

ISSUE 23

AUTUMN
2022

teaching shakespeare

POLICY • PEDAGOGY • PRACTICE

Issue 23 – Autumn 2022

ISSN 2049-3568 (Print) • ISSN 2049-3576 (Online)

HAFSA FAROOQ SHOWS HOW SHE USED GLOBAL ADAPTATIONS OF *KING LEAR*
CHRISTINA & EDWARD WOLF DELVE INTO LEICESTER UNIVERSITY'S ARCHIVES
DR IMAN SHEEHA & ZOE ENSER CONSIDER APPROACHING PROBLEMATIC PORTRAYALS OF GENDER
EXPLORATIONS OF NORTH LONDON'S RICH CONTEXT FROM DAISY WHITCHURCH & AMY FLETCHER
DR ROWAN MACKENZIE & PHEELIX OBUN ON THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

Find this magazine and more at the BSA Education Network's web page

www.britishshakespeare.ws/education/



MYFANWY EDWARDS is the General Secretary for the London Association for the Teaching of English. She is also a Curriculum Leader for English at The Richmond Upon Thames School and is working towards a PhD in English and Education at the Institute of Education, UCL. @Miff_

Welcome to the first edition of *Teaching Shakespeare* for the new academic year. The importance of who our learners are and what they know, to paraphrase a mantra I was taught on my own PGCE, might be one of the most important lessons I was given as a trainee teacher. It's something that all the contributors to this edition have considered on some level regardless of the stage their students are at. I have taken the mantra quite literally for this edition in that the articles show the challenging contexts in which Shakespeare is often encountered but also the capacity for context to challenge what we think about Shakespeare. They deal with the historical context but also the context of reception and performance.

Each article, I hope, reminds us that there is rarely a deficit of knowledge and experience in a group of learners but those experiences need to be treated with sensitivity and respect.

Several articles, written by teachers at secondary and university level, draw on the cultural context both of Shakespeare and of students. Amy Fletcher and Edward and Christina Woolf consider the power of contextual and archival artefacts as introductions to Shakespeare – whether in a classroom in North London or an archive in Leicester University. Daisy Whitchurch shows us how the knowledge and culture of her North London pupils interacted with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in illuminating ways. Iman Sheeha also considers how the contemporary

combines with the Shakespearean in her exploration of the impact of Sarah Everard's murder on her students study of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Whereas Hafsa Farooq brings in modern adaptations of King Lear to her teaching of A level. We are also able to share an excerpt from Zoe Enser's book *Bringing Forth The Bard* which is out now and aimed at supporting secondary teachers to approach the teaching of Shakespeare.

“THE IMPORTANCE OF WHO OUR LEARNERS ARE AND WHAT THEY KNOW, TO PARAPHRASE A MANTRA I WAS TAUGHT ON MY OWN PGCE, MIGHT BE ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS I WAS GIVEN AS A TRAINEE TEACHER.”

We continue to reflect on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on teaching Shakespeare through Laura Wright's article on staging *Henry VIII* as a live stream performance on Youtube and the opportunities digital theatre presented. The impact of one's own context can be seen perhaps most starkly in the co-written piece between Dr Rowan Mackenzie and Pheelix Obun. Their piece discusses the powerfully positive effect performing *The Tempest* had on men in a category C prison and gives us an insight into Dr Mackenzie's work with those who are incarcerated.

Thank you for reading this issue and I hope you have had a fantastic start to the new academic year.

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL <i>Myfanwy Edwards</i>	2-3
PLAYING AS PUCK <i>Daisy Whitchurch</i>	4-5
TEACHING IN THE WAKE OF SARAH EVERARD <i>Dr Iman Sheeha</i>	6-7
TRIUMPH MY BRITAIN? NAVIGATING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN NORTH LONDON <i>Amy Fletcher</i>	8-10
OUT OF THE 'HIDDEN' SHELVES: CURATING SHAKESPEARE ONLINE <i>Christina and Edward Wolf</i>	11-12
GLOBAL SHAKESPEARE: THE VALUE OF ADAPTATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM <i>Hafsa Farooq</i>	13
DIGITAL THEATRE AND ALIENATION AS OPPORTUNITY <i>Laura Wright</i>	4-15
SERVING TIME WITH SHAKESPEARE <i>Dr Rowan Mackenzie and Pheelix Obun</i>	16-18
GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS <i>Zoe Enser</i>	19-20

