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Cover Page Footnote

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ANNE DENCY LIPPERT

In recent months, the conversation around whether or not to include queer material within the public school classroom has escalated from a controversial subject to a hot-button political topic. Certain Republican lawmakers have spun a narrative that teaching children about queerness is akin to sexual violence, culminating in bills like Florida’s notorious “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which states that “public school teachers in Florida are banned from holding classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity” (Diaz, 2022). Michigan currently shows no immediate indication of following in Florida’s footsteps, but each new election cycle ramps up this same homophobic rhetoric, such as 2022 Michigan gubernatorial candidate Tudor Dixon’s proposed “Age Appropriate Classroom Instruction Act” (Dawson, 2022). And LGBTQ+ students in Michigan are facing other attacks, such as “a bill from Sen. Lana Theis (R-Brighton) [which] seeks to prevent transgender athletes in schools from competing on sports teams that align with their gender identity” (Stebbins, 2022). Our students are constantly bombarded with stories like these in the news, which lead to increased marginalization and put them in physical danger. Laws like these, even if they are not passed, have material consequences on LGBTQ+ students’ experiences at school in the form of their self-esteem and the treatment they receive from other students.

Queer youth are already particularly at risk - they are over four times as likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers” (Johns et al, 2020). The mental health of LGBTQ+ students hinges on their experience at school, and as “more than 8 in 10 LGBTQ students experienced harassment or assault at school” in 2019 (Kosciw et al, 2019), that experience is incredibly stressful and even dangerous for many students. The worsening political climate around the rights of LGBTQ+ youth will likely exacerbate this issue. However, “LGBTQ stu-

dent experiences may also be shaped by inclusion of LGBTQ-related information in the curriculum” (Kosciw et al, 2019), meaning that discussion of queer history and queer issues in the classroom could shape the way that students interact with their own identities and with the identities of one another. Students in Florida have had this opportunity taken from them, but there remains an opportunity in Michigan to make LGBTQ+ students feel valued and represented within their schools through the implementation and use of queer pedagogy. Queer pedagogy is “a radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of ‘normalcy’ in schooled subjects” (Bryson & Castell, 1993, p. 285). It is not enough, therefore, to include tokenized queer representation in our classrooms; we must embed queer praxis into every aspect of our pedagogy. The secondary Language Arts classroom offers a unique opportunity to implement queer pedagogy by incorporating discussions about queer identity in literary texts, especially through the inclusion of queer theory to analyze canonical works, and it is imperative that we as Language Arts teachers take advantage of this opportunity.

Queer Theory

Queer pedagogy developed from the ideas of queer theory, which is a relatively new branch of literary criticism that expanded out of gender studies in the late 80s and early 90s. Similar to how gender studies criticizes the lack of feminine voices in the literary canon and examines the depictions of women within it, queer theory does the same with queer voices and depictions of queerness within literature. Prominent voices in queer theory whose work I will be drawing from include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Adrienne Rich, and Judith Butler. The academic study of queer representation in literature was only possible, of course, due to the activism work of

predominantly trans women of color in the 60s and 70s whose efforts in the Compton's Cafeteria and Stonewall riots and other such demonstrations kickstarted the LGBTQ+ rights movement, which has increased in momentum to present day. Despite this momentum, the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States did not mark the end of that movement and queer people continue to be marginalized and targeted all over the country, which speaks to the continued relevance of queer theory as a vital analytic tool.

There are several predominant members of the literary canon who are known to have fallen onto the spectrum of queerness; Oscar Wilde, Virginia Wolfe, and Countee Cullen come to mind, among others. However, even works of literature written by heterosexual authors about heterosexual characters can be analyzed using queer theory; the word queer is inherently ambiguous and can encompass "a kind of position against normative or dominant forms of thought" (Whittington, 157), meaning that it does not necessarily refer exclusively to same-sex desire. Many overtly "straight" works of canonical literature are, then, rich in material for the application of queer theoretical concepts, especially when the definition of queerness is expanded in this way. In fact, Shakespeare himself is often theorized to have fallen under the category of what we might today call bisexual due to the homoerotic content of his famous sonnets (Reid, 2016). A fantastic example, therefore, of a canonical text that could be analyzed using queer theory in the secondary Language Arts classroom is Shakespeare's comedy play *Twelfth Night*, due both to its rich opportunities for study and its adherence to several Common Core English standards. *Twelfth Night* is an excellent candidate for making Shakespeare relevant to 11th and 12th-grade students, especially to LGBTQ+ students who likely feel underrepresented and unseen in most canonical texts. Analyzing the play through the lens of queer theory would be an exciting exercise in applying current social issues to the canon, and will prime students for deeper analysis of all literature they go on to read.

