

“Working My Way Back to You”: Shakespeare and Labor

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Des, I do allude here to the song performed by Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons in 1966 that reached #9 on the Billboard Hot 100; that was performed by The Spinners in 1980 and reached #1 on the UK singles chart and #2 on Billboard’s; and that was also performed by Boyzone, in the group’s very first release, and reached #3 on the Irish charts in 1994. If readers are old enough to have danced to this song in either of its American incarnations; are Irish and young enough to have danced to it there; or if for some reason were forced to see *Jersey Boys*, they will know that, despite the bubbly tune, the song is about a man who drove away the love of his life by abusing her emotionally or physically. Living through long and lonely nights, knowing he’s not so strong after all, he mourns the “happiness that died.” Yet he’s not “about to go living [his] life without [her],” so he’ll spend his days working his way back, trying to overcome her pride so that she will accept him, so that they will find again the “happiness that died” (Linzer and Randell).¹

Wondering why I chose to invoke a song whose tune may linger in their heads for hours, readers might conclude I did so to suggest that a change is—or changes are—occurring in the way Shakespeareans relate to Shakespeare, that we are working our way back to the happiness that died under the influence of a variety of democratizing and relativizing intellectual movements originating in the social upheavals of the 1960s, movements that found institutional and professional incarnation in poststructuralism, new historicism, and cultural studies. One such change is a return to aesthetics or to evaluation, to the seeking out, in our field, of “the Shakespearean difference” (Bloom 11). This return is motivated by an awareness that the dominant critical program isn’t fun and isn’t working—whether we call it, with Paul Ricouer, “the hermeneutics of suspicion” or less generously, and with Harold Bloom, a school of “resentment” aiming to “diminish...the difference between Shakespeare and the likes of Chapman” (Ricouer 32-35; Bloom 9, 10). Not just Bloom or the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics but Stanley Fish, Frank Lentricchia, Edward Said, and K. Anthony Appiah, among others, have sensed for quite a while now, since before the turn of the century, that

identity politics and “theory for its own sake” have lost some luster: “*mirabile dictu*,...more and more literary critics...actually devote themselves to...literature,” as Appiah put it in 2000 (44).

Wonderful to relate, indeed! Or is it? John Joughin points out in his introduction to *Philosophical Shakespeares* that our profession’s history over the past thirty years suggests that “disenchantment only ever serves to usher in new forms of re-enchantment as its necessary accomplice” (15). A more professional, though not necessarily more complimentary way to explain this movement, this see-saw or swinging pendulum, is that literary study oscillates agonistically

between the discipline’s two mighty opposites—form and history. From positivist (now ‘old’) historicism to New Criticism to New Historicism: from structuralism and post-structuralism in cultural studies to what one recent collection of essays has dubbed ‘the revenge of the aesthetic’: each new orthodoxy has staked its claim by repudiating its predecessor’s critical touchstone and re-covering (or re-‘new’-ing) the concept rejected or abjected by that predecessor....[Literary study is] a self-perpetuating cycle of exaggerations, misrecognitions, and demonizations...” (Cohen 1).

Stephen Cohen’s invocation here of professional politics and career-making suggests another such change, which might be called a return to the ethical, the idea, as Tzachi Zamir puts it, that “literature is knowledge yielding” (7). Besides the dreary knowledge Cohen invokes, literature yields other forms of knowledge, knowledge from the kinds of moral reflection stirred by watching or reading a play, reflection that resembles that stirred by watching the behavior of “the people who actually populate one’s own life” (Bristol, “Children” 33). Michael Bristol thinks that in order to “understand what’s happened to a character in a fiction [one really must] face up to what can happen to a real person” and interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays therefore requires something more than an analysis of the words on the page achieved through, say, an historically accurate understanding of those words as concepts and modes of behavior (“Confusing” 24). Interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays also requires “everyday background knowledge of how the world generally works,” not to mention an ability to fill in narrative gaps by contemplating “the scenes Shakespeare never wrote” (“Vernacular” 89). “Engagement with a character has a moral dimension” (“Confusing” 25) and this sort of engagement makes us think, makes us feel, and may make us better persons. What yields knowledge in literature is an imagining, an

engagement, that leads to “intensely moral experience” and a refusal of complacency with respect to the complexities of human behavior (“Vernacular” 102).

But moral inquiry of this sort is not personal or individual; it is social, rooted as it is in an understanding of “how the world generally works,” and it is therefore political. Shakespeare’s characters face conflicts between domestic and official obligations and other, more abstract or largely self-interested considerations, such as ambition or chastity or trust or love.

