"The Villainy You Teach Me . . .": Shakespeare and AP English Literature

Mary Janell Metzger

Advanced Placement English and Shakespeare share a kind of cult status these days: both are considered ready prescriptions for our "ailing schools" and the students who populate them. AP English, with its rigorous curriculum of reading, writing, and analysis, culminates in a test that has the virtue of winning its better scorers the financial rewards of college credit. Pressured by parents, legislators, and district administrators to offer proof of student learning, AP English is tempting given its original aim to prepare students for achievement beyond the high school classroom. For these reasons, AP courses are now mandated in several states and exam fees guaranteed by state budgets in as many more. And, as AP teachers will tell you, if there is one writer who may appear in successive years on the AP literature exam, it is Shakespeare. Teachers may debate the merits of many American and British writers, from the medieval to the modern, but you would be hard pressed to find an AP English teacher who forgoes Shakespeare.

As a college teacher of Shakespeare, I set out recently to discover something about what the connection between state drives for accountability, the growing popularity of the AP English class, and the teaching of Shakespeare means for students at the high school level. I've long been interested in the nature of my students' previous experience with Shakespeare, though reliant on their own necessarily brief and subjective accounts. What do students learn about Shakespeare in an AP English class, and how do they learn it? How does the connection between content and method prepare them for English classes like mine a few years down the road, or for the challenges of self-determination that await them once their secondary years are over? In order to find answers to these questions, I read widely in the literature about AP English, haunted the College Board-sponsored e-mail discussion list dedicated to AP English teachers, and, most importantly, spent a month in a local AP literature classroom as students studied Shakespeare's *Othello.* What I learned from these experiences and research suggests that the "new age" of Shakespeare may well be a sad one. Certainly, I came away disheartened, grieving for the losses of teachers, students, and community that I regularly witnessed during my study. While my experience of AP English constitutes but a snapshot of life with Shakespeare in today's high school, I believe that it is fairly representative for reasons I'll soon make clear.

Let me start with the good news. The resources for high school English teachers of Shakespeare have never been better. Thoughtful and provocative assignments for reading, writing about, and performing Shakespeare are abundant and easily accessible by way of the Internet and the bookstore. Thanks in great part to the Folger series on teaching Shakespeare, many teachers have abandoned the traditional and thoroughly deadening practice of making their students sit for days reading aloud a Shakespeare they find nonsensical and boring. Instead, like the teacher I observed, they get their students on their feet, playing in the best and

Copyright © 2002 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.

most grave sense of the word with Shakespeare's language, characters, and dramatic juxtapositions. In simply being Iago "on-stage," the students I watched discovered the dreadful pleasures of Iago's speech as they stood in the light of their peers' focus. Shakespeare's love of his malevolent figures is never clearer than when students recognize the intellectual and linguistic power he gives them. Attempting to block the first scenes of Desdemona's married life, those same students realized the problem of her position in trying to figure out the literal movements and expression of her body. Who is she? Assertive advocate of her own desire that "heaven had made her such a man" (1.3.162) or, as her father tells us, "a maiden never bold" (1.3.94)—or some complex combination of the two?[1] Much laughter and the easy discovery of the richness and force of Shakespeare's language and characterization are often the result of the simple act of getting students "playing" Shakespeare. Similarly, teachers are empowered by writing exercises found in the Folger series or shared generously by others on the Web. Rather than journaling endlessly, students may construct "word-operas" made of the various appearances of specific terms throughout an entire play or research the history of a play's production.

Such a lack of inquiry—of open-ended discussion rooted in knowledge of the text and its historical context—was, I'm grieved to say, the norm rather than the exception in my observation of the AP classroom.

Yet all these resources are meaningless if a teacher's central aim is the limited forum of the AP exam rather than the development of student inquiry and the larger understanding such inquiry leads to. For example, the AP English class I observed was a predominantly white class—as are most AP classes—in which ethnicity itself was often represented by both the teacher and the students as the "politically correct" concern of outsiders—and this despite their reading of *Othello* and the mixed ethnicity of the students themselves. Still, by following an assignment suggested in the Folger series for classroom presentations on *Othello,* the students were surprised to learn of the famous African American Shakespearean actors Ira Aldridge and Paul Lawrence Dunbar and their hateful treatment at the hands of a racist and rabidly anti-communist American culture and government. Unfortunately, no discussion followed from these realizations or the kinds of questions they implied about what reading or performing Shakespeare's *Othello* might mean now or then. Such a lack of inquiry—of open-ended discussion rooted in knowledge of the text and its historical context—was, I'm grieved to say, the norm rather than the exception in my observation of the AP classroom.

