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Embracing Difficulty:
The Challenge of Teaching Shakespeare's Language

by

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's language has always been thought of as extremely challenging to understand, especially to high school students. Too often teachers give up on embracing this difficulty and use No Fear Shakespeare or film versions in their classrooms to replace Shakespeare's original language. However, the beauty of Shakespeare lies in the foreignness and strangeness of his language, so are students really learning Shakespeare if all they examine are translations or adaptations? This essay examines how teachers attempt to teach Shakespeare, what challenges teachers must overcome to effectively teach Shakespeare, and what lessons can look like if both teachers and students embrace the difficulty of Shakespeare's language together.

It is December in my twelfth-grade English classroom in Mahtomedi, Minnesota. The students have read the modern English versions of *Beowulf* and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” with relatively little complaint. As we prepare for the Christmas holiday, I pull out *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, hoping that its sex, magic, and silliness will keep the students’ interest for this last month of the semester. Oh, how wrong I am... Instead of being greeted with cheers of glee, annually, I am met with groans, sighs, and eye-rolls. Students complain, “Why do we have to read this? It’s not relevant,” “We read Shakespeare already. Isn’t that enough?” “I don’t understand him, so why should I read him?” or “Aren’t Shakespeare’s plays written in a different language?” As teachers, we know the assumptions students have about Shakespearean plays. They believe them to be outdated and extremely challenging to understand. Though it is true that students at Mahtomedi have read through two of Shakespeare’s plays (*Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*) before, they still are unable to successfully read and interpret his plays on their own by the time they get to my class their senior year. Immediately, when I bring up reading Shakespeare in my 12th grade English class, I encounter an issue with lack of motivation. My students do not want to be challenged with a language that seems foreign to them, something they believe is too difficult for them to tackle.

Students tend to believe that when they try to read Shakespeare, they will not understand anything. To many of them, the frequent use of words such as “thou,” “dost,” or “ere” seems daunting. They begin to fret. They fear Shakespeare’s work. They are afraid of failing in front of their peers when they attempt to understand the play, yet cannot. Additionally, I believe there might even be a fear that they will enjoy Shakespeare’s work. We all know that people assume Shakespeare is too challenging, but we also associate Shakespeare with the educated: those that *can* understand. Therefore, students are afraid to be associated with that group. I believe one of

the reasons they do not want to grapple with the difficulty of Shakespeare is because of this. They do not want to stand out amongst the crowd of their peers. Many times, students will actively work against trying to enjoy his work because it is easier to sit back and allow me as their teacher to do the work and “translate” for them. They want the text to be modernized for them. This means that I end up doing all of the difficult work of sifting through passages that they deem too challenging to understand, despite the fact that they have (or supposedly have) engaged with Shakespeare’s plays already. I realized underneath this idea of modernization, there was a fear of difficulty. This is what I became interested in: why are students afraid of embracing the difficulty of Shakespeare’s language? Why are teachers perpetuating that fear? How is that fear being dealt with in the classroom? What other fears are keeping us, as teachers, from teaching Shakespeare and his original language?

Though I know seniors will experience difficulty when reading Shakespeare’s plays, I also know they have had experience with them. Because of this, I typically do not implement an abundance of background work; they have gone through this before, so I think, why should I have to discuss it with them again? However, I have come to the realization that as we work through Shakespeare’s plays, specifically *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I am typically spending more time interpreting the play than the students are. The irony of this is that because I am the one completing the difficult work, I—not the students—am the one getting enjoyment out of the plays and learning from them. I am the one that ends up analyzing and interpreting the play for them because they continually get stuck. In a sense, I feel as though I am giving up on letting them work through the difficulty. Through this process, both the students and I end up frustrated and confused. The days tend to repeat themselves: review of the previous day’s reading, students

read parts aloud, and I analyze for them. They are focused solely on filling out their study guide, not enjoying and comprehending the play itself.

The study guide isn't helping anyone, the students or me. Our current assessment measures are not working. Though the study guide is not technically required by our district, it is something I inherited when I started working at Mahtomedi. All of the teachers in my department use study guides for every Shakespeare play that is taught. Some teachers collect it for points, while other teachers simply use it as a study tool for students. However, the overall point of the study guide is somewhat cloudy. Some believe it helps students understand the play better, while others believe its main purpose is to assist students on their final test on the play. Currently, my department assesses each Shakespeare play with a summative unit test, despite the fact that the goal of the unit in 12th grade is to discuss how we are all interconnected across time and space, while being able to understand Shakespeare's language on their own. Many of the questions on the unit test are comprehension-level multiple choice questions such as, "Which of the following is NOT a part in the play the actors put on? a. Wall b. Moonshine c. Lion d. Tree." This type of question does not display what (if any) skills students have learned throughout the course of reading and analyzing this play. The test does not measure how much they have grappled with Shakespeare's difficult language or display what connections they have made with characters in the play. The test simply asks basic plot questions and asks students to match quotes to characters. Therefore, to me, it seems as though the study guide's only purpose is to teach to the test. Frequently, the only time students ask questions while reading the play is if they need an answer on their study guide. Instead of a study guide, I envision students looking more deeply into specific passages and working through them together, not necessarily answering a question related to something as expendable as what Peter Quince's day job is, like they

currently do. By focusing more on the learning goal of the unit, I will be able to engage students in difficult discussions regarding jealousy, love, and even making an ass of oneself.

