Blaspheming the Bard: the tension between highbrow Shakespeare and popular gentle will
by Lisa Maria Carparelli Schuma

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
Montana State University
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appropriation surrounding his works. The bifurcation of culture into “high” and “low” (or “popular”)
creates tension in a teacher’s presentation of Shakespeare, an author who is at once considered the
quintessential popular artist of his own time and the ultimate example of high culture in our own. The
terms “highbrow” and “lowlow” (as employed by Lawrence Levine in Highbrow Lowbrow: The
Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America) may be used to differentiate teachers’ attitudes toward
Shakespeare’s place in our culture as well as the often conflicting methodological approaches to
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examination of the motivations and attitudes underlying highbrow and lowbrow approaches to teaching
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AND “POPULAR” GENTLE WILL

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Abstract

Teaching Shakespeare is complicated and problematized by the issues of cultural sacralization and appropriation surrounding his works. The bifurcation of culture into “high” and “low” (or “popular”) creates tension in a teacher’s presentation of Shakespeare, an author who is at once considered the quintessential popular artist of his own time and the ultimate example of high culture in our own. The terms “highbrow” and “lwbrow” (as employed by Lawrence Levine in Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America) may be used to differentiate teachers’ attitudes toward Shakespeare’s place in our culture as well as the often conflicting methodological approaches to teaching Shakespeare employed within a single classroom or from one classroom to another. A careful examination of the motivations and attitudes underlying highbrow and lowbrow approaches to teaching Shakespeare allows teachers to coordinate effective and engaging classroom practices with personal perception(s) of Shakespeare’s significance.
INTRODUCTION

THE ATTEMPT AND NOT THE DEED CONFUNDS US\textsuperscript{1}

Sometimes students just don’t know how perceptively theoretical they’re being about issues. For example, cloaked in the whiny second-semester senioritis battle-cry “Why do we have to read this, anyway?” comes a fundamental and complex set of questions about culture, class, politics, and gender, among others. Aside from Homer the blind bard (as dauntingly translated by Richmond Lattimore), perhaps no other author or body of works has garnered so many such howls of displeasure and rebellion from my own students as the Bard himself. But I was always fascinated by the flip side—no other text earned as much interest, nor as much *pride*, as did Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. After struggling through the reading of the plays, students exhibited a rare sense of proprietary interest in the film productions and clips we viewed. They engaged in arguments and criticisms regarding the filmmakers’ choices, the actors’ performances, the “best and worst” of Shakespeare’s lines. And they bragged to schoolmates about how much Shakespeare they “got to” read and watch in my class. And I loved it. But why? Why was it important to me? And what was the significance of my student’s ambivalence toward the text’s challenges? Was I creating a Shakespeare snobbery, and was that a good or a bad thing? I turned these (and more) questions over in my head every year, especially at those times in when I resorted to using the “Random Renaissance Curse” chart (One student’s tentative, “Mrs. Schuma, thou yeasty, boot-licking harpy,” brought silence, followed by nervous giggles, followed by howls as of

\textsuperscript{1} *Macbeth*, 2.2.12
illicit pleasure. After that I excluded myself from the game, but I’d hear them calling each other lowborn, pasty hugger-muggers in the hallways for weeks afterward) to generate interest and confidence in Shakespeare’s use of language. And I reexamined my motives, my “objectives” when questioned by a colleague as to why I showed “so many movies” while teaching Shakespeare. “They won’t take the poetry seriously if they can just watch the story,” she warned. But I liked the stories. And my students did critically examine the poetry, if somewhat reluctantly. They delighted in mimicry of the archaic would’sts and thees in iambic pentameter, speaking in exaggerated tones and awful English accents. And the further removed my students seemed to me to be from “high culture,” the more impressed they were with Shakespeare in the end, and with themselves for feeling mastery of the texts on the whole, if not line by line.

There’s something different about Shakespeare, for my students, for me, for the academy, for American culture. Changes in politics, critical theory, and school curriculums have pushed the Bard from the undisputed center of the now-questionable canon, and from the domination of our textbooks. The old *Adventures in English Literature* has been traded in for the new *World Literature* book, with its welcome emphasis on cultures and texts that students had rarely been exposed to before. Shakespeare, it seems, might become just another dead white Anglo male in such a context. But Shakespeare is still studied in 90 percent of high schools (Gates 1) (though now alongside texts which call the bard’s ‘universality’ and ‘timelessness’ directly into question). Certainly, though, a tension surrounds questions of how Shakespeare is studied, and which works are chosen. In my own classroom, I encourage a sense of
interpretive authority and a focus on performance and audience that makes at least one of my colleagues shudder. “This isn’t Stephen King,” she’s fond of chiding me. (I’m not exactly sure what she means by that, nor why Stephen King must be made the standard bearer for popular literature.) But Shakespeare is, after all, quintessentially highbrow—look up the term and you might find Shakespeare the first example. Yet Shakespeare is also the quintessential popular artist. So to whom does he belong? And how do we communicate his place to our students? What does the tension between popular culture and intellectual elitism mean in education and for production and reception in general? The line between high culture, or art, and popular culture or even mass or “low” culture is (and has long been) blurred when it comes to Shakespeare. The tension between a middle class student’s desire to gain a hazily-understood bit of cultural capital and his desire to reject the imposition of intellectual edification from the cultural authorities-that-be is palpable in my third-quarter senior English classroom, and represents in microcosm the schism, the tug-of-war over Shakespeare in academia and in our culture.

In my own experience as a high school teacher and as a graduate student, I have observed that schism of sorts within the world of teaching Shakespeare. The curriculum may present one dry option in terms of learner goals: “Students shall read and analyze one Shakespearean tragedy,” or, (oddly) “Students shall understand the terms ‘iambic pentameter’ and ‘blank verse.’” The methods employed in reaching such learner goals vary as widely as do the teaching styles of the instructors. But one split seems most obvious to me in our approaches to teaching the work of the bard: Does the teacher value Shakespeare as a sacred symbol of elite, highbrow culture to be bestowed upon his or her
students? Or does the teacher approach Shakespeare as an enduring popular, *lowbrow* artist, albeit of great genius, to be studied and manipulated not from afar, but in the most familiar of terms and manners? Most interestingly, this tension between highbrow Shakespeare and “lowbrow” or popular Gentle Will goes not at all unnoticed, but quite *unexamined* by the very professionals engaged in the tug-of-war. While my rationale for a particular method of teaching *Macbeth* might be logical and well-considered, it is unlikely to include any mention of my own personal attitudes about the very nature of the cultural value of Shakespeare’s work. This observation may surely be made of the teaching of any literature at all; but our culture’s—especially our academic culture’s—relationship with and attitudes toward Shakespeare are uniquely deserving of consideration, and have a profound effect upon the Shakespeare received and/or experienced by students in secondary and post-secondary classrooms. Using the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” (as explored at length by Lawrence Levine in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, especially), I intend to investigate this schism, this tension apparent not only between different teachers’ methods, but even within a single teacher’s approach(es) to Shakespeare’s work.

At the end of our ‘Shakespeare Unit,’ my students having labored through *Macbeth* and wrestled with, (but generally enjoyed and frequently mastered) *Hamlet*, we “relax” by viewing—no assignment attached—Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. Upon my announcement of this ‘treat’ (not that they didn’t enjoy Polanski’s *Macbeth* or Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet*), students react: “Cool! I’ve seen that one. Great flick!” My heart twists. Is it just a “great flick”? It’s *Shakespeare*, after all. Have the slick
production values and the attractive actors with their bare bottoms and heaving cleavages obscured the significance, the brilliance of the poetry?! Again with the tension. I am, in spite of myself, loath to relieve Shakespeare of his high culture status, to allow simple enjoyment of the story, of the humor, of the humanity. Viscerally, I panic at the thought that Branagh’s interpretations and directorial revisions might be taken for the Bard’s own work! On the other hand, my whole purpose in showing the movie—no assignment attached—is to culminate the unit by returning Shakespeare, as it were, to the students. To say, “You have gained the tools you needed, now enjoy!” The tension, the tension. If they need tools to enjoy it, Shakespeare is obviously a code, a “cipher” of the dominant culture (Bourdieu 432). “A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms,” as had most of my students at the unit’s start. In such terms, I have only facilitated a “cognitive acquirement, a cultural code,” not created a “pure gaze” (433)—if such a thing is, indeed, possible at all. Yet my conscience tells me that Shakespeare should be enjoyed, should not be WORK. It’s the whole paradoxical point of my teaching it. Am I fortunate that the students, for the most part, are simply pleased to have added the tools to their cultural repertoire, and feel some sense of (perhaps snobbish) satisfaction at having gained them? Am I raising them up to Shakespeare’s level? Bringing him down to theirs? Single-handedly dismantling the vertical hierarchy of culture which Levine cautions is arbitrary and artificial but which Jostein Gripsrud asserts (in her article “‘High Culture’ Revisited”) is still a social fact? The push and pull of the two faces of Shakespeare is never so apparent to me as at the end of the third quarter (and, I must accept, the end of Shakespeare for a good percentage of my
students). The very fact that it matters so much to me and to many of my colleagues is evidence of that tension and of Shakespeare’s unique status in the cultural hierarchy.

Like it or not, Shakespeare is “High Culture.” The very labels, though, of high/low/popular culture are themselves not simple or without controversy. Lawrence Levine, in his examination of cultural hierarchy, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, explores the social construct of high culture versus popular, or low, culture:

The integration of Shakespeare into the culture [of 19th century America] as a whole should bring into serious question our tendency to see culture on a vertical plane, neatly divided into a hierarchy of inclusive adjectival categories such as ‘high,’ ‘low,’ ‘pop,’ ‘mass,’ ‘folk,’ and the like. If the phenomenon of Shakespeare was not an aberration—and the diverse audiences for such art forms as Italian opera, such performers as the singer Jenny Lind, and such writers as Longfellow, Dickens, and Mark Twain would indicate that it was not—then the study of Shakespeare’s relationship to the American people helps reveal the existence of a shared public culture to which we have not paid enough attention. It has been obscured by the practice of employing such categories as ‘popular’ aesthetically rather than literally. (30-31)

Levine goes on to point out that the term ‘popular culture’ is used not only to describe those works that gain a large audience, but as any work created within the lower classes, however poorly written or banal. ‘Popular culture,’ then, connotes a disposability, a lack of value and importance—no matter the literal size of the audience. Shakespeare, on the other hand, is denied the label ‘popular culture’ no matter how large a general audience may appreciate his works. He is “the possession of the educated portions of society who disseminated his plays for the enlightenment of the average folk...as a respite from—not as a normal part of—their usual cultural diet” (31). The labels don’t work, Levine says, when applied to the more fluid cultural interaction with Shakespeare’s work in 19th century America. But they do work now, counters Jostein
Gripsrud. Or, more exactly, they are *at work* in our culture and should not be denied for political or critical expediency. In “High Culture Revisited,” Gripsrud criticizes the assumption that the vertical labels of cultural hierarchy are “outmoded and only kept alive in reactionary ideological rhetoric” (533). In such a denial, we deny our very place in academia as positioned in high culture itself. “Denial of the existence of significant differences between high and low culture,” Gripsrud cautions, “is ideological in the most simplistic Marxist sense—it engenders ideas serving to conceal inequality in the distribution of power” (537). The very ability to access both high and low culture—to ‘look both ways,’ in a sense, is a function of class privilege (537), and must be recognized as such. Despite the current enthusiasm for accepting ‘popular’ (both folk/rural and mass/urban) culture into the ‘high’ (learned) culture of the academy, the “overlap,” as Gripsrud calls it, only works one way. So, despite the seemingly blurred lines between high culture (that of the upper class, of those with cultural, educational, and economic capital) and low culture (lower-class, popular, folk and/or mass culture), the distinctions still apply. Otherwise, the seemingly intrinsic value of appreciating Shakespeare seems to disappear as well. And as much as some cultural theorists may want that to happen, it has not happened...yet. Aesthetic value remains the property of the dominant culture, whereas practical value seems the domain of the dominated. And Shakespeare’s value is largely (as much as I would like to—and often do—label it universal, timeless, and so on) subjectively aesthetic.

Shakespeare, then, carries the clout, the mystique, the value of high culture. Yet Shakespeare, so decisively appropriated by the upper classes by the turn of the last
century, remains contested terrain in America. We still struggle for ownership of the Bard, and that struggle is complicated by the baggage of history and culture. The battle for Shakespeare is the battle for cultural power as well as for an icon of cultural legitimacy. By the same token, a great part of Shakespeare’s cultural value as the symbol of upper class sophistication is, ironically, the perceived ‘authenticity’ of the man and his works, evidenced by the historical popularity and so-called ‘universality’ of those works.

“Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu 435). And Shakespeare is an icon of taste. Yet the battle is not so simple with Shakespeare. It is the same one with which I struggle in my classroom: Does the lower class struggle to rise up to Shakespeare’s level? Or to pull him down to theirs? And from the other direction, does the dominant culture struggle to retain Shakespeare on their level? Or to keep the lower class from ‘acquiring’ Shakespeare, thereby moving up a rung in cultural/educational capital? And what does the tendency to unquestioningly place Shakespeare at the “top” of this hierarchical structure reveal about our complex cultural relationship not only with Shakespeare, but with “high art” of all kinds? Speaking of the function of high/low distinction, Bourdieu states,

“The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.” (436)

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2 I am not, however, unaware that the resistance to crossing cultural lines works both ways; the acquisition of highbrow culture by lower classes can also be seen as class rejection or suicide. The reading of Shakespeare by members of the lower classes might be seen as “inauthentic” or grasping, as the rejection of the “simple, everyday” values of the lower classes. This paper focuses, however, on the struggle for ownership of Shakespeare.
Perhaps part of the ‘problem’ with high culture’s claim to Shakespeare is that his work seems to remain open to the profane, to such “natural” enjoyment as low culture would have. In spite of the archaic language, the history, the complex language, Shakespeare remains somehow accessible and not entirely refined, thus open to the struggles and tensions this paper explores.

