

“Do I Speak You Fair?”:  
Exploring Conversations Around Boundaries and  
Healthy Relationships through the text of A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Submitted by

Caroline Lyons

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Thesis Review Committee Members:

  
Aubrey Whitlock, MFA, Supervisor  
Jean Roche

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## ABSTRACT

My work as an Education concentration in Mary Baldwin's Shakespeare and Performance MFA program brought me to the creation of a workshop teaching children the importance of boundaries and fostering healthy relationships to accompany our educational production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I came to create this workshop in collaboration with the Education Committee of Meadowlark Shakespeare Players led by the Director of Education of the American Shakespeare Center Aubrey Whitlock in response to a gap I was seeing in conversations young people were having about how to enter into healthy romantic relationships with their peers. I drew upon the works of Paulo Freire and bell hooks as well as trauma-informed pedagogical theories to bolster my teaching philosophy of "empowerment forward pedagogy." After conducting the workshop with three groups of students, I was able to collect data on the success of the workshop and find places where the workshop could be improved upon. The workshop's goal is to use Shakespeare's text as a vehicle for a much larger conversation about transforming harmful relationship dynamics in order to empower students to advocate for their personal and emotional boundaries.

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### Introduction: Getting to Know Caroline

I came to pursue a career in education after many years of what I call, “accidental pedagogy.” In my twenties, I lived in New York City, and I was supporting my burgeoning acting career with bartending. But something was missing. I would find myself occasionally googling the New York City Teaching Fellowship but something about giving up my acting career for the classroom did not sit well with me. Then after two years of consistent auditioning, I lost my agent and the glitz and glamor of a career in film and television dissipated and I was forced to pivot. I found myself in limbo until a friend offered me a job with her non-profit, Overcoming Barriers, an organization where mental health professionals dedicate themselves to helping families struggling through high conflict divorces. I was hired to be a green shirt volunteer at their annual family camp where family units were court ordered to attend and work through their unhealthy dynamics. I had been a camp counselor previously, but nothing could have prepared me for what this camp was going to look like.

I arrived bubbly and overly exuberant only to be met by children whose bodies and psyches were atrophied by the compounding turmoil they were experiencing at home. Simple tasks like catching a frisbee or playing a card game were first met with hesitation and fear. It was my job outside of their therapy sessions to try to give them a “normal” camp experience filled with campfires, games, and physical activities. My enthusiasm and compassion acted as my armor against wanting to speak my mind to the parents who were clearly damaging their children. After an exhausting week where I threw everything at these kids to try to get them to smile, one of the observing psychiatrists came up to me and gave me a big hug. She told me, “It was a pleasure watching you work with those kids.” When we broke out of our embrace, I blurted out, “I think I have to quit my restaurant job.”

I knew then it was finally time to take all these moments as a caregiver and a camp counselor and dig into my passion for working with children by expanding my skills as an educator. When the

COVID-19 pandemic cut off my work as an after school teacher and a postpartum doula temporarily, I had the opportunity to reflect on where I wanted my career to go. Then came the battle that I had been fighting since I graduated college in 2016: become a teacher or take another stab at being a professional actor. Mary Baldwin University's Shakespeare and Performance program enabled me to have the best of both; performance opportunities to feed the always hungry performer in me while giving me the tools to become an educator. It became very obvious to me that my Master of Letters thesis work would focus on education, and how a new set of tools drawing from drama therapy techniques and trauma-informed care could help educators navigate emotional dysregulation and retraumatization in their classroom.

The Master of Letters thesis was my first attempt at curriculum development and I fell in love with mining out details to ensure that every type of learner's needs would be met within my lessons. It took a tremendous amount of collaboration with Prof. Doreen Bechtol who had made a career both as a performer and in arts curriculum development. She was able to guide me through the critical scaffolding process of making a workshop that seamlessly hit my learning goals while keeping in mind trauma-informed practices. I sit now a year removed from that process, and can look back fondly on how the beginnings of an educator started to bloom from the pages of that 106 page document. I knew that I wanted to continue to hone the skills I developed from that first research project and translate it into my MFA thesis that demanded more specificity and frankly more vulnerability. I knew I had to turn up the heat and develop a curriculum that could put my skills to the test, and a single 20 second clip from a documentary would be the inspiration for that work.

During my MLitt thesis research, I encountered the documentary, *Paper Tigers*, a film that follows students at Lincoln Alternative High School in Walla Walla, Washington as the school district introduced trauma-informed strategies into their curriculum. They were finding the crux of students'

behavioral problems stemmed from trauma experienced outside the classroom. This documentary was instrumental in bolstering my argument that working through a trauma-informed lens helps take students out of their fight or flight instincts so that their nervous systems are at ease when sitting in the classroom. It leaked into every aspect of school culture, but there were pieces of the puzzle still missing. One of the nurses from Lincoln Alternative High School had this to say about the students in her care:

You know we—we push so hard for, you know, we got—we have to have sex ed. Look at all these kids getting pregnant. I do agree that they need to know what to use, but I think people are skipping right past the bigger issue, which is positive healthy relationships and understanding their worth. (*Paper Tigers* 00:35:36-00:35:53)

The landscape of sexual and reproductive health education in this country is ever evolving, and differs wildly from one state to the next based on social and religious frameworks of the communities involved. Solving the “sex education problem” is much more complicated than just combating harmful abstinence campaigns. Breaking down a sex education curriculum that could go beyond the mechanics of sex acts and speak to the nuanced dynamics of being in a romantic partnership with another person is still missing in even the most progressive sex education curriculums.

