



SHAKESPEARE

and social justice

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alison g. dover

Social justice education is “the attempt to use one’s position in the classroom to promote social and educational reform within and despite repressive educational conditions and mandates” (518). When curriculum involves “explicit instruction about oppression,” of which mostly made up by “the reading...of justice-oriented literature,” students are directly involved in critical analysis and relating fictional texts with real-life “issues of equity and justice” (521). “By using social justice as a lens through which to consider canonized and contemporary texts,” critics’ “attempts to portray” social justice and education as “unrelated” were refuted. The combination of social justice education, critical thinking development, support of activism, and practical writing skills are in line with the skills “prioritized throughout the Common Core” educational system (525).

what scholars are saying about SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

carla della gatta

Social justice requires “out-of-the-box thinking” skills to foster awareness for and interactions between diverse groups of people, which can be taught with education (170). The oppressed live a dual existence, both themselves and “the oppressor whose image they have internalized. In order for oppressed groups to achieve more awareness among the community, educators must create an environment that aids conversations on topics that historically overlook the disadvantaged group, creating a “discomfort of change” for the privileged confronted with reality. Providing students literature that presents social justice themes can help the privileged group face their own biases and the affected to “free themselves” from their oppressors. Shakespeare’s works present more than entertainment; they’re examples of and tools for engaging with the consequential fictions” of social injustice that are “mistaken as facts.” Essentially, “teaching social justice is a part of teaching Shakespeare” (172).

mary janell metzger

Teaching Shakespeare’s tragedies allows students to “explore [one’s] own beliefs about and experiences of ‘knowing’ suffering and loss” (116). His plays present “human vulnerability, individual and collective needs for community, and the long history of social justice” in a creative form despite concerns that the “long history of social injustice” present in his plays invalidates their utility for activism (115–116). There will always be takeaways from Shakespeare’s works, especially when discussed in terms of social justice (118).

introduction

william shakespeare is a writer for the ages. even past his fame during the renaissance, his works stand the test of time. while an array of themes are present within any of his plays, threads of social justice issues are the most pertinent for the modern audience to consider.

despite being born in the 1500s, shakespeare wrote comedies, dramas, romances, and tragicomedies that are more socially relevant than you may assume, especially in terms of social justice education.

the tempest (1623) addresses colonialism far before discussion on the dangers of such practices became mainstream. *much ado about nothing* (1600) tackles gender issues. *othello* (1604) doesn’t shy away from displays of racism, creating an uncomfortable scholarly conversation on the piece. and *macbeth* (1623) possesses characters whose mental health situations, when untreated, traverse a lethal path.



Shakespeare and Social Justice

the tempest

THE TEMPEST

While *The Tempest* (1623) primarily focuses on the mysterious wizard Prospero's secret plans to redeem his bloodline through an advantageous marriage, an all the more sinister subplot involving colonization reveals itself through the ever-resentful Caliban. Prospero's indignant belittlement and imprisonment of Caliban, a rightful native of the island, parallel the atrocious acts of New World colonizers who overtook the land of the Native Americans in the early seventeenth century.

Revealed through Caliban's bitter reminders as to his bloodline, readers realize that Prospero is not so justified in his claim to the island or his treatment of the "monstrous" Caliban (2.2.39). Scholar Kenji Yoshino analyzes Prospero's imposition of "his own conception of justice on the island he controls" as apparent exploitation (233). Yoshino clarifies that, legally, Caliban would have had a property claim over the island "regardless of parentage," i.e. his mother's former ownership because he was the "only human inhabitant of

the island when Prospero arrived" (246). Thus, Prospero's only claim to owning the island is due to the hierarchy of power: Prospero has the magic that can control both Ariel and Caliban, rendering them slaves to his will. "Remember," Caliban tells Stephano, "First to possess his books, for without them / He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not / One spirit to command" (*Tempest* 3.2.87-95). Without his source of power, Prospero has no control over Caliban, a powerless "sot." In this sense, Prospero acts as the duplicitous European colonizer who tricks the natives of the land as a friend only to exploit their trust and resources. Not only does he usurp Caliban, but imposes his and Miranda's "language" upon him much like the Europeans who burdened to bestow Western knowledge upon lowly natives (1.2.364).

