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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

A Narrative Reflection on Examining Text and World for Social Justice:
Combatting Bullying and Harassment with Shakespeare

Stephanie Anne Shelton

Abstract: Based on classroom readings and discussions of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, this Voices from the Field article examines the ways that teachers might use traditional canonized texts to encourage students to both critique and react against bullying behaviors. The author's experiences detail the narratives that students introduced while reading the play, enabling complex considerations of contemporary issues such as Islamophobia, homophobia, racism, and sexism, with the hope that other educators and teacher educators might use similarly sanctioned literacy selections both to counter school- and community-based resistances and to advance social justice in education.

Keywords: Bullying, Secondary English Education, Shakespeare, Literary Analysis, Social Justice

Stephanie Anne Shelton is Assistant Professor of Qualitative Educational Research in the College of Education and affiliate faculty in the Department of Gender and Race Studies at The University of Alabama. Publications have appeared in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Sage Research Methods*, and *Rethinking Schools*. Stephanie serves as the Vice Chair of NCTE's Genders and Sexualities Equality Alliance, as an appointed AERA Division D Committee on Equity and Inclusion member, and as Secretary/Treasurer-Elect of the AERA Queer Studies SIG.

The Beginning

After a student at my high school was brutally beaten by three other students due to ongoing racial tensions, and another student transferred after homophobic bullying, the administration decided that whole-school bullying education was necessary and mandatory. I was elated; I had felt many times that I was fighting a losing battle alone (e.g., see Flam, 2014; UNESCO, 2009 for discussions of teachers challenging bullying alone), and I looked forward to the entire school community being more vigilant about anti-bullying and anti-harassment. In a single day, I had chased down a student in the hallway for hitting and calling another student "fag," taken two of my male students into the hallway for discussing a female student's chest, and chastised a group for assuming that a Muslim man who worked in a local store was "probably a terrorist." And despite the public nature of the hallway and the presence of a co-teacher in one of the mentioned classes, I had done all of it solo. Day one of the anti-bullying campaign showed me, though, that the status quo would continue. The administration's response was badly drawn animated anti-bullying cartoons that seemed to be targeting elementary and middle grade students (e.g., see Bidwell, 2013; Brackett & Divecha, 2013 for discussions on similarly ineffective anti-bullying campaigns). The entire student body scoffed at the film clips, and they seemed to sense that bullying was not a big deal.

I want to assert that my administration adopted what they believed was a cost-effective and engaging anti-bullying curriculum. They were genuinely trying to make matters better. Unfortunately, though, the intentions did not match the effects. My students openly mocked the cartoons and tuned out when they were sent to homeroom to watch them. Because of the school's limited resources, there could be no additional anti-bullying efforts. So,

although the administration retrospectively realized its error, there was no alternative schoolwide course. I decided that I would at least address this problem in my classroom, so I looked for resources. The lesson plans, handouts, and activities that I found online and in the counselors' offices were problematic; most of them treated bullying as something abstract that students should be aware of, in case it happened. Interestingly, nearly all of the secondary resources focused solely on gay and lesbian students' rights, and although my research interests primarily focus on LGBTQ issues in education, I did not feel that students were only targeted due to (perceived or actual) sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression (e.g., see Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, & Desai, 2016 for a discussion on the multifaceted nature of bullying). My experiences had demonstrated that bullying was complex and typically touched on various identity elements. Worst of all, nearly all of the resources required days of lessons if they were to be truly effective, which most teachers know is nearly impossible with the mandated and heavily standardized curricula that exist in many schools today. Momentarily, I faltered, unsure of what to do next.