As Levine points out, the vertical labels of cultural hierarchy are too simplistic, too arbitrary to fully explain the struggle for Shakespeare and all the meanings attached over time to the man and his body of work. But they do serve to label, for the sake of discussion, the real differences in both power and attitudes reflected in the contested nature of Shakespeare’s place in our culture.

Shakespeare certainly is contested terrain, the site of a struggle for power, for culture. Clearly, one such struggle is a class struggle, a struggle for ownership of Shakespeare, a struggle to define what Shakespeare should be—poet of the people, or enshrined genius. But even within the ‘cultured, learned’ class, Shakespeare is the site of other struggles. Here Shakespeare is variously appropriated and reviled as prefeminist or misogynist, cutting-edge subversive or patriarchal bastion, anti-racist or arch-racist, sacred or profane, inventor of the human or culturally passe. Such arguments may keep the study of Shakespeare alive, and may change what his work means to high culture and popular culture alike. But the real tension, the real paradox of Shakespeare and what he is, what he *represents* lies in that struggle between high and low, haves and haven’ts.

Shakespeare’s work was, of course, not always reserved for the cultural elite and the highly educated. During his own lifetime, audiences from all levels of society
attended and enjoyed his plays. But his 'popularity did not end with his death, segueing
directly into deification and separation. Shakespeare's works continued to be performed
for general popular audiences for centuries after his death. Yet within the last one
hundred fifty years in the United States, Shakespeare's status as mascot for highbrow
culture has been firmly and seemingly permanently established. What happened to
separate a playwright of the people (such an American ideal!) from the masses he once
entertained? More interestingly, why did it happen?

Shakespeare's plays enjoyed consistent popularity in the United States, especially
in the mid-18\textsuperscript{th} to the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century. While Shakespeare's deification was well
underway (if not complete) even as this country fought for independence from Britain,
the reservation, the appropriation of his works as high culture did not occur until the
mid- to late- nineteenth century. Shakespeare's plays were essentially performed as
engaging entertainment, recognized and enjoyed by audiences from all levels of society.
Shakespeare's works were also "used" pragmatically by theatre troupes to legitimize their
trade, periodically under moral attack both in the U.S. and in Europe. He was also 'used'
to communicate moral lessons particular to the time and place of particular performances.
(Think of Othello's possibilities as a lesson in racial separation in the southern U.S., or as
a general lesson against jealousy.) In this way, the tension was already emerging
between Shakespeare's larger-than-life status and his popular bankability and appeal.
Playwrights and performers recognized and employed Shakespeare's aura of legitimacy
and cultural status, in addition to—or as part and parcel of—the plays' entertainment
value. Playbills often included a Shakespearean work as the main attraction, along with
an original short play which would otherwise not have found an audience. More often, Shakespeare’s plays were accompanied by burlesque or farce at the intermission. In any case, the works were prolifically produced and enthusiastically supported by the general public, educated and not (Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow* 13-46).

As in Shakespeare’s own time, such traveling productions of the bard’s works were attended by a cross-section of society. The audience’s proprietary attitude toward the production was evidenced by running commentary and exclamation, not infrequent participation in the action of the play, and expression of critical assessments through vocal and vegetable means. Such involved audiences clearly didn’t feel intellectually daunted by the language or the themes of the works (28-9). While some historians (themselves steeped in our relatively current but ubiquitous apotheotic attitude toward the Immortal Bard) point to what we might call a “dumbing down” of Shakespeare for 19th century audiences in order to explain the diverse playgoers’ ability to comprehend and appreciate such complex language and subtle characterization, Lawrence Levine warns against viewing such productions through the distorting lens of history. Rather than assuming that mass audiences could not possibly understand the nuances of language in what we have, in our lifetimes, always considered to be the ultimate in poetic complexity, Levine points out that, until the mid- to late- nineteenth century, the people of America lived a life filled with oral tradition. Listening to and reciting the difficult poetic language found in the King James bible may have acted as one sort of “bridge” between 19th century audiences and Shakespeare’s language. In addition, we must remember that, until the late 19th century, America was a country concerned and
impressed with rhetoric. Lengthy orations held the attention and comprehension of (especially political) audiences, and Shakespeare was studied not as literature, but as rhetoric. As literacy rose and the focus on and fondness for lengthy oration declined, then, both people’s admiration for Shakespeare’s use of language and their ability to focus on and comprehend the language of his plays also began to collapse. Additionally, the traveling acting troupes began more and more to be concentrated in urban centers, especially on Broadway, and largely in upper-class areas (in order, perhaps, to compete with movies in the early 20th century). But even earlier, in 1849, a sense of class division, a struggle for ownership of Shakespeare, had reared its head violently. The Astor Place Riots, in which over 20 people were killed, were a manifestation of class struggle for cultural capital. In brief, the riots were the result of competing versions of Macbeth, one starring an appealing, anti-aristocratic American, the other starring a seemingly pro-aristocratic Englishman. While the Astor Place Riots were not the cause of the upper class’s appropriation of Shakespeare as high culture, they were certainly a manifestation of class tensions as well as the sign of Shakespeare’s appeal and significance to both highbrow and popular cultures (Levine, Highbrow Lowbrow 63-67).

While many factors may have contributed to the appropriation of Shakespeare out of the hands and experience of the lower classes and into high culture, it’s important not to assume that the process was a ‘natural’ function of time and of Shakespeare’s talent. It is also important, I think, not to deny that talent by arguing that Shakespeare’s significance is only a result of that act of appropriation. (Again, the tension between the two aspects of Shakespeare’s work—popular and culturally sacred, is manifest.) Stuart
Hall argues that such appropriation of cultural property is not a ‘natural’ and singular event, but an “active destruction of particular ways of life, and their transformation into something new. ‘Cultural change’ is a polite euphemism for the process by which some cultural forms and practices are driven out of the center of popular life, actively marginalized” (Hall 443). Shakespeare became (along with opera and symphony, to cite Levine’s examples) contested terrain, symbolic of the increasing cultural separation between classes in the United States during the late 19th century (Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow* 85-125).

By the turn of the century, Shakespeare was, in practical terms, no longer contested terrain at all, rather firmly embedded at the “top” of the cultural hierarchy. Shakespeare wasn’t just an example of highbrow culture; Shakespeare was (and is) the example of highbrow culture. The educational and economic divide between upper and lower classes made a reclamation of Shakespeare seem impossible. At best, Shakespeare became “theatrical spinach” (31) of which the working class might partake for edification and intellectual nutrition, but never for the sheer enjoyment seen in the audiences of 19th century America. But as the critical theory and political face of the academy has changed, the unquestioned claim of high culture to Shakespeare has weakened. As a result, we now see in modern cinema repeated and bold attempts to reappropriate Shakespeare into popular culture. The tension is back, as are many and varied productions of Shakespeare’s plays.
Even in “popular” cinema, then, the tension is patent, the contested terrain still at the fore: does the filmmaker attempt to elevate popular sensibilities, to bring the audience “up” to Shakespeare’s level? Or does the filmmaker rather choose to dethrone Shakespeare from his elite status, to reappropriate the work by claiming Shakespeare as fellow subversive? Nearly all contemporary productions exist within this tension. Even as a filmmaker tries to be subversive or resistant in his or her interpretation and production of the play, he or she must undeniably work upon—poach, in a way—the highbrow status inextricably attached to Shakespeare’s work. Conversely, the Shakespeare aficionado seeking a ‘true’ interpretation of the bard for cinematic production must consider and conform to the desires of a popular audience. The paradoxical overlap is unavoidable. The sacred status of Shakespeare’s texts, only set in stone as late as the past 150 years, has entered the realm of undeniable truth in the minds of upper and lower class moviegoers alike. Any filmmaker walks a fine line between badolotry and blasphemy, either extreme leading to zero marketability.

The process of production→consumption, as noted by Michel De Certeau in “The Practice of Everyday Life,” is more complicated than first consideration might lead us to believe. Consumption, argues De Certeau, is actually an act of production—the production of meanings—in itself (484). This process is further complicated when applied to the production and consumption/production of Shakespeare’s work. The cultural stakes, the history of dramatic productions of the plays, the “highbrow” overtones, the perceived ‘claim’ upon the plays by both high and low classes, and the openness of Shakespeare’s work to directorial revision and interpretation all combine to
problematize an already complex process of production and consumption. The production of Shakespeare is, of course, first the consumption of his texts, and of the historical consumption/production of those texts. The line, in other words, from Shakespeare’s pen to our eyes and ears, is even less direct, even more heavily and inescapably mediated than usual. To further problematize the process, any production of Shakespeare for popular or mass culture is already the re-appropriation of the appropriated high culture (which appropriated Shakespeare from popular culture), or at least a rejection of that initial appropriation—which is tantamount to reappropriation in any case. This resistance and reappropriation does not require, but often does involve, the challenging of the dominant social class’s dominant meanings (Fiske 520), manifest in ‘accepted’ historical interpretations of the plays. Shakespeare’s plays, always open to broad directorial interpretation (by virtue of the varying folios, of the lack of specific stage directions, the complex rhetoric), become fertile ground for either subversion or reinforcement of those dominant values and meanings.

A screenwriter or filmmaker approaching a project based on a Shakespearean play has, of course, centuries of cultural transmission and interpretation to consider, as well as a question of proprietorship. Whose Shakespeare will inspire the film? Again, the tension arises between the “Shakespearean Scholar” and the “Popular Cinematic Artist”. Many filmmakers seek a balance between the two—striving to retain the cultural authority of an imagined ‘original’ or ‘real’ Shakespeare while still producing a culturally relevant and accessible (read: marketable) film. This ‘real’ Shakespeare, is a phantom, of course, a cultural invention based on centuries of “translative moves between and among
playwright(s), actors, audiences, scribes, compilers, printers, and so on” (Lehmann 1), including nearly a century of film adaptations. Whether a filmmaker chooses to interpret or employ Shakespeare subversively or ‘traditionally,’ such cinematic adaptation “will always be the product of complex negotiations between playtext and screenplay, early modern and postmodern, live action and framed simulation” (1), a product of “historic reciprocity” in which Shakespeare’s name and aura have lent and do lend cultural authority and legitimacy, while the cinematic mode lends Shakespeare continuing cultural relevance and longevity(1). And this reciprocity has come full circle. While early 20th century Shakespearean film adaptations (dozens produced in the first few years of moviemaking alone) were created to lend respectability to the new medium, current adaptations are often clearly intended as a cultural effort to return Shakespeare to popular status. And many such productions—especially those which might be considered resistive or subversive—clearly aim to wrest Shakespeare from highbrow ensconcement.

In addition to coping with sweeping cultural implications, an adaptation of Shakespeare must traverse the ideological struggle raging within the ivory tower itself—the traditional idealism which sacralizes Shakespeare’s text as ‘universal’ and ‘timeless,’ as (seemingly) opposed to more contemporary theoretical approaches which are not always so reverent toward the text nor the man. Shakespeare’s texts not only allow, they absolutely require interpretation. Thus a filmmaker must choose a direction and a tone with which to present the rich social themes offered. That direction, of course, is also based in political, cultural, economic and theoretical stimuli. A filmmaker uses an adaptation to make a ‘statement,’ given weight and interest by the name of Shakespeare,
but a filmmaker is also historically and culturally situated—and decodes and interprets Shakespeare’s plays accordingly. One’s race, class, gender, and experience with colonialism, for example, greatly affect how one reads (and thus produces meaning from) *Othello* or *The Tempest*. A filmmaker may choose to interpret, resist, or even revise (as sometimes even ‘traditional’ Shakespearean actors, as Derek Jacobi and Kenneth Branagh, have done) the intentions communicated in Shakespeare’s texts. All producers of drama, on film or on stage, must negotiate these issues of consumption, mediation, and production. But producers of Shakespeare’s works enter the fray, the struggle for ownership over a deified author to whom both high and low society would lay claim. With marketability and reputation both at stake, producing Shakespeare is an intricate undertaking indeed.