When Miranda criticizes Caliban's "brutish" "gabble" merely because it differs from her own language, Caliban retorts, "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how

to curse" (1.2.357-358; 1.2.364-365). Caliban's only power in the situation of colonialism is the language that Miranda imposed on the "savage" to be used by Prospero merely to "profit" himself for ordering Caliban to complete basic tasks like fire making, wood fetching, and other chores (1.2.314, 1.2.356). Here, language, as displayed by Caliban, is both debilitating and a source of reclaiming power against those who harness or steal power, whether through privilege, etc., to achieve their own ends.

Prospero and Miranda's use of disparaging language to describe Caliban reveals their feelings of superiority over the "savage" native (1.2.354). Barraging insults of "villain," "poisonous," and "monstrous" onto him, nearly every character--including Ariel--strips away Caliban's humanity, much like colonizer's deeming natives as savages due to English exceptionalism (1.2.308, 319; 2.2.39). Caliban

is not a silent prisoner, however. He causes plenty of trouble for Prospero and openly rebels against his lack of agency. While Prospero tries to ensure Caliban's obedience with his frightening powers, Caliban attacks his pride by pointing out his lack of subjects, stating, "For I am all the subjects that you have," and in turn, belittling Prospero (1.2.341). On top of routinely wishing "the red plague" upon Prospero and Miranda, Caliban threatened the safety of the pair by attempting to sexually "violate" Miranda (1.2.347). Rape is inhumane and should be treated severely, yet the admission of such a heinous act reveals Caliban's desperation to defy a powerful captor. Prospero's treatment of Caliban is not just a reflection of one historical colonization event but a thematic representation of colonization as a movement against indigenous people. The Partition of Africa can be compared to the events of *The Tempest* despite occurring centuries after.

colonialism



Social movements such as the #MeToo and the Women's March reveal the modern fight against systematic sexism that has raged for centuries. With these movements in mind, Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600) demonstrates to audiences how the feminine was a cause of "pervasive masculine anxiety" within Renaissance men who capitalized on "sexist mechanisms" of belittling female agency and their power to render men a cuckold within relationships (Cook 186). This anxiety is unhealthy inhabited in false accusations and ignorant assumptions about female fidelity, particularly for Hero.

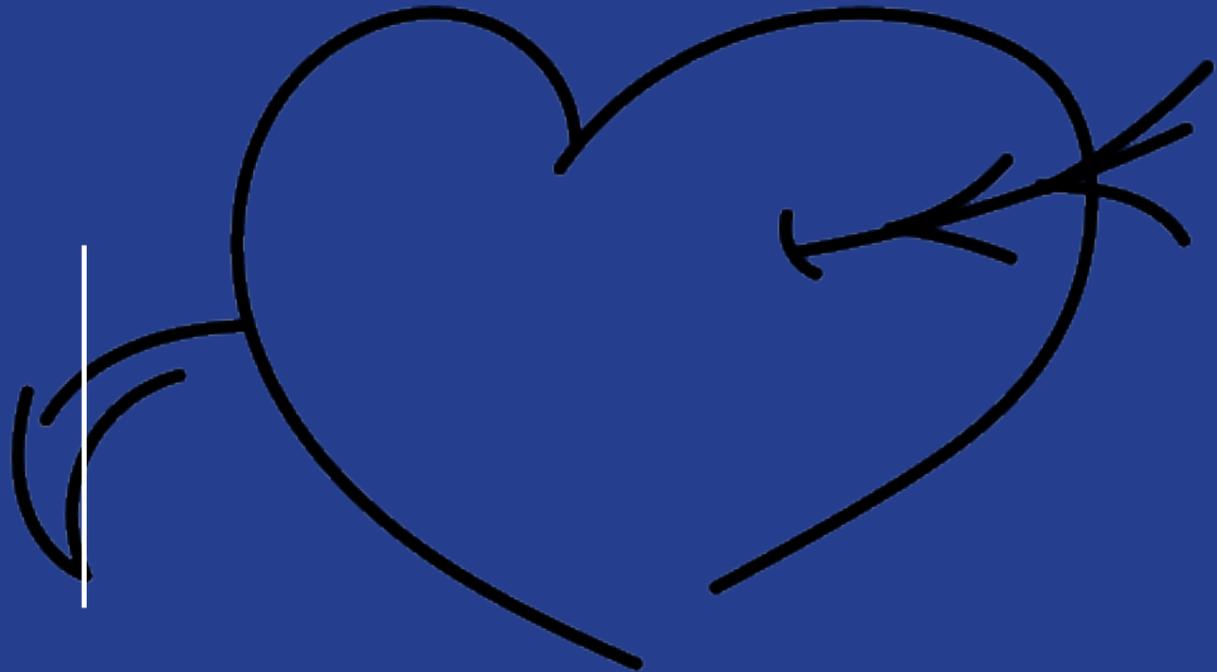
Beatrice's character appears to participate in the "assumptions and values" of "Messina's masculine ethos," belittling Hero's "docile" submission to "paternal authority" (190). However, this masculinity present in Beatrice's character allows her defense of Hero's honor after the distasteful bashing of her cousin's fidelity to be heard by Benedick. It is, thus, Hero's quiet and docile nature that "threatens Messina's men" to be exposed to their greatest fear: being rendered a cuckold (Cook 191, 187). The fact that assurance of paternity lies in the woman's court is a terrifyingly "active and powerful role" for women to possess (Cook 189).