Through this essay, I aim to demonstrate how essential embracing difficulty is to not only a student's English language arts education, but to their life in general. Students need a space to manage uncertainty, ambiguity, and the fear of strangeness. As teachers, we also need to be okay with being uncomfortable. If we cannot overcome difficulty, why would our students want to? By understanding both my own challenges and students' challenges related to teaching Shakespeare, I have created a unit and summative assessment that showcases what students can gain from embracing difficulty and making relevant connections to their own lives through the challenge of encountering *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as scholars and actors, not just students. Students will participate in differentiated lesson plans, which allows students of multiple learning styles to understand Shakespeare's difficult language. By doing this, my lessons in this unit are more stimulating for student interest as well as more aligned to the Common Core State Standards and our department goals and essential questions. Understanding and analyzing Shakespeare's difficult language provides the perfect medium in order to experience embracing difficulty.

How I Came to Love Shakespeare

Similar to my students, it was not the language that first attracted me to Shakespeare either. In ninth grade, I had an obsession with England; *Romeo and Juliet* intrigued me solely because it was a product of the country I loved. Growing up, my mom had a fascination with the royal family, specifically Princess Diana. Like many young girls, anything that my mom was interested in, I was instantly hooked. As a sophomore in high school, while playing the character

of Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar* in Honors English 10 is when I first truly became engaged and fascinated by the works of Shakespeare. I remember acting as Calpurnia to my peers, on my knees, begging Caesar to stay home, stating, “Alas, my lord, / Your wisdom is consumed in confidence. / Do not go forth to-day: call it my fear / That keeps you in the house, and not your own.” I finally understood Shakespeare’s words and I wanted my classmates to as well. The first time I was allowed to teach a lesson on Shakespeare, one of my first *real* teaching lessons during my field experience in my undergraduate years, stands out in my memory as well. I created a lesson plan on *Macbeth* while teaching in a rural Wisconsin town. When Lady Macbeth screams, “Out, damned spot!,” I had students display their hands and show us what they felt would never come off of them. Their stains were not blood like Lady Macbeth’s, but dirt, oil, grass, or hair dye from working on their farms, in auto mechanic shops, or in hair salons. As I grew up, Shakespeare’s plays no longer became products of England, but pieces of critical work in my education and my teaching career. Since that first encounter with Shakespeare when I was fourteen, it seems Shakespeare has become someone I idolize. Though I know I am required by the Common Core State Standards to teach the works of William Shakespeare, that is not *why* I teach them. I teach his works because in some way, they were always there for me. Every time I read or see one of his plays, there is a sense of nostalgia for all of these times in my life. What sticks out the most is my life abroad in England, where I completed my student teaching, using many of Shakespeare’s plays in my lessons, as well as toured around his home country, and where I fell in love with the man who would become my husband. In a way, to me, his plays feel like coming home.

My experience echoes Helen Vendler’s hopes for students in her Presidential Address in 1980 for the Modern Language Association titled, “What We Have Loved, Others Will Love.”

She states, “If we succeed at all in teaching others...to love what we have loved, we hope that some of them will become the teachers who will replace us—and that they will teach out of love, and write out of love...” (34). It is true that I feel similarly to Vendler. Because I love Shakespeare, I want students to love Shakespeare just as much. I want to teach them how to love it like I do and go on to teach it to a younger audience someday. Yet, I realize that as much as I would love for that to happen, it most likely will not. I recognize that despite the amount of love I express for Shakespeare in my classroom right now, students are not falling in love with his work like I hoped they would. In fact, I am sure that most of my students feel how Gerald Graff felt during his college years when he read texts that his professors loved: “tongue-tied and embarrassed when called on” (42). In his article conflicting with Vendler, titled “Disliking Books at an Early Age,” he points out that many times students will not love or understand a piece of literature just because someone puts it in front of them and they completed their assignments on it. Graff points out that teachers need to identify if they are thinking of the students or of themselves. If we think of only ourselves when teaching Shakespearean plays, we are most likely going to read through the play, have a few discussions and move on, but like Graff explains, we need to engage students. Therefore, teachers need to create lesson plans that allow for more interaction and enjoyment, not simply reading and answering questions, like my department currently does with our use of study guides. Additionally, Graff argues that students have to be able to speak well about what they read in order to read well (45). Therefore, if students do not have the chance to learn and use speaking and analysis skills, they will always feel less interested or invested in the text, despite how much their teachers love it. This is another place that teachers need to improve on. To be engaged, students need to be able to discuss what they are reading and learning about. If they do not know how to correctly discuss, they will never

be able to display their learning and understanding. As I have grown, I realize that despite the fascination I have with Shakespeare and his work, ultimately, it was the activities and lessons that got me engaged in his plays as well. It was never because someone else who loved Shakespeare introduced me to his work.