Teaching Shakespeare, I know from experience, offers a rich opportunity to explore the ways in which language and the contexts in which we use it open up questions of lifelong import. Great poets like Shakespeare help us to frame the most important questions: Who are we? Why are we here? Now? Then? How does our use of language reveal us? Lead us? Reading and writing about literature helps us discover answers to these questions and imagine the ways in which we might act on them in the world that lies beyond the classroom walls. These are not questions above any student. Indeed, adolescents understand better than many adults the risks we run in life by the choices we make. And they understand role-playing and its consequent rewards and punishments well, having to practice it nearly every day in the social confines of the American high school. They also know the power of words. Listen to their music, their speech, and read what they write for each other. Yet, from what I observed, discussions addressing these questions and the requisite affirmation of distinct and often irreconcilable points of view are too often the exception rather than the rule in the AP classroom in which Shakespeare appears.

Why? The answers are many. The cultural, economic, and social pressures that parents, school administrators, and legislators face lead them to believe that holding teachers accountable for what their students achieve will keep them safe from "failure." Telling teachers to define the meaning of their

students' learning by the single indicator of their final AP test score is easier than undertaking the work to define the shared values that empower any learning community. Parents, administrators, and school board members may honestly tell you that test scores are what the community wants. And they might be right—depending on which voices in the community you attend to. So the percentage of students who pass the final AP exam becomes the measure of how well students and teachers alike have done. One of the first things the teacher I observed told me about herself was the percentage of her students who had passed the AP exam the previous year. Certainly there is some reason for such pride in numbers because those schools where students score high on the AP exam tend to correlate with the percentage of students who go on to pursue a college degree. And college degrees mean economic security, as students and parents alike will tell you. The emphasis here on product over process is not incidental.

But what does the AP exam measure? And what does that have to do with Shakespeare? A test made up of multiple choice questions and three forty-minute essays may give testers a snapshot of reading comprehension and writing fluency. More likely, the test provides a measure of the student's ability to read and write under pressure—a pressure that at once excludes ambiguity and reflection and encourages vague generalities.[2] As a consequence of the nature of the exam, teachers often believe it is incumbent on them to mimic the conditions and expectations of the test in their classroom. So teachers, such as the one I observed, move extremely quickly. And by this I don't mean necessarily through the text, but rather through activities aimed at generating the skills required by the exam. The sense is often one of working at a time deficit and thus looking for quick fixes that will allow the teacher to offer the students an angle on a text that will serve them well should that text appear in the essay portion of the exam. At the same time, because reading comprehension is crucial to a student's success in the multiple choice portion of the test, exercises that force the student to focus narrowly on specific lines or passages—to attend to diction, tone (a term that comes up a lot on the AP English discussion list), vocabulary, and theme—take up a lot of class time.

I can hear the voices of teachers, parents, and taxpayers alike defending these practices as I write. As a teacher and parent of public school children myself, I know the simple and remarkable value of a student who can re-present what she or he has read clearly and accurately. But is this the aim of an AP class? According to the College Board, an AP English class "recognizes the need to emphasize the common skills in reading and writing that are necessary for advanced study in the field" (*AP Program Course Description* 3). The connection here between "common skills" and "advanced study" raises the question for me of how high school teachers and administrators conceive of what we do in a college English classroom. Advanced study of Shakespeare, I would tell them, requires basic reading and writing skills, but beyond this low level requirement, reading Shakespeare requires the imagination and a daring capacity to entertain ambiguity and the paradoxes of human life and history. Multiple choice questions and forty minute essays, while useful as a measure of some abilities, work as ends against the very consciousness of language and its power to shape human understanding that Shakespeare encourages in us. Indeed, in teaching to the test—consciously or unconsciously, by choice or force of circumstance—the most important aspect of Shakespeare's work, his ability to imagine the complex lives of powerfully historicized human beings, is lost to our students.