I felt empowered, though, while reading Elizabeth J. Meyer, who suggests that even if teachers lack the power to change the school environment or cultivate sensitivity from the administration, they can educate the students in their classrooms to effect awareness and change (2009, pp. 43-44). There are a number of studies which describe the benefits of integrating topics related to bullying "into relevant core subjects, such as literature" (Bochenek, 2001, p. 14; see also GLSEN, 2014). In the Foreword of the Human Rights Watch's *Gender, Bullying, and Harassment*, Lyn Mikel Brown describes the striking disconnect between anti-bullying literature and what she had actually experienced (2001; p. vii). Many students and

educators can easily recall attending assemblies about "important issues" that never seemed to take into account the real-life experiences beyond the contexts where they had gathered to hear the information; and, the pages of literature available often seem to have no connection to real life.

The Importance of Anti-Bullying Curricula in Classrooms

Incorporating topics related to bullying into the everyday environment of the classroom is important not only because it gives students prolonged exposure to the content and a variety of opportunities to respond to the topics at hand, but because it can help students contextualize, and even normalize, the information; it also allows teachers to address very real problems without losing already limited instructional time. Another advantage is that situating conversations about topics such as bullying in the classroom keeps students from seeing the information as separate from learning. There are risks when discussing issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia in isolation that students will begin to see the targeted groups "as 'other'" and themselves as the norm (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2009, p. 20), potentially perpetuating problematic behaviors and assumptions rather than stopping them. Or, that in trying to discuss complex and difficult topics such as White privilege and heteronormativity, students will erect defensive barriers, bolstered by claims or notions that teachers have "an agenda," that stop any productive efforts in their tracks. And, these risks are outside those of community and parent protests of teaching materials many assume to be

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inappropriate or too politicized for public education (Blackburn, 2014; Shelton, 2014; Thein, 2013).

I am currently a university faculty member who continues to teach and observe secondary students during a residential summer enrichment program. However, my most foundational teaching experience, especially regarding bullying, comes from the seven years that I taught in a traditional high school setting. The narratives and quotations featured in this article are based on research that I conducted, with my principal's, parents'/guardians' and students' permissions, during that time. The student quotations are not direct quotes based on audio or video recording; instead, they were assembled from observational notes that I took while I worked to address bullying through my curriculum.

My school's setting was, as is always the case, a critical component to consider as I prepared to implement an anti-bullying approach in my classroom. My students were, for AYP purposes, categorized as 100% socioeconomically disadvantaged and approximately 70% students of color, in a rural high school located within a strongly conservative Southeastern U.S. community. For context, it is worth noting that the high school's neighboring county had its first desegregated prom only about a decade ago. Additionally, a little over five years ago I wrote a letter to the local paper protesting a half-page article that the paper's owner had written declaring that same-sex marriage was against God's will. My current teaching situations afford me a great deal of flexibility and freedom, but within my initial context, I struggled with how to address entrenched attitudes that not only allowed but even

justified bullying. I had to have a method that I could defend to parents, colleagues, and administrators; I had to have a plan that required no money: supplemental materials, copious copies, and regular access to technology were budgetary impossibilities.

The Merchant of Venice and Anti-Bullying Possibilities

I had to find a way to open the lines of communication with students using materials that were already available and district-approved. My approach is likely easily transferrable to other texts, grades, and resources, and it demonstrates that even the most traditional texts can be used for social justice. Wandering through the bookroom, I brushed away cobwebs to find a corner holding various dog-eared class sets of Shakespearean plays. I selected The Merchant of Venice. The play's plot is extensive and readily permitted a wide range of anti-bullying discussions.

The play opens with an impoverished Bassanio begging his friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant, for a loan. Bassanio plans to use this money to woo and wed Portia, a wealthy heiress in a nearby kingdom. From the play's opening, Antonio seems to have a more-than-platonic interest in Bassanio, demonstrated by his sustained willingness to give the ever-impoverished Bassanio money and his notable mood shifts when Bassanio is near. However, in this instance Antonio is unable to make a loan because all of his merchant assets are abroad. He and Bassanio go to Shylock, a Jewish money lender. Antonio and Shylock hate one another, and both Shylock and Antonio discuss the ways that Antonio has publicly abused Shylock due to Shylock's Jewish identity. However, Shylock is wealthy, and Antonio needs money for Bassanio. They come to terms, and Shylock agrees to make the loan with one odd stipulation: If Antonio defaults on the loan, Shylock will collect a pound of Antonio's flesh. Meanwhile, in a subplot, Bassanio's friend Lorenzo—a Christian—seduces Shylock's daughter Jessica, and Lorenzo and Jessica steal a substantial amount of money from Shylock when they elope.