Thus, language is used to "inflict wounds" upon the reputation of women to assure that men do not become what they fear most, the historically feminine "target of unconscious fantasies," "misrepresentations," and the object of humiliation and distrust (189).

Much Ado About Nothing provides

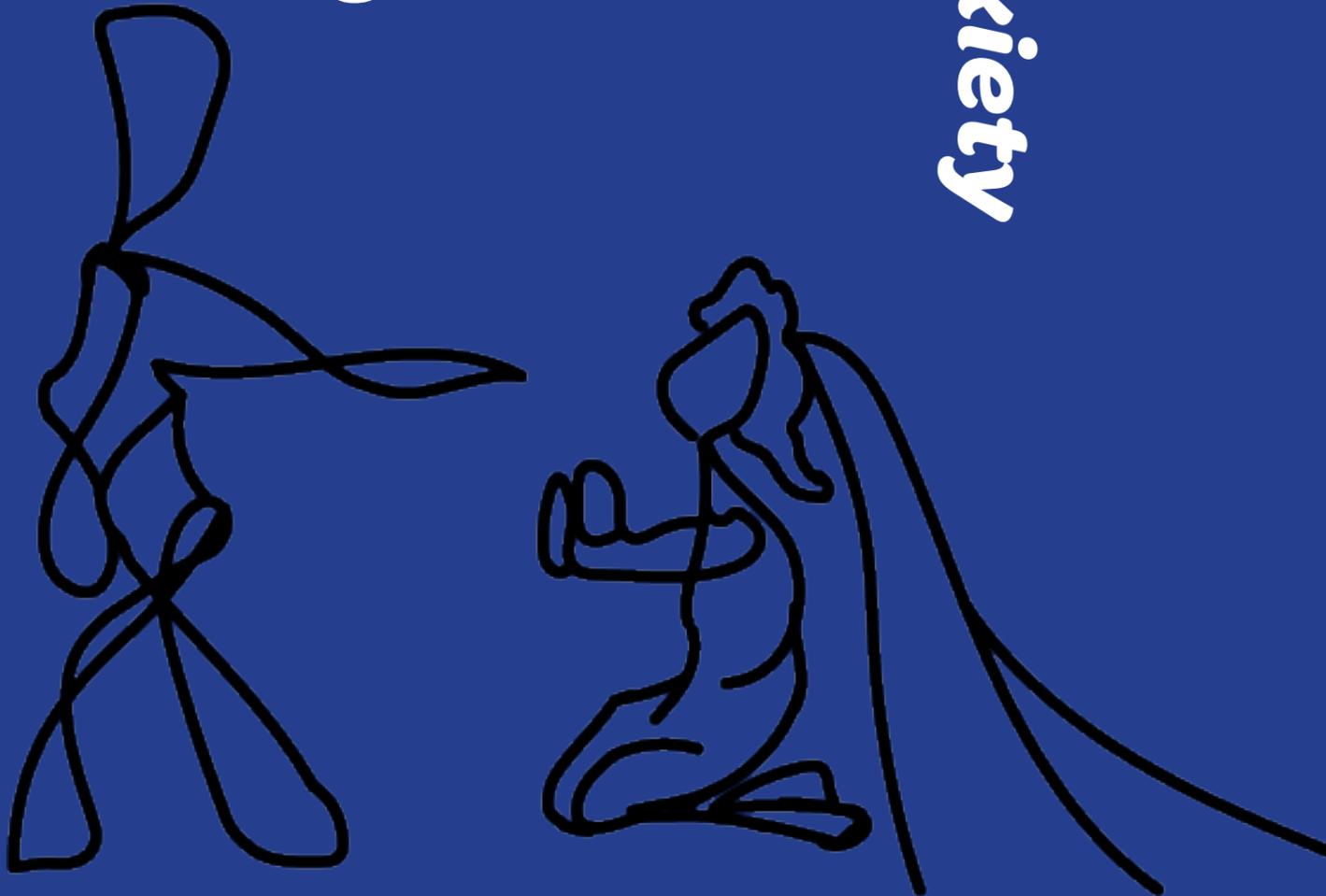
a lesson on sexism: women's voices need to be heard and their bodies to be present in society to perpetuate truth over misogynistic pondering or fear-mongering of the feminine power to usurp male control into humiliating cuckoldry. This idea is best represented by Claudio, Leonato, and Don Pedro, who immediately believe the accusations of Hero's infidelity despite Hero's appearance of innocence and quite denials against the claim. Claudio must get verification from male companions for his admiration of Hero, which he still has misgivings about despite their support, yet immediately believes Don John's claims of her witchery.

