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Safety and Silence in a Shakespearean Space

Cheryl Hogue Smith

CUNY Kingsborough Community College

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For a Shakespeare class at a community college in Brooklyn, I teach *Twelfth Night*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*. I chose these plays because each deals with some sort of diversity issue (gender bending, religious intolerance, and racism—among other issues). But I also chose these plays because I (correctly) assumed that most students had not seen or read them. Most of the students in my class are not there because they want to learn about Shakespeare, but because the class fulfills a requirement they need for graduation.

The first play my students read is *Twelfth Night*, which involves a set of twins separated in a shipwreck, with the female twin, Viola, disguising herself as a man and working for the Duke Orsino to woo the fair Countess Olivia. Of course, Viola falls in love with Orsino, and Olivia falls in love with Cesario, who is Viola in disguise. Since this play is a comedy, Viola does, in fact, end up with Orsino, and Olivia marries Viola's twin brother, Sebastian. The character of Sebastian enters the play in Act II with a sea captain named Antonio, who will be arrested if he is found in the town of Illyria (where all this action takes place). Yet stay Antonio does, all because he wants to be with Sebastian. Antonio several times tells Sebastian of his "love," and he gives Sebastian his "purse" in case Sebastian needs money. The relationship between Antonio and Sebastian is always something students question because they can't fathom why Antonio would put his life at risk just to stay with Sebastian, whom he has only known for three months.

During small-group discussions about Act III of the play, students were questioning Antonio and Sebastian's relationship: Is it one of brotherly love? Romantic love? Lopsided love in that Antonio loves Sebastian but not the other way around? How would the play change depending on how audiences see this relationship? One group called me over. They wanted to know why Antonio was in danger of being arrested. I referred them to Act V, where audiences learn that Antonio was accused of stealing ships from Illyria and/or cargo from their ships.

"Consider him as sort of a pirate," I said.

"Then that answers the question of whether or not Antonio is gay," says Sergei.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, If Antonio is a pirate, then he can't be *gaaay* because no way a pirate is gay!" Sergei exclaimed, punctuating the last part of the sentence with an exaggerated visual of limped wrists.

My feelers immediately went up. "What do you mean pirates can't be gay? There are a lot of bad-ass gay men, Sergei."

"Is not possible."

"Of course it's possible! Just look at the football and basketball players who are gay. . ." I am not exactly sure what I said beyond

that, but something, I think, about being respectful and moving on with their discussions. All I remember thinking was that my class was no longer a safe place to learn. Sergei is an older, loud, burly man, and even though students were working in small groups, I could tell by a sudden silence in the room that everyone in the class had heard him. *Everyone*. So whatever actual words were coming out of my mouth, "My class is not safe" is the refrain that kept repeating in my mind. It's no wonder I don't remember precisely what I said.

This exchange happened near the end of class, after which I immediately went to my colleague who is a co-director of Safe Zone on our campus. (Safe Zone is the organization that provides training to faculty and staff, who then become allies for LGBTQ students.) I wanted her help to figure out how to make my class safe again. The bottom line, my colleague pointed out, was that what happened next would be crucial because if I didn't address the blatant homophobic discussion that emerged in my class, I would be giving tacit approval to the idea.

Sergei's comments happened on the last day of the week that I saw the Shakespeare students, and I would not see them again for six days. The class is a hybrid class, so I see the students for one hour twice a week, and then students "meet" online for an extensive blog requirement. All weekend long, I toiled over what to do. I talked to several colleagues and friends. I did not want to call Sergei out in front of the class, and if I spoke to him privately, the conversation would still linger in the air with the other students. I did not know what to do. Then, 15 minutes before the next face-to-face class, it hit me.

I printed out Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?") and made my way into the classroom. We were covering Act IV, which deals with Antonio's capture. In class, we had a short discussion about various questions they had about Act IV before I told them we were going to do some work on a sonnet.

One of the students read Sonnet 18 aloud, and then I asked the students to talk to me about the poem. "What was it about?" I asked. "Love," came a collective reply. "What makes you say this?" I asked. And they pointed out all the various parts in which the poem that they thought demonstrated how much someone loved another.

"So you all agree that this sonnet is about loving someone?" Synchronized nodding heads replied. "Well, let me tell you the first 126 of Shakespeare's sonnets are typically referred to as the Fair Youth or Fair Young Man poems. In fact, the printed volume in which these sonnets were published has a page dedicating the poems to a Mr. W.H., who is thought to be either William Herbert, the 3rd Earl of Pembroke, or Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton. Many scholars believe that these love sonnets and

dedication are evidence that Shakespeare was either gay or bisexual.” I let that sink in.