Young people have been begging for more nuanced conversations surrounding relationships for many years now. The Making Caring Common Project out of the Harvard Graduate School of Education interviewed 3,000 young people about love, sex, and relationships and found that there was a huge gap in their sex education that would help prevent against misogyny and sexual harassment (Weissbourd et. al 1). 70% of the 18 to 25-year olds the project surveyed cited they wished the adults in their lives gave them more information about the emotional aspects of a romantic relationship including but not limited to: “how to have a more mature relationship” (38%),

“how to deal with breakups (36%), “how to avoid getting hurt in a relationship” (34%), or “how to begin a relationship” (27%) (Weissbourd et. al 2). The potential for these conversations are obscured by our country’s perpetuation of abstinence-only sex education. Starting in 1981, congressional bodies wrote legislation to push abstinence-only education with bills like the Adolescent Family Life Act that worked to “promote self discipline and other prudent approaches.” (“Sex Education” 5). In 2004, Rep. Henry Waxman began evaluating the effectiveness of 13 abstinence-only programs and his findings included but were not limited to: “The curricula blurred religious belief with science”, “The curricula contained false and misleading information about the risks of abortion” and “The curricula contained scientific errors” (“Sex Education” 6). Despite these staggering results, abstinence only curriculums still prevail in many states across the country. The Guttmacher Institute’s survey of sex education programs in September 2023 cited that “29 States require that abstinence be stressed” in addition to “10 states and DC require that abstinence be covered” (“Sex and HIV Education”). The most disturbing fact that the Guttmacher Institute uncovered was that only “18 states require program content to be medically accurate” (“Sex and HIV Education”). The failure to provide accurate sexual health information to young people has severe consequences.

Sexual violence runs rampant amongst young people with 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys being sexually abused or assaulted by age 18, and a quarter of those arrested for violent sex crimes are under 18 (Sparks). For transgender and non-binary students, 35% have reported being physically assaulted and 12% were victim to sexual violence (“Sexual Violence”) and with very few states requiring accurate information about gender identity and homosexuality, it leaves these students more vulnerable to misguided hatred. How young people engage with each other romantically and sexually is clearly being mishandled with the state of sex education as it stands. The Making Caring Common Project outlines some tools for parents and educators on how to expand the infamous “talk” to discuss what young people are craving to know such as strategies on how to spark

conversations around the markers of healthy or unhealthy relationships. I saw an opportunity to start these conversations in a space where one wouldn't typically think they would happen: in the English classroom.

When asked to create an educational workshop for Meadowlark Shakespeare Player's touring production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the concept of developing a healthy relationship and boundaries workshop came to me almost immediately. This play on the outset appears to be a farcical romp with fairies, mechanicals, and lovers, but there are deeply troubling themes right at the surface that I felt would be dangerous for us to ignore. The relationships between the lovers Lysander, Helena, Hermia, and Demetrius are a wonderful incubator for discussing romantic dynamics and the concept of setting emotional and physical boundaries with a romantic partner. Textually, *Midsummer* is riddled with instances of challenged and broken boundaries between the pairs of lovers with some of the most overt verbal abuse coming from the exchanges between Helena and Demetrius. Instead of hiding behind the overarching humor of this play, I worked hard with the directors as both dramaturg and Education Committee Head to challenge the typical staging practices for these characters in order to weave a new narrative for students in how they could potentially see the types of relationships they engage in modeled for them onstage. In this thesis, I will explore the development, implementation, and outcomes of my "Meet the Lovers: Healthy Relationships and Boundaries Workshop". I will continue to flesh out my teaching philosophy by exploring the pedagogical theories of other great educators. Ultimately my work seeks to pursue the five core values of trauma-informed care: "safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment" (Cannon 149).



## Chapter 1: The Teacher Becomes the Student

In the MLitt curriculum, a core requirement is a pedagogy class where we would be learning how to teach. I found myself putting an enormous amount of pressure on my success in this class because I felt if I did not succeed, my hopes of ever becoming an educator would be dashed. I had a wonderful professor who assuaged my feelings, and provided me with a tool kit that prepared me for the work in education I would be doing in the classroom during my MFA year, a degree program that follows the MLitt degree in this dual degree program. The final assignment was to write a teaching philosophy statement that would provide the foundation for what I would continue to develop over the next year as I began to market myself as an educator. After a few drafts, I landed on a phrase that I feel speaks to the amalgamation of my guiding teaching principles: “empowerment forward pedagogy”.

### **Empowerment Forward Pedagogy**

Between the research I conducted for my MLitt thesis and the work that I continue to do for this research project, I find myself looking to every corner of pedagogical theory in an attempt to patch together what I want to bring to the table as an educator. Many public health and education governing bodies have worked to define what it means to be trauma-informed in the classroom, but one of my favorite distillations of this critical work comes from Jocelyn E. Marshall and Candace Skibba’s collection of essays called *Trauma-Informed Pedagogy : Addressing Gender-Based Violence in the Classrooms*. This collection dives deep in what it means to build a trauma-informed classroom and a through line in many of these scholars’ work are the principles of trustworthiness and transparency. Professor Kellie Jean Sharp cites what disability activists discovered about the potential of a classroom being a “kairotic space” or “[a] less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged” (22). A “kairotic space” puts the educator and the students on a much more even playing field allowing for knowledge to flow between two equal

parties instead of an often hypercritical traditional model of education. Harmful, hierarchical power structures can leave vulnerable students subject to retraumatization especially if the expectations and materials presented to them are not properly scaffolded or made abundantly clear. Preventing all instances of retraumatization and emotional dysregulation is close to impossible for any educator, but what has proven successful across trauma-informed curriculums as noted in the successful framework Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS), a student can succeed if a classroom is “predictable, consistent, positive, safe, and equitable” (Eber et al. 4).

### **Paulo Freire**

In building empowerment forward pedagogy, I could not ignore two pioneers in the field of education whose work echoes one another in their fight for student agency. Paulo Freire was an eminent educator that developed a unique philosophy of pedagogy while working with the colonized population of Brazil. His work explored the concept of critical consciousness or *conscientização* in Portuguese which Kim Díaz describes in her biography of Freire as “the process of becoming aware of social and political contradictions and then to act against the oppressive elements of our sociopolitical conditions.” (“Paulo Freire”). His philosophies are intricate and complicated which is expected when the goal is to unravel years of oppression, but what I found was at the heart of his philosophy was simple: love. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one that has a history of being banned globally for its “subversive and dangerous” (“Paulo Freire”) nature, Freire pinpoints the why of his work with the following: “From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and women, and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love” (14). Freire also writes about love: “Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (62). Infusing love into a classroom can potentially make for a boundary-making nightmare which goes against the ethos of this research project; however, I see a world where leading from a place of love’s companions: compassion, empathy and respect can lead

to a classroom where students can cultivate their own voice in the fight against oppressive circumstances around them. I sit here writing this feeling like this should be the obvious avenue for education, but there is a precedent not only in my education but in the education of thousands of children where empowerment fostered from a place of love and care for a student's well-being was far from the goal of the classroom.