How We Attempt to Teach Shakespeare

Due to the difficulty of Shakespeare's language, an abundance of scholars have written numerous articles, books, and speeches designed to simply teach us how to read it. For instance, Russ McDonald's *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* explains Shakespeare's use of patterns, figures, and the traditions of rhetoric throughout his plays; The Arden Shakespeare's edited collection *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language* steps us through how to identify and read elements of Shakespeare's style, puns, meter, and dialogue; whereas Sister Miriam Joseph's *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* teaches us early modern grammar and rhetoric as Shakespeare would have learned it. Ralph Alan Cohen's book *Shakesfear and How to Cure It* addresses that Shakespeare's language is thought of as difficult, but that we, as a modern audience, understand over 90% of it already, which takes away some of the fear we associate with Shakespeare. As an educator and scholar, all of these types of texts are essential for me to learn more specifically about Shakespeare's genre distinctions, his use of meter, and the remarkable variance included throughout his plays. These texts are resources for me to become a more informed teacher, yet they would never be something I would fully give to my students.

The books aimed at scholars and university professors teach educators how to read Shakespeare for themselves, while books aimed at high school teachers tend to focus on ideas for helping *students* read (and not get bored or frustrated with) Shakespeare. Even just searching

“Teaching Shakespeare” on MLA Bibliography gives us 1,074 results, as well as 416 results on the Education Full Text database. These articles and educational resources all assist teachers in different ways. Peggy O’Brien, Folger Shakespeare Library’s Director of Education, has many editions of *Shakespeare Set Free* where she and her colleagues have created day-to-day lesson plans for almost all of Shakespeare’s plays. Other educators such as Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi have created a text for English teachers to successfully integrate Shakespeare’s texts into a high school classroom focusing on writing assignments, assessments, and the time period of Shakespeare, as well as his language. They include activities for teachers to use, scenarios for if something goes wrong, what the purpose of these texts is, and specific scenes to work with in their book *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centered Approach*. Brandon Shoemaker, author of “Research for the Classroom: To Read Or Not to Read—Five Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare,” published in the *English Journal*, is a high school teacher who discusses approaches of teaching the works of Shakespeare, specifically in a high school classroom. He identifies why we should even read Shakespeare in the classroom as well as ways he believes Shakespeare can be read: close reading, parallel text, graphic novels, film, or performance. There are also authors who focus just on one specific commonly taught text of Shakespeare’s, such as Delia DeCourcy and her colleagues, whose book *Teaching Romeo and Juliet: a Differentiated Approach* provides lesson plans, activities, handouts, assessments, a glossary, challenge questions, and suggested readings of *Romeo and Juliet*. Beyond these examples, there are hundreds of lesson plans and activities for a wide range of English language arts teachers using the works of Shakespeare in their classrooms.

The subject of teaching Shakespeare is far from complete. No one has yet figured out the magic solution and so dissertations continue to be written on how best to teach Shakespeare,

especially to high school students. Other emerging scholars are, in their master's theses or doctoral dissertations, also questioning how we teach Shakespeare's language in secondary classrooms. Daniel Mankowski's dissertation *Performing Shakespeare: Fun and Games or Purposeful, Emancipatory, and Empowering Pedagogy?* is a case study that questions how the act of performing Shakespeare plays in a classroom environment could be a superficial indulgence or, like his title suggests, a purposeful, emancipatory, and empowering activity, whereas Kendra Breitsprecher's thesis *Is Love Ever Enough?: Teaching Shakespeare at the Secondary Level* analyzes methods of instruction that secondary Iowa teachers currently use regarding Shakespeare in their classes. Mankowski points out current problems regarding the teaching of Shakespeare in various levels of classrooms. He concludes that the lack of rigor in some classrooms as well as the importance of standardized testing resulted in many of the lessons regarding Shakespeare to be uninspiring to students (150). He found that lessons surrounding Shakespeare can be more than simply fun and games, but teachers need curriculum review and faculty workshop time to do so. Mankowski does not concretely discuss at great lengths the difficulty of reading and interpreting Shakespeare within his classroom, more so just the boredom his students felt before acting out the play in class. His findings are similar to why I started to fall in love with Shakespeare though. He heavily relies on performing Shakespeare's works in classrooms. I distinctly remember acting as Calpurnia in 10th grade, making Shakespeare's texts not seem as difficult to me. Breitsprecher's thesis provides multiple examples of how teachers use Shakespeare and what they believe works for them. She also discovered twelve main reasons as to why Shakespeare is used in the classroom, such as, "The works of William Shakespeare are still relevant to today's students, due to their universal themes and spectacular use of language," "Reading the works of William Shakespeare can help raise