Shakespeare’s characters grow and change as they manage these conflicts, and this, according to Robert Weimann, is Shakespeare’s great contribution to the writing of character. In

Shakespeare, character is effected through

the dialectic between identity and relationship, between individual action and social circumstance. . . . The mere juxtaposition of character and society fails to satisfy Shakespeare’s immense sense of character. Merely to confront the idea of personal autonomy with the experience of social relations is not good enough as a definition of character. For Shakespeare the outside world of society is inseparable from what a person’s character unfolds as his ‘belongings’” (29, 27)

This, too, I would urge, is also part of “how the world generally works.” Writers, critics, and theorists may have reveled in the notion of an autonomous bourgeois self, a self liberated from or juxtaposed to social and institutional authority, and they may have reveled even more when they debunked what they had created. But, as I have argued elsewhere, it was solipsistic, class-based fun, having almost nothing to do with reality, for such a self was, and is, a fiction, unavailable to most people living in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, not to mention those living in the twenty-first. (“Cartoon” 84). Most people have never been free from social and institutional authority, most people know that their lives are played out, as Weimann argues is the case for Shakespeare’s great characters, in a vital—and moral—engagement with the social and institutional. Yet in the current configuration of our field, we rarely speak of this. We have, as Ronan McDonald puts it, “thrown the ethical baby out with the aesthetic bathwater” (143).

I

Readers were correct, then, if they concluded I intended my allusion to the ‘60s pop song to suggest that changes are underway in the way Shakespeareans relate to Shakespeare. But

rather than focus on the ways Shakespeareans are working their way back to aesthetics, I will focus here on one way Shakespeareans might work their way back to the ethical. I will suggest that before anything else, we should consider the work and labor of others, and in particular the ways our labor as Shakespeareans, the choices we make about what to study and how, affects the labor of others. Does it matter in this regard that, in the past thirty, now close to forty, years, our labor in conferences and in print has been devoted to Shakespeare and topics such as race, gender, or sexuality? That we have seen dozens and dozens, perhaps hundreds, of conferences on these topics and seldom a conference on labor, work, and class? Might one hazard a guess about the ratio of articles or books published in the last thirty years on these respective topics? A hundred to one? Two hundred to one? My concern here, however, is not to answer all of these questions (although I am arguing that the answer to the first question is “yes”), but to speak more generally about the work of intellectual life, the underpinnings, shall we say, of our field-specific work. Unabashedly presentist, this essay uses the recent past and the present as the basis for discussion, and I hope to particularize Terry Eagleton’s position, elaborated in the “Afterward” to the 1996 reissue of his primer on literary theory:

Men and women do not live by culture alone, the vast majority of them throughout history have been deprived of the chance of living by it at all, and those few who are fortunate enough to live by it now are able to do so because of the labour of those who do not. Any cultural or critical theory which does not begin from this single most important fact, and hold it steadily in mind in its activities, is in my view unlikely to be worth very much (187).

My contention is that that we have done far too little of this—holding steady in our minds that we live by culture because of the labor of those who do not—despite the politicization of literary study in the past forty years. Like King Lear, I will argue, we have taken too little care. We seldom expose ourselves “to feel what wretches feel” and we are not concerned to “shake the superflux to them / And show the heavens more just” (3.4.34, 35-6).

We know why the New Left began to focus on race and gender, on cultural politics, because the old socialist and working-class Left did not, focusing on class and class politics instead. “The Old Socialist leader Eugene Debs used to be criticized for being unwilling to interest himself in any social reform that didn’t involve the attack on economic inequality” (Michaels 19). But in moves just like the ones identified by Cohen above with respect to literary