One of the first things the teacher I observed told me about herself was the percentage of her students who had passed the AP exam the previous year.

An exchange I had with my representative AP English students explains how I come to such conclusions. After four weeks of studying *Othello,* undertaking a variety of writing and performance activities and completing a six-page essay involving secondary sources, the students were left alone with me to talk about AP English and Shakespeare. I asked them to respond in writing to a series of questions I had prepared and then opened it up for

discussion. The questions ranged from why they were taking AP Literature, to what they believed the uses of Shakespeare were, to what role they believed reading imaginary works—and by extension the imagination itself—played in creating a successful life. I asked them to define for me what they meant by success and also how they thought about the AP Literature test itself.

Overwhelmingly, the little practical use they saw for Shakespeare was limited to cocktail conversation or studies in human psychology. As one student put it, "Unless you appear to be cultured, different organizations and groups will reject you." Another explained, "Reading this lit shows how people behave—really just psychology. If you study these interactions, you will know what to expect from people and therefore be more successful." Many confessed, however, that while Shakespeare's work might not have much practical value, his writing and imaginary works in general were often personally meaningful. "Reading Shakespeare to me is like going home. It's tough sometimes, but I can't stay away from the language of his plays. They are so beautiful and true to life . . ." The same student expressed fear of the test, but tried to allay those fears by telling herself that it "will be no big deal" if she can "learn the technique of analyzing."

The disjunction between the imagination and analysis suggested here was most striking in student responses to the survey's final question: "Do you think using your imagination is an important life skill? Please explain why or why not." While most of the class believed reading Shakespeare had little practical purpose, they agreed, with a few notable exceptions, that the imagination was crucial to life (more about those exceptions in a minute). Without imagination, life would be "monotonous and boring," many students explained. And the imagination was required for the generation of new ideas. "New ideas keep things fresh," one student said. Another declared, "Imagination is the art of believing what could be and creating hypotheses from them." Those who disagreed with these views, though in the minority, were quite articulate and vocal. According to these students, while imagination was the key to a meaningful life, society itself rewards conformity much more highly than creativity. Because of this, as one student put it in writing and directly to his peers, "The imagination is a preschool relic." Significantly, one of these students was able to connect the test-driven context of the class with precisely the kinds of uniformity he believes are socially rewarded.

Othello and Desdemona from the May 2002 Folger Theatre production of *Othello.*

I recount these responses because the disjunction at work between analysis and imagination, between the power of language and the social uses of the pleasure it gives us, can largely be attributed to the effect of the classroom context in which they engage Shakespeare's work. More simply, these students seem convinced that their experience of literature in general and Shakespeare in particular is a hoop-jumping exercise that has little relevance to their aims to live "successful" lives. Indeed, when I asked one student who was angered by those who argued against the social significance of the imagination if she could explain how it figured into her notion of a successful life, she stared at me in confusion. Didn't I know? her wide-eyes seemed to ask. When I insisted she tell me, she finally expressed a vague generalization about making your dreams come true. And this is a straight-A student well

known as a "leader" in a school known for the academic success of its graduates.

What is missing for these students, I believe, is a communal experience in which the possibilities consequent upon considering the irresolvable questions of the nature of Shakespeare's work are explored. Reading and performing *Othello* should mean considering the problems of the play: the dilemma of a woman who cannot find a way to reconcile the contradictions of being a wife when doing so means both active advocacy of her husband's welfare and passive acceptance of his every desire, even when those are violent; the quandary of a keenly intelligent man who understands clearly his society's weakness for homogeneity over merit but chooses to

What is missing for these students, I believe, is a communal experience in which the possibilities consequent upon considering the irresolvable questions of the nature of Shakespeare's work are explored.

use that knowledge to destroy the one person who has controverted that inclination; and, last, the puzzle of a man who is presented as both beyond stereotype and caged by it. In the process of considering these scenarios, students should look hard at key passages in the play as a way of exploring how Shakespeare's use of language and action get us to think about such characters and the contexts in which they come alive. They can act out crucial exchanges in order to see and feel the meaning and significance of what can happen onstage. And by using historical resources now widely available they can explore the differences and similarities between the notions of difference at work in Shakespeare's world—those of rank, color, religion, gender, age, and culture—and those circulating in our own historical moment—race, gender, class, religion, sexuality, and age, among others. The aim is not to answer the questions of the play definitively but to locate ourselves in relation to it—honoring both in the process. Thus, for example, when students in my classes claim that *Othello* is a racist play, I challenge them to reconcile the early Othello with the Othello of the last two acts, and to do so in terms that take into account both the history of the term *racist* and an explanation of what tragedy is. I don't have the answer to such a challenge. But, like many English teachers, I do have the skills to hold them responsible for the clarity and integrity of their answer.