### **bell hooks**

Distinguished English professor and writer bell hooks in her book *Teaching to Transgress* recalls her time in segregated schools in the American South where almost all the teachers were Black women. She notes how inherently revolutionary their work was because the drive for Black children to learn was a “counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization” (hooks 2). The wonder of a school culture that dug deep into the talents and generational family frameworks of its students shifted dramatically with racial integration. hooks describes that Black students were expected to toe the line and were subjected to harmful racial stereotypes from their white educators who believed that to educate Black children, “rightly would require a political commitment” (3). Her love of school dissipated and that feeling would follow her into her career as an educator where she developed the notion of combatting oppressive educational structures that bred, “overwhelming boredom, uninterest and apathy”(hooks 10). In *Teaching to Transgress*, she describes her undergraduate students as follows:

They do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences. (hooks 19)

bell hooks built her classroom as a haven where students were to engage in acts of freedom by participating in an exchange with their instructor. The ingredients for a holistic model of learning

includes empowered teachers who are willing to take the same risks they are asking of their students. This is meant to dismantle the notion that teachers are meant to be, “all-knowing, silent interrogators” (hooks 21). Hooks through her writing challenges educators to have the hard conversations, to dismantle harmful sexist, racist, and classist educational structures all the while encouraging them to see their classrooms as a paradise for young minds to transgress in the ultimate act of freedom. In hooks’ and Freire’s words, I find their campaigns for freedom empowers me to shift the narrative from the harmful educators I encountered and uplift those that I felt emulated these titans’ words and pushed me to be a forward thinking, brave citizen of the world.

### **What about Shakespeare?**

In 2021, I came to a graduate program that focused on Shakespeare excited for the opportunity to revere my favorite playwright since childhood. His text was borderline biblical to me and I was often known in my undergraduate program for snottily insisting on “sticking to the text”. I am very grateful that the Shakespeare and Performance program opened my eyes to how the assertion that everyone loves, needs, and deserves Shakespeare does more harm than good. Out of the many Shakespearean scholars I studied in my three years here, I find myself coming back to the work of Laura Turchi and Ayanna Thompson whose book *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach* illuminates how to bring Shakespeare to the 21st century student who is interested in discussions of identity politics and infusing modern sense of identity to a 450 year old text. A text that is riddled with problematic portrayals of people who were once just considered “other”. My favorite quote from Turchi and Thompson’s work really helped me grapple with feelings of not wanting to perpetuate white, Anglo-centric themes to a global classroom. They write: “But the *teaching* of Shakespeare is a vehicle rather than a destination: advanced learners need increasingly sophisticated literary skills to face all complex texts” (Turchi and Thompson 7). I have the responsibility within a program that emphasizes the work of William Shakespeare to see him for

all that he is and challenge the text itself to paint a clear picture for my students. I want to encourage students of all identities and from all walks of life to tear into Shakespeare's text, and mine for themselves what speaks to them and how they may transform the text to reflect their lived experience.

During our May Term season selection process, the first of two decisions all twenty-three of us would unanimously decide on was having *A Midsummer Night's Dream* be our educational show. I shared in everyone's excitement to stage a magical world of fairies inspired by the nature around us in the Shenandoah Valley and how funny the Pyramus and Thisbe play-within-a-play would be. But then I thought about the lovers. Flashes of productions with Helenas scurrying across the stage begging like a dog for Demetrius to love her with lines like "The more you beat me I will fawn on you" (*MSND* 2.1.211) started to cross my mind and I could not in good conscience let young female identifying students see that sort of behavior, and not be prepared to have a conversation about crossing boundaries. Demetrius and Helena's dynamic is deeply flawed, and it is up to a production interpretation whether they ever had love for each other or if the love potion forever knit them together despite Demetrius' consistent contempt for Helena. Demetrius spits insults and threats at Helena while she pursues him in the woods with words like, "And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts" (*MSND* 2.1.235), but seems to make a shift once the love potion is lifted from his eyes. He has a monologue in 4.1 that seems to smooth over all of his misbehavior with an admission of love to Helena.

But, my good lord, I wot not by what power  
 (But by some power it is) my love to Hermia,  
 Melted as the snow, seems to me now  
 As the remembrance of an idle gaud  
 Which in my childhood I did dote upon,

And all the faith, the virtue of my heart,  
 The object and the pleasure of mine eye,  
 Is only Helena. (*MSND* 4.1.171-78)

This is all well and good and ties up the bow of a Shakespearean comedy quite nicely with a double marriage, but I cannot sit by and allow Demetrius to skate by without having any consequences for his actions. There would be children sitting in the audiences of our production understanding that despite treating your partner poorly, a series of silly circumstances could still bring you together.

So how do we talk about it? How do we make it not just another joke inside a rompy comedy when so many young people are trying to navigate romantic feelings with each other? Maybe it is by stepping into Helena's shoes who is pursuing someone to the point where they fight back with cruel words like "For I am sick when I do look on thee" (*MSND* 2.1.219). By infusing empowerment forward pedagogy with the spirits of bell hooks and Paulo Freire over my shoulder, it is my hope that I create a space within these workshops to empower students to have the hard conversations about what a boundary is and how they want to be treated. The following chapter goes into detail on how this workshop was developed through my work as dramaturg on our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and as Head of the Education Committee with Meadowlark Shakespeare Players.