criticism, the New Left demonized its predecessor, and threw out the “class” baby with the “Socialist-Marxist-Master-Narrative” bathwater, such that the “left today obsessively interests itself in issues that have nothing to do with economic inequality” (Michaels 19). Further though, and more importantly, when cultural politics overwhelm class politics, intellectuals are allowed to stop feeling what wretches feel, allowed to take too little care. Can it be coincidence that during the past forty years, as intellectuals pursued a politics of culture, income inequality has increased in this country to levels not seen since the 1920s? That “some 50 million Americans are members of households—consisting of one or more workers—[who] earn in total between \$20,000 and \$40,000 a year”? Or that “approximately 13.5 million Americans are even worse off, [living]...in families whose total family income is below the poverty line [of \$20,000 per year for a family of four], even though at least one family member works full-time”? (Madrack 66) Can it be coincidence that while intellectuals pursued a politics of culture, it has become almost impossible for workers to organize a union at job-sites? Or that governmental oversight and regulation has been allowed to be dismantled, piece by piece, to the extent that “managers of countless companies, many of them well-known and admired—not only Wal-Mart but JPMorgan Chase—...willfully break the law to reduce labor costs” and post enormous profits? (Madrack 65). Minimum-wage and maximum-hour laws are violated daily, hourly: at Toys-R-US, Pep Boys, and Taco Bell, managers erase hours from time-sheets; Wal-Mart has locked in workers on its night-shifts (Madrack 65, 66). At a software company, eighteen engineers were fired with no warning and told that “in order to receive their severance pay, they had to stay on the job and train their low-cost replacements from India” (Madrack 66).

One could multiply examples and data from the economists and political scientists, but a more important point for literary critics is that this situation, sadly, was not unanticipated. As I explained in 2000, the sociologists David Riesman and Nathan Glazer observed in 1955 that a focus by the Left on civil liberties and civil rights would be one that “differs politically from the old New Deal causes.” Such a focus, they argued, would “represent...for many liberals and intellectuals a withdrawal from...[such] larger...concerns [and a concomitant move] into personal life and...the field of culture” (75). Civil liberties and civil rights would be, furthermore, a focus that allowed intellectuals to seek allies among those who share their sense of culture, “among the rich and well-born rather than among the workingmen and farmers they had earlier courted and cared about; indeed, it [would tend] to make them conservative, once it

[became] clear that civil liberties are to be protected, not by majority vote (which is overwhelmingly unsympathetic), but by traditional institutions, class prerogatives, and judicial life-tenure” (78). Such a focus, Riesman and Glazer argued, would divide workers from intellectuals, and it would do so, in large part, because workers do not have the economic capital or the cultural capital—“the practice of deference and restraint which is understood and appreciated...among the well-to-do and highly educated” (78)—to see these issues as meaningful. For workers they mean mainly sacrifice, either economically or culturally, which was not and is not the case for intellectuals, the rich, or the well-born. Liberal intellectuals may not have liked it then, and the cultural Left may not have liked it since, and readers may not like it now, but Riesman and Glazer were and are correct: “the demand for tolerance...cannot replace, politically, the demand of ‘economic equality’” (75).

II

This essay is revised from the version I delivered in Youngstown, Ohio, at the annual meeting of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference, whose theme in October 2008 was “Working Shakespeares.” I had been to Youngstown three times before, in 1997, 1999, and 2001, to attend conferences hosted by the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University. It was nice to return to Youngstown, and to see the city in a better state economically. A decade ago, the city and the area more generally was bereft, still reeling, from de-industrialization. Beginning in the late 1970s, good jobs in steel “began to erode...and by 1992 less than a thousand people remained as steelworkers. The Youngstown area lost 40,000 manufacturing jobs, 400 satellite businesses, \$414 million in personal income and many people” (Corman). Downtown Youngstown was largely boarded up. People were grim. On one of my visits to Youngstown, I enjoyed a coffee and a muffin at The Beat Coffee House, right across the street from campus and the only game in town for the kind of coffee we professors tend to like. Shortly thereafter I discovered I’d lost my keys, and I returned to ask the young woman behind the counter if someone had turned them in. She said “no,” and when I said I couldn’t imagine where I’d lost them, she commiserated with a statement that haunted me for months and which, although I haven’t thought about it in years, returned to me quickly upon writing this essay. She

said, “Youngstown is like that. Kind of like a black hole. You come here and bad things happen. Things that don’t happen to you in other places.”

I am hopeful that fewer bad things are happening to people here these days, visitors and locals alike. Certainly visionary is Mayor Jay Williams’s and the City of Youngstown’s plan to recreate itself as “a sustainable mid-sized city” by “rationaliz[ing] and consolidat[ing] the urban infrastructure in a socially responsible and financially sustainable manner” (Youngstown 2010). But I am mindful that measuring Youngstown’s status as a black hole of bad luck cannot be accomplished by toting up what is nice for me, or us—the addition of two, maybe several Starbucks and a Caribou Coffee or that I was able to stay in a Hampton Inn now, instead of the decayed but wonderfully retro Best Western (or something) that was a mafia front (or hang-out) eight or ten years ago. We must tote up what is nice for others—jobs, health care, a decent standard of living. I am reminded here of people I know in Los Angeles—I think it’s no disgrace to call them “card-carrying liberals” and I am one, too—during the nasty 2003-04 grocery workers’ strike. Asserting their support for labor by respecting picket lines, they avoided Ralph’s and Safeway by shopping at Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s, grocery stores where picket lines weren’t established and whose cultural politics are easy to admire. But few of those committed shoppers knew that Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s didn’t earn a picket line because, just like Wal-Mart, neither of these companies is unionized. Taking too little care, not caring enough about income inequality to know these facts, these card-carrying liberals are part of the problem.