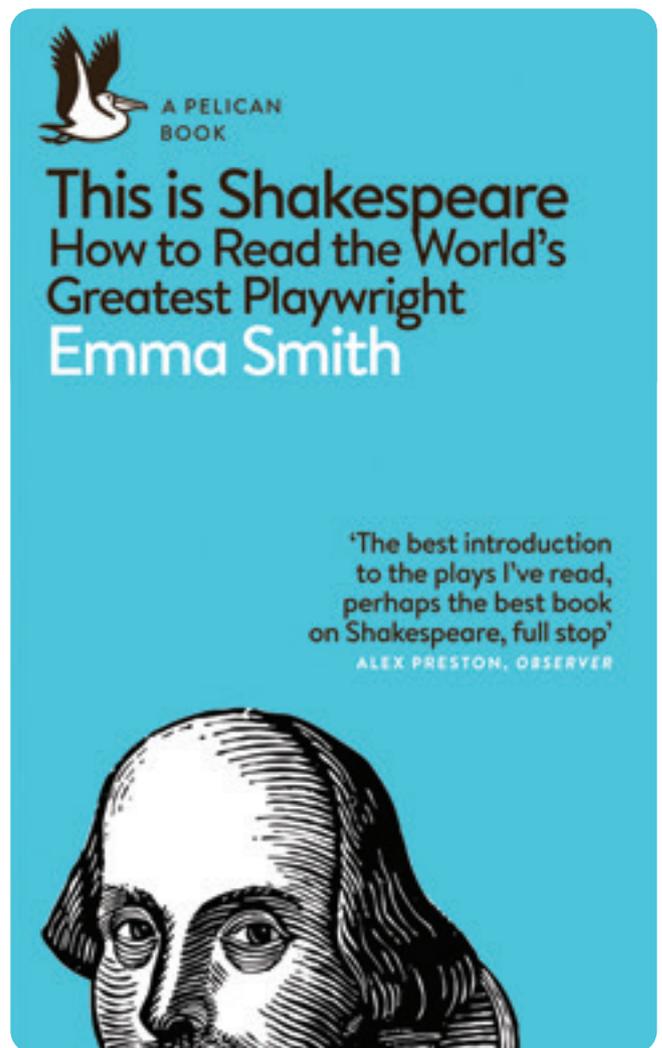
DAISY WHITCHURCH is an Early Career English Teacher at Acland Burghley School, North London. She is completing an MA in English Education at the UCL Institute of Education, where she also trained for her PGCE in Secondary: English.

Popping my head up to survey the classroom, I could see Holly's group scampering along the floor low to the ground, hiding behind the legs of tables, accompanied by a joyful shriek or two. Ibrahim's group were audibly laughing, working out exactly how they could make Ibrahim look most like a flower. Khaled's group were sat silently, refusing to make eye contact with another. To an external observer, this moment may well seem chaotic – it definitely looked like the students were playing around.

Each group had been given a quote from a key moment of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that included the mischievous hobgoblin: Puck. Their instructions were to devise a freeze frame that summarised the quote and action of that moment. The plan was that, after rehearsal, each group would perform their freeze frames whilst the rest of the class decided who was playing each character and provide comments on anything they particularly liked.

Emma Smith, in *This is Shakespeare: How to Read the World's Greatest Playwright* (mentioned in Issue 22), posits that the gaps, the ambiguities, in Shakespeare's plays are the vital aspects that bring his plays to life 'in unpredictable and changing ways' (2020, p.3). The gaps 'need us' (2020, p.4); the actors, academics, audience members, teachers and students, to complete them. During my PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) placements, I became fascinated with the possibilities the gaps opened up in the English classroom for a social and playful Shakespeare for all learners: a Shakespeare that welcomed learners as their whole selves to the classroom – just as everyone was welcome to Shakespeare's Globe.

My second PGCE placement was at a large school in Barnet, Outer London, which encompassed a diverse student population, including 60% of learners who spoke English as an Additional Language. My Year 8 class were studying *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – which, of course, can be entirely interpreted by the gaps and ambiguities that are paid attention to in the classroom – it can just be a play about fairies, and it can be also be a play about sex and relationships. In the scheme of learning I was teaching as a trainee, the focus was on the setting, plot and



characters. The activity that follows focused on analysing and interpreting Puck: the mischievous hobgoblin. It is Puck who enables Titania to fall in love with Nick Bottom and who places the love potion in the wrong Athenian's eye, mistaking Demetrius for Lysander, causing the lovers to fall into quarrel. I wanted to capture Puck's mischievous nature and embody the nuance of his character in the classroom using active approaches that allowed the students to play both in and with Puck's character.

The groups had set about happily and playfully devising their freeze frames after reading their given quotation. One group decided that Ibrahim needed to be the flower with which Puck drops the potion into Titania's eye: 'Through the forest have I gone./ But Athenian found I none./ On whose eyes I might approve/ This flower's force in stirring love.' (2.2.722–725). They spent the next few minutes working out how to make Ibrahim look especially alluring as a flower, in fits of giggles, which felt fitting: we discussed that perhaps Puck would find amusement and

joy in the flower he chose for the job. Holly's group were inspired by the word 'hobgoblin': 'Those that Hobgoblin call you and sweet Puck,' (2.1.418). They considered exactly how Puck might move; at the back of the classroom, they scampered around low to the ground. I heard them discussing the need to be low to the ground so as to hide if someone approached and how they could hide in their freeze frame without the magic of the forest. Here, two contrasting approaches to Puck's character emerged (which we later discussed); Ibrahim's group captured Puck's playful, mischievous nature, whereas Holly's group embodied the darker side of Puck's character. Through his low, secretive movements, there is a sense in Holly's Puck that his actions are not moral. The class were not 'perfectly' behaved in their groups, but neither was Puck – they were playing, like children do – suggesting that the route to understanding Puck's character through play was imperfect, a little messy and different for each group.

“THE CLASS WERE NOT ‘perfectly’ BEHAVED IN THEIR GROUPS, BUT NEITHER WAS PUCK – THEY WERE PLAYING, LIKE CHILDREN DO – SUGGESTING THAT THE ROUTE TO UNDERSTANDING PUCK’S CHARACTER THROUGH PLAY WAS IMPERFECT, A LITTLE MESSY AND DIFFERENT FOR EACH GROUP.”

However, not all groups had begun: Khaled's group were silent. I approached them and asked them to explain the moment that they were working on: Puck and the other fairies blessing Oberon and Titania's marriage. Khaled, slightly exasperated, said he wanted to act out 'blessing', but he did not know if what he was thinking of 'would work'. I encouraged Khaled to show me what he was envisaging. Staying seated, Khaled placed his arms by his sides and bent them at his elbows to ninety degrees with his palms facing upwards, pausing here. In this position, he moved his upward-facing palms closer to his chest and then away from him again in a circular, undulating motion.