Aside from such complex negotiations to be considered, a cinematic adaptation of a Shakespearean play must also navigate complications of language and format. Shakespeare’s world (and, as we have noted, the American culture until relatively recently) privileged word over image. Elizabethans went to “hear” a play with little visual accoutrement. Modern Americans, of course, go to “see” a movie—often with negligible verbal accoutrement. A filmmaker adapting the Bard’s play must negotiate this difficulty, again considering the sacred status of Shakespeare’s language and our 20th century preoccupation with a mythical textual fidelity. Is Shakespeare still Shakespeare when ‘translated’ into modern English? Is Shakespeare still Shakespeare if only the story, but none of the language, is retained? Again, the basic questions arise: What makes Shakespeare sacred? And who shall decide?
The answers to these questions have changed not only over the past several centuries, but even over the past several decades and the past few years, among different filmmakers from different times, different social and political directions, and different cultures. Consider Laurence Olivier’s 1940’s cerebral, subdued, very *English* Hamlet contrasted with Mel Gibson’s earthy, emotive Dane, and again against Branagh’s seething, sexy, subversive prince in 1996. What’s important about *Hamlet*? Olivier’s words (words...words!), Zeffirelli’s touching humanity and vulnerability (universality, perhaps) in Gibson? Or Branagh’s calculating (ideological) diatribe against the madness of monarchy and the coldness of conquest? What all three versions do seem to agree upon is the importance of Shakespeare’s language (though how much of the language, and where to put it, differs), and the possibilities for creativity created by the text. And none of these films diverges from scholarly expectations *too much*. Compare the reception of such ‘traditional’ adaptations with something like, say *10 Things I Hate About You*, on the surface a teen angst flick, until you realize (or until a 16-year old tells you, with a strange mix of reverence and disdain—that tension again) that it’s Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*. The association is not enough to garner the film critical praise. The loose interpretation is enough to garner eye rolling and derision from some Shakespearean scholars and cultural elites, yet delight from others. After all, isn’t Shakespeare’s story one about teenage girls learning to negotiate gender and familial roles and relations? Isn’t it about learning who you are in relation to what society expects you to be? Isn’t it about resisting those expectations? And aren’t all of those ideas worthy of reprise? If that is not enough to please ‘serious’ critics and some English
majors (and it wasn't), it was enough to catch the attention of a large segment of the popular audience—the teenage segment. (I imagine the confusion on the faces of the few of them who consequently decided to rent Zeffirelli's 1966 Taylor/Burton adaptation. Is this the same Kat? The answer is, of course, "No. No way."

If cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's plays involves tension, struggle, and negotiation, it also offers opportunity for the ultimate in creative collaboration. (And always an asterisk next to the work which says 'Based on Shakespeare's... ' if it isn't actually in the title of the movie!) "Shakespeare said everything," said Orson Welles (in the past century, one of Shakespeare's most prolific collaborative partners). "Brain to belly; every mood and minute of a man's season. His language is starlight and fireflies and the sun and moon. He wrote it with tears and blood and beer, and his words march like heart-beats" (in Holderness 182-200).

Shakespeare's place in American culture has always been in flux. And the tension between highbrow and popular culture that is now so apparent has always been present, though at times much less significant. In many ways (not least linguistically), Shakespeare has never been so far separated from the comprehension and attention span of the average American. Perhaps it is this elitist attitude that has created a near desperation—on the parts of both the intellectual elite who charitably want to 'share' Shakespeare, or by the popular artist who wishes to partake of Shakespeare, to return him to "the people." But this "Shakespeare Boom" seems not to signal so much a rise in cultural connoisseurship as a nostalgia for authenticity. While Shakespeare may not be "universal" in the idealist sense, we must recognize that his works provide endless
opportunity for the exploration of the human cultural condition. And whether his works are adapted (or taught) as resistive, subversive, or traditional (again, only mythically so), they carry the tension of belonging to two worlds: the popular and the highbrow. As a teacher, I have come to the conclusion that I must recognize and acknowledge and communicate that tension, and, as Gripsrud urges, my place within the social construction of high/low culture. These ideas are not beyond my students; they sense them, they touch upon them even with their complaints: “Why is this so hard?” “Why do we have to read this?!” I still can’t answer that, except to say that perhaps we have to read it because it is part of the contradiction of who we are as a culture; it is representative of the conflict and negotiations we engage in every day in America. Shakespeare, it seems, more than Homer, more than Sophocles, represents the tendency of society to pigeonhole that which defies definition, and the tension that results as we attempt to unravel that tangled web.

This paper explores and problematizes the cultural and theoretical issues faced by teachers in their approaches to teaching Shakespeare, arguing that these underlying issues are fundamental to student’s experience with Shakespeare in the classroom. I’ve employed the binary labels of *highbrow* and *lowlbrow* to illustrate the often paradoxical forces at play in the Shakespeare classroom as teachers struggle to reconcile the desire to “share” Shakespeare with the masses while simultaneously (and often instinctively) seeking to protect Shakespeare’s sacred, quasi-religious status. I hope to show how our unexamined attitudes toward Shakespeare’s place in our culture lead to pedagogical/methodological choices in the classroom, and thus to the perpetuation of our own attitudes in our students’ lives and, by extension, the culture at large. The central
chapters examine the underpinnings, practices, and implications of each approach to teaching Shakespeare. I explore the foundations of teachers’ choices and attitudes, and examine connections between theoretical trends within academia and teaching practices on the secondary level. My thesis concludes with a chapter that considers the broader ramifications of contradictory and/or coexisting approaches to Shakespeare within a school or even within a single teacher’s classroom, and provides some direction as to effective tactics for dealing with the tension inherent in teaching Shakespeare. I hope to encourage teachers to examine and understand on a theoretical level the choices they make in the classroom and the implications of those choices.
I am aware that I employ Levine's terminology loosely and somewhat ironically in labeling two, seemingly opposing, approaches to Shakespeare. After all, any effort to teach Shakespeare in a public school setting must be seen as an attempt to "restore" Shakespeare to the masses at some level. Likewise, any attempt to divest Shakespeare of his status as cultural icon and wrest his works from the dominion of high culture only serves to reinforce the reality of Shakespeare's tremendous cultural value which indeed, a lowbrow approach might seek to minimize or even deny. So, while the labels "highbrow" and "lowbrow" communicate a neatly divided hierarchy, they do so only imperfectly here, and are awash in the paradoxical tension which is the focus of this paper.

What, then, is a highbrow approach to teaching Shakespeare? Out of what preconceived notions might it emerge, and how might students in a secondary classroom receive it? On a larger scale, what effect do the choices of schoolteachers in their approaches to Shakespeare have on the university level and on the culture(s) at large? I'll attempt to answer these questions succinctly, with some digression into issues which, while closely related to the tension of highbrow/lowbrow, cannot be given full attention here.

In the simplest of terms, a highbrow approach is one in which the schoolteacher's reverence for Shakespeare's genius, for his place at the center of English Literature is the motivating force in the teacher's rationale and methodology. A highbrow approach to

3 "I have/Immortal longings in me."
*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.282
teaching Shakespeare seeks to maintain Shakespeare’s stature, while raising students to the level at which they might attain an appreciation for and perhaps even an understanding of Shakespeare’s works. That is, a highbrow approach maintains the sacralization of Shakespeare and his culturally elite status. Students gain cultural and educational capital through “learning” Shakespeare. As one with economic capital has a bank statement or stock certificate to demonstrate that capital, so might a student emerging from the tutelage of a “highbrow teacher” feel that she has acquired a stamp in her book which reads, “I ‘know’ Shakespeare.” (Next “important” author, please. I’m trying to fill my book!) While the teacher’s intent surely aims beyond such commodification of Shakespeare, the result might only rarely reach the level of appreciation and enjoyment the teacher had hoped to inspire.

And just as any “lowbrow” approach must be colored by Shakespeare’s undeniably elite status, no highbrow approach to teaching Shakespeare in the secondary classroom can be called wholly elitist, since teachers do indeed present Shakespeare—regardless of philosophy or methodology—to the “popular masses,” our high school students. Even the teacher most staunchly highbrow in practice betrays his or her desire to have Shakespeare known and appreciated by everyone (the key, of course, to the highbrow attitude is how he’s known, how well he’s appreciated). Rare indeed, and virtually silent these days, is the secondary level teacher who would withhold Shakespeare from all but the most intellectually gifted and culturally adept students.
This is not to say that a highbrow approach sees Shakespeare only as cultural capital, a commodity to be traded for social status and power (though Shakespeare is certainly a hot commodity in the commercial as well as the cultural sense). Bardolators, closet or otherwise, esteem Shakespeare not only because of his culturally entrenched icon status, historically fashioned as Levine has outlined in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, but because Shakespeare has something superior to offer. Approached from a highbrow perspective, Shakespeare is without peer (a phrase only a bardolator could use unselfconsciously these days) in language play, metaphor, character, dramatic structure...virtually any of the literary expressions we are expected to teach on the high school level. To decenter Shakespeare and teach his work parallel to, at an equal level with any other work, let alone with contemporary literature and criticism, is to deny natural genius, thus commit an immoral and politically suspect act. Here others, not just teachers, enter the equation: Shakespeare becomes something of a political standard-bearer, a symbol for all we might nostalgically believe was once true and good and right with our culture and our educational system—but which Levine repeatedly reminds us in *The Opening of the American Mind* was only briefly true, and possibly never as good or right as we “remember” it (73, 91-101).

While a highbrow approach is likely more than simply a conservative one, and a lowbrow approach not necessarily liberal, the tension between the two does spill over into a cultural arena beyond our schools and universities, but always connected to them. Briefly, then, I’ll examine the highbrow/lowbrow opposition in its political incarnation.
In *Who Killed Shakespeare?*, Patrick Brantlinger’s analysis of the socio-political-historical forces of change at work in today’s university, Brantlinger discusses the political ado his department dreaded if this misleading though technically true headline were to hit the press: “PROFESSORS STRIKE SHAKESPEARE FROM REQUIREMENTS” (15). In fact the department had discussed excluding Shakespeare as a requirement wholly *because* of his consistently solid status in the current class offerings. Brantlinger tellingly quotes one of his colleagues as saying, “The demand for Shakespeare is so great that if we offered six or seven Shakespeare courses every year instead of three or four, they would all fill,” and another adding, “It’s a fetish thing. Bardolatry. You can deconstruct other authors into oblivion, but Shakespeare really is immortal” (14). While Brantlinger doesn’t indicate whether his colleague would *like* to deconstruct Shakespeare—or any other author—into oblivion, his anecdote reveals the broad, largely unquestioning acceptance of Shakespeare’s status in our culture as well as in our intellectual communities. A high school teacher emerging from nearly any university, trained in nearly any theoretical school of thought, is still likely to accept (if not agree with) the “reality” of Shakespeare’s status as the unassailable center of the literary canon. Ironically, though, Shakespeare’s value in the eyes of the public has led to something of a mass hysteria fed by the fear that Shakespeare has been (or will soon be) purged from both university and secondary classrooms.

Bruce R. Smith reflects upon Georgetown’s Shakespearean debacle (upon which Brantlinger’s fears were largely based) in his article for *Shakespeare Quarterly* entitled “Teaching the Resonances,” one of the papers included in a panel session exploring
Shakespeare’s place in the university. When Georgetown, which has never required a Shakespeare course specifically, updated its curriculum requirements and offerings to better reflect the interests of both students and faculty, an uproar resulted. The likes of Saul Bellow, William Peter Blatty, and Charlton Heston were aghast at the notion that Shakespeare was no longer being required, and was being replaced by specialized courses such as “AIDS and Representation” or “Race, Gender, and Nation.” Of course, as Brantlinger’s colleague pointed out, Shakespeare was in little danger of being replaced at Georgetown either, with numerous sections offered (and filled) yearly (Smith 451-453). The press, however, loves a good headline, and it’s safe to assume that a majority of those reading the widespread reports of Shakespeare’s demise never learned that Shakespeare is, indeed, often not required because he doesn’t have to be. (Even here, the tension is evident: Shakespeare’s popularity both results from and ensures his continued elite status.) Many of those readers were surely secondary English teachers who—upon hearing that those theory-crazy, politically correct Ph.D.’s had given up on Shakespeare—took on the task of saving him from within the secondary schools. The highbrow teacher thus feels justified in favoring Shakespeare over works more contemporary or multicultural in character.

A highbrow approach, then, might be seen as largely a traditional or even politically conservative choice, though I hope to show later that highbrow Shakespeare is not exclusively the domain of the traditionalist. Throw into the mix the inherently political discussion of theory’s (theories’) place in the English classroom and the idea of highbrow/lowbrow becomes more complex and definitely more tense:
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Harold Bloom, in his argument for Shakespeare's "timelessness" and "universality" writes:

The other way of exploring Shakespeare's continued supremacy is rather more empirical [than methods employed by today's literary theories]: he has been universally judged to be a more adequate representer of the universe of fact than anyone else, before him or since. This judgment has been dominant since at least the mid-eighteenth century; it has been staled by repetition, yet it remains merely true, banal as resentful theorists find it to be. We keep returning to Shakespeare because we need him; no one else gives us so much of the world most of us take to be fact. (16-17)

Though Bloom tosses about terms like universally judged, true, fact, and (gasp!) most of us with little consideration (or perhaps with carefully defiant consideration) his bombastically resolute statement of Truth reads like a mantra for the highbrow teacher. Bloom's statement operates on the assumption (largely correct) that Shakespeare's status is a cultural reality. It ignores the problematic nature of that very assumption, though, and of Bloom's own ability to label what is "universal," or who "most of us" might be.

But such sure and nostalgic declarations are appealing in their apparent solidity; Bloom is sure in a world that isn't. And especially for a secondary teacher of English Literature, who must nearly daily encounter the (whiny) question "Why do we have to read this?", Bloom's proclamation of Shakespeare's importance is a clear answer to a murky question, and it relieves a teacher from the pressure of "keeping up" with the academy's ever-changing theoretical landscape.

Similarly, Paul Cantor, in his article "Shakespeare, 'for all time'?: Politicizing the Teaching of Shakespeare's Works," expresses the apparently highbrow concern not only that Shakespeare's body of work should continue to be studied, but that it continue to be
studied *properly*—that is, that it be taught from a traditional, highbrow approach which maintains the sacred status of Shakespeare’s text. He writes, “...we must be awake to the possibility that radical professors of literature have found more subtle ways of attacking our cultural heritage than outright canon-bashing. Having learned to treat traditional authors in untraditional ways, they can still pursue their political agenda under the guise of teaching canonical works” (34).