Shortly after the 2008 Republican Convention concluded in St. Paul, Minneapolis, Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur (D-Toledo) appeared on “Deadline Now,” a local public affairs show airing on Toledo’s public television station, WGTE.² She expressed strong regret that “in a year in which we need all the focus on the economy and the war,” the Democratic Convention focused on “gender and race.” Kaptur was dismayed by the media coverage, suggesting that we got “pulled over here, [to cultural questions]...when...we need attention here”...on the economy and the war. Talk about gender and race “curbed the amount of time the candidates could devote to [these serious challenges facing the country].” Perhaps anger is not surprising in a woman who represents a district in a city whose official unemployment rate in July of 2008 was 8.9%. But I suspect that Representative Kaptur was more than unusually exercised about the convention because she knew the crucial importance of the economy for voters in Ohio—a key

battleground state, where the unemployment rate in August 2008 was 7.4%—and also for voters in the neighboring state of Michigan where the unemployment rate in August 2008 was 8.9%, considerably above the national rate for August, 2008 of 6.1%., which was, nevertheless, the highest level since 2003.³ Primary elections in Michigan and Ohio were won with margins of 15% and 8%, respectively, by Senator Hillary Clinton over eventual nominee Senator Barack Obama.

Indeed, it is and was easy to wonder why Senator Obama wasn’t from the beginning many percentage points ahead of the Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, in the national polls. More even than in 2004, when the situation in Iraq had galvanized the public and would, two years later, result in a return of both houses of Congress to the Democrats, 2008 seemed the year for a Democrat to win the presidency. Iraq, Afghanistan, the economy—each was a deepening problem, and President Bush’s approval rating was less than 30%. Then, in the middle of September, a crisis emerged in the financial markets unparalleled in almost all of our lifetimes. Recalling 1929, the markets were in disarray and the world turned topsy-turvy, with free marketers, like Wall Street investment banks, not to mention George Bush and his cabinet, looking eagerly to Uncle Sam for bailouts. What was being sought and then implemented was socialism for “the rich, the well-connected, and Wall Street,” ensuring that “profits are privatized and losses are socialized” (Roubini). And yet, polls indicated that deep into September almost an equal number of voters support each presidential candidate. The explanation easiest to hand for this situation is racism among white voters. Hillary Clinton’s gaffe in May was telling in this regard. In what was, for me, her second-worst gaffe of the campaign, she cited an Associated Press story that referred to an exit poll finding that “Senator Obama’s support among working, hard-working Americans, white Americans, is weakening again, and...[that] whites...who had not completed college were supporting [her]” (Kiely and Lawrence). Commentators rightfully blistered Clinton for insinuating that African-Americans are not hard-working. But no one I know of at the time or since observed that Clinton’s remarks are derogatory, too, toward working-class and poor whites. After all, given the Clinton administration’s lack of concern for the poor and working-class,⁴ only racism or stupidity can explain the support given to Hillary Clinton by these “hard-working...white Americans” who haven’t completed college.

I do not deny the existence of the former (or the latter for that matter) among this group of people or any other. But neither racism nor stupidity can account entirely for the failure, since

1968, for forty years—that number again!—of the Democratic Party to win a majority of the white vote and in particular of the white working-class vote and even more particularly, of the white male working-class vote.⁵ Attributing these results to something other than these voters’ racism or stupidity is not, I know, a common view among upper middle-class liberals, perhaps especially in the academy, but here I would invoke Senator Obama, who, in his speech last March, entitled “A More Perfect Union,” chided members of his own class, those who would “wish away the resentments of white Americans, [and] label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns.” Such thinking, Obama implies, is counterproductive, widening “the racial divide” and feeding into the hands of “the real culprits of the middle class squeeze — a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many.”