When Bassanio arrives at Portia's kingdom, with Lorenzo and his new bride Jessica in tow, Bassanio wins Portia's hand in marriage by successfully solving a riddle. The bliss is shortlived, however, when they learn that Shylock has demanded Antonio pay his loan in full, to punish Antonio for his years of abuse and Antonio's friends for their involvement in Shylock's losses of both daughter and property. Bassanio, now wealthy with Portia's money, rushes back to Venice but unsuccessfully beseeches Shylock to take gold rather than a pound of Antonio's flesh. Portia arrives disguised as a man and successfully turns the tables on Shylock, arguing in court that the loan contract specifies only one pound of flesh but no blood. In short, if Shylock makes Antonio bleed while taking the flesh, then Shylock is in default. The Duke then steps in, frees Antonio of his bond, and forces Shylock to stop practicing Judaism and to surrender his remaining property.

Portia prepares to leave before she is discovered, but decides to test her new husband prior to departing. As Bassanio and Antonio thank her (him, they believe) profusely, Portia asks that Bassanio compensate her by giving her his ring—the wedding band that she had recently given him. Bassanio initially refuses, but after Antonio reminds Bassanio of how much Antonio loves him, of the fact that Antonio nearly died for him moments ago, Bassanio agrees. Portia leaves for home, angry that Bassanio has relinquished his wedding ring for Antonio. The play ends with all conflicts resolved in tidy Shakespearean comedic fashion, but the multilayered plot presented incredible opportunities for me. This was a text that explicitly examined

religious oppression, gender norms, gender performance, and socioeconomic class differences, all while implying a romantic relationship between two male characters.

To guide the students' reading of the text, I based our examinations of the play on Francisco Valdes's term "Euroheteropatriarchy," which he states is so integrated into societal oppression that to discuss the prejudices implied in the term are of "central importance" in creating "a society where 'difference' is not only tolerated and accepted but cultivated and celebrated" (2000; p. 405). I adapted the three sections of the term to make them accessible to students, to address real issues in our school, and to allow for dialogue that would hopefully achieve precisely the social critiques and social justice shifts that Valdes and I envisioned.

Euro

Valdes' discussion of "Euro" is one that is complex and far-reaching. The multilayered nature of "Euro" is unsurprising, given the ways that Eurocentricity have shaped and continue to inform both society-at-large and school spaces in general (e.g., Giroux, 2009; Shelton & Barnes, 2016). For the sake of clarity and organization, I have divided this relatively large section into three subsections: "Race," "Ethnicity and Religion," and "The Complexities of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion." While those three sections hardly encompass all that relates to issues of Eurocentricity, they capture the issues that emerged as my students and I read the play and demonstrate important areas of consideration for anti-bullying curricula, and the ways that the conversations examined race, ethnicity, and religion as both separate and constantly intertwined concepts.

Race

I have long appreciated the irony of being a feminist teacher who specialized in the texts of dead white men, and no one is more representative of the European-heavy canon than Shakespeare. I explained to students that we were specifically studying the notion of "White privilege" (see McIntosh, 1988; 2009 for concise definition and discussion), with the understanding that society affords advantages to White people that are not available to people of color—such as White people being presumed non-violent, while young Black men are often unjustly suspected of (and killed for) assumed crimes. I did not begin this conversation, however, with Shakespeare. My school had a mandatory bell-ringer component that had to focus on critical reading comprehension. I used short articles that I could project for the students, many of which focused on racialized privileges and oppressions. For example, my students read a short editorial by a local activist who described how many times that he, as a Black man, had been stopped by local police, in comparison to his White friends, whom he had informally polled. A question that I asked my students to answer as part of their warm-up was, "Explain why the author would include quotations from others [White friends, in this case], and what effects those inclusions have on his essay." I was conforming to the spirit of the bell-ringer assignment, in that students were reading and analyzing a text, specifically in relation to state-wide standards on persuasive argument techniques. I was also pushing students to consider and have discussions on race prior to introducing the play; a major advantage of the approach was that it allowed for a broad range of discussions, including other bell-ringer articles discussing sexism, homophobia, and so on. These various short readings were easy to justify, in that they were aligned with a school mandate, they were nonfiction, they were often locally applicable, they were publicly accessible, and they provided various opportunities for student examinations. And while serving as a warm-up