standardized test scores, particularly those in the vocabulary sections,” or “The works and themes of William Shakespeare can be used to introduce students to important current topics such as race, homosexuality, and mental illness” (25-26). Unfortunately though, there was no real analysis of why using a challenging text, in which students grapple with difficulty is necessary for students. One of the teachers Breitsprecher interviewed who uses *Romeo and Juliet* every year with her ninth-grade students joked stating, “Isn’t that the law?” (37), despite there being no actual justification for its use. Though these teaching tool texts and graduate theses and dissertations can be useful for implementing activities into our classrooms and even questioning why we still teach Shakespeare’s texts, few of these kinds of texts spend time on why we should embrace that difficulty.

To ease our fear that audiences won’t understand the language, we give them translated versions of Shakespeare’s work. Lezlie Cross explains the history of this fear, the latest foray, the *Play on!* project, and the arguments in favor of translation. For many scholars, the act of “translating” or adapting the works of Shakespeare seems immoral because it seems we are getting away from the “sacredness” of Shakespeare, yet many students find these types of tools to be essential in their understanding of the Bard’s plays. Cross examined specific fears in relation to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s *Play on!* project in her article, “Historicizing Shakesfear and Translating Shakespeare Anew,” published in *Theatre History Studies*. She explains that the purpose of the *Play on!* project was not because people will never understand Shakespeare, but to create a new arena of engagement with his texts (212). By creating these versions of Shakespeare’s plays, more audiences can engage in them. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s *Play on!* project works to modernize Shakespeare’s plays to fit a more contemporary

audience. They eliminate some of Shakespeare's archaic words to entice a modern audience to enjoy Shakespeare again. According to their website,

OSF commissioned 36 playwrights—more than half are women and more than half are playwrights of color, each paired with a dramaturg—to translate Shakespeare's works into contemporary modern English to celebrate the enduring impact of the Bard's plays. These commissions challenge the playwrights to bring the same level of dramatic pressure and rigor of language to their work as is present in the originals, deepening our understanding and engagement with Shakespeare.

In her article, Cross points out that since 1668 critics have deemed Shakespeare's language a bit obsolete (213). Translating, or modernizing, Shakespeare's works is not something new, in other words. We have the same concerns in 2019 that we had in the 1660s. People have been arguing about the importance of Shakespeare's original language versus modernizing the texts practically since Shakespeare's death. For so long, we have thought that Shakespeare's language on its own is too difficult for high school students, meaning Shakespeare's works take time to get through and understand, yet these students are no different than the audiences attending Shakespeare's plays in 1668. Despite the challenge of reading and interpreting Shakespeare, very few scholars and teachers argue for abandoning using his texts in high school classrooms. However, there is still a continual debate of using translation or not. Right now, we are in a wave of translation (e.g., the success of the *Play on!* project), but as Shakespearean scholars, we know it will not stay this way. What one generation does, the next will not.

Although we are in a pro-translation era right now, frequently, when we look back at earlier translations of Shakespeare's work, such as Nahum Tate's *King Lear*, we tend to look down on them. We believe that those directors did not trust Shakespeare or their audiences,

which is what Cohen is arguing for right now. He says, “Shakespeare’s language has enough modern currency to make his meaning accessible to the confident modern reader” (105). Therefore, if students and audience members are confident that they can understand his language, they will. Some scholars and audience members who have spent an abundance of time studying Shakespeare fear that the projects such as *Play on!* will eliminate the pleasure and pride that comes with understanding Shakespeare’s original language (Cross 224-225). These people were not born knowing how to read Shakespeare; they learned it. Many times, these scholars believe Shakespeare’s original words need to be preserved, no matter the cost. Those that prefer his original language do not want his language to be simplified for them. They enjoy hearing the words that have become familiar to them and feeling the resonances of ambiguity in his language. They do not want interpretive decisions made for them. Cohen, the most notable opposing force to the *Play on!* project vehemently believes Shakespeare’s plays do not need to be updated to a modern-day language, continuing to keep the debate of translation versus original language going.