Analyzing Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* Through a Queer Lens

When studied through a queer lens, *Twelfth Night* is an excellent study of same-sex desire, same-sex relationships, and the fluidity of gender. The heroine Viola is shipwrecked and, thinking her brother Sebastian is dead, engages in cross-dressing and uses the male name Cesario to earn herself a position under a nearby nobleman, Duke Orsino (Shakespeare, 1.2). Tasked by Orsino to win him the affection of Lady Olivia, who he himself has tried and failed to woo, Viola finds

that Olivia is falling in love with her instead, thinking her a man (Shakespeare, 1.4). In many productions, they share an embrace on stage (Nunn, 1996). Simultaneously, Viola is falling in love with Orsino, who knows her only as the male Cesario (Shakespeare, 2.4), and Viola's twin brother Sebastian is alive and well, attempting to reach the Duke's court with ship captain Antonio, with whom he develops a rather homoerotic friendship (Shakespeare, 2.1). All the while, several raucous background plots are played out exploring the ideas of class, religion, madness, and revenge. The conventions of gender and sexuality are toyed with constantly in *Twelfth Night*, and although by the end nearly the entire main cast has found themselves placed into a conventional heterosexual relationship (Shakespeare 5.1), the work remains an excellent medium to discuss the complicated relationship between gender and sexuality, as well as the more general subjects of unrequited love and miscommunication.

While teaching *Twelfth Night* through the lens of queer theory there are three main sets of character relationships to consider, the first of which being Viola and Olivia's relationship. When Viola dresses as a man and takes on the role of Cesario she is tasked by Duke Orsino to win him the affection of the lady Olivia, but she soon inadvertently wins that affection for herself. In fact, soon after they meet Olivia exclaims, "Even so quickly may one catch the plague?" (Shakespeare, 1.5.301), indicating the swiftness and strength of her feelings for Viola whom she believes is a man but is, in fact, another woman. The depiction of same-sex attraction throughout the play is done largely for dramatic effect, serving to add conflict to the plot and prolonging the marriage-hindering misunderstanding so instrumental to a Shakespearian comedy (Thomas, 2014); however, Viola and Olivia's interactions do not seem to be played up for comedic purposes, as both women speak of their feelings in an incredibly open and sincere fashion. When Olivia professes that "I do not know what, and fear to find / Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind" (Shakespeare, 1.5.315-316), her voice rings of true affection and, although she does not consciously know it, that affection is for another woman. Several Shakespeare scholars have taken this analysis one step further by asserting that it is Viola's inherent feminine nature that attracts Olivia in the first place, citing Viola's rejection of the prewritten sonnet given to her by Duke Orsino and the impetus of Olivia's interest being that "breach in Petrarchian convention" (Ake, 378) to argue that Viola's positioning as a woman gives her the "personal knowledge of female desire" needed to woo Olivia that Orsino lacks (Ake, 388).

However, at the end of the play Olivia marries Sebastian, Viola's twin brother." Thinking him Cesario, Olivia finds herself "betrothed both to a maid and man" (Shakespeare, 5.1.275), placing Sebastian as a sort of second-best to the woman Olivia had truly loved. The fluidity of human sexuality and the pressures of normative society are fully on display through Olivia's actions as she experiences same-sex attraction, is confronted with the realities of that attraction, and is given a more socially conventional outlet for her feelings.

Olivia's is a pattern of behavior in accordance with queer theorist Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality, wherein heterosexuality is considered as not natural or innate but rather "something that has to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force" (Rich, 135). Rich argues that the institution of compulsory heterosexuality pushes women to pursue relationships with men as a way to "assure male right of physical, economic, and emotional access" to women (Rich, 135). Compulsory heterosexuality is a constant force in the lives of all women, especially women in Shakespearian comedies. Male characters have hopes, desires, and actions that move beyond and transcend the romantic – they pursue revenge, adventure, fame, fortune, knowledge, power – but female heroines are far too often relegated to solely romantic pursuits and, more specifically, the romantic pursuit of men (Free, 1986). Olivia's pursuit of Viola, whether intentional on Shakespeare's behalf or not, makes a mockery of this convention, allowing her to safely seek and explore same-sex desire without breaking any explicit societal taboos. After all, does it matter if Olivia thinks that Viola is a man if she is in love with a woman all the same? Her final rejection of that same-sex desire in favor of a more conventional, heterosexual relationship demonstrates how deeply rooted and powerful the forces of compulsory heterosexuality are – marrying a man she doesn't know is preferable to pursuing the connection she shares with a woman. Her actions are reminiscent of gender and queer theorist Judith Butler's observation that "heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself – and failing" (Butler, 313). Olivia's attraction to Viola is a performance of heterosexual desire but a completely inauthentic one, and her ultimate rejection of Viola in favor of Viola's twin brother is equally suspect. In this way, although Olivia and Viola never have an outwardly same-sex relationship, their interactions can be studied and discussed under queer theory.