reading activity for class, they were also warm-ups for the discussions that I hoped to have in the coming days with *Merchant*.

In the course of reading, the discussions began to shift from religion specifically to racial oppressions within the community. Given the preceding bell-ringer discussions and the large student of color population, my students had little difficulty relating the text to their experiences, and one student described a time when a White cashier had put the money on the counter rather than put the money in her hand: "I guess she thought she'd catch a disease 'cause I'm Black." When a few White students tried to suggest that the issue was with that specific cashier and not racial inequality, I incorporated Peggy McIntosh's short essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1998) as a way to provide examples of a White person's understandings of White privilege from everyday life (e.g., asking to speak to a person in charge at most establishments usually means speaking to a White person). Empowered by those discussions, several students of color countered White peers' arguments against racism with their own experiences. One Latino student shared that often when he paid with cash, those accepting payment assumed that he was a drug dealer. An Iranian American student sighed and said, "I get tired of people looking at me and thinking I'm gonna blow them up." In one class, he had been horrified that another student skit had actually featured "terrorists," complete with black yarn beards, who claimed to be Muslim. When he had confronted his peers, saying "Man, that wasn't cool," they had responded that they "were just playing, and chill out." Drawing on McIntosh, other students of color agreed that if they tried to challenge problematic representations, White students often

dismissed their objections as them being too sensitive, rather than acknowledging blatant or nuanced racist undertones. As a result of the conversations, which had certainly been bolstered by outside reading such as the bell-ringers and McIntosh, students were able to consider the assumptions that each of them had made about others based on race, and we considered how racialized stereotypes were both damaging and easily perpetuated.

Ethnicity and Religion

When we discussed ethnicity, my students often framed ethnic concerns as synonymous with racial ones, and literally as Black and White. This tendency was unsurprising, as those two racial designations comprised the majority of the school. However, the play permitted different perspectives. We examined ethnicity specifically in relation to Jewish identity, given the play's content, and we focused on the predominance of

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Christianity in *Merchant*, examining how Shylock's people were disenfranchised because they were Jews, not White Christian Venetians. In the text, Shylock charged Antonio, "You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog / And spet upon my Jewish gabardine" (1.3.111-112). The students were always shocked by the accusation; I still remember one student saying, "Man, somebody spit on me, I'd kill 'em." Her comment provided the perfect opportunity to discuss why Antonio abused Shylock and how that prejudice translates into our own society, specifically within the students' schools and communities.

We discussed, for example, the fact that non-Christian groups in our school community had to drive to other counties to hold religious services—a