Indeed, while many have fretted for years—perhaps most famously in Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter With Kansas?*—about the (white [male]) working-class’s flight from the Democratic Party, and while many have demonized those voters for their racism, sexism, and homophobia, the fact is that this group of voters saw the situation well. In 2008, during the long presidential campaign, Senator Jim Webb of Virginia observed that in the 1970s, “there were a lot of people, like myself, who got really disillusioned by the Democratic Party getting away from its message of taking care of working people...And after the Democratic Party started obscuring its message, they look[ed] up and [said], ‘At the top there’s no real difference between the parties, no real difference except at least these people’—the Republicans—‘are gonna protect God and guns’” (Boyer 40). In 2000, in a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Anna Greenberg suggested that “the Democratic Party changed over time such that white men no longer [saw] it as representing their interests” (2). In 2001, Greenberg’s fellow political scientist, William Galston, reminded members of the Democratic Leadership Council that “nearly every major development of the past generation worked to push white men away from the Democratic Party,” including defense and foreign policy, the role of government in people’s lives, the many fronts of the culture wars, and the ways power was distributed in the party itself. Of course, as Frank pointed out in 2004, the DLC itself is one of those developments. This powerful group, which “produced figures such as Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Joe Lieberman, and Terry McAuliffe, has long been pushing the party to forget blue-collar

workers and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white-collar professionals who are liberal on social issues.” Yet of course the DLC is hardly alone in promoting this agenda and, as Frank observes, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly when “in the last four decades liberalism ceased to be relevant to huge portions of its traditional constituency” (*Kansas* 243, 242).

Politics is about distribution. Politics is—eventually, or nearly—a zero-sum game. Local, state, and federal budgets are zero-sum games. Taxes are zero-sum games. And when politicians and parties change the ways they distribute power and benefits, some win and others lose, as Greenberg points out:

the bulk of the New Deal policies administered at the national level such as the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps benefited men. . . . The programs of the War on Poverty and Great Society, on the other hand, largely aided women and minorities. . . . These changes to the welfare state meant that Democratic policies fundamentally changed the role of government in [peoples’ s] lives (6).

From this perspective—and regardless of how favorably one judges those changes, the ways in which “the Democratic Party has moved to or represents the political left” (Greenberg 2)—the voting behavior of the white working class, and particularly of white working-class men, must be judged rational if somewhat conservative; it is not, as pundits, politicians, and intellectuals too often suggest, the result of unabashed racism, sexism, and homophobia. Nor is it solely the result of choosing to privilege morality over economic interests, as Michaels correctly sees is a common and legitimate choice among the upper middle-class (139). Rather, as Webb confirms, working-class persons vote for their values because that is all they can vote for, because they cannot vote for their economic interests. They know that the Democratic Party, like its intellectual ideologists, substituted culture for class and began the process of deregulation and tax reform in favor of the well-to-do in 1978 during the Carter administration, and that the Clinton administration, among its other sins, took away what remained of the Glass-Steagall Act, a measure from 1933 that tightly regulated financial firms (Cassidy 26). “Like the conservatives,” this Democratic Party, “take economic issues off the table” (Frank, *Kansas* 243). These voters know, as Webb says, that there’s no difference at the top when it comes to matters economic.

If this is the case, then to win the votes of these voters, liberal politicians must address their interests, give them something tangible—like health insurance and retirement benefits, the

opportunity to organize a union, a more equitable distribution of wealth, job retraining and unemployment insurance, and equally funded primary and secondary schools throughout the United States. What will not do is to consign them to losing their jobs at age 40 or 50 and then offer them the comfort of a lower-division classroom where, after studying diversity and tolerance, they will learn, as Walter Benn Michaels puts it, to “feel better about their inferiority,” not to mention the inferiority of others. Michaels suggests that this option is too easy, and that we fetishize diversity and tolerance because doing so is easy. Doing so “tell[s] us that racism is the problem we need to solve and that solving it requires us just to give up our prejudices.” In contrast, “solving the problem of economic inequality might require something more; it might require us to give up our money” (89). Which is why, as Michaels also points out, “the right wants...culture wars instead of class wars because as long as the wars are about identity instead of money, it doesn’t matter who wins. And the left gives it what it wants” (109).⁶