I, too, am currently stuck in this debate regarding translation and adaptation of Shakespeare in my own classroom. I do not spend much time discussing the language or assigning activities with our Shakespearean plays at the 12th grade level. We typically just read through the original play together with the study guide and watch the movie afterward, focusing on the element of reading Shakespeare’s original language, reading the play as we assume an original audience in Shakespeare’s time would have seen it. This is partially due to time constraints, but also because I fear it would be too boring and/or irrelevant to keep all of my seniors engaged for longer than necessary. Essentially, I want to get through the play with them as fast as possible because they constantly complain about the difficulty. I feel like quite a

hypocrite when I reflect on this though because it is the complete opposite of what I do in my one section of English 9. In all English 9 classes at Mahtomedi, our students read *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, a common practice across the United States. However, in my English 9 class, I have students read a graphic novel version of the play. Students still complete a study guide, but that is not the main focus of the unit, like it is at the 12th grade level. The summative assessment is still a test as well, but it is completely different than the 12th grade Shakespeare test. The 9th graders do not answer any multiple-choice plot questions. The test focuses on translation and students' understanding of original Shakespearean language. Students are given passages from the play to re-write in their own words and to explain the significance of each passage to the play overall. In my 9th grade unit, we complete character analysis charts, discuss Shakespeare in popular culture, and together, we work on "translating" Shakespearean language into modern-day language. My 9th grade students have absolutely loved reading *Romeo and Juliet*. They constantly get frustrated with me if we stop reading for the day because they are so eager to find out what is going to happen next. So I find myself wondering, *Why can't I do that with older students? Why do I believe seniors need early modern English, but freshmen need adaptation?*

I want them to experience and learn to embrace difficulty, and Shakespeare's language is filled with all the best kinds of difficulty I know. Simon Palfrey's *Doing Shakespeare* explains that Shakespeare's writing is much denser and more concentrated than any other playwright's (19). Palfrey argues, "No matter how trained in rhetoric, no first-time audience can ever have picked up all of the material that is stuffed into Shakespeare's denser constructions" (22). Shakespeare's passages are long and filled with concentrated language, which demands reading stamina. When including the works of Shakespeare in my classroom, I need to remember this. Even I, as the teacher, do not pick up on everything Shakespeare intended. In fact, I might never

pick up on everything he meant due to the density. Therefore, I cannot expect my students to pick up on everything either. They have much less experience with Shakespeare than most educators do, but this is not a reason to give up on them working with these difficult passages. Palfrey stews on the difficulty of Shakespeare and explains that “his language remains strange and difficult for us no matter how familiar we become with it” (24), which is what makes his work so rich and exciting.

Paula Blank’s *Shakesplish: How We Read Shakespeare’s Language* gets us to acknowledge the foreignness of Shakespeare. Hers is “the first book on Shakespeare’s language to explore how we hear, understand, fail to understand, are amused by, disturbed by, bored by, moved by, and challenged by it today” (xi). Blank explains that today, without knowing it, we speak “Shakesplish,” an “interlanguage,” “the product of a psycholinguistic process of interaction between two linguistic systems, those of the mother tongue and the target language” (like we see in “Spanglish”) (14). So, as a modern-day audience, we are stuck in this limbo-type stage of essentially two versions of the English language, trying to identify which time period each word or phrase belongs to. This often leads to students caring more about each word’s meaning than what the overall plot of the play is. We sit and stew on what Shakespeare may have meant, when in reality what modern readers interpret is nothing like what he intended. Sometimes we overanalyze because we think we have to. Blank helps identify some of the reasons as to why modern readers constantly get stuck in the foreignness and difficulty of Shakespeare’s language, but she still does not identify why students specifically need to work through this sense of difficulty.

Blank does include a discussion on the sense of fear in Shakespeare’s readers, though. She points out that one of the problems with the *No Fear Shakespeare* editions is “that fear of

Shakespeare is not always a bad thing, and not something that gets in the way of our appreciation” (26). Blank goes on to state, “...we don’t just feel a sense of superiority in relation to modern English translations, even to the bad ones. They create in us a sense of vulnerability, if not inferiority. We fear modern English translations because we worry that our own English isn’t up to Shakespeare’s” (26). This makes me believe what has begun to happen is that because students are fearing Shakespeare’s language, they believe it is too difficult for them. They see translations and modernizations of his work everywhere, so they assume his original language is much too advanced for them. In reality, that is not the case. Students end up going into Shakespeare’s plays with this mentality and giving up too easily. They do not want to give in to what their teacher is asking them to do.

How Teachers Struggle with Shakespeare’s Difficulty, Too

As English language arts teachers, most of us agree that reading Shakespeare is beneficial for students in multiple ways. Like Palfrey and Blank point out, one of Shakespeare’s benefits is that his language is so strange and foreign to us. We try to get students to run toward this strangeness because we believe that is what makes his work so much fun to read, yet students tend to run away from his difficulty. When students are faced with difficulties, whether they stem from academics or not, they feel they may fail in front of their peers, parents, and/or teachers. Oftentimes, they also lose confidence in themselves because of this and have a hard time being open-minded and trying something new. Students are not the only ones who run from difficulties though. Teachers, including myself, do it all the time as well. Just like my students, I struggle with Shakespeare, too. I do not necessarily mean by understanding his plays, though that

can be challenging at times, but by the outside influences in my life that pull me in all sorts of directions when teaching Shakespeare's works.