fact that most Christian students had not known. We examined the ways that Christian students were permitted to carry Bibles in their book bags, but that Islamic students were fearful of having a copy of the Quran on their person. We even considered the racial segregation inherent in the Christian community, with nearly all of the students' churches heavily racially segregated. These discussions brought the oppression in Shakespeare's text to life in their own lives. They began to critique their outrage of Antonio's treatment of Jews as hypocritical, given their new critiques of longstanding acceptances of the real ethnic and racialized religious oppressions all around them. Meyer explains the need for a "response to bullying and harassment in schools [...to include] social and cultural impacts such as [...] race, ethnicity, religion, and the school environment" (2009, p. 23). Our discussions mattered, not because of the text that we used, but because we read our own lives as text once the play legitimized those discussions. Reading the play also allowed us to consider religion in a more academic sense, allowing students to put down walls regarding their particular beliefs. In one class, all of the students identified as Christian except two. The Muslim student elected not to discuss his religion, and I did not push him to do so for fear that he would feel tokenized and expected to impossibly speak on behalf of all Muslims. However, the student who identified as an atheist was readily vocal and said that she understood how Shylock felt, that she had overheard both teachers and peers say that she was going to hell. As the teacher-authority figure, I made sure regularly at least to discuss religions as diverse, both to prevent any student from feeling responsibility for doing so and to encourage broadened notions of religious practice. For example, if students were discussing religious oppression in relation to Judaism and Christianity, which was unsurprising given the play's plot, I reminded them of assumptions made of other belief systems, including Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Doing so relieved any student of feeling individual responsibility to do so while avoiding that Christianity be constantly centralized in discussions. Many of the students' comments during discussions reflected their realizations that they had simply assumed everyone around them believed as they did, and that applying something true of the majority to all people was problematic. Some even apologized to the atheist student, saying "I didn't know" or "That wasn't very Christian of us," allowing textual and historical discussions of religious intolerance, with the play serving as the catalyst and touchstone.

The Complexities of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Students understood racial, ethnic, and religious discriminations, but the play let us dig even deeper than that. During the trial scene, students who were staunch Shylock supporters shifted to Antonio's camp. In the play, as the Duke demanded an explanation of Shylock's determination to cut the pound of flesh from Antonio's chest, students were frustrated with the money lender's response: "So can I give no reason, nor I will not" (4.1.59). Defectors would complain, "You can't cut somebody open just because you're mad. That's crazy." However, Shylock's supporters would remind their peers of the earlier scenes and the fact that Antonio had insulted, kicked, and spit on him. One of the common limitations of bullying education is that typically it only teaches teachers and students to identify and report bullying. Using a text to dialogue with students about bullying, however, allowed for much more.

After considering the merchant's and lender's motivations, students could consider why people bullied others. Interestingly, a study of 6,500 middle and high school students found that 5% of student respondents could be identified as bullies, and of that group all but 0.5% had also bullied (Buckley,

2011). Consider that half of 1% of bullies were not themselves bullied. My students had little difficulty understanding both the societal prejudices that condoned Antonio's anti-Semitism and the source of Shylock's hatred. Throughout the unit, at least a few would recall a news story about a school shooting or bullying incident in which the perpetrator was described as depressed, distant, or an outcast. Often they would even discuss students in our school who fit those descriptions, and at one point I noticed that some of the students who had been discussing Shylock and Antonio's relationship made a point to invite a withdrawn, trench coat wearing loner into their collaborative project group. By the end of the year, the students and initial loner were working together regularly, and all of their averages had improved. This success does not imply some magical fix, but it showed me that students found it much harder to ignore truths, such as ostracized peers, if we were talking about them in relation to both literature and real life.

> **"My very existence reinforced Whiteness as power, even if unintentionally."**

Discussing discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and religion were often challenging for me, primarily because I am White and was raised in a Christian religious tradition. In several of the classrooms, I was both the only White person and the person of authority, while nearly every student identified as Christian. My very existence reinforced Whiteness as power, even if unintentionally. My students' religious identities reinforced Christianity as a norm, similar to the representations of the play's protagonists. However, my discomfort and my students' identities were not justifications for avoiding important conversations about the play's portrayal of a power system obviously tailored to serve and protect the White Christian man. Despite the fact that Shylock's demand for Antonio's flesh was perfectly legal, the Duke threatened the lender:

"How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend'ring none?" (4.1.88), implying that even if the Duke enforced Shylock's legal contract, on which Antonio had defaulted, the Jew would pay at a later date. And indeed, after Portia nullified the bond, the Duke stripped Shylock of half of his property, and more importantly, his Jewish identity, and ordered him, "Get thee gone" (4.1.397). Even before the recent news stories detailing police violence against people, especially young men of color, Muslims, and Jews, my students understood the idea of a system crafted to prefer a particular group in a variety of ways. Some of them talked about family members serving time, and how when they visited there were far more people of color, especially Black and Latino inmates, than White people in the jails and prisons. Others told about how police officers constantly harassed them when they attended a mosque or synagogue, while none of their Christian friends had ever has such experiences at houses of worship.