## Chapter 2: Getting to Work

As an education concentration, I felt it was important to have my hands in as much of the educational shows as possible. Not in a way to control outcomes, but I wanted to start thinking like an Educational Director at a theater company, and see how putting on an educator's hat could make the show as clear as possible for our audience. In addition to being an actor in a four person TYA adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, I acted as dramaturg to our production of *Midsummer*. It was slightly challenging balancing being an actor in one show and being dramaturg in another, but my dramaturgy work began with looking into best practices for Theater for Young Audiences. I encountered The New Victory Theater's Spark Change Initiative that looked at what it means for children to be exposed to theater and often. Some takeaways from this initiative was performance arts education and seeing theater had the following outcomes for its participants:

1. Cultivates an enduring love of the performing arts
  2. Expands perspectives and interpersonal skills that strengthen teamwork
  3. Inspires creative thinking, which encourages innovation and problem-solving
  4. Nurtures hope and improves self-confidence, which fosters optimism and resilience
- ("Spark Change")

I wanted to emphasize these outcomes to my company not to necessarily scare them into realizing how important this work was going to be for the students, but how mindful we needed to be in our telling of this deceptively difficult play. Because I knew that early on I wanted to work on a workshop about the lovers, I wanted to take a microscope to their dynamic.

### Meet the Lovers

The directors, Johnny Williams III and Alaina Smith, already agreed with me on the concept that the lovers were childhood friends who, upon growing up, had developed romantic feelings for one another. It is important to note that in our particular production we wanted to introduce a queer

relationship within the lovers, so the traditionally male character of Lysander was renamed Lysandra, and we presented her as a female coded character changing her pronouns to match her identity. We also re-gendered Theseus to be a woman so Athens was ruled by two women newly in power grappling with old Athenian law that would forbid Hermia and Lysandra from being together. Our show ends still with all the lovers marrying, but it is impactful in our production that Theseus and Hippolyta made an executive decision to rewrite Athenian law for this relationship to prosper. Meadowlark Shakespeare Players in choosing our season wanted to emphasize telling queer stories and we felt it was important students could potentially see themselves in the lovers navigating hetero and homosexual relationships to show a wider representation of love. Lysandra and Hermia's dynamic textually is pretty straightforward with the exception of a scene in Act 2 where Lysandra is pushing for Hermia to share a bed with her while they rest from their long walk in the woods. Lysandra attempts to convince Hermia with pretty poetry like, "One turf shall serve as pillow for us both;/One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth"(MSND 2.2.47-48). Lysandra eventually gives into Hermia's protesting and finds a bank further off to rest, but as many students pointed out while I was working with them on this scene, it was not fair that Hermia had to be so persistent in telling Lysandra that she did not want to share a bed. This was the first example that I pinpointed in my workshop of someone setting a boundary and a person accepting it even though it took some convincing.

Analyzing Helena and Demetrius took a little more time, and I again spoke with the directors about what their goals were with this couple and how they wanted them to appear for audiences. They had decided on Demetrius being very much in love with Helena, but struggling to follow through on this plan because he was under the harsh thumb of Egeus' authority. Instead of their scenes together just being full of vitriol and contempt, we wanted some of the love they had for each other to shine through so we could watch Demetrius make the painful choice to let Helena



go and snap under the pressure of Athenian law. It is not until after the events in the forest that Demetrius is able to speak his mind and stand up to the authority figures in his life to fight for his love of Helena. Some of the language in the infamous “spaniel” scene in Act 2 scene 1 was changed as well. We replaced the word “beat” with “ignore” to soften the violent language of the scene in an attempt to make it more appropriate for younger audiences. About two weeks into the four week long process, I was able to take a look at rehearsals and see how the show was going. The queer representation and use of Spanish and Arabic interwoven in the text beautifully expanded on identity. The mechanicals were roll-on-the-floor funny, but I was waiting for the lovers. Jean Roche and Sarah Scarsborough who played Lysandra and Hermia respectively had a beautiful innocence about them as if they were both exploring this side of themselves for the first time and every hand hold, every glance was cherished. There was such a lovely innocence to these lovers that I have not seen previously from other productions, and I think it made the narrative much more relatable especially to our young audiences. It was a beautiful take. We had the lovely Petra Shearer and Shawn Passero as Helena and Demetrius and I saw in their dynamic two friends who were having a clear misunderstanding. My dramaturgical note for Demetrius’ reaction to Helena was that he may have an outburst at the apex of his frustration with Helena that shows a man torn: torn between a love that he wants and a love that he is expected to have. It took some time, but I feel Petra and Shawn struck a really nice balance of playing the humor of the scene, but also revealing the difficult situation they found themselves in. The workshop would then be more of an opportunity for students to ask questions about the production and unpack what they saw, but not every school elected to have a workshop accompany seeing our production. When it came to creating the workshop, I came to the table with ideas and had the opportunity to troubleshoot them with my Education committee.

## A Meeting of the Minds

Within the fabric of the MFA company sit different committees and I had the honor of leading a team of four members of my company in the creation of educational programming to accompany our two educational shows: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and an adaptation of *The Winter's Tale*. I came to the table from the beginning with this idea of a boundaries workshop using the lovers as a case study, and it fit nicely into the traditional educational model of having two to three workshops that are diverse in learning goals. One supporting the textual analysis of Shakespeare's text and others to get students up on their feet and creating theater. The Education Committee met for three weeks with Aubrey Whitlock, Director of Education at the American Shakespeare Center, who not only is an alum of the program but a longtime educator and responsible for the educational programming for the ASC. She brought invaluable curriculum building insight that was pivotal to our workshops. One framework was called "I Do, We Do, You Do," a model of direct instruction, where the instructor begins the class by introducing the vocabulary and subject matter they will be working with as the "I Do" portion of the workshop. "We Do" is where a skill is practiced through guidance by the instructor where the layed out vocabulary is used and the instructor can stop and start the skill building to meet the needs of the classroom. The final "You Do" is where the students can practice the skills they have built thus far with the information that has been given on their own to display what they have taken away from the "I Do" section of the lesson. I found this framework to be extremely helpful because it neatly organized the new skills I was looking to teach into digestible pieces that ultimately lead to empowering students to take the scene in their hands.