Cantor continues his lecture as to how Shakespeare certainly *shouldn’t* be approached:

There is a difference between political approaches to literature and politicized approaches...Unfortunately, in their effort to use Shakespeare to strike a blow for multiculturalism and other radical goals, today’s literature professors tend to be reductive and iconoclastic, presenting a diminished Shakespeare, one who is, I believe, much less interesting than he ought to be to our students. In particular, contemporary critics work to undermine the older view that Shakespeare’s plays are somehow of universal significance, a claim most eloquently embodied in a line from the eulogy by Ben Jonson prefaced to the First Folio: “He was not of an age, but for all time!” (35)

He goes on to disdain all approaches to Shakespeare which are “reductive” in nature—anything which implies at all that Shakespeare is ordinary or common, anything which reduces the importance and stature of Shakespeare’s genius. “Traditional Shakespeare scholars,” he writes, “did not appear to be pushing any kind of agenda and, in particular, they did not seem obsessed with asserting their superiority as people of the twentieth century over Shakespeare, the Elizabethan” (35).

Cantor’s concerns reveal that it’s no longer just a matter of whether Shakespeare should be taught, or whether other authors should be given equal time and status. The question of whether *theory* will be used, overtly or covertly, to usurp Shakespeare’s
rightful place in the canon (to name the issue frankly without entering into the larger fray of the canon/culture wars) has become a weighty element in the tension any teacher (who is at all aware of current issues in the field) feels in choosing between Shakespeare the icon and Gentle Will of popular culture.

Geraldo U. DeSousa explores the issue of the added tension within English departments “between” theory and literature in the Winter 1997 “Issues” segment of *Shakespeare Quarterly* entitled “Paradigm Lost?”, which includes the papers from a panel session of the same title at the 1997 annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America. In examining the question of whether universities should be teaching theory *or* Shakespeare, De Sousa writes, “The rift within the English department mirrors a rift...between English departments and the rest of the university and...between academia and the culture at large” (450). That is, the question of theory *versus* literature (Shakespeare) is again politicized, and does become (consciously or unconsciously) a factor in a schoolteacher’s approach to teaching Shakespeare (resulting both from his/her own training within the university and from his/her awareness of the socio-political battle being waged in the headlines). De Sousa’s purpose, it seems, is to dismantle that binary opposition and expose the possibilities for both Shakespeare and theory to thrive in the academy, and not even necessarily separately. He closes his introduction to the papers with a statement which would warm the heart of any highbrow-leaning teacher: “Obviously, Shakespeare does not face any immediate danger of being displaced by theory” (451, emphasis mine). Obviously? To Harold (or Allan) Bloom, Paul Cantor, or, say, William Bennett, perhaps it is not so obvious. To a schoolteacher or a politician
reading news magazines or papers, Shakespeare seems to have already "lost" this "battle" in academia. But De Sousa continues with a statement one teacher might find reassuring, another naïve: "I think that an overwhelming consensus prevails in the profession and in the culture that Shakespeare has a place in the curriculum and an importance as both a literary genius and a cultural phenomenon" (451). Most "conservatives" and traditionalists would agree—though perhaps taking issue with the "cultural phenomenon" part. And finally, De Sousa writes, "Our primary challenge is to encourage a love for Shakespeare...not only in potential teachers but also in a future generation of scientists, legislators, attorneys, and accountants" (451). Theory, he argues, is useful and appropriate in the classroom only if it helps achieve that goal (and the papers that follow De Sousa’s introduction indicate that it can).

According to De Sousa, then, the binary, politicized opposition between theory and Shakespeare is fallacious. I would extrapolate that a teacher schooled in postmodernism, deconstructionism, feminism, post-feminism, Marxism, cultural studies—any of the inherently political and presumably (or presumed-to-be) liberal theoretical approaches which would espouse irreverence toward "classic" "Western" literature—might also approach Shakespeare with an emotional reverence which has little to do with intellectual literary theory and everything to do with the broad cultural statement De Sousa himself confidently asserts. That same teacher might even teach Shakespeare at the high school level from a quintessentially highbrow approach—again, in the simplest of terms, one which seeks to maintain Shakespeare’s elite status—though probably one less hostile to theory’s function of opening Shakespeare’s work to a more
varied set of observational lenses, than a more traditional, less theoretically inclined
teacher might employ.

A highbrow approach seeks to maintain the sacralization and “authenticity” of
Shakespeare’s genius. Applied to the extreme, it “de-popularizes” the bard altogether,
removing the original intent of the author (as understood by the teacher and/or
Shakespearean scholar, to be sure) from the grubby (popular) hands of actors, directors,
interpreters and other (mass) mediators of The Works of Shakespeare. An extreme
highbrow approach attempts to remove Shakespeare from a popular cultural context—
indeed from a real cultural context in the literal sense—in favor of a sterile and academic
shrine of sorts in which the purity of Shakespeare’s language and message(s) might be
held, ostensibly static and apolitical if not ahistorical. Traditionally, this approach has led
some teachers to insist upon the reading of the plays, the experiencing of Shakespeare’s
poetic Word, without the mediated, culturally loaded experience of viewing or
performing the plays as drama. Or, when performance is included in such an approach, it
might be from a single point of view, a predetermined interpretation leading to a choice
of film versions which the teacher might perceive as more “authentic” or
“authoritative”—more correct: Zeffirelli, that is, not Luhrmann (and then, interestingly,
Olivier, not (Zeffirelli’s) Gibson—or, worse, Hawke!)4.

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4 I refer to Franco Zeffirelli’s period production of Romeo and Juliet, traditionally the film version of choice (at least in the high school classroom) since its release in 1968, more recently juxtaposed with Baz Luhrmann’s less traditional William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet. (Though it’s important to note that, while Luhrmann’s film received mixed reviews, some of its biggest fans were and are diehard bardolators; and for its time, Zeffirelli’s production was seen by many as less reverential and less concerned with Shakespeare’s language than perhaps it should have been.) Similarly, Lawrence Olivier’s 1948 portrayal of Hamlet would probably carry more weight as a faithful representation of Shakespeare’s intentions than Mel Gibson’s less cerebral 1990 representation or the slick, modernized portrayal by Ethan Hawke, no longer a Dane, in the 2000 film version of Hamlet directed by Michael Almereyda.
The inherent irony again rears its head with any reflection at all upon the many cultural and individual (if there can be an individual apart from the culture) biases brought, over time, to such an “authoritative” highbrow approach. Clearly, for example, the choices of which play or plays to include in textbooks (and indeed which version of said play(s), and edited by whom) are loaded with the very sociopolitical motivations and ramifications a highbrow approach might claim to avoid. And so, high school sophomores everywhere read and watched *Julius Caesar* for three (and in some places more like five) decades after World War II. Countless teachers helped students understand “what Shakespeare was saying” about loyalty, honor, democracy, leadership, and war. (Those *are the themes* of the play, aren’t they?) Textbook editors, school boards, and high school English departments used the play to overtly encourage such “American values.” And high school students earned the coinage of “knowing” what the play was about, of what “Et tu, Brute” really means. As a bonus (and anyone who has taught tenth graders will acknowledge that it is, indeed, a relief), Julius Caesar is wholly devoid of the sexual references and bawdy humour found in so many of Shakespeare’s other plays.

Of course, *Julius Caesar* was not selected in a political or cultural vacuum any more than Shakespeare’s *Tempest* appears out of one in more current “World Literature” textbooks, yet traditionalists might sense an agenda at work in the latter choice to which they’d turned a blind eye for the former (*Julius Caesar* was, after all, what I read as a sophomore as well!). The difference, perhaps, lies in one’s comfort with just who is doing the choosing, and whose political needs and beliefs are perceived as being served
by that choice. That is, whose version of “American values” is being served by the choice, and how comfortable are we with the ongoing changes in our culture reflected by those values? *The Tempest* might serve as a context for examining issues of race and postcolonialism—issues somehow more controversial than those mined from the staid *Julius Caesar*. Indeed, I have bridled at the suggestion that I give up *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* (the plays I studied and loved in high school, after all) for *The Tempest*, a play I am not prepared to teach without providing my students some overt instruction in the theoretical underpinnings of the textbook publisher’s choice to include it, or of the way “they” suggest I present it. I question the agenda. Yet I do not ask myself the same questions of my own more conventional choices; society does not ask me those questions. Even within Shakespeare’s own works, a kind of highbrow/lowbrow tension becomes increasingly apparent as cultural and political issues make their way into my classroom, or, more honestly, into my consciousness. On a highbrow-lean day, I stick with my “outdated” classroom copies of the British Literature textbook, leaving multiculturalism and postcolonialism in the lockers.

Even as the highbrow teacher offers the experience of Shakespeare to the masses (that is, the students), he or she seeks to maintain Shakespeare’s genius as somewhat inaccessible, and therefore valuable. In simple terms, so ingrained is the capitalist law of supply and demand in our culture that only that which is difficult to achieve or acquire can be highly valued. In a chapter explaining the evolution of cultural hierarchy in America, Lawrence Levine writes:

> The cultural fare that was actively and regularly shared by all segments of the population belonged *ipso facto* to the lower rungs of the cultural hierarchy. As
we gradually come to the realization that Fred Astaire was one of this century's
good dancers, Louis Armstrong one of its important musicians, Charlie Chaplin
one of its acute social commentators, we must remember that for most of this
century they could be shared by all of the people only when they were devalued
and rendered non-threatening as "popular" art. (Highbrow Lowbrow 234)

He continues:

...Exoteric or popular art is transformed into esoteric or high art at precisely that
time when it in fact becomes esoteric, that is, when it becomes or is rendered
inaccessible to the types of people who appreciated it earlier. Thus a film like D.
W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation, which was popular or lowbrow culture when it
was released...is transformed into high culture when time renders its
"language"...archaic and thus less familiar and accessible to the masses. (234)

And so it is with Shakespeare, who, until the end of the nineteenth century,

was rhetorically, dramatically, and stylistically more accessible to the masses. In the
highbrow classroom however, the inaccessibility resulting from language is highlighted
and valued. Shakespeare is rendered more difficult, and therefore more valuable by a
highbrow teacher's focus on the complex form, archaic language, and remote themes
which Shakespeare's works legitimately present.

To make a dangerous generalization, a highbrow approach is most likely a more
traditional and more conservative approach, which is not to say that it cannot be effective
or energizing for some students in such a classroom. It is also likely to be rather
intimidating and somewhat discouraging for less skilled students, and downright
offensive to students who resist the very notion of the value of high art. As Levine notes,

"Although the stated intention of the arbiters of culture was to proselytize and convert, to
lift the masses up to their level, in fact their attitudes often had the opposite effect. The
negative stereotypes of terms like "culture" and "cultivated" took hold early" (235).
student who disdains cultural capital as useless or pretentious finds little appeal in highbrow Shakespeare.

To further generalize, a highbrow approach is more likely to be employed by a teacher with a background of formalism, New Criticism, or “old” historicism. The highbrow approach places Shakespeare’s works or Shakespeare the author at the center of the lesson—at the top and in the center, to continue in terms of a hierarchical construct—with students seeking to attain that level and the teacher guiding them, often along a single, predetermined path, to that attainment.

A highbrow teacher’s focus on language, poetics, and dramatic form might require students to examine the play’s poetic, dramatic, and rhetorical structures through close reading—a practice many high school students might not be terribly familiar nor comfortable with. A committed highbrow teacher would certainly need to provide guidance, then, in the mode of study itself, as well as those particulars my students like to call “background,” which would include historical and biographical information as well as literary and dramatic elements particular to Shakespeare (and unfamiliar to students). Certainly, the practice of close reading provides students with a valuable reading tool applicable far beyond Shakespeare. For students already enamored of language, such an approach provides an opportunity to explore Shakespeare’s language in depth, to “play” with the turn of the phrase, the ironies, the tensions alive in Shakespeare’s plays. And even for students who struggle with language and reading in general, a structured highbrow approach offers genuine cultural capital and satisfaction in exchange for the monumental task of “wading through” the language of Shakespeare—and mastering it.
A highbrow teacher sees the knowledge base (which she has gained and can now impart to students) as not only a necessary foundation to her students’ comprehension of Shakespeare’s language and works, but as an opportunity to motivate students and create the curiosity and enthusiasm to learn more, to embark on their own journey with the Shakespeare to whom they’ve been introduced. To say that a highbrow teacher wants to carefully control her students’ access to (or image of) Shakespeare is not to say that she would define that access altogether; rather such a teacher is likely to see knowledge as the key to a student’s personal understanding of and eventual (appropriate) awe and admiration for Shakespeare’s ability to capture the human experience—intellectual, emotional, political, corporal—in the poetry of his plays. The goal of the highbrow teacher is not to deaden Shakespeare, as critics would argue, but to ensure a fully informed approach to his works. Of course, an approach which emphasizes language for its own sake, forgetting or ignoring students’ interests, skill levels, and attention spans, might end up looking like the horror stories we’ve all heard about that “highbrow” English teacher who “killed” Shakespeare for class after class of high school students. Any highbrow-leaning teacher knows that there is a fine line between encouraging a complete appreciation and understanding of Shakespeare’s poetry, and engendering resentment toward or frustration with the language. The most effective highbrow teachers I’ve known seamlessly blend the high-interest, human elements of Shakespeare with the genius of his language, challenging students to explore Shakespeare with far more complexity than they might without a teacher’s guidance.
Shakespeare’s status as “important”—even essential—to English teachers and to the culture at large has defied simple explanation, and is left without elucidation by De Sousa, among others. Even Robert Scholes, calling for an entirely reconsidered, reoriented “discipline” of English seems to assume that Shakespeare (while perhaps decentered in the curriculum) will remain securely in the classroom, and not just quite alongside contemporary mass culture, either. And while Levine’s historical explanation of Shakespeare’s ensconcement in high culture sheds much light on the path Shakespeare’s works took through mass culture to become the proclaimed property of high culture (but to still be wrestled over between highbrow and lowbrow both in culture and classroom, as is the contention of my thesis) it still falls short of fully unraveling the mystery: Why Shakespeare, “for all time”? And why is it so “obvious” to many of us within and outside the field of English?