When teaching Shakespeare in a high school English language arts classroom, I am faced with both external and internal challenges that make me want to run in the opposite direction of spending any additional time on his plays. As a young teacher, I do all that I can to establish credibility with my students, their parents, and my colleagues, so including anything in my curriculum that may seem "too difficult" or "unnecessary" gets tossed out regularly because I do not want to lose what I have worked so hard to gain. Additionally, when I try something new, I do not know what the outcome of the situation will be. I can anticipate what I believe will happen and how students will respond to the lesson and activities, but if it is not successful, I either have to scrap the whole section and move on or reteach the entire section in a different way so that students could be properly assessed. Therefore, I and many other teachers tend to avoid lesson plans that we do not know the outcome of. We have internal struggles, just as our students do. We do not want to fail in front of them, just as they do not want to fail in front of their peers, family, or community.

Besides how we personally feel about change in curriculum, there are external factors that come into play as well. Oftentimes when teachers start at a new school, they are given a shared folder of resources and curriculum ideas from their colleagues. As we get more comfortable in our new roles, we tend to sway away from what has been given to us, creating our own curriculum and activities, yet this does not always go over well with our department members. When I implement something new into my classroom, I regularly get some sort of judgment from my colleagues. To try different methods of instruction and curriculum is exciting, but there are always other teachers in the department who are skeptical because they believe

what they have been doing for the last 20 or so years is better than something new that they do not know the outcome of. By the time students reach English 12, they really just want to pass the class, as it is typically their only graduation requirement left. Too often, their teachers feel this way too. Skepticism of lesson plans does not always come from just inside the English language arts department though. Currently, many American schools are turning into STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) schools. Mahtomedi has this reputation, despite the fact that we are not. Many of my students will load up their course schedules with physics, anatomy, calculus, statistics, or computer science in place of taking an elective course in the humanities. These teachers even joke with our students that discussing elements of literature such as foreshadowing is a waste of time. Because of this, we no longer have any elective courses in our department. With this in mind, it can be extremely challenging to get students to buy into anything going on in my classroom, forcing me to want to take the easy route and avoid difficult or strange lessons with students. Because Mahtomedi is known for being an academically high-achieving school, there is a lot of pressure from administration to allow our students to be successful. If I fail at something in the classroom, it is not just the students that suffer, and me getting embarrassed, but also I could be reprimanded by my principal. If students constantly suffer, meaning their grades drop or they are not excelling to the same level as students in another class, I may be forced to eliminate all of my lesson plans and use another teacher's curriculum, again scaring me away from embracing the difficulty of teaching something that seems foreign and strange to students.

How I Teach Difficulty Through Shakespeare

As I think about the day I will introduce *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the frigid December morning this year, I still anticipate groans and sighs, but I know that now when I teach this text, together we will embrace the difficulty. Instead of having them read the play aloud, fill out a study guide, ask questions solely about the study guide (not the actual play), and take a multiple choice test, they will be looking into the play—and into themselves—by acting it out, translating, independently reading and thinking, comparing film to text, and debating. Through this new unit, they will not only be learning more, but hopefully enjoying more as well. Before examining the topic of Shakespeare's difficulty, I had struggled to come up with a concrete and engaging response to their question of, "Why do we have to read Shakespeare?" beyond "Because the Common Core states we have to." Now, I have come to the conclusion that students need to grapple with this question on their own. My new lesson plan puts them at the center of the translation debate.

Like every other 12th grade English language arts teacher in the United States, I have specific Common Core State Standards to achieve, as well as department goals and essential questions to fulfill. The challenging piece to this is to make sure students are engaged, like Gerald Graff argues. If we simply put a text in front of the student, they are not going to want to read past the surface level. Therefore, the best way to captivate students in the debate regarding Shakespeare's language is to have them join in. Realistically, as I have reflected on my school's units surrounding Shakespeare, I have realized that our department has not been meeting these standards. By examining Graff, Cross, Palfrey, and Blank, I have developed the idea that though Shakespeare is difficult, we should not shy away from this challenge, as scholars, teachers, or students. We just may need to go about his work differently. As Cross discusses, there is and always has been a longstanding debate regarding translating Shakespeare's work, yet very rarely

do we ever let students in on that debate. We, as teachers, tend to believe that we get to make that decision for them by using only translations because we believe the original language is too difficult for them or shying away from translation because we believe students need to only be exposed to the original language. However, as Graff explains, teachers need to create lesson plans that entice students, not just make the curriculum “easier” if we want them to learn and grow to enjoy literature. By allowing students to join in on the debate, they themselves become Shakespearians too. Graff gives us a concrete example of what this looked like in his own experience with difficult literature, stating, “I gained confidence from recognizing that my classmates and I had thoughts that...were not too far from the thoughts of famous published critics. I went back to the novel again and to my surprise found myself rereading it with an excitement I had never felt before with a serious book” (43). If we do not allow students to have a say in this debate with other scholars, they will never get to enjoy it. Through reading in a manner that gives students agency, they can learn to overcome difficulty and understand the enjoyment that will come with it.