When brainstorming what my workshop would look like, we had sweeping conversations about what falls under the umbrella of making a boundary. Consent was a topic that came up in the initial planning of the workshop but with the amount of time that I had to talk about both boundaries and the text of *Midsummer* I felt there was a whole other workshop that could have been

taught on consent alone, so we decided to pivot to add in a conversation about status. The status conversation was meant to talk about how status impacts how we treat one another and how that comes into play when trying to establish a boundary with someone. This worked well for defining the worlds of *Midsummer* and to explain some of the dynamics within the different character groups. A trauma-informed practice is prefacing the workshop with an agenda and that was built into the workshop's framework; however, I found that when I did the workshop for my peers, I sounded a little ominous by including that what we would be discussing may be emotionally challenging and when it came down to it, it caused more nervousness than easing people's mind. So I made sure upon doing the workshop again for students, I would introduce the agenda of the workshop and included that talking about boundaries might bring up some hard feelings and that we would be in the room to support anyone having a reaction to the material.

The workshop's "We Do" textual analysis was divided into different elements that intend to help the students with a close reading of Act 2 scene 2 of Lysandra and Hermia's text and Act 2 scene 1 of Helena and Demetrius' text. For Lysandra and Hermia's scene, I asked the students to underline instances where they felt a character was setting a boundary. This was a way to see after the conversation we have had about boundaries and status whether they could start recognizing it in a scene where boundaries are set and ultimately met. Then things became more complicated when we closely read Helena and Demetrius' scene. I asked them to look out for three different elements while they were doing a close read of the text. The first element was I wanted them to circle words the characters used to describe themselves and one another. I wanted to guide them towards pinpointing the negative language Helena and Demetrius were using to describe each other and especially how Helena was degrading herself in order to gain Demetrius' favor. The next element was two-fold. I asked the students to underline instances of what the characters were threatening to do to each other accompanied by putting a star next to the *yous* and *thous* shifts in the script after

having had a conversation about how the use of these two words distinguish status between characters. Penelope Freedman in her book *'You' and 'Thou' in Shakespeare: A Practical Guide for Actors, Directors, Students and Teachers* helps clarify these shifts by contextualizing how these pronouns were used in Early Modern Literature. She writes:

The use of **thou** and **you** was very flexible. We find, both in the language of ordinary people and in the plays, rapid shifts between the two, sometimes in the same sentence or line of verse. These shifts to reflect the transitory mood changes are what make paying attention to the pronouns so revealing. (3)

It is a niche piece of scholarship, but I felt it was an important addition to our conversation about boundaries because it is a quick find that can help track the mood of a scene and demystifies this word “thou” as something archaic to a word we can put into a modern context.

Finally I asked them to put a box around instances where boundaries were being broken or violated. I also encouraged the use of the word “comfort zone” to familiarize them with another term for setting a boundary that may have been heard before. On the few occasions I did this workshop, including with my own company members, I saw pages filled with lines, circles and boxes showing me that scaffolding this close reading exercise was successful. The workshop was then meant to culminate in a “You Do” of having the students rewrite lines of Helena and Demetrius’ scene in their own words, rectifying the boundaries that were being broken by both characters. They did not need to be written in verse or even be the same length of lines that the characters speak, but I did emphasize that it may be challenging to keep the action of the scene going once a boundary has been set and to challenge them to invent a new dynamic between these two lovers. The ultimate goal of this workshop was to use the vehicle of Shakespeare to encourage students to take the text into their own hands, and to not accept archaic and flawed relationships just because someone said Shakespeare is important. The words can be a mirror of what can happen, and I wanted to give

them the power to smash that mirror and design a scene with a sense of agency and empowerment in mind. The pedagogical philosophies of Freire and hooks sit on my shoulders as I think about students hungry for information that is not only relevant to their education, but how they relate to their “overall life experiences” (hooks 19) and infuse a sense of self-love and respect when interacting with one’s peers. In the following chapter, I will examine what it was like taking this workshop out to three different populations of students and dive deep into an analysis of the data that I collected from two out of the three groups of students.

### Chapter 3: “I Understand What You’re Saying, But I Will Always Love You”

A chapter in bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* is in the style of an interview that Gloria Watkins (bell hooks’ legal name) has with her writing voice bell hooks where she discusses her connection to Paulo Freire. hooks describes why she decided to write this chapter this way with: “it afforded me an intimacy— a familiarity— I do not find it possible in an essay” (45). The chapter is a wonderful dedication to this man’s great work by the voice of another educator and what I took away would pilot me forward while teaching this workshop. One of hooks’ many glowing descriptions of Freire includes: “In so much of Paulo’s work there is a generous spirit, a quality of open-mindedness that I feel is often missing from intellectual and academic arenas in U.S. society”(54). It is very tempting for me to want to control outcomes, especially of this workshop that I feel does important work, but I could not resort back to the tyrannical educator I was desperately trying to escape from in an attempt to make students learn something. A generous spirit and an open mind helped as I presented these ideas to three very different populations of students and their reactions to the material continually transformed what it meant to talk to young people about boundaries.

#### **Acting I at Mary Baldwin University**

In the fall of 2023, I had the opportunity to teach the undergraduate introductory acting class at Mary Baldwin University. I was so honored by the chance to bring my love of the craft of acting to students who were making the big transition from high school to college. I had a class of 10 students, most of whom were freshmen with one junior. Mary Baldwin University is uniquely positioned as a school that welcomes many students of diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds as well as many first generation college students. This was the first time I was tasked with teaching a 15-week course all by myself and definitely found myself learning on the fly what my students needed from this elective course and how I could best set them up for success. They were

the first group of students outside of my peers that I conducted the workshop for as a sort of litmus test to gauge the flow of the workshop and where aspects of it could be improved upon or edited. It is important to note that the feedback collected does not include this data set of students.

