

**Abstract: Working Class Shakespeares: Shakespeare in Class and Class in Shakespeare**

Timothy Francisco (Youngstown State University) and Sharon O'Dair (University of Alabama)

**Workshop description**, as listed in the Bulletin:

This workshop will address Shakespeare, upward mobility, and the (re)production of social class, especially as related to college access and success. Through shared readings, participants will engage Working-Class Shakespeares from critical, pedagogical, and even biographical perspectives. They will also query, among other questions, the responsibility in teaching working-class students; the relationship between Shakespeare and cultural capital; the ways class and status in the academy influence criticism and pedagogy; and what Shakespeare's plays reveal about education's role in the formation of class, status, and mobility.

**Workshop participants:**

Mara I. Amster (Randolph College)  
 Eric Alexander G. Binnie (Hendrix College)  
 Doug Eskew (Colorado State University-Pueblo)  
 Lenora Belle Jones-Pierce (Emory University)  
 Fayaz Kabani (Allen University)  
 James Trygve Newlin (Valencia College)  
 Nichole Pena (Ball State University)  
 P. A. Skantze (Roehampton University)  
 Bhavin Tailor (University of South Carolina)  
 Sara E. Thompson (University of Maryland)

**Participants were asked to complete the following assignments:**

**First** we asked that participants compose an approximately 3-4 page (or 750-1000 word) "class profile" about their experience and understanding of social class. We asked participants to identify their class of origin, whether they've changed classes in their life, and what criteria or definitions they use to determine their class position(s).

**Second**, we asked that participants read all the class profiles and re-examine their own in perhaps a one-page essay. We asked: did the other class profiles cause you to adjust your understanding of class, or your own class position? What issues and problems arose from the class profiles that you did not consider? Or that you chose not to consider? Do these issues differ for those among us who were raised in working-class homes and those among us who were raised in middle- or upper middle-class homes?

In addition, however, we asked that participants address both parts of our workshop's subtitle: "Shakespeare in Class and Class in Shakespeare." Taking the latter first, we

asked the following question: What do Shakespeare's plays tell us about the purposes and meanings of education as they relate to class, status, and mobility? Please be specific in writing again a one-page essay on this question, specifically a short close reading or two of some bit of the Bard's work.

Thinking about Shakespeare's take on education leads nicely into the question of pedagogy now, for us. And so we asked participants to read essays by Ed Pechter and Stephen Booth. Both appeared in *Shakespeare Quarterly* in Summer 1990. This issue was the third that *SQ* devoted to teaching, following issues in 1984 and 1974. Since 1990, *SQ* hasn't returned to the subject, although the journal did publish a cluster of short essays in Winter 1997 that originated in an SAA panel and *SQ* published a follow-up essay by Karen Cunningham in Fall 1998. According to Ralph Cohen, who edited the 1990 issue, the 1974 issue was eclectic in focus and the 1984 almost exclusively about teaching through performance. His issue in 1990, perhaps unsurprisingly, addressed "the upheaval in Shakespeare criticism—from deconstruction to new historicism" as well as the variety of institutions where Shakespeare is taught—from high schools to elite graduate programs. A quick look at the cluster from 1997 (and at Cunningham's 1998 essay) indicates the continuing effects on teaching of "the upheaval in Shakespeare criticism"—as well as the brouhaha over the elimination by many elite colleges and universities of Shakespeare as a requirement in the undergraduate curriculum.

Cohen assumes that teachers' goals vary, "ranging from the practical (making students better playgoers) to the educational (making students better thinkers) to the value-laden (making students better people)" and that these goals reflect "the differing perspectives of the students they teach." This seems quaint, in particular the assertion of causality—that our goals reflect our students' differing perspectives—and the implication that any one group or class of students would have homogeneous perspectives, needs, desires, aims. That said, one of the reasons we are gathering for this workshop is to think through the challenges and rewards of teaching working class students.

So, we asked that participants compose a two-page essay, addressing some of the following questions, offering explanations and justifications:

What are your goals (not your students' learning outcomes) in teaching Shakespeare to your students? If applicable, do those goals differ for working-class students and for upper middle-class students? Do your students in your current position differ from those you taught in graduate school? If so, did you adjust your pedagogy? Do you think you have a particular responsibility in teaching working class students? Do you think pedagogy should take into account the academic, financial, and cultural hurdles faced by working-class students? And how? Should pedagogy take into account the stated desires of working-class students for upward mobility? Do you consider it important to articulate for working-class students the intersections and divergences between social or cultural capital and 'actual' or financial capital? How do such formulations influence our understandings of the 'purposes' of Shakespeare and literary study?

**For the workshop itself**, we posed a series of “follow-up” questions to each participant based on questions, complications, and contradictions we’d gleaned from assignments 1 and 2. Responses to these questions constitute the workshop’s first hour.

In the second hour, we will begin again, on pedagogy, asking each participant to field this question, “did your understandings of class, and your class backgrounds, and those of the others in the group, influence your selection of, and interpretation of the passage, scene, or character [you described in assignment 2]?” We then will ask all participants to examine the passages in turn, though we don’t expect to get through them all.

For the last thirty minutes, we posed the following questions, which, if we are lucky, we will address:

1) At least two participants wondered what drew us all to this workshop, and we would note that 6 of the 9 of you are graduate students or assistant professors. We might hypothesize that our young colleagues are astute enough to see the handwriting on the employment wall and that regardless of the status of one’s PhD, one well might find oneself teaching students who are, as one participant observes (and as we all know), “surprisingly distant from literature as a whole, let alone Shakespeare.” This participant also observes (unwittingly channeling O’Dair’s first essay on the profession, published in 1997), there’s “a massive gap between my expectations for what the students knew and what they actually knew.” We might hypothesize that our young colleagues are in a bit of a panic: as another participant puts it, “I’ve been plunged into the depths of existential anxiety that I’ve wasted my life on a topic that is irrelevant to my working-class students.” If our hypothesis is correct or even at all correct, we applaud your willingness and courage in confronting this challenge! And we hope that the writings we have done and the conversation we will have can be one step toward a larger project of understanding a complicated professional and pedagogical scenario.

2) We’re not sure just how to put this, but where do we stand if on the one hand, Shakespeare remains part of upper middle-class culture, a culture to which working-class students generally do not have access in primary and secondary school, and if on the other hand, working-class students want upward mobility, to be upper middle-class, but do not see Shakespeare as relevant to achieve that goal? That is, if they do not, perhaps, see Shakespeare as part of the upper middle-class culture they want to join? Are they right? How did we arrive at this situation? Have we contributed to this problem by, on the one hand, “de-professionalizing” our critical practices, privileging “popular,” “relevant,” or “appropriative” studies over aesthetics, moral reasoning, or historical and textual rigor and by, on the other hand, acquiescing to a kind of middle management “professionalism” in which our time increasingly is spent doing assessment, retention, and even recruitment? At this point in the democratization of higher education and curricula, is anything to be done? Does this problem even matter if our goal is to provide upward mobility only?

Signed: Timothy Francisco and Sharon O’Dair