I was very careful not to look too closely at Sergei, but I did notice that he was turning a little red and was clutching his desk rather tightly. He was clearly uncomfortable.

“However,” I explained, “other scholars think that Mr. W.H. was a reference to someone who gave the original publisher, Thomas Thorpe, the sonnets to publish, and it is Thorpe and not Shakespeare who inserted the dedication to thank that individual for the sonnets.” I continued to tell the students all about Anne Hathaway and Shakespeare’s three children (including the Hamnet/ *Hamlet* connection), Shakespeare’s will (leaving his “second best bed” to Anne Hathaway), and Shakespeare’s career in London and subsequent retirement back to Stratford-upon-Avon and his wife. “So,” I asked, “once Shakespeare returned to Stratford-upon-Avon for good, was it a case of what happened in London stayed in London?”

I ended by saying, “Draw your own conclusions, and decide how much of this information will influence how you see the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian, but the script is the script and doesn’t change. But, at the very least, you should know about this part of Shakespeare that scholars have debated for centuries. Oh, and by the way, Shakespeare only wrote 154 sonnets, so 82% of them could be about his love for this fair youth/young man. However, the entire collection was dedicated to Mr. W.H.”

Sergei could control himself no longer. “SHAKESPEARE?!?!?”

“Mm hmm.” I shrugged. “Maybe.”

He repeated, “Shakespeare?”

“Yes. Some scholars believe that Shakespeare was either gay or bisexual. Again, whether or not that is true doesn’t change the script, but it might give you some insight into Shakespeare’s characters. And maybe it won’t. It’s up to you how you decide to interpret their actions and words.”

“Shakespeare,” this time said almost as an aside.

“One last thing before we leave,” I said. “I want to remind you that when you are writing on the blog, it’s sometimes difficult for your tone to come across, and a couple of times, there have been some comments that were on the edge of being offensive, even though I know they weren’t meant to be. You don’t know who is in this class, and no matter what your beliefs are, you have to be respectful of who *might* be in the class. So please watch what you say.” No one had been disrespectful on the blog, but I wanted to get a message across to Sergei in a back-door way that he should be careful of what he said.

I felt good about the class and the way it unfolded. I felt even better when, during the next class, Sergei said he would probably write about the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian. When the papers finally came in, I looked at his immediately. I was disappointed to see that he did not explore it.

However, I was delighted at two other papers I found. One was Jacob’s, which included the following:

As a future therapist, I can’t help but question why Shakespeare wrote the way that he did? Furthermore, as a gay man living in modern day America, I have to wonder about some of the relationships he portrayed in *Twelfth Night*. What was Shakespeare saying about love and relationships? I know that we have discussed this very topic to the point of tears in our class, but perhaps I can look at it in a different way . . .

Then there’s Sebastian and Antonio. I have heard the arguments against Antonio being in love with Sebastian but I can’t buy into that notion. I strongly believe that Shakespeare had these two together to make a solid point. Furthermore, I must say that there are very few people in the world who would go to such great lengths as Antonio did for Sebastian. Antonio very openly declares his love for Sebastian several times throughout the play, puts himself in danger of being arrested, and even is willing to kill Andrew thinking that Cesario was Sebastian! Actions speak louder than words, and Antonio’s actions give great credit to the argument that his love was more than just platonic. So what did Shakespeare want us to learn from all of this? Why put so much gender bending, homoerotic aspects in his play? I actually wonder if Shakespeare thought of himself as Antonio in some regards. With Shakespeare addressing love sonnets to Mr. W.H. in real life, it’s fairly easy to imagine that Shakespeare would put some of himself into the characters he brought to life. In the end of the play, it is never made certain whether or not Antonio was released or if he was taken away in irons. This scene for me was especially heartbreaking after all that Antonio had gone through to prove his love, to be rejected by Sebastian for Olivia and thrown in chains. Was Shakespeare drawing a parallel to his own life here? Was he shackled from his true love by society? Art is often an outlet for emotional turmoil and I can’t help but ask the question of whether or not Shakespeare was using his plays as a way to write his demons on parchment.

I loved that Jacob had taken the sonnet lesson and used it to try to interpret the play in a way that made sense to him. What struck me, though, was Jacob’s very bold statement that he is “a gay man living in modern day America” and showing me, perhaps, why he interpreted the play as he did. I have to wonder whether he would have said this had the Sergei incident not happened. I can’t entirely explain why, but it very much felt that by telling me he is gay, Jacob was giving me his approval for the way I handled the problem.