I started the day by prefacing that this workshop was connected to research that I was conducting for my master's thesis, and that their participation was helping me gain critical information about its effectiveness. Because my students had not seen our productions of *Midsummer*, I provided them with some critical plot points that spoke to the more traditional version of *Midsummer* all the while citing some of the changes Meadowlark made for our production. I began the workshop as I had planned with a conversation around status. They shared a few definitions of status including, "how you relate to other people" and "where you stand in society" also citing that singer Beyoncé has an incredible amount of status when she enters the room, but as I would continue to find when it came to these status conversations, the connection between boundaries and status seemed disjointed. When the conversation began on boundaries, the students were able to provide their own definitions of boundaries as well including: "what I am comfortable with" and "what I will accept from others." Two students shared instances when they were in high school, they would be touched without giving permission and I found myself shocked by the information. I was shocked not only that it had happened to them, but that they were also willing to share that with me in this setting. I thanked them both for their vulnerability and reinforced that what happened to them was not acceptable. Their demeanor was not impacted by sharing this information, and they were able to participate in the remainder of the workshop.

Following that conversation, I played scenes from the 1999 filmed production of *Midsummer* that I prefaced leaned more towards PG-13 with suggestion of male nudity in the Lysander and Hermia scene. They were quick to point out their frustration with Lysander pushing Hermia to sleep near him with both his words and body language and this was reflected in how they underlined the

text itself to show where boundaries were being drawn and how they were being impacted. Then I showed them the scene between Helena and Demetrius and their attitudes towards this scene was different. They found Helena's persistence both comical and sad in the sense she was clearly missing that Demetrius was trying to set a boundary with her. We then moved into the threefold text analysis with one student reflecting that when asked to put a box around instances where boundaries were broken, they wanted to put a box around the whole scene since they felt it was such a breakdown of boundaries.

Finally I broke the students into small groups where they had the chance to rewrite Helena and Demetrius' scene so that both parties had their boundaries set and met. Then they had the opportunity to perform what they wrote for the class. The scenes were filled with giggles and one included Demetrius galloping away on a horse drawn carriage from Helena while she replied with a downtrodden, "Alright, I'll leave you be and try to figure myself out." When I took my instructor hat off and asked them what they thought of the workshop, they answered me with quiet nods and sentiments of approval. I left the class breathing a sigh of relief that the workshop had legs and appeared to have a clear through line. It was still important for me to keep in mind that my students were slightly older than my initial target audience of middle and high school students, but it seemed to have the impact I intended. The next group of students I would present this workshop to required some more thinking on my feet.

### **Group A: "Stop Being Delulu"**

To protect the identity of the students I conducted my first official workshop with, these students will be referred to as Group A. In my workshop there were approximately 35 eighth grade students of a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds who had all just seen our production of *Midsommer*. I had been asked to only bring 30 minutes of my hour-long workshop, so I had done some amputation to accommodate the time frame I was given. This time I was able to have Shawn



Passero and Petra Shearer come with me to the workshop to help with reading the scene so the students could hear the words again and to then perform the students' versions of the scenes. We started with introductions, moved into a conversation about status asking the students how status was reflected in the play, and how could you tell that someone had higher status than another character. Again, I could feel that the transition between a conversation about status into talking about what a boundary is was still disjointed which would be reinforced later with some reactions that students had to the workshop, but we pressed onward.

For time, I cut discussing Lysandra and Hermia and went straight into Helena and Demetrius having Shawn and Petra read the scene again and then condensed the close reading portion to just include putting a box around instances where boundaries were broken. Being conscious of time, I did not spend as much time as I would have wanted unpacking what they boxed but a few students volunteered to read and answer why they had chosen certain passages. Then we moved into the rewriting of the scenes. I broke them into about six groups with some students deciding to work independently. I had two students who expressed confusion at the jump, but their teacher was able to work with them to help them come up with an answer. The room was filled with delightful chatter and giggles as they put into their own words the scene.

With a few minutes left, I had Shawn and Petra read as many of the scenes as we could get through with gusto and flair. A student-written line that got the most giggles was the infusion of some Gen Z slang with Demetrius asserting: "Leave me alone! Find someone whose does love you stop being delulu." What continued to be a pattern in these scenes was that the students did an excellent job of interpreting the scene in their own words showing that their reading and auditory comprehension was high. Not many of the scenes, however, changed the outcome to reflect boundaries being respected. This could have been a result of me not explaining the goal of the exercise well enough or that our boundary conversation was severely truncated. But there was one

line a student wrote that had Petra, Shawn and I looking at each other with awe and a sense of pride. One student wrote a line for Helena as follows: “But if I love you nothing can change the way I feel Demetrius I will choose to let you go.” It changed the mood in the room slightly because the impact of Helena listening to Demetrius, and choosing to let him go stood out from the other responses students had. We then thanked the students for their time and attention and had a two-hour car ride back home to reflect on the workshop. Shawn made a point that adding privilege into the conversation about status could potentially help with that pesky gap I was dealing with between status and boundaries. The outcomes of this particular workshop felt skewed to me because of how truncated it needed to be but what I took away from the experience was that the different modalities of students hearing and reading the scene did ultimately lead to them being able to deliver a product that showed they understood the scene. Did they change the scene to create new outcomes, not necessarily but I am grateful for their personalizations. If I had the chance to do the workshop again in this timeframe, I would focus the conversation more on boundaries at the onset and really dig deeper into explaining how to change the scene, potentially working on an example as a group before they dived into smaller groups. The next group of students would have the full hour with me, but had a different experience with the material.

### **Group B: “I Can’t Control My Feelings”**

Group B was much smaller with only seven students: two 8-9 year old male-identifying children and four 13-15 year female identifying children with one in the age range identifying as non-binary. These students were pretty homogenous in their racial and ethnic identity and had previous experience working with Shakespeare’s text outside that of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I took Shawn’s advice and infused privilege into my conversation about status which led to a slightly livelier conversation about how parents assert authority over their children. I still found, however, that the transition between status and privilege and boundaries to be a bit of a stretch. I tried to

bridge it with the “thou” “you” conversation, but I still feel that portion is a little underdeveloped and needs more research to translate properly. Because they had not just seen our production of *Midsummer*, I showed them clips from The National Theatre 2018 production. Their reactions to the Lysander and Hermia scene were similar to those from my Acting class in showing their frustration with Lysander having to be told multiple times before he listened to Hermia’s boundary. But their reaction to the Helena and Demetrius scene leaned much more anti-Helena than was typical which would then be reflected in the scenes they wrote.