Michaels calls this conception of politics a “profound mistake” (19), a judgment with which, of course, I agree. We can see the profundity of the mistake in the recent election, in the closeness of the race and in the stunning choice by John McCain of Sarah Palin as candidate for Vice-President. Pundits duly noted that Palin ably brings the Republican base of evangelical Christians into the McCain fold. But the choice also demonstrates—again—that identity politics can be embraced by the right as well as the left. No one to my knowledge observed that Palin kept “culture” on the front burner of this election. Rather than shout from the rooftops, with Representative Kaptor, the facts about globalization and job loss—or Professor Roubini’s judgment that the recent economic crisis constitutes socialism for “the rich, the well-connected, and Wall Street...[as]...profits are privatized and losses socialized”—Democrats wrangled with Republicans, and pundits blathered on, about whether a woman counts as a measure of diversity if she opposes abortion, charges victims for rape tests, and would like to ban books. If she can run a state government and raise five children at the same time, is she a feminist? Is she as good a feminist as Hillary Clinton? What is her appeal, exactly? Is it that she a sexy puritan? Do women find their inner Elle Woods in Sarah Palin?

Further, while much has been made about the generational change heralded by the rise to prominence of the Obamas and Palins, the selection of Sarah Palin as a vice-presidential candidate adumbrates a problem no one to my knowledge has yet discussed: we will in future field not only candidates who are Black or Asian or female and hold advanced degrees from

Harvard or Yale but also candidates who hold academic degrees and are unqualified for high office. Barack and Michelle Obama and Sarah Palin are all about the same age—Michelle and Sarah are the same age—and their educational histories result from choices the country made in the 1960s to expand access to higher education to almost every American, only not equally for all. Enabled by programs of affirmative action instituted decades ago, the Obamas hold the sort of credentials typically held by holders of high office, degrees from Ivy League or peer institutions. Enabled by expanded access to community colleges and state universities, Palin holds the sort of credential typically held by people selling radio advertising, having managed to obtain a bachelor’s degree in journalism after (apparently) switching schools five times in six years, attending the University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hawaii Pacific University, North Idaho College, the University of Idaho, Matanuska-Susitna College, and the University of Idaho again. Is it ironic—or just plain scary—that the next Vice-President of the United States, the person just a heart-beat away from the Presidency, might well have been a woman who has the kind of higher education that most Americans, and almost all poor or working-class Americans, in fact have: six schools in six years and a BA in something?

The political histories of these candidates—and our political futures—are the result, partly, of our society’s inability to speak the truth about the ways we have gone about expanding access to higher education, as if a Rose is a Rose is a Rose, when clearly one Rose is far more rare than another. Whether Barack Obama has more native intelligence than Sarah Palin, I cannot say. But I can say he is better educated and more suited to high office than she is, because Columbia University is significantly different from and superior to North Idaho College, even though our ideology—perhaps especially our professional ideology—insists upon no difference between them. Further, even if, like me, you acknowledge that difference, not one of us can point out the error of our ideology here, since that ideology has also made politics a “code of manners,” a way to “ensure that no one is offended” (Michaels 91). Unlike conservatives who loudly proclaimed Palin’s unfitness for office, we are not going to publicly “diss” the educational credentials of a woman who perhaps overcame many obstacles to obtain her degree. Not one of us is going to suggest publicly that those who attend North Idaho College are not comparable to those who attend Columbia University and therefore are not qualified to run the country. Would you do so publicly, to your own students?⁷

III

When I teach undergraduate Shakespeare, a favorite classroom exercise is to introduce discussion of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by asking students why they are in college. Invariably, they reply, “because I want a better life.” Some say, “because I want to make more money.” Occasionally, one says, “for the intellectual challenge.” I then ask what jobs they hope to find upon graduating and I write them on the board: teacher, lawyer, social worker, probation officer, art therapist, and because this is Alabama, minister or pastor. I then ask them to identify the jobs performed by Shakespeare’s rude mechanicals or more pointedly, the jobs performed by today’s “rude mechanicals”: carpenter, of course, but also electrician, plumber, pipefitter, oilfield driller, automobile or aircraft mechanic, and so on. I then ask my students who makes more money, a small-town lawyer or the person who pilots ships in and out of Mobile bay? A minister or a driver for UPS? A social worker or a plumber? And then I tell my students I am reminded of the movie, *Moonstruck*, when Rose Castorini’s would-be lover—who is, as you may recall, a college professor, and quite possibly a literature professor—walks her to her home late at night and is astonished to discover she lives in what is, from his point-of-view, a mansion. He then asks what her husband does for a living. When she replies that he is a plumber, the would-be lover is almost struck dumb.