As this example suggests, I want to help students take seriously *what* Shakespeare is saying about the challenges of living in his day and age, *how* he's saying it, and *what that might mean to us* as human beings living in a different historical moment that nevertheless follows from Shakespeare's own. Of course, taking seriously what Shakespeare is saying requires grappling with his often difficult syntax and strange vocabulary, but if Shakespeare is presented as a puzzle rather than a cultural requirement, students are much more ready to take such work on. As the students in the AP class I observed knew well, Shakespeare might be a prerequisite for the AP exam, but unless you aim to be an English teacher or a dramatist of some kind, he will never show up in a job interview. They know the cultural literacy argument for Shakespeare is a sham, and we earn their distrust when we try to convince them of it. But as the same students tried to tell me in their defense of and personal commitment to the role of imagination in their lives, "We can't live without it so help us to see how it works and how it can help make our lives more meaningful."

When students tell me, as they always do, that Shakespeare is hard and strange, I ask them what their parents think of rap or Hip-hop. "They don't like it," they tell me. Why? "Because they don't understand it." Well, I tell them, Shakespeare's more like a Hip-hop artist than many would like to think. He made up a lot of words and often sacrificed convention for rhythm or meaning. He wanted badly to make money at what he did. He wrote quickly and sometimes carelessly. I say these things to my students not to diminish Shakespeare but to humanize him. Of all canonical artists, he comes with the most baggage.

What I am advocating does not require a PhD in English with a specialty in Shakespeare, as many

might believe. Instead it requires a commitment to literature as acts of imagination and forms of beauty in which the history and mystery of human beings are played out. Yes, the tools of literary analysis are useful in this process. But they are no replacement for the passionate interest of students in what the text can mean to their personal and necessarily public lives. The students who take flight in my classes are not those who have mastered the literary handbook—though, again, it offers some handy tools. Nor are they necessarily students who do well on multiple choice and timed essay exams. Rather, they are students who take seriously their own relationship to the literary imaginations they encounter and understand the significance of that relationship to their role as members of their communities. I can help them employ syntax and grammar to greater effect in this project. I can show them how to develop their analysis of the textual evidence to better illustrate their argument. I can explain to them what the passive voice is and how it weakens the power of their writing. But I cannot give them a voice or tell them what that voice means. Indeed, they really do not understand the real utility of such skills until they have something they urgently want to say.

Let me be clear. I am not advocating an "anything goes because the student's having fun" approach. And, yes, there are things a student may passionately want to say—about Shakespeare, or themselves—that I won't give them credit for. If Shakespeare's work can teach us anything, it is that writing with power and beauty is not a matter of pure voice but of taking responsibility for our relationships and the significant role language plays in representing those. Voice is required, but it's a beginning, not an end. Too often AP English Literature, with its emphasis on deducing the most likely answer among four possibilities and the value of quick, pointed essays, diminishes the likelihood of teachers and students engaging in the slow and uncertain work of holding each other accountable to the lives and art at hand. Significantly, that aim is related to the only personal reason students in this particular AP class gave for taking it: longing overwhelmingly to be "challenged," many acknowledged the pleasures of working with others committed to challenging themselves.

The more that AP English teachers concern themselves with test preparation, the less likely it is that their students will arrive in my class prepared to do the work I require of them. Why? Because test preparation necessarily values "technique," as the student above clearly explained, over the harder, paradoxical task of developing honest, respectful relationships to the art of Shakespeare. There are courageous AP teachers who understand this, as I learned reading the AP English discussion list. Responding to the common question of needing to teach this or that text, one teacher bravely ventured that, beyond the necessity for historical, communal, and generic coverage, English teachers should teach what they love. In doing so, they teach the most important lesson of all, he said—that language and the art we can create with it can change lives. Great readers of all kinds are always moved by such love—there is no greater form of sustenance.