These questions, yet to be definitively answered, are some the highbrow teacher might acknowledge but feel no need to consider deeply. It is the very certainty, nay the Truth of Shakespeare’s superiority (over what and whom need not always be carefully considered)—coupled with the sheer joy we take in the brilliant language, the magnificent insights—that tugs us, already in possession of the cultural and educational capital the study of Shakespeare has granted, to present Shakespeare from the highbrow end of the spectrum. The unquestioned certainty expressed by Bloom, De Sousa, and Brantlinger’s colleague allows teachers to continue to teach from a highbrow approach even as we read and author apocalyptic and gloomy elegies to the teaching of Literature (Shakespeare) in the university and the secondary classroom. Indeed, the hullabaloo over
Shakespeare's place (or lack thereof) in the English classroom may even cause some teachers to (rebelliously) take up the mantle of the traditionalist and eschew more open or egalitarian approaches to Shakespeare. But whether a teacher presents his works with a tone of awe, nostalgia, elitist superiority, or defiance, students in the highbrow classroom receive the message that Shakespeare becomes theirs only when they have worked to attain a certain level of cultural and educational capital—to which the teacher is the gatekeeper.
A DIVIDED DUTY

If the highbrow approach reflects a somewhat intransigent attempt to maintain what is perceived to be Shakespeare’s rightful and sanctified place at the center of the canon, a lowbrow approach might be seen as an equally reactionary volley against that same notion of Shakespeare’s dominance and cultural centrality. A lowbrow approach to teaching Shakespeare seeks, in one form or another (and for myriad reasons, some of which I will explore here), to wrest Shakespeare from high culture and to restore his works to the domain of popular culture. Most such approaches are anything but anti-academic or anti-intellectual, but are certainly anti-establishment (if the establishment can still be seen as the domain of the traditionalist).

The tension and irony involved with a lowbrow approach seems much more acute even than that inherent in a highbrow approach. A lowbrow approach struggles to free itself from the assumptions and limitations of a hierarchical cultural structure, even while working within and against that structure, indeed even while supporting that structure to a degree in its end result of maintaining Shakespeare’s popularity and therefore his continued status as cultural icon. Thus a well constructed, carefully reasoned lowbrow approach might be much more complicated in its formation, production, and reception than a highbrow approach which accepts the validity and indeed bases its own value upon

5 “I do perceive here a divided duty.”

*Othello*, 1.3.181
the established hierarchical structure of high and low culture. And just as it is easy for a highbrow approach to become thoughtlessly engaged in sermonizing Shakespeare’s genius, a lowbrow approach might easily devolve into a strictly reactionary mutiny, functioning only as an attempt to revoke the power of high culture by devaluing the aspects of Shakespeare which make his work inaccessible and therefore elitist. Because a lowbrow approach gone astray (or simply inadequately considered) provides a meaty target for traditionalists and the culture at large, I’ll examine here some less effective methods as well as those more mindful incarnations.

Just as a highbrow approach can be seen to result from the historical (and nostalgic) construction of artificial demarcations of cultural superiority outlined in Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, a lowbrow approach to teaching Shakespeare a now firmly at the “top” of that cultural construction is the result of larger movements both in literary studies and in pedagogy, including the rise of “theory” at the university level (especially studies in reader response, post-colonialism, feminism, Marxism, New Historicism, and cultural studies), and a pedagogical shift privileging learning styles, multiple intelligences, multiculturalism, collaborative learning, and “critical thinking” skills over the acquisition of knowledge. Both of these broader trends decenter Shakespeare (or any “important” author, and indeed at times the literature itself) in favor of the individual student’s experience with and reaction to the work, or of a particular theoretical approach (or as Paul Cantor would label it, an “agenda”). The degree to which a teacher’s approach requires that experience and reaction to be informed by history, close reading, and literary analysis, determines its place on the hierarchical spectrum of highbrow/lowbrow,
as well as the degree to which Shakespeare as cultural icon remains the focus of the method.

While a lowbrow approach is not necessarily a politically liberal approach, nor is a theoretically informed approach necessarily aligned with a distinctly lowbrow attempt to treat Shakespeare as popular culture, a lowbrow methodology is certainly more likely to develop from “liberal theory” than from traditional conservatism. Much of what theory has served to do in the past three decades, after all, has been to decenter not only canonical authors and their works, but to decenter literature itself. I am not assuming, though, that all attempts to decenter Shakespeare would qualify as “lowbrow” teaching approaches in the sense that both Levine and I have employed the term. This discussion of a spectrum of teaching approaches is limited to teachers who want to teach Shakespeare—or at least who accept the charge they’ve been given to do so—but who employ different methods and, as this paper argues, different agendas in doing so, no matter how unexamined or unconscious. I acknowledge that many theoretically informed approaches to Shakespeare might amount to “unteaching” Shakespeare’s value as either a cultural icon or a popular artist—in effect, to teaching that Shakespeare needn’t be taught, read, or experienced at all. That trend, while related to the concepts discussed herein, falls outside the bounds of this discussion. Someone who wishes to remove Shakespeare from the cultural and literary landscape altogether, cannot be seen as sharing the lowbrow goal of restoring Shakespeare to the masses.

A lowbrow approach to teaching Shakespeare might be further divided into two broad categories: one maintaining but reassigning the sacralization of Shakespeare’s
genius from "high art" to "popular art"; the other rejecting or at least questioning Shakespeare's cultural importance—perhaps even his "genius"—outright, invalidating or at least ignoring the reality of Shakespeare's cultural significance, and perhaps even seeking to dismantle the value system which has placed him there. Clearly the latter category might result from a teacher's attention to theory in his or her methodology; the former is perhaps the more common demonstration of a lowbrow approach in the secondary classroom, since, as this paper argues, less consideration tends to be given on the high school level to the theoretical underpinnings of Shakespeare's place in the curriculum, and indeed to the why's and how's of our presentation of Shakespeare to our students.

A radically lowbrow approach would, by definition, require casting off Shakespeare as a required curriculum component, thus removing the author's status as icon and returning his work to the popular masses who might choose for themselves whether to make the bard's acquaintance. Such an approach amounts to a sort of separation of church and state, a refusal to participate in the state-sponsored cultural deification of Shakespeare, as it were. Surely some teachers in a high school English department somewhere have discussed the possibility of jettisoning Shakespeare (notwithstanding the unfaltering faith of so many university English professors that Shakespeare will always be taught). In my own district, a proposal to allow Senior students to choose elective English courses each semester would have the effect of removing Shakespeare as a requirement at that level (but not on the Freshman and Sophomore levels). To make that happen, though, the district curriculum would have to
be altered to reflect the move away from requiring canonical authors—a change neither
the board nor the community is prepared to make. That problem might be solved by
requiring one semester of “classic” Western Literature and allowing a choice of classes in
the other. This town isn’t ready to relinquish its opportunity to “civilize” its children, nor
are many others across the country, be they rural, suburban, or urban.

A lowbrow approach is a rejection of high culture’s appropriation of
Shakespeare’s works, but not necessarily of Shakespeare’s enduring (not to say
“timeless”!) mass appeal (not to say “universality”!). That apparent recognition of the
unique quality of Shakespeare’s work lends an ironic twist to a lowbrow approach in the
classroom: Even while “reducing” Shakespeare to accessible popular artist, while
suggesting that even His works may be less important than what it is we make of them;
even so, there is the generally unselfconscious acceptance that Shakespeare will and even
should be taught. Robert F. Willson, Jr., in an article entitled “Why Teach Shakespeare?
A Reconsideration,” writes of that certainty, “No, we would never doubt the centrality of
our author, even in a deconstructed curriculum, especially since innovative critics rely on
his work to help them deconstruct the canon” (206). Though Willson’s article focuses on
teaching Shakespeare at the university level, the sentiment (for it is exactly that) of
acceptance for Shakespeare applies equally to the high school English department. Even
a Shakespeare decidedly decentered in any given pedagogical or theoretical approach is
still undeniably central to the curriculum.

Still, in the secondary classroom where Shakespeare is usually a required subject,
many teachers choose a version of lowbrow approach, opting to make Shakespeare as
accessible as possible and favoring enjoyment over the sort of carefully cultured
“appreciation” so important to the highbrow instructor. Such an approach requires the
removal of barriers to Shakespeare as popular artist. The very aspects of Shakespeare’s
work that make him “high art,” then, might well be removed altogether. It is possible for
a teacher not only to avoid dealing with Shakespeare’s language by choosing texts which
are “translated” into modern English, but to avoid the “text” as such altogether by having
her students view a production of the play which opts for updated language, setting, and
costuming.

A lowbrow approach involves “de-mystifying” the genius of Shakespeare,
bringing Shakespeare” down” (to use again that awkward hierarchical language) to the
level of the students. The lowbrow approach, then, may be steeped in that very
hierarchical mindset it seeks to escape, as it is based on the assumption that popular art
must be less difficult to understand—must be more accessible—than “high art.” Yet a
lowbrow teacher might still set great value upon Shakespeare (without necessarily
examining that irony), seeking to re-place that value in the hands of the masses, the
cultural “have-nots”—a sort of a Robin Hood approach to teaching Shakespeare’s works
which at its best restores humor, humanity and approachability to the plays, while at its
“worst” (in the eyes of Harold Bloom or Paul Cantor, at least) brings Shakespeare
“down” by removing the very impediments to understanding which the highbrow
approach would argue are central to the meaning and value of his work. That is, by
removing the play’s “literariness” and complexity of form and language, a lowbrow
approach renders Shakespeare less valuable, less Shakespeare than the highbrow contingent, and even, it seems, the culture at large believe it should be.

Outside the classroom, though, other Shakespearean Robin Hoods have succeeded to an impressive degree in reversing the historical construction of a highbrow Shakespeare removed from the hands of the masses; public performance programs across the country (like our own Montana Shakespeare in the Parks) enjoy great popularity with, if not an even cross-section of society exactly, a broad and varied audience who seek to enjoy Shakespeare’s plays and seem undaunted by the “difficulties” and complexities touted by highbrow teachers as the admission price to cultural erudition. As Levine explains in Highbrow/Lowbrow, Shakespeare’s sacralization results in large part from attempts over the last century to remove his plays from the “free market,” so to speak:

When Shakespeare, opera, art, and music were subject to free exchange, as they had been for much of the nineteenth century, they became the property of many groups, the companion of a wide spectrum of other cultural genres, and thus their power to bestow distinction was diminished, as was their power to please those who insisted on enjoying them in privileged circumstances, free from the interference of other cultural groups and the dilution of other cultural forms. As long as they remained shared culture, the manner of their presentation and reception was determined in part by the market, that is, by the demands of the heterogeneous audience. They were in effect “rescued” from the marketplace, and therefore from the mixed audience and from the presence of other cultural genres; they were removed from the pressures of everyday economic and social life, and placed, significantly, in concert halls, opera houses, and museums that often resembled temples, to be perused, enjoyed and protected by the initiated—those who had the inclination, the leisure, and the knowledge to appreciate them. (230)
Levine goes on to explain that, though the lower classes were not exactly excluded in a physical nor a financial sense from attending cultural events in these new "temples," those who controlled the physical institutions also controlled and determined the issues of politics and taste which governed the way in which the arts were presented:

The taste that now prevailed was that of one segment of the social and economic spectrum which convinced itself and the nation at large that its way of seeing, understanding, and appreciating music, theater, and art was the only legitimate one; that this was the way Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Greek sculpture were meant to be experienced and in fact had been experienced always by those of culture and discernment. (231)

Public parks performance programs, of course, "set Shakespeare free" from the physical confines, at least, which represent high culture, highbrow Shakespeare. Shakespeare is open to interpretation by a broader spectrum of people from production through reception, and is completely without class division in the economic sense, as it is free to the public. Thus Shakespeare in the Parks removes barriers to Shakespeare's accessibility by removing him from the institution, and by staging productions of Shakespeare's plays which from year to year answer to no single arbiter of politics nor taste. Such, perhaps, is the dream of the lowbrow teacher, who attempts to do the same while paradoxically literally confined in one such institution which creates and perpetuates the inaccessibility of Shakespeare, the Immortal Bard. It drives some teachers to desperate and sometimes disastrous choices in the classroom.

We have all witnessed and perhaps taken part in literature classes that demand only that students react to a piece of literature on an individual level, that students relate to the literature and discuss its very personal meaning(s) with the rest of the class. Such methods are derivative of the idea, quintessentially lowbrow in spirit, that there is no one
right way to interpret a piece of literature (certainly a stand fraught with intense and basic theoretical issues); perhaps it follows then that everyone's interpretation is equally "correct" and valuable—and worthy of relating through even the most inane and painfully anecdotal discussions. ("Like, I totally get where Hamlet is coming from 'cause my boyfriend totally ratted me out to my lame parents this one time...?") Even the most anti-bardolatric (!) teacher can hear Shakespeare spinning in his grave...or tomb.