Their performances were enthusiastic, using the architecture of the space to their advantage by making grandiose entrances and exits. I had paired the students off based on their age so they could feel they had an equal peer making the scene with them, but upon reflection it would be interesting to see what shaking up the age groups would have yielded. There was an exchange in one of the scenes that stood out to me as being a real reflection of understanding the assignment and wanting to take the toxicity out of the scene. One group wrote the following exchange:

DEMETRIUS: “Even though you love me I will never love you that way and maybe we should stay away from each other.”

HELENA: “I respect that, so even though I’m sad you don’t love me, I’m willing to leave.”

With some scenes being charged with a little more aggression and agitation because Helena was refusing to listen to Demetrius, this scene ended peacefully with a lot of maturity and poise. I was wowed by their enthusiasm and willingness to jump headfirst into making these scenes their own, but upon asking if they felt confident making a boundary with someone they knew in their life, they were silent. This workshop is not meant to move mountains, but allowing students to reflect on the boundaries section of this workshop to include more personal examples might make their understanding of a boundary more clear. But the question remains if I am licensed to be having that deep of conversations without being able to police admissions students might make. I was able to

gauge the success of this workshop with the use of a feedback form that Groups A and B filled out upon finishing the workshop and the results brought a wide range of feedback.

### **Data Analysis**

Before conducting the workshop for students, I had crafted a Google feedback form that asked a series of six questions to gauge what the students' takeaways were from the workshop. I did not have this available in time to survey my acting class but was able to disseminate the form to Groups A and B for the students feedback. I had a total of 28 responses across the two groups but based on the anonymous nature of the feedback, I have no way of telling which group a particular response came from. The feedback form included a child assent clause to ensure the ethical collection of data and consent forms were sent to the parents of participants to ensure they understood the nature of feedback collection. Overall, I am encouraged by the outcomes of these feedback forms and the effectiveness of the workshop.

The first question on the form was to give students an opportunity to put into their own words how they felt about the workshop. They were given the option to use three, separate descriptive words to describe their experience. The descriptive words ran the gamut with 22 students providing positive feedback such as “awesome, creative, surprising, fabulous, exciting, and useful” with six students describing the workshop with words like “I didn’t like it, messy, random, difficult, and confusing.” With 79% of the students providing me with positive feedback, I have a better sense of what work and the impact that it had and how the holes that I was instinctively feeling impacted the feedback I was receiving.

The second question had the students rank the usefulness of the workshop on a scale of one to five. 46% of the students selected three for usefulness as the overwhelming majority with 18% choosing five and 7% choosing one. I feel this speaks to how increasing specificity and giving more chances for sharing personal experiences could increase the feeling of connection to the material.

The next question was probably the most important question asking “do you feel you have a better idea about what it means to set a boundary with someone you know?”. 75% of the students answered yes, 21% answered no and the remaining percentage selected the “other” option. In retrospect, I should have only provided two options and made the question mandatory to answer to ensure an even distribution of data, but I still am quite pleased with the results. It is extremely rewarding to see that two-thirds of the students felt they took away a new skill that enhances their sense of autonomy and empowerment when advocating for themselves.

The next question asked the students to choose which aspect of the workshop they liked the most with the option to make multiple choices. There were two choices that were the frontrunners for favorite part with 46% choosing the discussion about status, relationships and boundaries and 57% choosing hearing their scene be performed. The next choice that had 39% of the responses was marking the scene with different ideas to focus on. In an interesting turn of events, the aspect of the workshop that received the least amount of responses was rewriting the scene with newfound boundaries and a healthier dynamic with only 21% of the students choosing that option. I am interested to see if potentially writing the scene as a larger group instead of feeling the pressure of coming up with a scene with just a few peers would have improved this score.

One question that sparked some interesting feedback was an open ended question asking the students to share what boundaries now mean to them after having taken this workshop. I had a total of 23 responses to this question with really insightful answers including but not limited to, “Boundaries mean when you say clearly what you are okay with and not okay with”, “Boundaries are something that limit others from making you uncomfortable to a certain extent”, and “They mean that if you have a bubble that you cannot touch their bubble because right that is called a boundary.” I am proud that the students were able to take the definitions and examples I provided them and put their feelings about boundaries into their own words in so many unique ways. Finally, I gave the

students the opportunity to share any last minute thoughts about the workshop. Most students answered “none” or “no” but this is where the students took the opportunity to be brutally honest. One student wrote: “Although many parts were fun, it could be a bit boring in some parts” and another wrote: “um it was a waste of my PE block i would have rather been at pe for that time.” I would be delusional to think that every student was going to be riveted by this workshop but only having two negative opinions out of 20 responses to this question total still encourages me to feel that the workshop was successful.

I am grateful that my labor of love has had such positive results. From its conception to its execution, I have been overjoyed to be having conversations with young people on how they can empower themselves to speak up in their relationships and set boundaries that protect their emotional and physical autonomy. I am looking forward to this workshop having a life outside of Mary Baldwin’s Shakespeare and Performance program and the potential for more workshops using Shakespeare’s text to have hard conversations with young people. Conversations that they are looking to have with the adults in their lives to broaden their tool box in order to conquer the world as more emotionally empowered community members.

### Conclusion: “Let Us Recount Our Dreams”

The Meet the Lovers workshop is born out of not wanting to settle. I did not want children watching our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and feel they could not raise their concerns about the ways the lovers treated each other. If I have learned anything from studying William Shakespeare's plays these past three years, we have no business revering his work when it has major flaws. I also saw this as an opportunity to have conversations that children do not often get to have in the classroom. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us all that it is not enough to just teach the material anymore. If a student is not well of mind and spirit, they will not be able to retain who the third president of the United States is. In my MLitt thesis, I referenced being inspired by the work of Michelle Lipinski who is the principal of Northshore Recovery High School. NRHS is a school geared for children with Substance Use Disorder (SUD) and their work goes beyond teaching the students the material. They are looking at the whole child and see their work as life or death. If they do not put the tools for sober life in the hands of these young people, they fall victim to their demons. I am of the opinion that any child whether they are impacted by a mental, emotional or physical disability should have the chance to gain strategies towards social and emotional empowerment.