What do I conclude from my students’ responses? I conclude that they are not in college to make more money than they could without a college education and that to the extent they equate “making more money” with “college,” they are misguided. I suggest to them—as I suggest to you—that for them “better life” does not mean more money but it does mean not doing physical labor, not working with their hands, and it does mean avoiding dirt, sweat, and foul smells. As such my students confirm what Garrett Keizer suggests about our culture as a whole: ours is one “that has as its highest aim the avoidance of anything remotely resembling physical work” (11). This seems to me to be true, but our culture’s aversion to labor is long-standing, conventional, and deeply rooted.⁸ More than four hundred years ago, Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and toward the end of the play, Duke Theseus wonders how his court shall “wear away this long age of three hours / Between our after-supper and bed-time?” (5.1.33-4). Offered a list of ready entertainments, the Duke settles his curiosity upon “A

tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisbe, very tragical mirth” (ll. 56-57).

Theseus’s master of revels explains:

A play there is, my lord, some ten words long.
Which is as brief as I have known a play;
But by ten words, my lord, it is too long,
Which makes it tedious; for in all the play
There is not one word apt, one player fitted.
And tragical, my noble lord, it is,
For Pyramus therein doth kill himself;
Which, when I saw rehears’d, I must confess
Made mine eyes water; but more merry tears
The passion of loud laughter never shed. (ll. 61-70)

This assessment fails to convince Theseus to choose another entertainment, but Philostrate’s emphasis on propriety, taste, and style foreshadows the responses to the play offered by the assembled audience of Theseus’s court: both play and players the aristocrats tell us, are ungoverned, disordered, uncouth, childlike, and error-ridden (ll. 123, 125, 353, 122, 237).

Pyramus and Thisbe is the work of “hard-handed men.../ Which never labour’d in their minds til now,” and it is, as Hippolyta concludes, “the silliest stuff that ever I heard” (ll. 72-3, 207).

Years ago, Louis Montrose concluded, correctly I think, that the “ideological positioning” of *Dream* and of its play-within-the-play “is more complex and more equivocal than can be accommodated by the terms of an elite/popular opposition” (198). Yet the oppositions invoked by the aristocrats in response to the mechanicals’ work—mind/body, order/disorder, adult/child, governed/ungoverned, and refined/uncouth—have displayed remarkable staying power and, I would suggest, serve to characterize elite assumptions about “rude mechanicals” even today. But today, one doesn’t need to be an aristocrat to be a part of the elite; academics are part of the upper middle-class. Data from the US Census Bureau indicate that in 2007, a household with a minimum income of \$100,000 resides in the top fifth of households in the country. If a household earns \$177,000, it resides in the top 5% of households.⁹ If you are a tenure-track faculty member—even a rookie assistant professor—and you have a partner earning the same salary as you, you are in or very near being in the top fifth of households. If you are a full professor, with a partner earning the same salary as you, you are in or very near the top 5% of

households. What this means, if I can paraphrase Michaels, is that you are not part of the middle-class, and certainly not working-class. You are upper middle-class.¹⁰

As a result of not caring and not courting for fifty years, many academics, especially those educated in elite PhD-granting institutions, are so disconnected from working-class persons that, I think, we literally cannot see the problem of class.¹¹ Some of us cannot even speak to working-class people, as William Deresiewicz confessed in a recent issue of *The American Scholar*.¹² We are too much like Lear, trying to rule the world with eyes closed and ears shut, not realizing how profoundly our choices affect the lives of others. And so, as I conclude this essay, I would like invoke once again the old King’s prayer, spoken when his eyes and ears were open:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just (3.4.28-36).

Without a doubt, we will see more houseless heads and unfed sides among us in the coming years. What do we do?

Over twenty years ago, when criticism became strongly politicized, Bristol argued it is not enough “simply to say ‘forbidden things’ about Shakespeare or...connect his work to an ideologically subversive discourse.” Located in the academy, such efforts express “the politically weak and practically insignificant corporate goal-values of pluralism.” What is needed, Bristol argued, is a “critique of tradition [that] breaks out toward an active constituency” (“Lenten Butchery” 220; *America* 61). Breaking out toward a constituency is difficult, however, when a person has no relationship to it, can’t speak to it, doesn’t even know it exists. In the wake of Barack Obama’s election to the Presidency, many on the Left and in the Democratic Party think irrelevant the constituency that is white working-class America. Demography tells the story, they say: continuing immigration, the continuing “browning” of America, means that

