



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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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 “lowbrow” (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.

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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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 “lowbrow” (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 CONFOUNDS US<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> *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 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup> 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 passé. 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 'popular'ity 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<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century audiences and Shakespeare's language. In addition, we must remember that, until the late 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Jacoby 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 *lowbrow* 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.

IMMORTAL LONGINGS<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>3</sup> "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*:

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!)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> 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-leaning 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 fine 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). A

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<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> "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

































































