

campus, for our students, and for our surrounding communities (plural). In my teaching, I ask my students to find *something* in the plays they are studying, the characters and situations represented, that they can recognize in themselves. I want them to own what they read, to find their own way in, to see that, apart from a few linguistic distractions, a few "thees," "thous," and "those," Hamlet or Othello or Shylock or Antonio "R" us. They really R. No one ever asks me (though I know the question is out there somewhere) why we still study Shakespeare, and why we study Shakespeare at Montclair State. Here's my answer anyway. It's because he knows us, knows who we are now. We don't just talk about Shakespeare as a dead carver of cultural relics, though there's some of that too. He also helps us to understand ourselves. Now. It's not like we've changed all that much.

Notes

- 1 A quick Google search reveals the (often anecdotal) urban-mythic scope of reports of this phenomenon, perhaps best known from Sara Munson Deats' path-breaking essay, "The Conspiracy of Silence in Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet,'" in *Youth Suicide Prevention: Lessons from Literature*, eds. Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker (New York: Plenum Press, 1989).
- 2 Marcos Vargas, personal communication, November 2016.