The most interesting topic, though, was related to the power structure of the school itself. Despite admirable strides, "students of color are more segregated than ever before" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 173), and students inevitably discussed the racial separation that they saw. For example, they noted that the advanced placement and honors classes, which required teacher recommendations, were unrepresentative of the school; White students constituted less than 20% of the school population but typically made up 80-90% of the top tier classes offered. Students also felt faculty targeted particular students as discipline problems, because of the ways they dressed, looked, or talked, and that usually these students were Black. They pointed out the aggressive administrative efforts to address sagging pants, a clothing choice typically made by Black and Latino students, for example.

These conversations on school rules and norms allowed us to discuss a bullying issue that often goes unspoken. Adults can be bullies, too, and in some cases, "teachers comprise[...] an overwhelming majority of the perpetrators" (Meyer, 2009, p. 18). My goal was not to fully subvert school order, as I wanted to keep my job and I wanted students to avoid disciplinary action. My goal was to have students examine the roles that adults in school settings (and elsewhere) have in determining what actions are deemed normal, and therefore acceptable, and which are, like sagging pants, deemed aberrant and therefore vulnerable to punishment. Students began to note that school rules, such as the dress code, seemed to target students of color while simultaneously treating what they termed "White behavior," such as tucking shirts into belted pants, as acceptable and expected.

Hetero

Race and ethnicity remain issues when combating bullying, but homophobia often goes ignored because, particularly in the Southeastern U.S., many feel that it is a controversial problem that is inappropriate for school (Meyer, 2009; Thein, 2013). Even with opportunities to discuss lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) representations in literature, teachers often choose to either briefly mention or not mention an author's or character's sexuality. I have found that, while there can be risks, the benefits to students can be well worth them. Reading *Merchant* presented the opportunity to have students consider Antonio's relationship with Bassanio. Numerous Shakespearean scholars point out the homoeroticism in the play. Steve Patterson wrote that Antonio's "affection may be evident from the moment the merchant has Bassanio alone," and that "Antonio's grand gestures are further identified as

signs of physical desire, not simply platonic love" (1999, p. 20).

The first time that I taught the play, I felt my stomach rolling as I weighed the consequences of talking about a possibly gay character. I was an openly out lesbian teacher, and I was terrified of someone accusing me of pursuing the mythical "gay agenda." But before I could say anything, students immediately commented on how sullen Antonio is before and how near-giddy he is after Bassanio's appearance in Act I. One student said, "The only way you're gonna give somebody who's that broke money, after they've already wasted all of the other money you gave them, is if you got it bad." When I asked her to explain, one of the other students rolled her eyes and said, "Man, Ms. Shelton, that fool's in love." A few of the students were startled by and rejected their interpretation, but as we continued through the play, Act IV caused some pause. Antonio, prepared to die to resolve Bassanio's debt, told Bassanio, "Say how I lov'd you [Bassanio], speak me fair in death; / And when the tale is told, bid her be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love" (4.1.275-277), a clear statement of affection, if not more. And when Portia, Bassanio's wife, freed Antonio from his bond, Antonio convinced Bassanio to relinquish his wedding band (from Portia) in payment to the attorney (4.1.449-457). By the end of the play, some students were sure that Antonio loved Bassanio; others decided that they were just close friends. Regardless, the conversation normalized the topic of sexual orientation, allowing discussions then and later.