“Blessing, Miss, do you see?”, Khaled asked.

“Perfect! Exactly what the fairies might be doing!”, I exclaimed, copying Khaled's hand and arm movements.

“Khaled,” I probed, “Where have you seen someone doing this before?”.

Khaled told me that 'in his religion', he sometimes prayed like this. He had also seen older family members praying like this. Khaled explained that this motion accompanied *dua*; a special prayer from Muslims to Allah when they need help, guidance, or forgiveness – usually in private. I asked Khaled whether holding one's hands with palms

facing upwards was significant. Khaled said that your hands would always be raised but it also depended on how much you needed Allah; if you were in greater need you might bring your palms together and raise them higher. Khaled shared that he had blessed family members' marriages in *Dua* before, asking Allah directly to grant his blessings on the marriage. He thought that there would usually be something said about families coming together, too. Leaving the group to it, they set about creating a freeze frame of Oberon and Titania standing tall, holding hands in union, with Khaled in position as Puck blessing the marriage.

Through playing with the word 'blessing' through gesture, Khaled was able to make his own meaning: he related the word to his knowledge of his religion and culture. When Khaled's group performed their freeze frame to the class, I repeated that Khaled had shared an interesting insight about prayer. Having checked earlier that Khaled was pleased to share his ideas, he shared his thinking behind their freeze frame. Khaled confidently repeated some of what he had said to me and finished by asking his classmates: 'You know?'. Khaled's question seeks affirmation from his classmates but also positions him as the expert on this topic – he is mirroring the checking for understanding that a teacher might do. Khaled was the expert in the classroom on this subject; I am not a Muslim, nor do I know much about Islam. Lots of learners in the room were privileged to this religious and cultural knowledge and in an authoritative position in relation to it, and to me – subverting a traditional view of authority in the classroom. Shakespeare was not the only source of culture in the room. Rather, the learners became the source of culture through talk and play.

“paying attention to the gaps is vital: it is the ways in which we can celebrate students' cultures and identities, enabling them to remake the play as their own.”

By allowing the class to be playful with Shakespeare, to embody Puck through play, they both became Puck and remade the character as their own. Having now completed my first year as an Early Career Teacher, I have often found myself reverting to 'easy' reading, shying away from approaching a text playfully and really socially – often for fears associated with 'poor behaviour' and having a lack of control – but it is when I remind myself of Khaled's group and plan in playful, social moments that, I think, Shakespeare's plays have truly come alive in the classroom. Paying attention to the gaps is vital: it is the ways in which we can celebrate students' cultures and identities, enabling them to remake the play as their own.



teaching in the wake of sarah everard

DR IMAN SHEEHA is Senior Lecturer in Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama at Brunel University London. Her research interests include early modern domesticity, gender, and race. She is the author of *Household Servants in Early Modern Domestic Tragedy* (Routledge in 2020). She is currently working on a project on neighbourhood communities in early modern England.

When Sarah Everard left a friend's house near Clapham Common, south London, to walk home on March 3rd, 2021, little did she know that what clothes she was wearing, what colour her outfit was, what shoes she had on, and how she conducted herself while in public would be national news and constitute crucial details repeated in almost all reports on her murder. Reports on her disappearance, on the discovery of human remains later confirmed to be hers in woodland near Ashford, Kent, and on the subsequent arrest of a Metropolitan Police officer in connection with her murder almost never fail to mention the same details. Sarah, we are repeatedly told, wore bright clothing, had trainers on, called her boyfriend on the way home, and stuck to well-lit streets. In short, as one report put it, she 'did everything she was "supposed" to do as a woman out walking.'

At the time I was teaching *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to my undergraduate students as part of a module on Shakespeare as text and performance. One of the module's aims was stressing the relevance of the plays to students' lived experiences. Like many people, I was deeply distressed by the details of the murder. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* seemed to me as the perfect opportunity to open up a discussion with my students about misogyny, sexual assault, gender-based violence against women, rape culture, and victim blaming. That was because at the heart of reports stressing the fact that Sarah Everard 'did everything she was "supposed" to do' lies an implicit assumption that women who don't are perhaps to blame when they find themselves victims of violence, that women in short skirts or shorts, in high heels, and not in a conversational mood to ring anyone, women who choose less well-lit streets for their journeys back home somehow invite (and deserve) violence.

At the heart of *The Merry Wives* lie similar problematic assumptions that seem to have been internalised by the play's titular characters. Approached by the impoverished knight, Sir John Falstaff, as potential sources of financial and sexual gratification, the wives' first impulse seems to be to blame not the lecher, but their own public behaviour.



Photo © Vincenzo Lillo/Shutterstock.com

In the wake of Sarah's murder, *The Merry Wives* offered an excellent opportunity to open up a discussion with my students about those assumptions and to help them engage with the play in a way that makes it their own and speaks to their very real concerns surrounding sexual assault, rape culture, misogyny, and gender-based violence against women. I opened the session by asking students to identify the underlying assumptions behind both the reports on Sarah Everard's murder (I shared links to the articles cited here in advance) and Shakespeare's wives. The aim was to develop students' close reading and critical thinking skills as well as to highlight the continuity of those harmful assumptions. Having identified the problematic nature of the wives' internalised assumptions about themselves, the students were then asked to address this problem by intervening in the text, taking ownership over it, and changing this problematic aspect. Students were invited to take part in a creative writing exercise designed specifically to respond to the omissions in the text. The results were astonishing.