Obviously, teachers of AP English are caught in a terrible jam similar to today's coaches of young athletes. There is no escaping the pressure to win and the temptations to sacrifice the long-term development of individuals and the communities to which they one day may contribute to the short-term rewards of the approval of the horde. But let's be honest. Teaching Shakespeare must mean challenging young people to take seriously the complex forms human lives and histories take. If we do it right, I think, they may pass the test, but more importantly, they may learn to love the language that Shakespeare and they share and to think hard and carefully about its uses. If we do it right, they may return to Shakespeare, finding something new in each reading of *King Lear*—as age and family history shape their own lives. They may learn to laugh at the gender play of the comedies with the relish of those who have survived the trials of identity formation, even as they recall the blushing pain and joy of the role-play that got them there. They might even discover that *Romeo and Juliet* does not idealize the lovers but asks that we see their foolishness in the context of a world with few alternatives and forgive them. Most of all, they might learn that Shakespeare's work, like all powerful works of art, reveals to us what Friedrich von Schiller called humanity *in potentia* (423). That is, great literature can show us the power and beauty of being human—in this context and in that—even as it plays out our limits. None of this is accomplished by teaching to a multiple choice, timed essay test like AP English Literature. If, as the growing popularity of AP English suggests, most students will encounter Shakespeare in such a reductive context, we would do well to heed the

voices in Shakespeare's work of those oppressed by others. As Shylock explains, "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (3.1.60–61).

Notes

1. All Shakespeare citations are drawn from *The Norton Shakespeare.*

2. For recent critiques of the aims and reliability of the AP exam see Lichten, Markham, and Jones.

Works Cited

Advanced Placement Program Course Description: English. May 2001, May 2002. http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/repository/english_0102_10284.pdf.

Greenblatt, Stephen, et al., eds. *The Norton Shakespeare.* New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.

Jones, Joseph. "Recomposing the AP English Exam." *English Journal* 91.1 (2001): 51–56.

Lichten, William. "Whither Advanced Placement?" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 8 (2000). 24 June 2000. http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n29.html.

Markham, Jeffrey C. "Hidden Dangers of the AP English Exams." *English Journal* 91.1 (2001): 18–19.

Schiller, Friedrich von. "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man." *Critical Theory Since Plato.* Rev. ed. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992.

MARY JANELL METZGER teaches at Western Washington University, Bellingham.

EJ 50 years AGO

Reading Readiness for Historical Literature

". . . I wondered seriously if it would not increase the young student's comprehension, and hence his emotional response, if he could see these stories as an expression of the age in which they were written, instead of trying to place them against a twentieth-century backdrop. We prepare the city-born six-year-old to read a story about the seashore by taking him first to the water's edge, so he can gain experiential knowledge of gulls, sailboats, and seashells. Then the words he reads in his story convey a meaning to him. Must there not be a 'reading-readiness' program at a higher level in preparation for the reading of literature of a past age?"

Rosemary S. Donahue. "Adventure in Sensibility." *EJ* 41.1 (1952): 31–33.

Folger Shakespeare Library's Resources for Teachers

Home to the world's largest Shakespeare collection, the Folger Shakespeare Library is a major center for scholarly research and a lively venue for exhibitions, cultural programs, and the performing arts. Believing Shakespeare is for everyone, it annually serves more than three million teachers and students in K–12 through its student festivals, guided tours, performances, and groundbreaking teaching materials and publications. The Folger's NEH-funded Teaching Shakespeare Institute produces the latest in curriculum resources, made available internationally through the Teaching Shakespeare Web site, www.folger.edu/education/teaching.htm. Also on the Internet, Hamlet on the Ramparts, www.shea.mit.edu/ramparts/, is the first project in a multimedia, distance-learning collaboration among MIT, the Folger, and eight secondary schools throughout the United States. The Folger Shakespeare Library is located at 201 East Capitol Street, S.E., Washington, DC 20003; Tel: (202) 544-7077; Fax: (202) 544-7520; Web: www.folger.edu.