We'd diagrammed the love quadrangle. We'd laughed at Bottom's word choices. We'd recited Titania's speeches. We'd played games to help us understand Shakespeare-speak and subtext, and we'd written lines with scansion marks to see the rhythms. We'd acted out Puck's tricks and reviewed Shakespeare's colorful insults, and it seemed like the class was having a grand old time. Then David approached me after class.

A Midsummer Night's
GENDER DIVERSITY

BY LAUREN POROSOFF

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"Ms. Porosoff, are we going to *do* anything with this book? You know, besides read it out loud and have you translate it for us?"

Stab. I knew just what he meant: Instead of the deep dig into a text's ethical and societal questions that I usually bring to my English class, we were acting out a shallow story about lovers, fairies, and donkey-headed bad actors, with some iambic pentameter thrown in. As defensive as I felt ("But it's Shakespeare!"), I knew David was right. I wanted to meet his challenge—to approach *A Midsummer Night's Dream* more critically and in a way that felt more relevant to the students' lives.

As if Puck himself had magically contrived it, that same week I attended a workshop where Jennifer Bryan presented her New Diagram of Sex and Gender (see References), which offers a way to think beyond binaries by using a set of continuums for biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. At the workshop, I came up with a new way to approach *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with my 7th graders at Ethical Culture Fieldston, a private pre-K–12 school in New York (about 35 percent of the 1,700 students identify as students of color, and 22 percent receive financial aid).

Three Adjectives

For the first day of the lesson, I broke the students into four groups and assigned each group a set of characters: the lovers (Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander), the Athenians at court (Egeus, Theseus, and Hippolyta), the mechanicals (Bottom, Quince, and Flute), and the fairies (Oberon, Titania, and Puck). Working together, the students in each group had to agree on three adjectives that defined each of their characters. The students described Helena, who rats out her best friend in an attempt to get attention and later gets her man through fairy magic, as desperate, jealous, and self-conscious. Her beloved Demetrius, who went after Hermia even though she was in love with someone else, was stuck up, narrow-minded, and persistent.

Next, the student groups switched character lists and had to revise the adjectives, keeping at least one and chang-

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ing at least one adjective per character. I wanted them to negotiate meaning and return to the text for evidence to support their claims about their characters. So even though proud, beautiful, and seductive all seemed fitting descriptors for Titania, the group that was working

on her cut proud (they reasoned: "Just because Oberon called her proud doesn't mean she was!") in favor of independent-minded (citing how she refuses to spend time with Oberon or give him the changeling boy). I pushed that group, asking them how they knew Titania was

beautiful when there's no description of what she looks like. Caroline said, "She's the *fairy* queen."

The next day, I told the class that we'd be discussing a theme that interested Shakespeare: gender. I showed them Bryan's diagram and went over the concepts

of biological sex characteristics, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation—and how these don't necessarily "line up"; a heterosexual woman can have very masculine characteristics, and a person can be born with XY chromosomes but present as a girl. (The students had studied genetics in their life sciences class, so they knew what XX and XY meant. Still, they were surprised to learn that XX doesn't equal girl.)

I asked the students what messages they get about how girls and boys are "supposed to" look and act, and what happens when people challenge those assumptions. Some students tentatively mentioned labels for those who defy gender expectations—tomboy, metrosexual, and homo—and for relationships that fall outside societal comfort levels—bromance, manny, and girl-crush.

"But a bromance doesn't mean you're gay," Nick protested. "It's the opposite."

"Right," Caroline said, "But why do you need a label at all? There's no term like that for girls."

"Because it's different for girls."

"Why? Girls are allowed to spend a lot of time with their best friends, but guys aren't?"

"Guys are, too. It's not like if I hang out with another guy all the time, everyone starts saying we're gay."

"I don't think when people call it a bromance anyone thinks the two guys are actually gay. It's as if you're making fun of the idea of guys spending so much time together."

I jumped in: "Caroline, it sounds like you're saying that the word 'bromance' reveals a cultural conflict between gender identity and gender expression. In what we call a bromance, two guys are very close friends."

"But having close friends isn't gay," Nick said.

"But is it considered feminine? I think what we're getting into is how gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation all get lumped together."

Why is a very close friendship between two straight, masculine guys a problem?"

"It's not a problem."

"Then why do we label it a bromance?"

Class was over. I left them with the question.

"Is Puck Bi?"

The next day, I wasn't sure whether I should pick up the discussion about labels and bromances—and the sexism and heterosexism that limit our views of what friendship can look like—or return to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Motivated by pressure to keep on with the curriculum and hoping there would be more teachable moments, I opted for the latter.

I drew a line all the way across the board, labeled the ends "masculine" and "feminine," and asked the students to get back into their small groups and place the characters from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the gender expression spectrum. Listening to the students' negotiations was amusing and enlightening:

"No, Hermia's not more masculine than Egeus. Egeus is her dad!"