I modelled the activity on *The New York Times*' publication in 2016 of imagined 'deleted scenes' in Shakespeare's plays, scenes that might have been but aren't there. I gave specific guidelines to help my students: What might Mistress Ford and Mistress Page have discussed between announcing their plan to take revenge on Falstaff in Act 2, scene 1, and their next appearance together in Act 3, scene 3? What might the women's responses to his letters have been had they unlearned the internalised sexist assumptions about women's complicity in acts of violence against them? I also suggested that students can work on the existing scene and intervene in it in a way that benefits from the discussion we had about its problematic nature. I suggested that they can delete lines, rewrite others, and incorporate their own writing within it if they liked. To help students with this exercise, I offered Moll Cutpurse from Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* as an example of a female character from early modern drama who, when faced with a similar situation to the Windsor wives', reacts differently and speaks out in defence of women's right to socialise. I shared the lines Moll delivers to the bewildered 'lecher', Laxton, in scene 5: 'Thou'rt one of those/ That thinks each woman thy fond flexible whore:/ If she but cast a liberal eye upon thee,/ Turn back her head, she's thine; Or among company,/ By chance drink first to thee, then she's quite gone,/ There's no means to help her' (72–7).

In response, students produced short pieces that focused on addressing the wives' internalised victim-blaming. One student thought the lines should be delivered in a sarcastic manner, possibly with an eye roll, suggesting Mistress Page is aware of the sexist culture that blames

women for men's transgressions and that she has not internalised it. Another student suggested that, after Mistress Ford wonders: 'Why, he hath not been thrice in my company! What should I say to him? I was then frugal of my mirth', Mistress Page should reply: 'Stop it with this victim-blaming nonsense! He is a lecher and the fact that he sent me an identical letter too shows it is not really about you. It is about him and the way he views women!'. Another student suggested that a later line by Mistress Page, from Act 4, scene 2, should be brought forward and inserted here: 'Wives may be merry and yet honest too'. The student incorporated the line into a piece of creative writing she has written, stating: 'You were his host. You were generous and hospitable, and he has violated your trust and hospitality. Why talk you of 'mirth' as if it were a crime? Should women now police their tone and be grumpy to avoid suspicion and accusations of encouraging lechers? No, my dear. Wives may be merry and yet honest too'. My personal favourite was by a male student. It read: 'I have been your friend for years, Alice, but never knew you adopted those harmful views. What next? Shall we be killed on the streets and be blamed for our murder, too? Shall reporters ask what we were wearing? What we were doing out there late? On our own? Why didn't we stick to well-lit streets? No. Our sisters are reclaiming the streets. We need to reclaim our right to be merry and sociable too on those streets'.

Teaching *The Merry Wives* in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard meant opening up discussions about important challenges women are still facing in the 21st century as well as encouraging the younger generation to be part of the solution through their sense of justice, their critical thinking skills, their creativity, and their active and productive engagement with Shakespeare.

Bibliography

- Jane Hamilton, 'Sarah Everard did everything she was 'supposed' to do as a woman out walking but she never made it home'. Published: 13 MAR 2021. https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/sarah-everard-everything-supposed-woman-23705018?utm_source=linkCopy&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=sharebar
- Coppelia Kahn (ed.), *The Roaring Girl in Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Giorgio Melchiori (ed.), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002)
- Molly Pike, 'Storm Huntley tearful as she says Sarah Everard 'could have been any one of us'. Published: 15 Mar 2021. https://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/storm-huntley-tearful-says-sarah-23723156?utm_source=linkCopy&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=sharebar



NAVIGATING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN NORTH LONDON

a MY FLETCHER is a teacher in North London and this article is taken from work she did as part of her MA in Shakespeare and Education at ICL Institute of Education.

It was my first Year 7 lesson of an 'Introduction to Shakespeare' unit, and I had collated a collection of Shakespeare in history and culture artefacts for pupils to explore. Mahir (all names have been changed to culturally appropriate pseudonyms) had been puzzling over these with his group when I came over and asked what they noticed, drawing their attention to an extract from Ben Jonson's poem about Shakespeare from the First Folio. I asked them what they made of language like, 'Triumph my Britain' and Mahir responded with, "I think of the EDL." (the acronym for a far right group called the English Defence League.) I was stunned by his comment and asked him to expand, as I hurriedly turned to write his phrase on the whiteboard. He continued that he didn't really know how to explain but he felt it was something that the EDL would say.

At my school the majority of pupils identify as Bengali, including Mahir, and many pupils are aware of the EDL because of the organisation's vicious attacks against Muslims, and particularly because of the EDL's attempt to march through Tower Hamlets. This lives in many of my students' collective memories. I knew that I wanted us to grapple with the relationship between Shakespeare and "the nation", but I had not expected such an explicit link to modern day English nationalism in the first lesson. What exactly was Mahir trying to say? What questions does this raise about Shakespeare and "Englishness"? What hold does Ben Jonson's declaration have in English classrooms today? What does Mahir's comment tell us about culture and nationalism?