Numerous studies show that "[l]esbian, gay, and bisexual youth are nearly three times as likely as their heterosexual peers to have been assaulted" (Bochenek, 2001, p. 20), and GLSEN's (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) 2013 National School Climate Survey found that nearly 90% of LGBT students experience some form of harassment

in school (GLSEN, 2014). Every one of my students said that they heard "That's so gay" or a variation every day, and that sometimes it was from the mouths of teachers. In one class, I had several "out" students, and although all were talented and accomplished students who had strong social circles, each one had stories to tell about homophobic bullying in community and school. One student said that his church-going peers would tell him that they were praying for him, and that they "hated the sin, not the sinner." Another nearly got into an altercation in the cafeteria when he had had enough of being called "fag," talked back, and got shoved down.

I am sure that the students would never have shared these stories without the context of the play to open communication. I was out to my students, but it was not until we discussed Antonio and Bassanio that they talked about their own experiences. Sometimes teachers make the assumption that discussing controversial topics in structured ways is unnecessary, because students talk about them on their own (Shelton, 2014; Blackburn, 2014). It was clear, though, that although most of my students had known each other for at least twelve years, and some for eighteen, few realized that their peers were being targeted due to their LGBTQ identities. It took only a day for me to hear one of my students reprimand a friend in the hallway for saying that a shirt was "so gay." She told her friend, "You don't know if someone who's gay is around, and if you use that word like it means 'stupid,' then you could offend them." The same student later chose to do a research project on legal issues related to marriage equality, although she had planned to study animal rights before the play. I cannot assert confidently that all or even most of the students were sensitive to LGBTQ issues following *Merchant*, but a single ally is well worth my students' vulnerable personal narratives and the stomach churning discomfort that I initially endured.

Patriarchy

Gender is an essential component of responding to bullying, and studies show that "female students experience more frequent and more severe forms of sexual harassment than males" (Meyer, 2009, p. 23). Near the start of reading the play, I had students list negative terms usually directed at girls. Nearly all of the terms were unsuitable for print, with some of the tamest being "bitch" and "whore," but anyone in secondary education knows what most of them are, and with each class, the list got longer. Then I ask for terms negatively applied to boys; while there were some, the list was minimal in comparison— with most insults for boys actually feminizing them, like "pussy." In short, students noted that not only were girls regularly insulted, but that for boys, being equated to a girl was usually the insult. The visual evidence of the lists allowed us to talk about the terms "commonly used in schools by male students as ways to assert masculinity by degrading female peers," that are meant to objectify females while insulting them (Meyer, 2009, p. 9). This social contextualization within their own experiences allowed students to understand the nature of patriarchy: reinforcing the notion that females are objects rather than people, thus explaining why they could be so readily and simultaneously insulted and be the insult, and that masculinity, which was equated with strength, intelligence, and decisiveness, innately made someone more fit for authority.

I generally discussed the issue of gendered insults before the play introduced Portia in Belmont, because it gave me the means of discussing how, although Portia was powerful, intelligent, and independent, her dead father determined who would marry her and, even from the grave, controlled all of the wealth that Portia competently governed alone (1.2.24-25). Students were outraged

that Portia was obviously able to run a kingdom without a husband but that the play demanded that she be married, and that her husband would then assume all wealth and power. One student summed up the prevailing attitude nicely: "Bassanio's this dummy who's been begging folks since the start of the play for money, and now that fool is supposed to run a kingdom because Portia's got a vagina? Nah. That's straight dumb. And all them people in the kingdom gonna be homeless because we all know Bassanio can't even manage his own life, but he's a dude, so he's in charge. This junk makes me so mad!"

The students truly began to apply the concepts of patriarchy and sexism during the trial scene. It frustrated female students that Portia had to dress as a young man to be heard in court, and it infuriated them that after successfully and impossibly nullifying a contract that no other character had managed to challenge, her ultimate reward was to be married to "that slacker scrub Bassanio." The play's resolution invited students to discuss sexualization and minimization of girls and their abilities, in homes, schools, jobs, and in general.