"Whatever."

As Sharon Beehler notes in her article for the Winter 1990 issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly* entitled " 'That's a Certain Text': Problematizing Shakespeare Instruction in American Schools and Colleges":

The danger of this approach [besides, presumably, a slow death from boredom], as we discovered in the sixties and seventies, is its tendency to get off the track. The play falls behind as students share the situations of their own lives—a task that could be productive if students learned to *reflect* upon their own experiences, but such reflection rarely goes beyond the expression of feelings. (196-197)

The lack of productivity leads the teacher to a sort of incongruous see-saw of highbrow/lowbrow methodology: "Teachers caught in the bind of promoting discussion that strays from the Shakespeare text rely upon tests of memorized material in order to remain accountable for teaching the play" (197). The result is an approach which is lowbrow in motivation, but which—lacking in careful consideration of desired learner outcomes—becomes neither an intellectually challenging lowbrow approach nor a culturally significant highbrow one. Students in such a "lowbrow" teacher's classroom might come away at best confused between the two Shakespeares they seem to have encountered.
Other secondary teachers present Shakespeare in a manner deemed profane by very traditional teachers: the performance approach. An ill-conceived performance approach might focus wholly on students' uninformed reinterpretation of the action of Shakespeare's plays—a rewriting or paraphrasing of his lines, an updating of the setting...simply a retelling of Shakespeare's tales—Shakespeare a la Cliff, but without the pesky literary criticism or exploration of literary and poetic device. Students have great fun with Shakespeare, translating the naughtier lines (if they catch them), composing clever rap soliloquies, and donning creative costumes on which more time has been spent than on the actual reading of the play. Such an activity really does little for the critical thinking skills, theoretical sophistication, or cultural edification of the students involved, but still cannot be considered a complete loss in terms of introducing students to Shakespeare from a lowbrow perspective. Students come away from such an exercise feeling that Shakespeare is certainly accessible, and that he is fun. In that respect, the approach has, in a sense, succeeded in returning Shakespeare to the masses, unfettered by any of the language, poetry, structure, or history which might make the study of Shakespeare difficult and therefore elitist. However, highbrow and lowbrow teachers alike might wonder whether the works the students have “experienced” and “interpreted” were Shakespeare's at all.

Just as we might question the extreme highbrow teacher’s motives in seeking to maintain Shakespeare’s inaccessibility, we must also question the motivation of a teacher who presents Shakespeare solely “for the fun of it” without a thorough rationale for abandoning Shakespeare’s poetic language altogether in what is, after all, a Language
Arts (or English Literature) classroom. Again, if Shakespeare has been decentered in favor of a pedagogical or theoretical objective, that goal is not identifiable in a loosely-interpreted performance approach.

Add to the list of lowbrow-inspired but ultimately hollow classroom practices the use of video, unencumbered by investigations of complex issues such as interpretation, mediation, production, and reception. A classroom full of students watches a screen, passively compliant, as Shakespeare passes before their eyes in the medium most “accessible” to our culture as in general. What could be more lowbrow than Shakespeare on TV?! Thus, Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* is Shakespeare’s *Henry V*; Helena Bonham-Carter’s Ophelia is the only Ophelia. And in a manner paradoxically reminiscent of a more traditional approach, the student comes away “knowing” Shakespeare without engaging in any critical thinking or straining any of his or her multiple intelligences. Perhaps the teacher feels she has replicated the *Shakespeare in the Parks* experience to the best of her ability; she has not considered that she has simply returned Shakespeare to that fixed place, that “temple” of high culture in the form of the VCR-on-roller-cart in the institution of all institutions, the public high school classroom.

A truly lowbrow approach, in the spirit in which both Levine and I fretfully employ the term, is not simply one devoid of pompous, learned lectures and pages of dry historical background reading for homework. It is not an easy out for the teacher too intimidated by or disenchanted with Shakespeare to attempt effective highbrow methods. A lowbrow approach, as I noted at the chapter’s start, does more than simply make Shakespeare easy or fun, and is most likely and effectively employed by a teacher who
might well love Shakespeare as much as someone at the highbrow end of the spectrum, but who loves and cherishes Shakespeare more as a friend, even a colleague, than as a deity. A lowbrow approach calls into question Shakespeare’s inherent value as pure capital, leaving students to adopt or abandon Shakespeare as enduring popular artist and, hypothetically, freeing students from the cultural practice of bardolatry. Shakespeare, as popular artist of his own time, was a popular playwright, meaning that people went to see and hear his plays. And so the core of any approach which intends to restore Shakespeare to the popular masses must favor seeing and hearing Shakespeare over reading and even gaining critical understanding of them, though I would argue that the latter two goals need not go by the wayside. Whatever the initial motivation, what all lowbrow approaches share is that the point of the instructional methods is emphatically not to “attain” Shakespeare, but to achieve some other skill through Shakespeare which will render his works accessible to the student once outside the classroom and without the teacher; Shakespeare is returned to the masses.

Most lowbrow approaches, then, are not simplistic attempts to de-academize Shakespeare, to remove all intellectual rigor from the study of his works. A more considered approach acknowledges the cultural significance of Shakespeare and engages that structure in its presentation of a Shakespeare decentered from the students’ literary study. In other words, whatever the specific political or theoretical tack chosen in a single classroom, Shakespeare is not merely presented as the supremely desirable cultural currency whose significance may be accessed and acquired only through the teacher’s careful guidance, nor as strictly “for fun” popular playwright whose stories simply reflect
our own concerns, but he is rather “problematized” by students and teacher alike.

Problematizing Shakespeare necessarily means decentering him (the author and possibly the works as well) to focus at least equally on issues surrounding the study of Shakespeare’s production, historicity, mediation, and reception. In her 1990 article, Beehler writes:

...The wave of new critical approaches that arose in the seventies as deconstruction put its mark on all areas of literary investigation made us consider our own ideologies, the language of those ideologies, and the blindesses of these ideologies in ways wholly unexpected and radically revolutionary. Whether we began to engage in feminist criticism, new historicism, cultural materialism, or psychoanalytic criticism, we found ourselves rediscovering that our strategies or reading were so thoroughly conditioned by personal and linguistic context that the theories themselves upon which we operated became the focal point of our investigations. Reader-response critics like Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish helped us understand the complexity of the interpretive act and the importance of “interpretive communities” in the production of meanings, upsetting our assurances and problematizing our teaching. (198)

Even at the high school level, students are capable of considering their place(s) within the larger culture and within history. Their special talent is, in fact (I have found) questioning such ideas as authority and precedent, and that, I believe, is the beginning of problematizing anything, indeed is the basis of any theory listed above. The ability to question authority is, indeed an issue of accessibility and ownership. For an author to be examined, manipulated, questioned, a reader must have access and feel authorized. Thus any act of problematizing Shakespeare is an act of creating accessibility and authority, which might well cause consternation for those who fear a loss of status (for Shakespeare or for themselves); problematizing Shakespeare is the heart of teaching Shakespeare from a lowbrow perspective.
A well-constructed performance approach, with its focus on interpretation, negotiation and literal production on the part of the readers (Beehler 200) is probably the most commonly attempted “lowbrow” approach in high school classrooms, and allows students to problematize Shakespeare by wrestling with the tasks of interpretation and production. Performance strategies must always seek to de-center Shakespeare’s authority (though, paradoxically not usually his cultural importance), replacing that focus with one on each student’s own interpretation of the play, and that interpretation’s interaction with another student’s interpretation, and so on. A highbrow critic might rightly fear that a student hasn’t the background, the understanding, the authority to interpret and produce Shakespeare without a clear understanding of his life and world, the rhetorical structures and conventions of the age, the nuanced meanings of Early Modern English vocabulary words… And without knowledge and consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of an academically sound lowbrow approach a teacher’s rejection of any and all barriers to “accessing” Shakespeare might indeed devolve into the anti-academic free-for-all I described earlier in this chapter—just as an unconsidered highbrow approach might end in a hollow mouthing of Shakespeare’s genius.

In addition to its theoretical focus, a carefully considered performance approach to teaching Shakespeare is more concerned with addressing student’s critical thinking skills and appealing to varied learning styles and skill levels than it is about establishing and/or maintaining Shakespeare’s status in our culture. Allowing students to participate in the production/reception process also requires them (or should, at least) to communicate and defend a rationale for their personal interpretations, and perhaps even
to convince others of their interpretation's validity. Students must then negotiate the logistics of the production itself. Clearly, Shakespearean or not, any carefully planned performance approach provides nearly endless opportunity for critical thinking exercises and the demonstration of specific Language Arts learner outcomes. Still, we must recognize that most teachers do hope to engender a fondness for Shakespeare that will indeed have exactly the (perhaps unintended) effect of perpetuating Shakespeare's cultural significance. The difference is that these students have been allowed to handle Shakespeare on their own—albeit, one would expect, with considerable guidance from a teacher who does, after all, know more about Shakespeare than most of them ever will; the performance approach, while effective, has not entirely erased the tension involved in tossing the bust of Shakespeare about the classroom in a figurative sense.

But a performance approach, while the one of the most popular manifestations of "lowbrow" teaching on the secondary level, is certainly not the only one. The interests of the academy seep slowly into the secondary level to be appropriated with varying levels of awareness and consideration in the same way as has the popular performance approach.

Perhaps the most easily traced evidence of a shifting focus, a challenge of the established cultural hierarchy, and the influence of post-secondary literary study appears in the secondary level literature textbooks. Most obviously, one can see the shift from Shakespeare comprising a large section of a British Literature textbook (in which many other excerpts are poems and prose inspired by or responding to Shakespeare's work, and in which nearly everything else included is "classic" high culture—the Western Canon in
brief), to a “World Literature” textbook which contains perhaps a few Shakespearean sonnets and a play (or even just a portion of a play) as a segment of a chapter on Early Modern European Literature. Shakespeare and the Western Canon are at least notionally decentered (and the textbook is twice as thick, containing maddeningly brief excerpts from as many cultures as possible). Of course, whether the teacher chooses to cover the entire textbook, treating Shakespeare as another blip on the radar screen of World Literature, is another matter entirely—a matter which goes to the heart of the choices made by every English teacher in his or her approach(es) to teaching literature.

These choices, forced by movements and developments in theory and in politics at the university level, are not always informed by those same movements and developments. That is, a high school teacher is quite often unaware, except in the broadest sense, of the theoretical underpinnings of the changes occurring in the field, manifest most visibly in the changed textbook from which he or she must teach. Without continuous or at least periodic dialogue between the secondary and post-secondary members of the field, a secondary teacher may, for example, understand that we have moved toward a less ethnocentric, more multicultural approach to teaching literature. That the choice of The Tempest is an invitation to explore issues of post-colonialism and race, to decenter Prospero and by extension Shakespeare, may be lost on even the most instinctively lowbrow-leaning teacher without rather specific “training” in those theoretical perspectives. And certainly inexperienced and/or uninformed attempts to lead students into such theoretical territory might mightily backfire on the textbook editors who had hoped to inspire something akin to a lowbrow approach in secondary classrooms.
nationwide. So while a “lowbrow movement,” is afoot, so to speak, at the secondary level, it is perhaps not as conscious, coherent or clearly articulated as it might be—though to mournful traditionalists it appears to be vastly successful.

At the very least, though, changes in the contents of high school textbooks has provided secondary teachers with the opportunity to teach Shakespeare alongside a wider variety of voices from the Early Modern period in England, as well as from a wider variety of other cultures. Even without a mindfully theoretical motivation, this contextualization of Shakespeare provides a more balanced—or at least a less skewed—picture of Shakespeare within his own milieu which complements (and might inspire) a lowbrow approach to teaching the plays. On the other hand, Shakespeare might be as likely to be used as the counterpoint to the “less worthy” works and authors included in newer textbooks.

Least likely is a lowbrow approach on the high school level which openly and purposefully chooses, names, and explores a theoretical perspective from which to approach Shakespeare. I say least likely for several reasons: First, many secondary teachers are products of undergraduate programs which did not emphasize theory, at least overtly, and are therefore simply unprepared to present an overtly theoretical approach to their students; second, contemporary theory is politically suspect amongst the general public and might be dangerous ground for a public teacher who does have the theoretical background to present it; and finally, even a teacher who is well prepared and willing to present Shakespeare from an overtly theoretical perspective might assume that students are not interested nor intellectually capable of such an approach at the secondary level.
Whatever the reason, a lowbrow approach which calls Shakespeare’s highbrow cultural status and inaccessibility into question through direct theoretical examination is likely the hardest to find in a high school English classroom.