When planning this unit, I aimed to challenge Shakespeare as "high culture", a label which places Shakespeare on an ahistorical plinth as a literary figure beyond the reach of the ordinary person. I was conscious of the way that Shakespeare in education has been framed as a form of legitimate culture, to be admired and held at arm's length to protect it from the contamination of popularity. In Douglas Lanier's work he has tracked Shakespeare's "un-popularisation", leading to his emergence as a

national poet of Britain, who transcends class divisions and is a spokesman for a 'universal' human nature. There is also, though, a particular "Britishness" attached to Shakespeare. Former education secretary, Michael Gove, infamously parroted Matthew Arnold to promote a notion of a unique British literary superiority, a kind of nationalist literature, with Shakespeare at the fore. This is in itself inherently exclusionary because nationalism relies on a self-appointed normative community deciding who does and doesn't belong. There is, then, a puzzling conflict in the way that Shakespeare is presented: he is simultaneously universal *and* uniquely "British." When Mahir made his inadvertent link between this popular Conservative narrative about Shakespeare to a white nationalist organisation it became clear to me that we were dealing with the consequences of this kind of racialised nationalistic Shakespeare mythology. How could I deconstruct the view of Shakespeare as an unassailable precious national treasure?

"there is, then, a puzzling conflict in the way that Shakespeare is presented: he is simultaneously universal and uniquely 'British.'"

As well as an excerpt from Ben Jonson's poem, I showed pupils other artefacts, for example a painting of Ira Aldridge, the first Black actor to play Othello in London – an image that became important in a later discussion we had as part of the first activity leading to a class enactment of Act 1, Scene 5 of *Hamlet*. I displayed 4 stills of Hamlet (David Tennant, Benedict Cumberbatch, Paapa Essiedu and Cush Jumbo) and asked students to talk about their impressions of his character, and whether they noticed similarities or differences. I paused at Mahir's table and heard them talking about the actors' identities. Mahir explained to the class that they were all being played by "different people" and that in the "olden times it would only have been played by white boys because they were racist then, and now it can be played by anyone like Black people or women and stuff." I wanted to unpack what he had said and asked if any of the students remembered the image we saw of a stage performance of *Othello*, and what they thought racism might have been like in the past. Diric then reminded the class about Ira Aldridge and another pupil, Bobby, puzzled over whether things might have been different in the past because, "Britain at that time was mostly white so most people would be racist unintentionally." In response to Bobby I referenced my reading of Miranda Kauffman's *Black Tudors* and in



particular the Black royal court trumpeter. There was a buzz of, “Oh yeahs” and, “We learnt about that” around the room, and Adnan piped up with, “John . . . something . . .” – the trumpeter’s name was John Blanke. Mahir then added, “Also Black people were in England before white people were.” To bring the discussion back to Bobby’s point I explained that the categories ‘black’ and ‘white’ didn’t exist in the same way when Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, however, Othello had always been racialised and the actor, whether Black or white-in-black face, had to play European stereotypes of those racialised as non-white.

This discussion made me reflect on Shakespeare’s shifting place within culture. I’m certain that Mahir didn’t know that his assertion that “anyone” can play Hamlet is a contribution to the manufactured “culture wars” narrative and the “war on woke” directed at teachers, fanned by reactionary newspapers. Nor that many of those same people would be furious at the suggestion that there is a multiracial English history that goes back beyond the Empire Windrush. Mahir is clearly aware of Cheddar Man’s skeleton, and evidently students have had previous discussions which acknowledge our shared multiracial history. The power of this classroom talk is that it illustrates clearly how much pupils bring to a classroom, how they are not empty vessels to be filled by the teacher.

“THE POWER OF THIS CLASSROOM TALK IS THAT IT ILLUSTRATES CLEARLY HOW MUCH PUPILS BRING TO A CLASSROOM, HOW THEY ARE NOT EMPTY VESSELS TO BE FILLED BY THE TEACHER.”

Through this talk pupils are relating Shakespeare to their own knowledge and experiences, and grappling with what Shakespeare might mean today – Shakespeare is a site of struggle tied to discussions around identity. The fact that there are women and Black people playing Hamlet was agreed, unanimously, to be important and right. Mahir made the point that, “some people are sexist or racist and they think women or Black people can’t play Hamlet because of their skin colour or gender.” In response to this Micah posed a question to the class: if Shakespeare were to travel to 2022 and he saw that all kinds of different people were playing his characters, how do you think he would react? The class said he would be proud and happy because his work was still being created and his legacy has continued. Greta suggested that the most important thing about an actor is their acting and not the way that they look and Mohammed reminded the class that boys used to play girls on stage during Shakespeare’s time. It is important that this set students up to feel a complete sense of ownership over Shakespeare – in a mixed London classroom there was absolute certainty that any of them could play his roles. I want to suggest that the enactment of the scene that we did next as a class would have taken on a completely new meaning had it not been for this discussion, which set Shakespeare up, on our classroom stage, as a communal participatory activity.

“THROUGH THIS TALK PUPILS ARE RELATING SHAKESPEARE TO THEIR OWN KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES, AND GRAPPLING WITH WHAT SHAKESPEARE MIGHT MEAN TODAY – SHAKESPEARE IS A SITE OF STRUGGLE TIED TO DISCUSSIONS AROUND IDENTITY.”