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One student, who had a large bust, shared how guys joked that she could make a lot of money as a stripper and that she was wasting her time with honors classes. Another described how males on her bus would pop her bra strap and ask her if she wanted to have sex, and when she complained, the bus driver would respond that she needed to wear jackets over her shirts. The problem, my students and I found, was that treatment such as this was the norm, not the exception, and often when they reported such incidents they got the "boys will be

boys" speech and a sympathetic pat on the head. (A response that recent events concerning the new U.S. President echo in unfortunate ways—a strong indication that these sorts of conversations continue to be vital.)

Most female students who shared said that these kinds of treatment had gone on for years, and at this point they barely noticed it, unless they were exceptionally cruel. Many boys in the class begrudgingly and ashamedly admitted participating in such behaviors, claiming that they had not realized that girls had been so affected by their actions. Following our reading of the play's Act V, during which Bassanio makes a crude joke about Portia's "ring," or within textual context, her vagina, female students, and some males, pushed those boys who had acknowledged wrongdoing to be more self-critical and reflective. Why was it acceptable, they asked, for boys to touch girls' bra straps, for Bassanio to talk about Portia's anatomy, and for boys to reference girl's breasts when exchanges that might reverse the gender roles of such interactions, such as girls touching and commenting on boys, would be likely be deemed shocking and unacceptable?

A study done in several schools with different populations found that it did not matter what the students' socioeconomics, race, ethnicity, culture, or geographic locations were; every setting reported that "gendered harassment was prevalent" (Meyer, 2009, p. 37). Teachers and students often ignore gendered harassment, though, because it is an element of patriarchy. For millennia, females have been objectified to the point that sexism is unconsciously inculcated. However, just as my students mourned Portia's loss of power and

independence, teachers need to take notice of the damage done to female students due to gendered bullying and harassment. Sexual harassment and bullying are "still prevalent in schools," and female students often have "no outlet for response and complaint of tangible harm," although there is evidence that sexism affects girls' mental, emotional, and academic well-being (Meyer, 2009, p. 9). It is only through conversations about entrenched notions such as patriarchy and sexism that students and adults can not only recognize but stop normalized abuse.

Conclusion

I realize that not all teachers have access to this particular play, and that not all schools will permit these particular conversations, though I will point out that nearly all of the topics discussed here, after some cursory preparations on my part, were student-introduced and student-led. Crafting spaces that encourage students to broach difficult topics may provide some measure of protection from administrations, parents, and communities. Additionally, I would emphasize that due to its interdisciplinary nature, English Education permits teachers to use varieties of texts that might prompt conversations that address social ills, including bullying and harassment. For example, *Huckleberry Finn*, an oft-assigned text, provides material to examine not just race, but also concepts such as socioeconomics (e.g., considering Pa's financial desperation and Huck's stances on slavery versus Tom Sawyer's) and gender expression/identity (e.g., the woman's analysis of gender performance when Huck disguises himself as a girl). *The Crucible*, a play that many students read and that nearly all of my students adored, provides concrete examples of both peer group and judicial bullying that could enable a range of conversations on peer pressure and power differentials in schooling. Additionally, organizations such as the National Education

Association and the National Bullying Prevention Center offer free curriculum guides that some teachers might find useful to pair with standard and/or mandated texts.

What is most critical is that teachers realize that there is true social justice potential in every classroom, in every assigned material. *Merchant* went from being a dust-covered play in the bookroom to one of the most powerful tools that I had to educate and empower students. I have learned from my own experiences and as a teacher educator, too, that specific examples that can be adapted or altered for particular teachers' needs are more helpful than abstract and generalized ideas that end up taking more effort to incorporate and implement. The important point is not to necessarily use this play; rather, it is to use what we have access to, to ensure that our students are safe in our hallways and classrooms, regardless of what they look like, who they love, or who they are. It is my hope that the research and conversations that were helpful to my students might inspire other teachers to examine how they might address the very real threats of bullying and harassment, with whatever resources that they and their students have. To not do so is to risk reinstituting the status quo that negatively affects children and society at large every day.

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