Claudio asserts his dominance as a male when "bidding" Hero's father to "answer truly" for her nonexistent crimes (4.1.79). His word is immediately prioritized by Leonato over Hero merely because of his sex, which Claudio seems inclined to exploit from sheer anger. John capitalizes on Claudio's jealousy by deceitfully crafting an aura of sensuality around Hero. He barely questions Hero's actual nature before deciding his poor opinion of her. A mere word from John accusing Hero as "every man's Hero" causes Claudio to dismiss Hero with an angry "farewell" based entirely on a jealous mistrust of the one he claims to love (2.1.163; 3.2.106). If publicly shaming Hero at the altar wasn't enough to doom his reputation, Claudio later decides to dive into another quick marriage; thus, not only does Claudio reveal himself as insecure but flighty in his emotions (5.3).



gender

anxiety



othello

OTHELLO



Contemporary events of police brutality upon and against black bodies creates a need to address Shakespeare's own dialogue regarding the subject for readers, scholar, and students alike (Smith 104-105). Particularly referring to Othello, the "moral complexity" of Shakespeare's works plays creates a consideration of how readers of his work are implicated in the world's "history of racism and misogyny" (Metzger 120). Othello's blackness results in torment, violence, and contributing to

the "establish[ment] of whiteness as a standard of humanity," a reality that readers must wrestle with to reap and utilize any helpful meaning from the text.

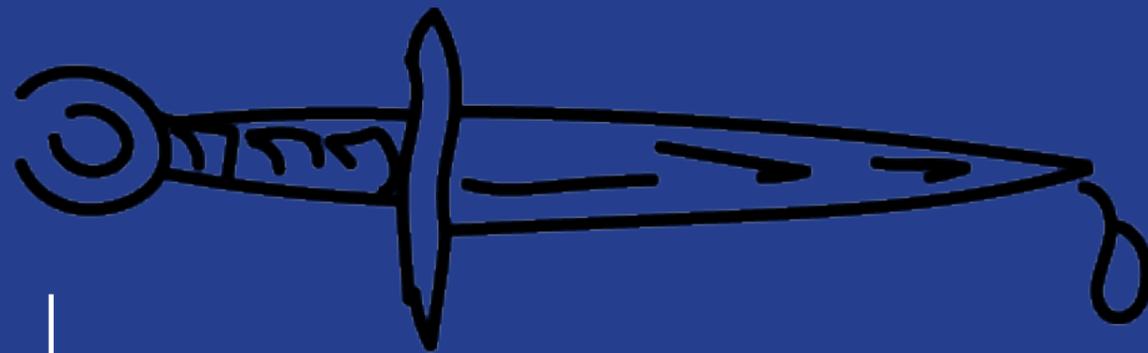
Shakespeare uses the white characters of Othello to demonstrate the "sickening effects of systematized injustice" via their use of Othello to achieve their own ends, including Desdemona (Metzger 122; Othello 1.3.121-122, 2.3.29).