“What is the best way to learn Shakespeare’s language?” This is the question for my unit on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I will explain to students that in 9th grade, we (their teachers) made the decision for them. Now, as seniors, it is their turn to decide. Like Cross states, we must “expand [our] understanding of the ever-changing position of Shakespeare’s works in our society” (226). Therefore, we must understand that approaches to reading and performing Shakespeare’s work will continue to come in waves, but high school students should also be involved in the conversation. Their first assignment, before we even begin reading the play, will be to individually read blog posts from *Play On Shakespeare* such as “Translating Shakespeare to modern English is not a literary travesty” and “To translate or not to translate, that is the

question,” excerpts from Lezlie Cross’s article “Historicizing Shakesfear and Translating Shakespeare Anew,” excerpts from Simon Palfrey’s chapter “Shakespeare’s Difficulty and Excessiveness,” as well as Ralph Alan Cohen’s response to the *Play on!* project published on *American Shakespeare Center* titled, “American Shakespeare Center Director of Mission’s Response to the Shakespeare Translation Project.” Once students have read these, they will complete a written response to the question “Should Shakespeare’s plays be translated to modern English?” in the form of a journal entry, simply getting their thoughts about translating Shakespeare onto paper. These thoughts will not be shared with their peers.

Students will have just thought through their initial reactions to the debate of translating Shakespeare, yet they have not discovered what it is like to actually read Shakespeare’s language blindly, without translation or an introduction to the plot or characters. Typically, when we begin reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, students are disengaged or uninterested about what is to come because they have no connections to the characters or plot yet. Therefore, students must be coerced to interact with the text immediately. To begin, students will be required to read Theseus’ initial speech on their own. Because this passage is so challenging to work through, students will most likely not pick up on the fact that Theseus’ marriage to Hippolyta is forced or what is really at stake if Hermia denies her father’s demand to marry Demetrius. Once students are introduced to the setting and characters through this first reading, I will map out on the board all of the characters and different “worlds” we will encounter. Together as a whole class, we will discuss this initial scene, questioning why Shakespeare chose to start his story in this manner. Afterward, we will all read the remainder of Act I together to ensure everyone has a handle on the overall plot line and characters. Students will take on character roles, reading their lines aloud to the class. While reading Act I, we will continue our discussion of the relationships

presented in the exposition of the play, what is at stake for each character, and how the love square of Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius is actually something quite common to the lives of high school students. Throughout this act, students will experience the language with their classmates, hearing it spoken aloud, while getting an overall basic understanding of the early stages of the play.

As we know, Shakespeare's language is "long-winded and yet dense" (Palfrey 20); therefore, students miss out on much of Act II's important language. For example, Titania's lyrical, descriptive language regarding the mother of the changeling boy in her argument with Oberon tends to go over students' heads. This conversation can be difficult for them to see that Titania is aching over her loss of her friend, the changeling boy's mother, when it seems that Oberon simply just wants possession over the boy, a situation staggeringly similar to students in the middle of a divorced set of parents. Additionally, when Helena begs Demetrius for his love, students gloss over the real loss she feels. To many of them, she seems too clingy and attached and cannot think of her as a strong character. Because Act II is so difficult to understand, students will be split up into small groups to read through passages and translate each section together. Once students have created their own translations, they will read both the *No Fear Shakespeare* translation and the *Play on!* version of the more challenging passages in Act II. As a small group, they will be examining how the translations differ and what each of them left out. For example, in Shakespeare's original Act II scene ii, Hermia states, "With half that wish, the wisher's eyes be pressed!," yet the No Fear Shakespeare version simply states, "You sleep well too" ("A Midsummer Night's Dream Translation"). Though these two lines may inevitably have the same meaning, Shakespeare's dreamy language is completely stripped away. This portion of the assignment will fulfill the Reading Literature 11-12.4 standard, as they are required to

determine the meaning of words and phrases while creating their own translations and reading other translations. Throughout this act, students will be able to understand what nuances get left out of the play within translations as well as what they understood better because of translations.

There is no better way to understand a play than to see it performed (or act in the performance of it). Because Act III is the most action-filled act in the play, students will come back together as a whole class to act it out. In this act, we see the hilariousness of Bottom turned into an ass and then watch Titania dote on him, sparking thoughts of bestiality. This act also includes the notable fight scene between the four young lovers, displaying the timelessness of unrequited love. Typically, this act has a lot of emotion not only for the characters in the play, but my students as well. Oftentimes the boys find the altercation between Hermia and Helena amusing, but the girls do not. The cattiness and nastiness of Helena and Hermia's lines hit them too closely. However, because it will be acted out, the class is able to play up these lines, allowing them all to see the emotional nature of what is at stake in friendships and romantic relationships. For this activity, students are going to be able to cast and costume themselves. This allows them to match their own personalities with the personalities of the characters in the play and to produce the play as they envision it. When a student performs a play, they are going to be much more invested in it than if they simply read it. Plays are meant to be acted, yet so often we fear acting in our classrooms. Unless students perform Act III, they miss out on the dramatic dialogue and action between the young lovers. When simply reading, students do not understand the complexity of what is being said and how this argument impacts all of their relationships. These four lovers mirror high school relationships in an incomparable way. Both in the play's relationships and in high school relationships, there is an irrationality of attraction and desire, the

cruelty of tossing a person aside, the ridiculous fights people get into over a loved one, and the loss of friendship because of a potential romantic relationship.