The second most obvious pairing in *Twelfth Night* to portray same-sex desire is the relationship between Cesario (Viola

and Orsino. While working under him Viola begins to develop feelings for Orsino quite quickly; when he asks her to win over Olivia on his behalf she professes that "Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife" (Shakespeare, 1.5.46). Orsino seems to consider Cesario a close friend and confidant and the two skirt around the topic of Cesario's affection several times, such as when Orsino asks him what woman he has his eye on and Cesario replies one "of your complexion" (Shakespeare, 2.4.31). These comments are always shrugged off by Orsino but, in the end, when Cesario is revealed to be a woman, he wonders aloud that "Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times / Thou never shouldst love woman like to me" (Shakespeare, 5.1.280-281). It is especially telling in this line how, despite their imminent marriage, Orsino continues to refer to Viola as "boy," and how quickly he accepts and reciprocates Viola's love upon realizing she is a woman.

The interactions between Orsino and Cesario, especially on Orsino's end, can be looked at through queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's ideas that "the male bonding that sutures patriarchy is necessarily homophobic and forms a continuum with homosexuality" (Rivkin, 899). Before Orsino finds out Cesario's true identity, he confesses that he believes "there is no women's sides / Can bide the beating of so strong a passion" as what men are capable of feeling (Shakespeare, 2.4.103-104), indicating that women are not capable of feeling as strongly as men are; that the love of men is superior to that of women. Of course, Orsino does not say this line to imply that he would prefer a male partner to a female one, but the homosocial bond Orsino forms with Cesario is only too easily converted into a romantic one upon the revelation that Cesario is a woman, and that ease is partly due to Orsino's preexisting esteem of Cesario as a fellow man. There are even certain productions, such as a 2017 stage production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, where Orsino kisses Cesario on stage before Cesario has been revealed to be a woman (Luscombe, 2017). So, like Olivia and Viola, although Orsino and Cesario's relationship ends in a normative, heterosexual marriage, the road the characters take to get there is certainly applicable to queer theory.

Finally, the dynamic between characters Sebastian and Antonio is rife with potential for exploring Sedgwick's ideas about the continuum between homosocial friendship and homosexual relationship. Sebastian, Viola's presumed dead twin brother, is first introduced in act two of *Twelfth Night*, accompanied by ship captain Antonio, who has saved his life after the shipwreck (Shakespeare 2.1). Their relationship is one of remarkable closeness; Antonio specifically speaks of particu-

larly deep feelings when he pleads to Sebastian “If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant” (Shakespeare 2.1.34-35), even though he admits that Sebastian’s journey will take them to Duke Orsino’s court, where Antonio has “many enemies” (Shakespeare 2.1.44). This alone is not wholly indicative of a homosexual relationship, as the word “love” in Shakespeare’s time had a host of connotations, not all of which were romantic (Reid 2016). However, Antonio shows a devotion to Sebastian that goes beyond consideration for his own life, so if what they share is nothing but a friendship, it is an especially loyal and affectionate one. Furthermore, it is notable that, at the end of the play when each character is placed neatly into a heterosexual marriage, Antonio is left single, and his fate is unknown (Shakespeare 5.1). Of course, “in and of itself, Antonio’s failure to find a wife does not necessitate playing his intense affection for Sebastian as erotic love, but it does open up that possibility” (Thomas, 2014, p. 226). Antonio’s lack of marital closure at the end of the play creates space to look more critically at his relationship with Sebastian, and while there is not enough evidence to conclude firmly that their relationship was a romantic or sexual one, there is certainly enough to play with the idea, as many productions of *Twelfth Night* have done (Thomas, 2014).

Teaching *Twelfth Night* in the Secondary ELA Classroom

As for the rationale behind teaching *Twelfth Night* specifically in an 11th - 12th-grade classroom, there are several factors at play. To begin with, it is much more likely that 11th and 12th-grade students would have the experience necessary to analyze and discuss a text lens like queer theory when compared to 9th or 10th-grade students. When discussing marginalized communities in the classroom, it is always important to center the safety and comfort of the students who identify with those communities. Older students will be better equipped to handle sensitive subjects with respect and compassion. That is not to say that there is an age where teaching queer literature would be inappropriate or where I would not recommend it; in fact, I believe that more LGBTQ+ representation is needed in the curriculum at every grade level. In the case of a play like *Twelfth Night* or other canonical works where queer representation could be interpreted as a source of comedy or is otherwise ambiguous, though, the level of maturity found in upper secondary grades would be slightly better suited to the subject material. On top of all that, *Twelfth Night* corresponds fantastically with several Common Core standards for ELA in 11th and 12th grade.