Just as a traditionalist comes to his or her perspective somewhat unconsciously, so do many teachers choose an “alternative” or lowbrow approach to teaching Shakespeare: the desires to present Shakespeare as a popular artist and to bring down barriers to his accessibility are as often unexamined and inherited attitudes as are those of the highbrow teacher. Such a lack of examination and communication of the teacher’s motivations and goals leads all too often to a choice of methods which provide students with a less intellectually rigorous experience with Shakespeare, and one which might mislead students to ignore the full potential and impact of Shakespeare’s gift for language. Some students, already used to a more “academic” approach to Shakespeare’s plays in other teachers’ classes (or even to other literature in the same teacher’s classroom), may even feel cheated or confused by the sudden transformation of his or her English classroom into a drama club or screening room. Students know, by virtue of their constant immersion in culture of one “level” or another, that there is more to Shakespeare than making a video with friends or chatting about personal reactions to Hamlet’s plight. A teacher who refuses or fails to acknowledge the high culture component of Shakespeare’s work denies students as much of the picture as the teacher who assigns the silent reading of Shakespeare’s plays and omits the viewing and/or performance of them. Thus students find themselves in the familiar position of waiting for their teacher to pronounce for them who Shakespeare shall be this year, in this classroom, according to this textbook and
teacher; though the approach is different, in an intellectual sense the teacher ultimately only maintains the structure in which the institution defines for students what Shakespeare can be. I find this failing perhaps more serious in the lowbrow approach, however, as it purports to work against that very structure of institutionalized culture even while carelessly contributing to it, albeit from a different political posture. Without a more mindfully, overtly, (and perhaps courageously) defined and communicated perspective, at this as well as at the opposite end of the highbrow/lowbrow spectrum, we as teachers fail to live up to Shakespeare’s potential, and students leave high school with at best a one-dimensional view of Shakespeare’s plays.
Certainly, secondary teachers will recognize themselves in both of the portraits I’ve provided of a highbrow and a lowbrow teacher. Most of us lean one way or another without being entirely one or the other—though I suppose we know people we’d like to label as utterly highbrow or lowbrow (without knowing, usually, exactly what goes on in their classrooms). The complexity of our cultural and personal relationships with Shakespeare (whomever we conceive him to be) leaves us unlikely and possibly unable to adhere solely and strictly to one single approach to presenting his works. But I would argue that many teachers do approach Shakespeare from a decidedly highbrow or lowbrow outlook, in attitude as well as content and method. The point is that we tend to do so without consideration of why we do so, just as Brantlinger and De Sousa are able to assert that Shakespeare is safely fixed in the academy without consideration of why that is or what that means for the culture at large. In the midst of such unconsidered decisions, our students’ experiences with Shakespeare, literature in general, and even critical thinking skills are shaped; thereby much of our culture’s attitudes are shaped—or at least reinforced—as well.

Perhaps in the push-pull this tension creates through our attempts to straddle the divide between the Immortal Bard and Gentle Will, we may end up with a somewhat balanced presentation of both sides—by accident, as it were. What lacks, however, is a consideration and an open discussion of that tension and its causes—its history on a cultural level as Levine explores it (in *Highbrow/Lowbrow* and *The Opening of the*...
American Mind), but also on a personal level. Without that full disclosure, students feel by turns confused and manipulated by our efforts to alternately deify and deconstruct Shakespeare.

I remember my first year as an English teacher, presenting Macbeth to my Senior Essentials English class, populated by eleven reluctant male students. Essentials English was what we used to call basic, remedial, or “bonehead” English. No written curriculum existed for the class, except the nebulous suggestion that I “mirror the regular curriculum,” making necessary changes in content and presentation (I assumed) to suit the skill level(s) of my students. I found out much later that, for years before, the teacher I was temporarily replacing had not interpreted that directive in the same way as I (quite naively) had. Essentials English had been a course in applied communications (indeed, probably much more “useful” in a practical sense than the course I taught that year). While I recognized and addressed the need to provide practical and “real world” language experiences for my students, I’ve always been one to read and follow the directions. And the directions, in the form of the curriculum guide, said to “mirror” what I was doing in my regular classes. I can recognize and admit it now: the truth was, I felt I’d be doing my students a service by “exposing” them to Shakespeare, to high culture. Reading skills among this group, though, hovered at the fifth grade level. One student, Bob, read and wrote at about a fourth-grade level and lacked the ability to write in cursive. He and others had struggled mightily with the reading assignments I’d given all year. I decided to teach Macbeth using a simplified version I found in a literary periodical to which our department held a subscription.
So, after a brief introduction to Shakespeare's life and times, and some discussion of the group's familiarity with his work or at least his reputation, I assigned roles and we began reading the play aloud in class. We read the first few scenes before I really looked at the faces of my students. Their various expressions reflected disdain, boredom, and, most of all, disappointment. I hadn't been the only one to cringe when Malcolm called Duncan “Dad” in the updated, simplified language of the text. “This is dumb,” Arnie offered on behalf of his classmates, “This isn’t what Shakespeare sounds like.” Hmm. Earlier that morning my “regular” classes had complained for the opposite reason, whining, “Why does everybody have to talk this way? Can’t they just speak English?! This is dumb!” But these eleven students were, it seemed, offended that I had offered them Shakespeare—something important—and given them instead a halting, flat, choppy, and uninteresting play out of a magazine. It was false advertising.

Gladys V. Veidemanis, in her article “Some ‘Basics’ in Shakespearean Study” takes up the question I found myself faced with that day:

But what text should students read? Every year new advocates of a “simplified Shakespeare” surface, along with “Shakespeare Made Easy” texts. Led by scholars of the eminence of J.R. Rouse, such advocates argue the desirability of a “minimal” translation to simplify complex exposition, dense stylization, and obscure wording. Granted, the notes and critical apparatus of a scholarly edition of the plays can seem overwhelming and distasteful to the beginning reader, and a simplified text could possibly facilitate more immediate accessibility. (5)

Veidemanis argues, though, that such texts result in distorted meaning, lost metrical and metaphorical values, and “warped” characterizations. “In short,” she writes, “what is destroyed is the poetry, and thereby the essence of Shakespeare” (6). It's what I
discovered that day, and what my students knew without being told. The article, which appears in the NCTE's 1993 *Teaching Shakespeare Today: Practical Approaches and Productive Strategies*, goes on to offer some alternatives to encouraging interest and understanding without losing the fundamental poetic nature of Shakespeare’s works. She does so, though, without explaining the value we as teachers assume is embodied in that poetry, in the difficulty associated with mastering Shakespeare’s plays.

My Essentials students knew about that value too. And they were aware that I hadn’t given it to them—that I had ripped them off. By not considering what my students knew (or felt), however intuitively, about the value of Shakespeare as educational and cultural capital, I had made the wrong choice and shown a lack of respect for my students. And—again the tension is apparent—by emphasizing the importance that they know *something* of Shakespeare, no matter how “warped” or diminished, I had imposed on them the judgment that without cultural capital they were “lower” class, or less valuable as people. This exchange had not been, to borrow Paolo Freire’s terminology, a “dialogue”; I had not had the faith in my students that they had the ability to make what they would of Shakespeare—to find out for themselves what *Macbeth* had to offer, if anything. I had assumed that the real Shakespeare was too much for them, or, more precisely and shamefully, that they were not enough for Shakespeare. And I had done all of that without examining the hierarchical structure of cultural stratification I worked within (and served to maintain). We started over. We read *Macbeth* from the regular textbook, moving slowly, using the editorial notes, and viewing clips of two film versions of the play.
I don’t remember Bob’s last name. I remember where he sat, in a desk woefully small for his hulking frame. I remember how gently he received abuse from his peers who recognized and seized the opportunity to periodically pick on someone weaker than themselves, despite his size and apparent physical strength. When I think of him, I picture him, patiently waiting for me to assign him a role; I recall his face on that day when we decided together to read the “real” Shakespeare, that face flushed with pride and joy as he surprised us all with his concise and accurate paraphrasing of each character’s lines. While the other students struggled with the meter and the archaic language, Bob listened intently, read his lines fluidly—more easily than he had ever read the high-interest, low-reading level stories we’d encountered earlier in the year. Soon, the entire class turned to him at the end of each long speech for insight into what had been said. I am still surprised when I remember it. Had I not seen it happen, I would not believe it. For students, Shakespeare is a litmus test for intelligence as well as cultural literacy. That Bob’s ability to decipher Shakespeare’s language—and by extension Bob’s apparent intelligence—was superior to their own was inconceivable to them. Bob seemed not to notice their (insulting) surprise, only to grin with pride and enjoy the moment.

It’s a long and sentimental story, I know. But I tell it here because, aside from always bringing a tear to my eye, the experience has had great significance for me as a teacher, and I have never begun the task of teaching Shakespeare each year afterward without thinking of it, without looking out at each year’s classes and wondering which student will find so much more in Shakespeare than I would think him capable of doing. And it is the moment, early in my career, that I started thinking about the issues I’ve
raised here. What assumptions do I carry about the value of Shakespeare (why do I assume that a student would be flushed with pride to master Shakespeare’s language, or disappointed to fall short of the challenge?), and how do my actions as a teacher dictate the way Shakespeare is received and in turn viewed, perhaps for a lifetime, by my students? Why do I make the pedagogical choices I do?

Indeed, my reaction to that event and the very fact that I relate it here betrays my own tendency to view my role as one which raises students “up” to some transcendent level of understanding embodied by Shakespeare and other “classic” authors. Yet the tension is evident once again in the fact that I chose to teach Shakespeare in an Essentials English class to begin with, seeking to share the accessibility and popular appeal of the plays with students who cared much less for literature than for cars. My own experience, then, epitomizes the tug-of-war teachers of Shakespeare experience in classrooms everywhere, on every level—again, often without much consideration of that ubiquitous tension. Most of us do not think about, let alone discuss with our students, our underlying attitudes about Shakespeare, our expectations of our students’ responses to his works, or our assumptions about what Shakespeare will mean to them (both in the classroom and in life).

Though less theoretical and more mundane, the issues of time, resources, curriculum requirements, and student motivation also make hierarchical choices a reality and a necessity, however we may like to argue that there is no choice to be made, that the hierarchical construct of highbrow/lowbrow is just that, a construct which may be abandoned and nullified by any teacher at any time. And like the individual choices we
make within our classrooms, English departments and even school boards often make
curricular and financial decisions based on the unspoken and inarguable fact that
Shakespeare is the center of any English program. That assumption is likely
accompanied by others which allow decision-makers to presume that the Shakespeare
they have in mind is the same one all faculty members will present to their students.
Clearly, that is not the case. Shakespeare, we have seen, may be the most sure and solid
of canonical authors, but that very culturally sacred status complicates our definitions of
and interactions with his works beyond measure.

Again, my own experience with the textbook adoption process attests to the
practical reality of the highbrow/lowbrow tug-of-war at the high school level. Upon
beginning my teaching career in 1993, I was greeted by my department chair with two
senior-level textbooks: the Adventures in British Literature textbook (which I had used
as a high school student a few short years before) and the newly adopted World
Literature textbook. “This is the book we’re using starting this year,” my colleague
explained. “But we’re keeping class sets of the old one, because it has Beowulf and
Macbeth in it. We all teach Beowulf and Macbeth.” And as a brand-new teacher, my
direction for teaching that first year came from my mentors and from the curriculum
guide neither of which reflected the sea-change from Western Literature to the new
course title of World Literature. Some teachers ignored the new book altogether, while
others jumped at the chance to teach important literary works like The Bhagavad-Gita or
Elie Wiesel’s Night. Still others had been using supplementary materials all along to
teach the “new” works offered in the World Literature textbook. But the new book, with
its choice to include *The Tempest* in place of the more familiar *Macbeth* or the much-favored *Hamlet*, forced each of us to face and reveal our own biases. Would we, each individually, define the Shakespeare that our students *should* receive? Would we rather allow or even welcome the “change” reflected in the textbook and perhaps the culture at large? The choices are there to be made, and will be—consciously or not. Our deep cultural and personal biases and inherited attitudes about literature in general and Shakespeare specifically should be carefully considered rather than simply acted upon with little awareness of their implications and ramifications for our classrooms and the broader culture.

Over the next several years, our department carried out our own version of the canon wars without ever labeling it as such. We each functioned from our largely highbrow or largely lowbrow positions on that hierarchical scale without a thought (or at least without a conversation) as to why or how we came to hold such positions. Having discarded all but enough British literature books for classroom copies, we found ourselves short when several of the newer teachers and a few of the “old”, had *need* to check out the “old” books as the primary text for an entire unit (in my own case and others, for an entire semester or more) to all of our students. As a department, we soon agreed to allocate precious funds to order more copies of a textbook that had been out of print for five years, and which we had so lately *discarded*. In addition, we purchased (inexpensive) copies of *Hamlet*, which until then had been available in our book room only in small quantities and nominally reserved for the honors-level students. Clearly, most of us “had time” to teach more than one of Shakespeare’s plays, but only a few
chose the *Tempest*; and the rest of the department did not blink an eye at what would seem to be a wholly unnecessary expenditure in strictly practical terms. Then most tellingly, in 2001, the same department, up for textbook adoption once again, chose a new British Literature text to replace the eight-year-old *World Literature*. While the newly chosen text is different in its choices of content than the old British Literature book (the unavailability of which on the used market weighted heavily in the choice of the new text), the choice is an indication of one department’s unwillingness to abandon the Bede, the Chaucer, and most emphatically the *Shakespeare* with whom our generation of secondary English teachers became English teachers. The change is also indicative of a swinging political pendulum to be sure, but illuminates as concretely as possible the unspoken values and attitudes held by the teachers who made the decision. In very concrete terms, then, our collectively unexamined, unspoken approaches to teaching Shakespeare led directly to great expense on the part of the department and even the district as a whole. Resistance to a “new” way of teaching Shakespeare and a “new” play to teach was accepted as appropriate and even respectable in the microcosm of our department.