But the biggest victory was Jonathan’s paper, which completely took me by surprise:

So I will argue that it is very plausible that this reference of love between these two men was solely based on the biblical love as it existed between David and Jonathan. And this was the opinion that I took when we blogged about the relationship between these two gentlemen. Perhaps my opinion was rooted in my own biases as a Christian and as a heterosexual male. So I decided to explore this relationship further devoid of my biases, because as I continue to read the script of this play, the words of Antonio spoken to Sebastian becomes more of a deeper love than just brotherly love. . . .

Upon all the expression of love by Antonio to Sebastian, one thing that I still could not figure out was that, was it mutual, in other words did Sebastian had the same feelings towards Antonio or was his love elsewhere? I guess it was elsewhere, because upon meeting Olivia for the first time he jumped on her marriage proposal and never looked back. His attention completely shifted from Antonio to his sister and his new bride. . . .

Finally, what was the point of the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian in the play? Was Shakespeare trying drop hints about his own sexuality considering the sonnets that he wrote to one Mr. W.H.? Or was he trying to rile up the religious establishment of his day, especially the puritans? All that I can say is that it shows the genius of William Shakespeare and how he was way ahead of his time, because 450 years on, the issue of homosexuality is still very divisive even in today's society.

When I read this, I looked back at the blog entry that Jonathon referenced, which pre-dated Sergei's homophobic remarks in class:

It is highly questionable that Antonio's love and affection for Sebastian is romantic, because I think in Sebastian, Antonio sees a fine and gifted young man who could be the son that he never had and who has lost everyone that he cares about, meaning his entire family. So he probably just wants to be a father figure, adviser and confidant to him. We also have to bear in mind that in Shakespearean days, England was a very conservative society so such idea as homosexuality was very rare. Is it possible that Shakespeare reference of love between these men was based solely on biblical love as between David and Jonathan or as the Apostle Paul speak wrote about to the people of Corinth?

After rereading his blog entry, I can better see Jonathon's biases, but as part of a larger discussion on the blog, this entry just seemed to express an innocuous opinion of one student. In his paper, though, Jonathon is demonstrating such an awareness of his own

biases and how those biases might be clouding his understanding of the play. His last line—"All that I can say is that it shows the genius of William Shakespeare and how he was way ahead of his time, because 450 years on, the issue of homosexuality is still very divisive even in today's society"—said to me that Jonathon had changed his mind, at least in part, about homosexuality. We talked a lot in class about how, sadly, Shakespeare was writing about issues we still deal with today, and if Jonathon thinks that Shakespeare was "ahead of his time," then maybe Jonathon sees that the divisive issue of homosexuality is one that should have been eradicated long, long ago.

By not ignoring the blatant homophobia that surfaced in my classroom, I preserved and defined my class as a safe space for students to reveal and discuss their beliefs. Certainly students are allowed to believe whatever they believe, but they are not allowed to make others feel unaccepted in the class—and that includes any student who may tactlessly react to someone with intolerant views. After teaching Sonnet 18, Sergei never again made offensive comments (either in class or on the blog), even when we moved to *The Merchant of Venice*, where students often questioned the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. I wish I could say that I think Sergei was more respectful because he, like Jonathon, started to look at Antonio and Sebastian's relationship in a different way. But the truth is, I think he felt silenced by me in much the same way that I think students felt silenced by him, and I can't help but think about the implications of that kind of silencing. Is it okay to silence one student's voice if it's a voice of intolerance? To do nothing *may* push other students to the fringes of the class, and to do something *may* marginalize the student whose voice insults. When we are faced with this kind of choice, we have to recognize that it may become a choice about whom we choose to silence, and we, as teachers, must always choose the side of tolerance and hope that we *don't* silence any students or push them to the fringes. Looking back, I think I did push Sergei to the fringes and made him feel like an outsider for the remainder of the semester, even though my intention was to do the exact opposite. I have to say, though, that it's a choice I would make again—as difficult as it is to admit that I would knowingly and deliberately silence a student. But the Jacobs and Jonathans of the world help make these kinds of decisions easier.

About the Author:

Cheryl Hogue Smith is an Associate Professor of English, a Faculty Coordinator of the Opening Doors Learning Communities, and the College Now Humanities Course Coordinator at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York. Before moving to New York, she taught for ten years at CSU Bakersfield and was a Fellow of the South Coast Writing Project at UCSB.