eventually the Democrats will not “need” white working-class voters to win the Presidency. Even if true, however, this argument is not compelling, either conceptually, politically, or morally. Conceptually, it ignores the question of where lines of political contention in a post-racial America will be drawn, a question that might be answered by the word “class.” Politically, it ignores the fact that in a year when conditions were almost otherworldly ripe for victory by Democrats, it took a meltdown of the financial system—the worst since 1929—to secure that victory. In contrast, as Webb argued in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2004, every election would offer powerful margins of victory to the Democrats if they found a way to bring the white and African-American working class “to the same table, and so to redefine a formula that has consciously kept them apart for the past two centuries” (Boyer 40). Morally, it ignores the fact that for two centuries, a formula has indeed “consciously” kept apart these constituent parts of working class. Indeed, to ignore the white working-class would be to replicate that formula by flipping it, as if the sins of the past justify future sin. The Democrats will win, consistently, not when they ignore the white working-class, but when the Party and its intellectual ideologists work their way back to Labor, when they respect Labor as much as they respect Mind, and when they find their allies among working people, regardless of gender, color, or ethnicity.

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NOTES

¹The version sung by the Spinners and Boyzone is a medley with “Forgive Me Girl.” See: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/gary.hart/lyricsd/detroit.html>. Accessed 6 September 2008.

² My transcription of the interview. Accessed 28 September 2008.

³ See the U.S. Department of Labor website for data on the states: <http://www.bls.gov/lau/>. For the national rate see <http://www.bls.gov/>.

⁴ Think of what characterized the 1990s, including welfare reform, NAFTA, stagnating wages, and a continuing rise in income inequality. Consider that, as Thomas Frank puts it, Bill Clinton “ruled like a nice, responsible Republican,” balancing the budget while triangulating here and triangulating there (“Future”).

⁵ According to Andrew Hacker, John Kerry and Al Gore fell 17 and 12 percentage points, respectively, behind George Bush among white voters (16). Bill Clinton fared worse in 1992, falling 21 percentage points behind the combined total of Bush pere and Ross Perot, and about the same in 1996, falling 11 percentage points behind the combined total of Robert Dole and Ross Perot (National Exit Polls Table).

⁶ In this sense, the left is a handmaiden to, an “accomplice” of, and in certain instances, the “police force” for the right, having produced—or more accurately, perhaps, having reduced—politics to a “code of manners, a way of talking and acting designed not to produce radical social change but to ensure that no one is offended” (Michaels 19, 75, 91).

⁷ Neither did the Obamas to the country. In Denver, both emphasized a shared goal to ensure that every American will have what they had, what they wanted, what their families worked for, “the chance to go to college.” Neither said a “good college,” much less “an Ivy League college,” and neither mentioned by name the institutions of higher education each, in fact, had attended. If this was arguably good politics, it was also hypocritical and heightens the irony that we might well have gotten the ignorant Palin as Vice-President, instead of the brilliant Obama as President. We might well have gotten she who had what the Obamas seek to give to all, “the chance to go to college.” Again, I insist, a rose is not a rose is not a rose.

⁸ More than one hundred years ago, Thorstein Veblen argued that our culture has long understood physical labor to be “irksome,” “ignoble,” indeed “wrong...and...morally impossible.” It is the “perquisite of the poor,” and thus to be avoided (200-201). The irksomeness of labor *and of those who labor* is “a cultural fact,” Veblen argued, for which there is no remedy “short of a subversion of that cultural structure on which our canons of decency rest” (201).

⁹ <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/h01AR.html> In 2007, the median earnings for men in the US was \$45,113 and for women it was \$35,102. See: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/p38AR.html>

¹⁰ Michaels, 192. He is speaking of himself.

¹¹ Before he could write *The Trouble With Diversity*, Michaels had to move, with an outsized salary, to a public institution like the University of Illinois at Chicago, whose PhD program is ranked a lowly number forty. Quite a shock, I am sure, after Berkeley and Johns Hopkins, where he labored previously, but that is what it took to focus his mind on the topic of class. Literally, I think, he could not see the topic at Berkeley or Hopkins.

¹² Deresiewicz confesses that “it didn’t dawn on me that there might be a few holes in my education until I was about 35. I’d just bought a house, the pipes needed fixing, and the plumber was standing in my kitchen. There he was, a short, beefy guy with a goatee and a Red Sox cap and a thick Boston accent, and I suddenly learned that I didn’t have the slightest idea what to say to someone like him. So alien was his experience to me, so unguessable his values, so mysterious his very language, that I couldn’t succeed in engaging him in a few minutes of small talk before he got down to work. Fourteen years of higher education and a handful of Ivy League degrees, and there I was, stiff and stupid, struck dumb by my own dumbness.”

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