Teaching *methods*, to be sure, covered the range of highbrow/lowbrow within the department, and indeed within individual classrooms from week to week or even from lesson to lesson. What we all had in common was our closet bardolotry (or at least acceptance of bardolatry as a fact of life) coupled with our innocent failure to examine why Shakespeare was so intensely important to us, and why each of us approached him in the way we did in our own classrooms and together as a department. We shared our ideas
in terms of cultural literacy, critical thinking, creative interpretation, but we always
danced around the issue of Shakespeare’s significance on a personal or cultural level.
We certainly did not suggest to one another that it might be time we all take a fresh
approach to Shakespeare—that we update our repertoires by participating, for example,
in current academic, theoretical debate on the subject. The most we managed on such
topics were occasional snide reminders that Shakespeare “isn’t Stephen King” (or that the
video projector was not purchased to reside permanently in one instructor’s classroom).
Those not sharing the decidedly traditional bent of the other senior-level teachers were
silently quashed (or perhaps converted) by the sheer confidence of the rest of us.

My department had fallen into what Paolo Freire calls “one of the myths of the
oppressor ideology: the absolutizing of ignorance” (114). Here, Freire explains,
“dialogue is impossible” as the vicious cycle of silencing dissenters leads the class of
“those who know or were born to know” to hear only their own “truth” and to dismiss all
other viewpoints as incompetent or ignorant (115). Indeed, in our case, our apparent
unanimity in our rejection of different views of Shakespeare made us deaf to them, and
led us easily to believe in our own “truth” (in defining Shakespeare) as absolute. Those
teachers who were less familiar with Shakespeare or did not teach his works were
marginalized, if willingly so in some cases. This is not to say that the department’s
choices were wrong or even necessarily oppressive, though Freire would argue so.
Where Freire’s arguments are most meaningful is in their insistence upon mindfulness;
our lack of consciousness, candor, and dialogue about our attitudes and assumptions had
a visible effect on our department’s budget. The effect on our students was subtler but just as real.

As I’ve explored, the highbrow teacher may be personally invested in maintaining Shakespeare’s highbrow status. Shakespeare’s inaccessibility lends the teacher the power to withhold or bestow his cultural capital upon students. As Paolo Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this top-down, “banking” model requires that the teacher project

an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, [which] negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher’s existence—but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher. (53)

For a highbrow teacher, limited access to Shakespeare provides reassurance to one’s ego as well as one’s job security. For a first-year teacher of Essentials English, the propensity to view my students as ignorant “receptacles” to be filled from the font of my knowledge was all too powerful. Though I was forced to recognize Bob’s ability to teach his peers and his teacher, for years I still failed to see Bob as an individual who could create his own meaning from Shakespeare’s words. My importance as a teacher was predicated upon providing the answers, the access, which I perceived my students to be lacking.

Lowbrow teachers have different motivations, though for some the ego is no less involved. Certainly, the locus of power is *always* an issue, if a largely unspoken one, in teaching Shakespeare, by virtue of the cultural capital—and the literal economic
capital—Shakespeare represents. So, even though some teachers do use Shakespeare as a staging-ground for a battle against convention, as Gripsrud has reminded us, they always do so from a position of privilege and educational/cultural power. Even as the lowbrow teacher uses unconventional classroom methods to tear down the snobbery associated with Shakespeare, he or she does so from the comfortable position of having already acquired the conventional Shakespeare, and with the power and the leisure to reject that embodiment. Students who have not yet come to “possess” Shakespeare in his culturally deified form may be confused by this contradictory depiction of Shakespeare’s works if no explanation for the shift is provided and discussed. Students might then go through the motions of “accessing” Shakespeare through performance and interpretation without understanding or appreciating (and perhaps without wanting) the “empowered” role they’ve been given. Thus Shakespeare has been returned to the masses only within that classroom, and only for the duration of the Shakespeare unit. Once again, the teacher has failed to engage in a true dialogue with his or her students. By employing Shakespeare’s popular culture appeal only as a means of resistance to the dominant, high cultural status reserved for Shakespeare and Shakespearean scholars, the lowbrow teacher ironically limits Shakespeare—and students’ views of Shakespeare—to definition within that hierarchical construct. Only by engaging Shakespeare along with the students, by abandoning the hierarchical construct of the teacher-student relationship, can a lowbrow teacher really free Shakespeare from the stuffy confines of iconicity. That is, an effective lowbrow effort does not involve a teacher “returning” Shakespeare to the masses (her students)—which calls for the teacher to once again simply bestow knowledge—but a
teacher setting out with her students to discover what Shakespeare is all about. And
discovering what Shakespeare is all about would certainly and again ironically require
some investigation into the seemingly highbrow territory of metrical structure,
Shakespearean biography, poetry, literary devices, dramatic conventions, and the like.
And so we come full circle. "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-
invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings
pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other," Freire writes (53). In Freire’s
view, a student must have a complete view of reality in order to avoid manipulation or
oppression (from either political direction) within the hierarchical system (55).

We must recognize that teaching Shakespeare is an emotionally charged task
which brings to bear all of our emotions and attitudes, conscious and unconscious about
art, culture, literature, the canon, and pedagogical practices. As teachers we must
recognize and acknowledge our tendency to view ourselves as superior to our students in
cultural capital, whether we use Shakespeare as a talisman of that superiority or as a foil
against which to exhibit our own subversively superior intelligence. Not only are our
emotions enmeshed in the choices we make about teaching Shakespeare, but for many of
us, (as difficult as it may be to admit it), our egos are involved too. This entanglement
makes it difficult for us to allow students to find their own meaning in Shakespeare, be
they traditional or radical.

Once we recognize the degree to which our self-worth, or at least our self-image,
is attached to our own “knowledge” of Shakespeare, we can more openly employ the
methods we each find most appealing and effective in presenting his plays to students. I
argue that any effective approach must include a frank discussion of the dichotomy the teacher and students are faced with, and perhaps a broader conversation about the idea of culture and canon wars. Students, especially high school students, are keenly aware of issues of ownership, hierarchical social distinctions, appropriation and "poaching", and even cultural sacralization. That a person or object can serve as a symbol of status and power is no surprise in their world of brand-name clothing, social cliques, athletics-worship, and academic competition. Their lives provide neat delineations between popular culture (what they choose to watch, listen to, read, and participate in) and "high" culture (what parents, teachers, and/or affluent adult society watch, listen to, read, participate in, and assign to adolescents as homework), between high and low social stratifications (and here, of course, "popular" takes on the "higher" connotation). In a sense, adolescents live the same sort of tension inherent in teaching Shakespeare. They at once value conformity, acceptance, and accessibility even as they seek individuality and rejection of the norm. They rely upon for comfort and survival the parents and authority figures they scorn. High School students are living, breathing paradoxes, the original revolutionaries of which Freire writes. So once we've acknowledged the struggle within ourselves, it makes sense to spend at least some time in the classroom talking about it with our students, though perhaps in a manner limited and focused by time constraints and student interest. Ronald Strickland, in an article included in Teaching Shakespeare Today entitled "Teaching Shakespeare against the Grain" suggests that we do just that:

A pedagogy focused on critical literacy would reveal "Shakespeare" as a body of knowledge shaped and constructed by critical and pedagogical apparatuses, rather than as a distinct and substantial subject that exists independently of our work as scholars, teachers, and students...
teacher can do in this situation is to acknowledge his or her implication in the institutional assumptions and conceptual frames that produce our particular constructions of "knowledge" (169).

For some teachers, this conversation is the point of teaching literature. For the stalwart traditionalist, however, Strickland’s focus on literary study as an “important [site] of ideology production available for political struggle” (169) reeks of liberalism, of a reductive decentering of literature for purely political purposes. For the highbrow teacher, then, this conversation with students might seem at best unnecessary and distracting at first. I suggest, though, that even a brief discussion of the cultural implications involved in studying Shakespeare does not disempower the teacher so much as it empowers the students to better understand Shakespeare’s predetermined cultural value and so to more actively (and enthusiastically) relate with the plays—on whatever level or with whatever focus the instructor has deemed appropriate. Acknowledging the complexity of Shakespeare’s status does not necessarily negate that status, as some highbrow teachers might fear. To deny the complexity is to deny our students a “real” experience with Shakespeare.

In fact, such a conversation might appropriately begin long before the “Shakespeare Unit.” It would make sense to discuss these larger current issues in literary studies (in the “field” or “discipline”) as a foundation for the class as a whole, at the beginning of the school year. Both teacher and students might be enlightened through discussion of some of the following questions: Who is Shakespeare? What does he represent to you? How have his works been presented to you in the past? How does Shakespeare appear in the culture at large, outside the educational setting? To whom
does Shakespeare belong? Why do we study his works at all? How is reading a Shakespeare play different from reading, say, a best-selling novel or even a bumper sticker?

Robert Scholes would encourage such questions, inherently if plainly theoretical in nature, at all stages of literary study. In his call for a “discipline” of English in *The Rise and Fall of English*, Scholes calls for a focus on intertextual knowledge (168). “That students...should be excellent readers, ready to encounter unfamiliar texts, to situate them, interpret them, and criticize them—these are the goals of an English education with respect to the consumption of texts” (169-170). Scholes neatly skirts the issue of highbrow/lowbrow by making the assumption that (at least some) canonical works would retain their presence in the curriculum, though he argues that our approach as “professors” of that literature in the most literal sense must change. The highbrow teacher must shift out of his or her comfort zone enough to acknowledge that Shakespeare does not exist in a vacuum, and that students are capable, with guidance, of accessing much more of Shakespeare significance than we might have believed.

In addition to broaching the subject of Shakespeare’s cultural status and its effect on both teachers’ and students’ assumptions, attitudes and reactions, a high school teacher also needs to provide students with at least an orientation to the historical and current theoretical landscape surrounding Shakespeare’s works. Of course, this would require that the secondary level teacher has an awareness and understanding of that landscape; again I argue that the topic needs to be addressed—not obliquely or diffidently, but overtly at local, state, regional, and national levels in our professional
journals and conventions. While theory may not be the main thrust of a secondary level Shakespeare unit, students are sophisticated enough on this level to recognize that literature does not exist in a political nor intellectual vacuum, and they should understand that every approach to literature is a theoretical approach, whether it is acknowledged or not. For college track students, this understanding would serve as a foundation for further study in the humanities. For other students, the basic understanding that even great cultural “truths” like Shakespeare’s centrality in our culture are constructs of history and politics might be even more critical, since a blind acceptance of the hierarchical social stratifications leaves individuals most vulnerable to the sort of oppression Freire has explored.

When we teach Shakespeare, we teach more than the plotline of a play, more than an understanding of blank verse or soliloquy, more even than cultural touchstones. We impart all the unspoken issues represented in Shakespeare. We enter contested terrain, often without acknowledging to our students that we stand on shifting sands, on a minefield (to mix metaphors) of cultural issues of taste, power, and cultural stratifications which will just as silently and subtly pervade their entire lives. Whether we jump in by rolling in a VCR and screening day after day of Shakespeare on film without investigating a written version of any play, or by requiring identification of paradoxical language and repeated imagery without regard for performance aspects of works, we do so without having a dialogue with students about what we’re doing, what we’re using Shakespeare to represent, to try to convince them of—whether we’re mindful of it or not.
We deny, as Gripsrud warns us against doing, the stratifications of culture that are a reality, and which we are at leisure to view as blurred or nonexistent only from our own status as culturally/educationally elite. We need to explore the idea that those with cultural capital are deemed superior. We don’t want to say it, to admit it to our students or ourselves. And we certainly don’t want to admit that the beauty and complexity of Shakespeare’s work are enhanced by the cultural superiority he offers us, the ego strokes we give ourselves for having the intelligence to “know,” to possess Shakespeare, whether we choose to explore him through traditional or subversive means.

Sharon Beehler explores the importance of opening up the complexities of Shakespeare’s works to the investigation and interpretation of students in her 1990 article “Problematicizing Shakespeare.” “Instruction in Shakespeare often revolves around the formulation of meaning. As long as the teacher announces a meaning,” (be it highbrow or lowbrow in perspective) “students have no access to their own critical powers, but a class that negotiates meanings inspires critical thinking.” To take Beehler’s problematization of Shakespeare one step further, I would argue that only by acknowledging the larger struggle over “Shakespeare’s” significance and power in our culture can students fully engage in the process of “making meaning,” and that the exploration of Shakespeare’s cultural centrality is a necessary aspect as students learn “that their interpretations are always positioned and that those positioned interpretations have consequences for them” and for the culture at large (200-202).

In the same article, Beehler writes,

How world views are constituted and how power relations are established depend a great deal upon the ability of individuals to perceive the effects
of their interpretive choices within communicative activities. Thus, students whose critical thinking has developed to the extent that they can reflect upon, question, and judge their perceptions quickly and confidently will eventually exercise greater power within their social community.

Students cannot fully engage in a dialogic, interactive interpretation of Shakespeare without an awareness of the complexity of undertaking that task within a culture which both sacralizes and profanes his works. Problematizing Shakespeare’s works and his very status as cultural icon/popular artist challenges and authorizes students to make their own decisions as to where Shakespeare belongs in our culture. Engaging students in a dialogue about Shakespeare’s place in their lives may indeed threaten Shakespeare’s unquestioned status in the literary canon; doing so, though removes the blind veneration of bardolatry and the political manipulations of radical agendas in favor of a reasoned, mindful comprehension of what Shakespeare has represented and might yet represent for our society.

Perhaps most importantly to every twelfth-grade English teacher though, students will be able to answer their own vociferous and perennial question—“Why do we have to read this, anyway?”
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