After reading an extract from Act 1, Scene 5 we cast Greta as the ghost and Diric as Hamlet to be directed by the class. I had a prop bag and the class engaged in excited (somewhat shouty) discussion about dressing each character. Thrilled by the assortment of wigs, the class initially placed a multi-coloured clown wig on Greta as the ghost. I asked the class how this would make an audience respond to the ghost and they agreed it would be too funny. Instead they opted for a white mask which they agreed was more ghost-like. They then agreed that they wanted Greta to stand on a chair to indicate that she was levitating like a ghost. In order to create some drama the class suggested she should begin crouched down on the chair, then rise up slowly with the mask on and turn to point ominously at Hamlet. For Diric they again initially wanted to put him in a blonde curly wig, which sent the group almost into hysterics and required a lot of patience and counting down to silence from me. I again pointed out the reaction that the wig had triggered in the audience and it was quickly discarded as inappropriate. Instead, the

students suggested a tweed suit jacket and bowler hat, which they agreed better signified Hamlet's status. There was quite a lot of back and forth about how Hamlet would react to the ghost's entry because some students argued he might be happy to speak with his father's ghost, whilst others argued he would be shocked and afraid. We settled on Hamlet putting his hand to his mouth and freezing as the ghost arose and pointed at him.

“they were socially constructing meaning: a process that was beautiful, messy and playful exactly because it was a backwards and forwards process of experimentation.”

What the class were doing here should not be dismissed as 'fun', but should be taken seriously. When considering how to write about this moment I thought of the *Richard III* student improvisations that John Yandell describes in *The Social Construction of Meaning* and the way those pupils used all kinds of resources to explore roles. Yandell's description describes precisely what my Year 7s were doing as they made costume changes and puzzled through how to bring this scene to life. I'd like to suggest that it was not just Doric and Greta on the classroom stage who were "in role", but that the rest of the class were engaged in their own act of improvisation as directors. All pupils were playing and, vitally, they were not doing so in isolation but as a collective. They were socially constructing meaning: a process that was beautiful, messy and playful exactly because it was a backwards and forwards process of experimentation.

Although I believe there would have still been value in this embodiment without the discussions on identity and who can play Shakespeare roles, the meaning of this enactment took on a greater significance because of the fierce way the class had argued for their position, their right to take Shakespeare and make it what they wanted it to be. It took on greater meaning for me because of what Mahir's words about the EDL had led me to consider about the place of Shakespeare as a nationalist figure in a world where, as Simavohan Valluvan highlights, nationalism is always, in the final instance, about its own exclusionary racisms.

Returning to Mahir's comment about the EDL, and the traditionalist Shakespeare that transformed him into a figure interpreted in nationalist terms, I want to assert that the class had transformed Shakespeare into something that was theirs and which contested the Conservative view of classroom Shakespeare. They were living proof that culture is ordinary and, after hearing Mahir's comment, how could I possibly dismiss what their contestation of a top-down singular view of Shakespeare meant?

“what they had done was to prove Lanier's assertion that Shakespeare is a figure whose importance and survival depends upon skillfully navigating the ever-changing politics of the establishment and the street, and that English teachers must see this as central to teaching Shakespeare.”

I'm not suggesting that this was done knowingly, that pupils could perfectly articulate what had happened, but that what they had done was to prove Lanier's assertion that Shakespeare is a figure whose importance and survival depends upon skillfully navigating the ever-changing politics of the establishment and the street, and that English teachers must see this as central to teaching Shakespeare. Pupils entered a complex wider cultural debate, contested and questioned Shakespeare in a way that the establishment demands that they should not in the name of the "war on woke". I was left thinking that what happened in our classroom started the process of a meaningful repopularisation of Shakespeare and should be viewed as what it is: legitimate cultural production that must be taken seriously.

References

- Lanier, D. (2002). *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. Oxford University Press.
- Valluvan, S. (2019). *The Clamour of Nationalism: Race and Nation in Twenty-First Century Britain*. Manchester University Press.
- Yandell, J. (2013). *The Social Construction of Meaning: reading literature in urban English classrooms*. London & New York: Routledge.



CURATING SHAKESPEARE ONLINE

DR CHRISTINA WOLF is Higher Education Academy Senior Fellow (SFHEA) at the University of Leicester. Her interests are in the fields of English Literature and language with a particular focus on Shakespeare and the relationships between Early Modern texts and 21st century learners. DR EDWARD WOLF works on the interdisciplinary fields of literature, game studies, and film studies.

This article reports on a piece of archival research and exhibition that aims to bring together remarkable manuscripts and rare copies of books Shakespeare is likely to have read and known and which belong to the University of Leicester Library. Some of these items date back to Shakespeare's own time or before. Others are copies printed in the centuries that followed, which also attests to their enduring importance and appeal. The three main aims of the project are to highlight the connections between Shakespeare's work and the works of others, to give students access to a scholarly source of information relevant to their studies, and to motivate students to engage in archival research. The project was born out of the desire to create a source of input on relevant material for the Erasmus and Study Abroad undergraduate international students attending the *Shakespeare and English Language* modules at the University of Leicester.

At the beginning of each academic term, students attending these modules are taken to a visit to the Library Special Collections to see rare books connected to Shakespeare's work. However, before the conclusion of this project, students had no specifically designed support reference material to which they could go back after those visits. Initially, the online exhibition aimed solely to fill into this gap. However, the Covid-19 outbreak gave this project a new unexpected role. Between the whole of 2020 and most of 2021, physical access to the Library remained considerably limited due to Covid-19 restrictions, the online inhibition became thus the only viable way for the students and the community to access such material.