In many of Shakespeare's plays, Act IV can be somewhat dull, yet that allows directors a lot of leeway on how to showcase that act. When students get to Act IV, they will first read it individually. Students will jot down notes about the play as they read. Once everyone in their group has fully read the act, they will then watch Act IV of the Michael Hoffman version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As a group, they will have a discussion about their understanding of each version, discussing the intricacies of both, which satisfies the standard of Reading Literature 11-12.7. In this standard, students are required to compare two versions of a Shakespearean play with some other form. The Hoffman version is entertaining for students and up until this point, they have not seen a production (besides their classmates') of the play. One most notable directorial choice Hoffman includes in this act is when the four young lovers awake. Hoffman has Theseus and Egeus ride to the forest on horseback to be stopped on the outskirts by Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena all naked in the grass. Though it is hinted at in the play that there is some sort of sexual nature happening overnight, it isn't explicitly stated, like Hoffman displays. This allows students to have discussions about how plays are really blueprints for productions and the directors can choose how that is reflected onstage or onscreen. Additionally, students will be able to discuss with their groups how they felt about the casting and costuming the producers chose and how they helped or hindered their enjoyment and understanding of Act IV.

As teachers, we know that all students learn differently, which is one reason as to why student choice is essential to learning. Act V's lesson will have two different parts. First, all students will read the act, so they all have the same basis for understanding. Once all students

have read the act, they will then choose their own adventure. Students will be given the option of translating, acting out, or watching the film version of Act V. They will split into three groups based on their choice. Once students have completed their adventure, with their group, they will debate with their other classmates about the most effective way to understand Act V. In the debate, each group must identify three specific passages/scenes that they understood better in their version rather than in reading the original language alone as well as explain why their method of learning is better than the other two groups' methods. Through this activity, students will see that one version is not always the answer to understanding Shakespeare's language. Throughout Act V, there are some scenes that will be easier to understand when acted out, such as Puck's epilogue, but the audience's reaction to *Pyramus and Thisbe* is more clearly visible in the film version, and the spell Oberon casts makes more sense once students have translated it. By discussing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in these small groups and with the whole class, students are able to grapple with his work and evaluate arguments regarding it, proving they have met the college and career readiness standard as well. Because all students learn differently, teachers need to provide a differentiated learning style for them, even though it may be chaotic and challenging to monitor. Throughout this method of instruction, students are able to interact with the play in multiple different styles.

And no longer will the students be subjected to a multiple-choice exam, which has never addressed either the Common Core State Standards or my department's essential questions. The new unit assessment will have two parts. The first part will be asking students to draw parallels between their own lives and the events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Students will be required to choose two concrete examples from the play that they see reflected in their own lives, answering in paragraph form, which directly answers our department question of, "How are we

interconnected across time and space?” The second part will be to go back to their journal entry in the beginning of the unit and answer what they believe is the best way to teach Shakespeare’s difficult language to high school seniors, again being answered in paragraph form. In this second question, I will ask them to also address the questions “What was difficult about Shakespeare’s language and what helped you navigate that difficulty?” as well. Through these responses, I can not only see how well they understood the play and what standards they have met, but also what they have learned about grappling with Shakespeare’s difficult language and the value of difficulty in the classroom. By using *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as a curriculum resource, I can show students that shying away from challenges forces us to miss out on an abundance of pleasure. Additionally, to overcome his difficult language teaches students resilience and provides them an opportunity to gain a lifelong skill.

In the end, I hope students will experience and therefore learn that embracing difficulty is not scary and that we really cannot grow if we do not overcome obstacles for ourselves. Though we may want to make things easy on ourselves by avoiding uncertainty, humiliation, and ambiguity, all of the elements that come with difficulty, we must realize that learning and grappling with difficulty takes time, and that we have to revel in the fact that we may make asses of ourselves. As Paula Blank and Simon Palfrey express, Shakespeare’s language is absolutely foreign and strange to us and that it will *always* be difficult because his plays truly are more challenging to understand than other playwrights’. Despite this, his language is not to be solved like a problem on a multiple-choice test, but allows us to mull over the strangeness of something that is both our own language and not our own language: to embrace the challenge of Shakesplish.

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