"Yeah, but she went against what he wanted. Plus, Egeus has to listen to Theseus."

"So then Theseus should be more masculine than Egeus."

The big reveal came when I wrote the adjectives from the previous day under each character's name. The adjectives for Helena, who they'd deemed very feminine, were *insecure*, *jealous*, and *whiny*.

For Titania, who they considered more masculine, the adjectives were *aggressive*, *stubborn*, and *powerful*. What did this tell us?

Some students acknowledged that gender stereotypes affect their readings of characters: "Demetrius and Helena are basically in the same position. They both like someone who doesn't like them back. But when Demetrius chases Hermia, we call him persistent, and when Helena chases Demetrius, we call her desperate. That's not right."

Others protested that guys and girls "aren't really like that," and I reminded them that we weren't talking about individual behaviors—how actual women or men act—but about how we expect women and men to act. As one student deftly summarized it: "We expect girls to have close friendships. We don't assume they're lesbians just because they hang out a lot and give each other hugs. But if guys do that, and we know for a fact that they're not gay, maybe we call it a bromance. As if it's not normal to be at the straight end of sexual orientation and the masculine end of gender expression, and still have a close friendship. So we label it."

"Exactly."

Then I asked: "Which characters do we like the best?"

"Puck! He's funny."

"Bottom."

"I respect Hermia for not listening to her dad."

"I wish Helena would've just listened to Demetrius. Who'd want to marry some guy who only loves you because of a flower? A *flower*!"

"Interesting how the characters we find most likeable are the ones we put in the middle of the gender expression spectrum."

"Ms. Porosoff, is Puck supposed to be bi?"

"Remember, we're talking about gender expression, not sexual orientation. We don't see Puck having a love life of his own, so we don't know if he's gay, straight, or somewhere in between. But

> ## "Interesting how the characters we find most likeable are the ones we put in the middle of the gender expression spectrum."

we did say he's somewhere in between masculine and feminine. Why?"

"'Cause he's a fairy and he's a guy? Aren't fairies supposed to be girly?"

"Oberon's a fairy, too, and we put him all the way over here," I said, pointing to the masculine end of the spectrum.

"Yeah, but Oberon's the *boss*. Look— it says right here—"

"Tell us where you are."

"Act 2, scene 1, line 44. When Puck is talking to that other fairy he meets in the woods, he says, 'I jest to Oberon and make him smile.' Oberon is the king, and Puck is his jester."

"True. So are you saying we think Puck is less masculine because he's subservient? And that, since Oberon is the boss, he must be more masculine? Is it possible to be feminine and the boss?"

"Titania's the queen. She's a boss, too—that fairy Puck meets works for her. And we put her way on the feminine side."

"Yeah, but not as feminine as Helena."

"Whatever," Caroline said. "I can be as feminine as I want and still be a CEO."

Beyond "Diversity Books"

I can't say the lesson radically changed the students' worldviews. They still sometimes confuse gender expression with sexual orientation. They still use words I wish they wouldn't. They, and I, are still in the process of accepting

I can't save discussions of gender and sexual orientation for when we read texts by women and LGBTQ authors.

gender as a set of spectrums. But we did think about gender diversity—and a canonical text—in a way that helped us explore societal expectations and our own assumptions.

Amid all the jargon about 21st-century skills and multicultural competen-

cies is an important question: How can we honor students' real experiences, help them bring their real concerns to class, and teach them how to critically read the real world?

At first, my response was simply to alternate between classics like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and relatively contemporary texts with a greater diversity of voices. This approach is what James Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks would call "additive": "[the] addition of content, concepts, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum without changing

its basic structure, purposes, and characteristics . . . usually accomplished by the addition of a book, a unit, or a course to the curriculum." (See Resources.)

But I know I need to do more than add a few more diverse literary works into a curriculum composed largely of

texts by straight white men. At the same time, I don't want to just dismiss the classics as outdated. For one thing, the classics are classics for a reason: They were constructed with a sophistication and creativity worth studying, and they contain universal truths about the human experience that still feel relevant to students' lives. For another, all books should be "diversity books." I can't save discussions of gender and sexual orientation for when we read texts by women and LGBTQ authors—any more than I can save discussions of race for when we read texts by authors of color.

Instead, I'm beginning to change how I define *reading*. Reading still includes examining texts for authors' devices and motifs. But it also includes looking at how identity is constructed in texts, and applying those understandings to how we "read" media, current events, and each other. This approach is more like what Banks and Banks call the "transformational" approach, which "changes the basic assumptions of the curriculum" so that students learn multiple ways to see the world.

So, yes, I need to update my reading list, and I also need to change my basic assumptions about how we approach literature. I haven't yet taken my English course to that level of transformation, but as diversity practitioners often say, "That's the work." ∎

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