Shakespearean connections

The texts which were highly influential on Shakespeare's work are quite well known and researched. There is a long tradition of scholarship that helps us understand the importance of the books Shakespeare read and how he used them when writing his plays and poems (Collier,

2000; Gillespie, 2004; Miola, 2000; Muir, 2014). Firstly, there is a body of research that tells us about the curriculum of the Elizabethan grammar school which Shakespeare most likely attended (Baldwin, 1944; Enterline, 2021). Secondly, there are reliable records that tell us which texts were published and/or circulated as manuscripts in the period and to which Shakespeare must have had access (Stationers' Company, 2021). However, more important than identifying verbal echoes of such texts in the body of Shakespeare's work is to understand how he incorporated concepts and weaved the ideas with which he came across in his reading into the fabric of his poetic and dramatic writing (Scragg, 2009). Above all, one of the most striking features of Shakespeare's compositional approach is the way he transformed and diverged from his source materials when creating his own. While this textual metamorphosis possibly delighted Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences (Miola, 2000), such allusions and references are very likely to be now lost to many contemporary audiences and readers in the 21st century. By displaying such source material online, we hope to highlight their significant influence on Shakespeare's work and point viewers towards the texts that can clarify such literary, historical, and cultural references.

The rediscovery of lost manuscripts and books is usually welcomed with considerable excitement among scholars and the public. Such events are, however, rare. Most of the time, librarians and book historians work with material whose existence is well known and properly documented, catalogued, and preserved on existing collections. This is also true for the vast majority of students joining the Shakespeare modules in the Erasmus programme at the University of Leicester. Most of them are unaware of the existence of the items in the Special Collections and do not possess a more in-depth knowledge of the printed material in wide circulation in Shakespeare's time. Some of the manuscripts and books included in the exhibition lay dormant on shelves and cabinets for years and may have been overlooked by whole generations of non-specialist readers. For instance, it was our search for materials possibly related to *King Lear* that led to the archivists' realisation that the David Wilson Library actually holds a very rare manuscript of Layamon's *Brut: The St Alban's Chronicle*, (pictured left), possibly from the 15th century, where a reference to Goneril, one of Lear's daughters, can be seen around the middle of page. Such 'rediscoveries' certainly do not deserve widespread publicity, nor do they have the impact of the unearthing of a lost book or

Whene he had reigned xxij yere he dyede & lyeth at Tawlet. **A**nd
that yere reigned kynge Salomon in yherlm. that made the noble
temple. And to hym com to yherlm. Sybyle quene of Salba for to
hewe & as if it were woth. that men wode of the grete & noble wit
and wisdom of kynge Salomon. And sthe fonde it woth that men had
wode to hir of hym. **O**f kynge lud ludibras. that was kynge loked
sons.

And after the kynge leylo: reigned his sonne lud. ludibras y
made the cite of Tamertbury & of wynechestre & he reigned
xxij yere & dyede & lyeth at wynechestre. **O**f kynge Bladud that was
ludibras sonne reigned & was a gode man & a mygniauer. **C**aple xxij

And after lud ludibras reigned Bladud his sonne a grete mygnia
uer & thow his craft & mygniauer he made the gornelone hote the hote
bath. as the gost tollith. And he reigned xxij yere & lyeth at new Troy.
of kynge leylo: & of the ansiers of his doughters. And how his yongest
doughter was mappede to the kynge of frunce.

After the kynge Bladud reigned leylo his sonne & the kynge leylo made
the towe of leycester & lode call the towe after his name. And he
gouernede the lande well & nobly. the kynge leylo had thre doughters
the first hight Conaryll. the secunde Egan. the thirde Eydre. & the
yongest doughter was fairest & best of condicions. **T**he kynge her fader
become an olde man & wolde his doughters were mappede or that he
dyede. but first he thoght for to assay thaim. which of hem lonyde
hym most & best. for sthe that lonyde hym best. scholde be best mappede.

And he axede of his eldyst doughter how much sthe lonyde hym. &
sthe ansyde & wode. lower then her alme lye. now certis. for the
fader that is a grete lous. **T**hen axede he of the secunde doughter
how much sthe hym lonyde & sthe wode more & passyng all creatyng
of the world. mayfayn q. he may no more axe. **A**nd then axede
he of the thirde doughter how much sthe hym lonyde. certis fader q.
sthe my doughter hane tolde you glounges wordes. but for woth y schall
tell you the truth. for I lous you as much as I wode to luf my fader.
And for to bypunge you more in copenys. hec luf goth. y schall tell
you. for as much as ye be worthy. so muche schall ye be lonyde. **T**he
kynge his fader wode that sthe had sloynede hym. & become non.
wrotis. And swore by honon & oth. that sthe scholde non hane god
of hym. But his doughter that lonyde hym so much. scholde be well
Anamored & mappede. And the first doughter he mappede to a knyght
kynge of Scotland & the secunde he mappede to banonist. & the

play. Nonetheless, every time a manuscript or edition of a text which has gone unread for a long period of time receives new attention and consideration, some forgotten knowledge and ideas are brought back to life.

When selecting materials from the collections for the exhibition, our main criteria was to bring off the shelves copies of texts that influenced Shakespeare and editions of his works where such influences are most noticeably demonstrated. Putting related editions of texts side by side allows us to document the importance of the connections between Shakespeare, his source materials, and other writers and editors who followed him into the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. One of the principles we adopted when putting the exhibition together was that books need to be considered not only as the vehicles for a text, but also as material objects that carry their own history of production, circulation, and exchange. The format, materials, design, and printing of books situate them in historical contexts with all the complex associated networks of cultural, economic, and emotional values. As objects that have belonged to someone, books as material objects often carry the traces of their ownership.