My sentiment is not a new one and I am grateful as trends in education are moving towards including social and emotional learning in national curriculums. I drew from trauma-informed practices when developing my workshop and bolstered my pedagogy with the words of bell hooks and Paulo Freire empowering me to see a child as more than just a student, but a global citizen looking to dismantle oppression through newfound knowledge. And those students are looking to improve upon relationships with their peers, begging the adults in their lives to talk to them about what it means to be in a romantic relationship. Asking them how to properly break up with someone, how to be treated with respect and with numbers of intimate partner violence still on the

rise amongst young people, we need to act quickly by empowering them with the tools to advocate for themselves.

I am truly grateful for the opportunities to have taught my Meet the Lovers workshop with different groups of children from all walks of life. The feedback I received gave me hope that the outcome could be two fold. Students could feel confident conquering one of Shakespeare's plays by making it their own, and they could learn how to combat negative relationships by learning how to set boundaries in order to keep one another safe. At every step, it is my hope that students feel empowered by the new information they are receiving and can draw connections between these new ideas and their personal experience always with empowerment forward pedagogy in mind. When I declared my education concentration in the fall of 2022, I presented materials of what I have done thus far in education. I had this to say about the kind of teacher I wanted to be: "I hope not only to foster a love of learning literature but provide space to explore their [students'] emotional lives by handing them a vocabulary for vocalizing and embodying their feelings." I sit two years later writing the last sentences of my second thesis project with the confidence that I did 2022 Caroline proud. I feel like I am continuing to take steps to honor that sentiment and the future holds more opportunities for "empowerment forward pedagogy" where an equal exchange of ideas between teacher and student allows for students to feel empowered to reflect on the world around them and work to effect change.



## Appendix A: Workshop Handout

**LYSANDRA**

Fair love, you faint with wand'ring<sup>1</sup> in the wood.  
 And, to speak troth<sup>2</sup>, I have forgot our way.  
 We'll rest us, Hermia, if you think it good,  
 And tarry<sup>3</sup> for the comfort of the day.

**HERMIA**

Be it so, Lysandra. Find you out a bed,  
 For I upon this bank<sup>4</sup> will rest my head.

**LYSANDRA**

One turf<sup>5</sup> shall serve as pillow for us both;  
 One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth.

**HERMIA**

Nay, good Lysandra. For my sake, my dear,  
 Lie further off yet. Do not lie so near.

**LYSANDRA**

O, take the sense, sweet, of my innocence!  
 Love takes the meaning in love's conference<sup>6</sup>.  
 I mean that my heart unto yours is knit<sup>7</sup>,  
 So that but one heart we can make of it;  
 Two bosoms interchainèd with an oath—  
 So then two bosoms and a single troth.  
 Then by your side no bed-room me deny,  
 For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie.

**HERMIA**

Lysandra riddles very prettily.  
 Now much beshrew<sup>8</sup> my manners and my pride  
 If Hermia meant to say Lysandra lied.  
 But, gentle friend, for love and courtesy,  
 Lie further off in human modesty.  
 So far be distant; and good night, sweet friend.  
 Thy love ne'er<sup>9</sup> alter till thy sweet life end!

**LYSANDRA**

"Amen, amen" to that fair prayer, say I,  
 And then end life when I end loyalty!  
 Here is my bed. Sleep give thee all his rest!

**HERMIA**

With half that wish the wisher's eyes be pressed!

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<sup>1</sup> Wand'ring— going off the path that you are suppose to be on.

<sup>2</sup> Troth— truth, good faith

<sup>3</sup> Tarry— stay, remain, linger

<sup>4</sup> Bank— the ground next to a river

<sup>5</sup> Turf— grassy patch of ground

<sup>6</sup> Conference— debate, argument, discussion

<sup>7</sup> Knit— unite, join, make one/

<sup>8</sup> Beshrew— blame, take to task, wish mischief on

<sup>9</sup> Ne'er— contraction for never

**DEMETRIUS**

Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair?  
 Or rather do I not in plainest truth  
 Tell you I do not, nor I cannot love you?

**HELENA**

And even for that do I love you the more.  
 I am your spaniel, and, Demetrius,  
 The more you ignore me I will fawn<sup>10</sup> on you.  
 Use me but as your spaniel<sup>11</sup>: spurn<sup>12</sup> me, lose me,  
 only give me leave to follow you.  
 What worser place can I beg in your love  
 (And yet a place of high respect with me)  
 Than to be usèd as you use your dog?

**DEMETRIUS**

Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit,  
 For I am sick when I do look on thee.

**HELENA**

And I am sick when I look not on you.

**DEMETRIUS**

You do impeach<sup>13</sup> your modesty too much  
 To leave the city and commit yourself  
 Into the hands of one that loves you not,  
 To trust the opportunity of night  
 And the ill counsel of a desert place

**HELENA**

It is not night when I do see your face,  
 Therefore I think I am not in the night.  
 Nor doth this wood lack worlds of company,  
 For you, in my respect, are all the world.  
 Then, how can it be said I am alone  
 When all the world is here to look on me?

**DEMETRIUS**

I will not stay thy questions. Let me go,  
 I'll run from thee and hide me in the brakes  
 And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts

**HELENA**

Fie, Demetrius! I should be wooed and were not made to woo<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Fawn— revel, gloat, show delight

<sup>11</sup> Spaniel— a particularly loyal dog

<sup>12</sup> Spurn— kick, strike, stamp [on], dash

<sup>13</sup> Impeach- discredit, disparage, call into question

<sup>14</sup> Woo— win over, persuade, coax

**DEMETRIUS**

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**HELENA**

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**DEMETRIUS**

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**HELENA**

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**DEMETRIUS**

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**HELENA**

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