Iago's "baseless fictions" push Othello to fulfill racial stereotypes of the "easily jealous" and "reckless black killer" that create such self-hatred within Othello that his stories countering racist claims are no longer viable. Thus, Othello kills himself, a fulfillment of Iago's intentions to manipulate a culture of racism to rid himself of the "Moor" Othello through his own destruction (111). Shakespeare's tragedy reveals the lethality of racism, especially when it is internalized by the group facing a prejudiced backlash. Not even in Othello's last moments can he use his own voice, forced to outsource his "narrative agency."

Othello also calls readers to consider the effects of racism upon the stories of afflicted black bodies. Smith writes, "Whom

can [Othello] trust to tell his story or speak of him in a balanced way?" (112). To speak about Othello is to speak about race, and any consideration of color-blindness or racism as existing in the past is a gross display of white privilege that stamps out voices of minorities. Othello's "dying request" is "to tell his story," and the only way in which to properly do that is with the reconsideration of one's own racial biases (122). It also requires avoiding the act of "speaking for" the affected group, which is its own form of imperialism (122). Thus, listening to non-dominant groups is necessary to expand one's understanding of racial issues, the "barriers that divide us, and to help rethink "our collective responsibility" to enact change through Shakspearean scholarship and social justice advocacy (124).

*"To speak about
Othello is to
speak about
race"*



mental

health



MACBETH

The serious focus on mental health awareness may be a recent source of various movements and education initiatives, but the 21st century focus on these issues does not mean that they didn't exist during the Renaissance. Therefore, producing fresh interpretations requires readers to implement modern understandings of health and behavior within their analysis of a text.

Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's resolutions to set themselves against their own character (for Macbeth, murder rather than civility, and Lady Macbeth for masculinity rather than femininity) are the contributing factors to their issues with mental health and eventual demise (1.5.40-54). For Lady Macbeth in particular, her calling upon the "Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts" is contrary to humanity, because she is associating femininity with weakness, but she is actually centering her mental operations upon feeling nothing at all, which is neither feminine nor masculine because it excludes any kind of human emotion.

Lady Macbeth's crazed demise is certainly an effect of internalized sexism of Shakespeare's time, because she would not have caused the stress of rejecting the femininity within herself if only she had the agency. Unfortunately, her body's inability to cope with losing her humanity -- saying she could even "dash the brains out" of a smiling baby -- is a mere side effect of convincing Macbeth to join in her inhuman vie for

power (1.7.54-59). Because the treatment for mental health (i.e. psychoanalysis) comes "centuries too soon, the doctor responding to Macbeth's concerns of his "wife's madness" that "the patient / Must minister to himself" (Yoshino 167; Macbeth 5.3.45-46). There is no one around to provide her the treatment she requires to deal with the effects of her ambition and internalization of "unsexing" herself, changing her nature not merely from female to male, but from human to inhuman.

Macbeth's agonizes over the "bloody instructions, which, being taught, return / To plague th'inventor this evenhanded Justice/ Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips (Macbeth 1.7.9-12). Scholar Kenji Yoshino makes sure to clarify the presence of natural law even by a doctor witnessing Lady Macbeth's crazed sleepwalking: "Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles"(5.2.68-69). Yet Yoshino also states that the definition of nature not only refers to the "inanimate physical forces" of the surrounding environment, but also "physiology, temperament, conscience... order, character, or normalcy" (164).

Yoshino's discussion of natural law and justice pushes us to consider the importance of mental health education, awareness, and treatment, especially for those who have committed crimes and utterly transformed themselves due to such inhumanity, losing touch with what it means to be emotionally and physically healthy.

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carla della gatta