First, standard 11-12.1 states that students should be able to “Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain” (CCSS ELA). Reading *Twelfth Night* through the lens of queer theory is a fantastic application of this standard, as students will be both citing specific and outright discussions of queer identity, as well as subtler, less immediately obvious representations such as Antonio and Sebastian’s relationship. Specific applications for the fulfillment of this standard could include a creative exercise where students study the queer subtext in a specific scene in *Twelfth Night* and rewrite the scene to be more explicit in its depiction of LGBTQ+ relationships. Another possible activity could be having students direct and act out a certain scene and provide a rationale for their depiction of the queer subtext within it. On a smaller scale, students could write a short journal entry or make a playlist inferencing what a certain character is thinking and feeling at a place in the text where those insights are not provided. Olivia’s reaction to discovering Cesario is a woman, for example, is not given within the text of the play. By creating their own meaning within the text, students will practice the skill of sorting through multiple layers of intention and meaning within a text, which is invaluable not only for the understanding of literature but for the understanding of all textual interactions.

By comparing two different productions of *Twelfth Night* (such as the 1969 British TV adaptation directed by John Sichel and the 2012 Canadian stage adaptation directed by Barry Avrich) and examining how they differ in depicting the LGBTQ+ elements on stage, standard 11-12.7 is also fulfilled. This standard encourages students to “Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)” (CCSS ELA). Interpretations of works change over time, and by comparing and contrasting the 1969 film adaptation with a more recent stage production, students could see those changing interpretations for themselves which could lead to an interesting discussion on the social contexts involved with that change. This standard could be assessed with a paper studying the differences in textual interpretation between two productions and analyzing the possible factors behind those differences. For a more creative approach to this standard, students could take what they observed from both productions

as well as their own reading of the play to direct and perform a certain scene, then proceed to examine the contexts of their own experiences and how those contexts influenced their interpretation and performance. The ability to acknowledge and analyze the individual factors that influence our own perceptions and actions is one that lends to increased empathy and understanding, which happens to be a prominent goal of anti-racist, anti-biased teaching (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019).

Of course, many people, including certain lawmakers, administrators, or parents, may balk at the idea that high school students should be discussing topics such as gender and sexuality in the classroom (Diaz, 2022). However, LGBTQ+ students are too often left on the sidelines in terms of representation in the literature included in school curriculums, and a cisgender, heterosexual characters and relationships are everywhere in canonized works, and it can be difficult for students to be engaged in a text if they are not first able to see themselves within that text. For many students, finding “some point of connection, something that made the book or the characters real for them, something they could remember or understand from their own lives” (Alsup, 24) is a prerequisite for interest, and interest is often a prerequisite for meaningful analysis. It is certainly possible for students to make more abstract connections to the events and characters in a piece of literature, but it can be incredibly grating for them when none of those texts seem to have a real, tangible connection to their lived experiences; I can personally attest to the frustrations queer students have in Language Arts classrooms that ignore the existence and experiences of queer people, having been one of those students myself. LGBTQ+ students deserve to feel just as accepted and just as represented as their cisgender, heterosexual classmates, and for that reason, it is imperative that they are represented in the texts explored in the classroom.

Twelfth Night is certainly not the best representation of queer identity or queer relationships, as its ending “solves” each character’s queerness by inserting them into a heteronormative relationship; however, because it is such an accepted work in a canon that seems to ignore queer identity completely, it can be a fantastic stepping-off point for LGBTQ+ students to see themselves within those canonized works and subsequently find interest and joy within literature, especially when taught in a text set that incorporates other, more realistic depictions of LGBTQ+ identity. Here lies an excellent opportunity to incorporate young adult (YA) literature into your classroom in the form of texts such as Benjamin Alire

Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* or Sara Farizan’s *If You Could Be Mine* (Fink, 2016). These texts both explore “intersectionality across sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and class” and *If You Could Be Mine* specifically offers “opportunities to reflect on sexual identities in religious, specifically Muslim, communities” (Fink, 2016). The idea of intersectionality comes from critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who criticized how identity politics in the late 20th century failed to encompass the experience of those who fell under multiple marginalized identities, her primary example being women of color (Crenshaw, 1991). While it is important to analyze the social justice themes in canonical texts such as *Twelfth Night*, it is equally important to create a wide and varied array of diverse, intersectional representations within classroom texts - this is truly a case of too much is never enough, especially when placed against our increasingly homophobic and transphobic political climate (Diaz, 2022). If there isn’t time to include a whole YA novel in conjunction with a canonical text like *Twelfth Night*, even reading short essays or news stories about queer experiences could help create similar nuance. Placing two texts in conversation with one another this way additionally provides even richer opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding through synthesis projects. For example, students could write flash fiction with the general plot of Sáenz’s novel but using the characters Antonio and Sebastian, or Farizan’s novel but with Olivia and Viola. If you took the route of reading an article about queer experience, students could create a project imagining how contemporary queer issues would affect the characters and relationships within *Twelfth Night*. The options are endless.

Beyond affirming queer students and offering a rich opportunity for analysis, the discussion of gender and sexuality within a classroom text could create avenues for non-LGBTQ+ students to learn more about queer issues, and increase both empathy and acceptance surrounding those issues. Social justice approaches to pedagogy can be controversial, but they are certainly worth pursuing due to their potential for expanding students’ worldviews and empowering them to advocate for positive change. One of the biggest pillars of teaching for social justice is that instructors “recognize individual, diverse student identities and seek to respond to these individualities with appropriate and relevant instruction” (Alsup, 47), and including texts from the canon that highlight those identities is certainly a huge part of that recognition. For students who do not identify as LGBTQ+, exploring queer theory through the lens of such a canonized text as *Twelfth Night* will teach

them to notice and appreciate the less-obvious queer subtext of other canonized works. Through the correct scaffolding and facilitation on behalf of the instructor, classroom discussions about queer identities in literature and the lived world would broaden the minds of students and empower them to be more accepting, as well as more likely to advocate for their fellow students. This facilitation should include explicit expectations about respect and open-mindedness, which should be closely monitored and enforced to ensure that no student is being marginalized or made to feel unsafe. By discussing marginalized identities in the classroom, it would be much less likely that those students would grow up to be hateful or ignorant of people corresponding to those identities (Stokes, 2015). As political rhetoric about the queer community becomes increasingly inflammatory, stomping out hate and ignorance is imperative in the fight to protect LGBTQ+ people and spaces.

The National Council of Teachers of English laid out a comprehensive plan in 2019 for affirming LGBTQ+ students within the classroom, promising

“To develop plans to assist teachers in making schools, colleges, and universities safe and welcoming places for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender nonconforming, intersex, queer, and questioning people and their allies to initiate and sustain conversation about the relevance of gendered, sexual, and affectional identities to reading and writing lives, to teaching lives, and to the well-being of students; to promote inquiry into issues of sexuality and gender identity and expression in the teaching of literacy and literature; to encourage proposals for presentation of such inquiry through public meetings such as the NCTE Annual Convention; to support individuals in the production of publishable written reports of such inquiry; and to select excellent proposals for inclusion in the Annual Convention.”

As a queer educator, I have laid out one avenue for individual teachers to follow through on the NCTE’s goals for increasing LGBTQ+ inclusivity within the classroom. The excitement of teaching English, though, is that there are countless avenues to explore queer identity in our classrooms. My hope is that this paper has not been an instruction manual so much as a catalyst for creativity, and an inspiration to look at every text we teach for queer representation.

I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for LGBTQ+ students in today’s classrooms to learn and study while their very rights to exist and to pursue joy are being debated by poli-

ticians and pundits. It must seem pointless, at times, to pursue meaning in the classroom when life outside it seems so utterly bleak. As their educators, then, it is our express responsibility to offer our students meaning, and to make classroom materials relevant to our students’ actual lived experiences. Making meaning is imperative both to ensure our students are engaged with classroom material and to ensure that they are engaged with their own lives. I don’t think I can overstate the danger our LGBTQ+ students are in, nor the importance of even the smallest acts of solidarity with them. We are teaching them how to read and write, of course, but I would argue that our most important role as Language Arts teachers is to teach them to form connections and find meaning - whether that be in texts, in interactions with others, or within themselves. We occupy a unique position as Language Arts educators in that the material we teach offers space to discuss personal and controversial subjects. Rather than shying away from that space to remain on solid, less contentious ground, we should embrace it, fill it, and make it our mission to push its boundaries as much as possible. Ultimately, it’s about demonstrating to LGBTQ+ students that they have a place within literature, that they have a place within the canon, and that they certainly have a place within our classrooms.

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