Good examples are the over a hundred copies of the so-called Geneva Bible held by the David Wilson Library (pictured overleaf – with annotations from former owners, including dates of birth in the 17th century.) This is the

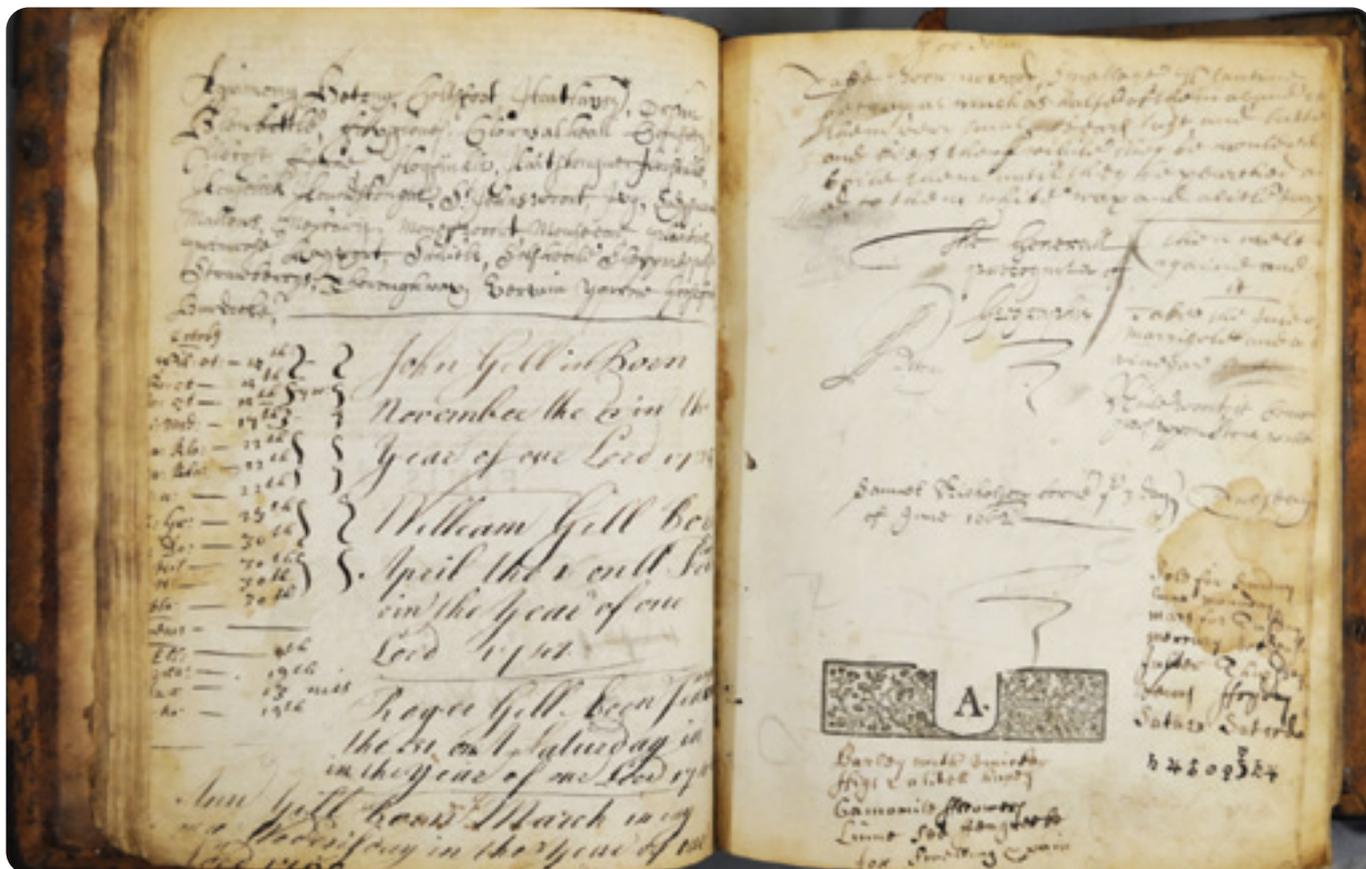
“the format, materials, design, and printing of books situate them in historical contexts with all the complex associated networks of cultural, economic, and emotional values. as objects that have belonged to someone, books as material objects often carry the traces of their ownership.”

version scholars believe Shakespeare would have read, consulted, and with which he would be thoroughly familiar. Any Tudor home that could afford a copy would have one, and many of them still survive because of its availability in such numbers. Yet each of these copies is unique despite the fact that most of them belong to the same editions spanning from 1583 to 1599. Their distinctive nature comes mostly from the annotations made by their former owners. Copies passed from one generation to another, margins were annotated and blank pages often used for domestic notes as well as to register the births and deaths in the family. Not only do these notes attest to the centrality of the Bible in the lives of individuals and communities in Renaissance England (Hamlin, 2018; Marx, 2000), but are also a reminder that each copy of a book may bring to its readers some new information and perspectives.

Conclusion

Special collections and archives are important repositories of knowledge and information. Exploring them allows us to retrieve and ‘rediscover’ texts and other cultural





artefacts that can potentially expand our collective knowledge. In order to achieve such goal, we made use of a web-publishing platform for sharing digital collections and creating online exhibits to disseminate information and present content to readers in an easily accessible and visually appealing way. Retrieving from the shelves editions of texts which influenced Shakespeare when writing of his plays and poems – such as the Bible – allows students and visitors to the online exhibition to look at Shakespeare work, various manuscripts, and printed materials from fresh perspectives and establish new connections between. As a way forward, we hope to be able to engage students in the process of data collection in future similar projects. We believe that interdisciplinary archival research and the use of new technologies may help academics make collection items more accessible to new readers and audiences thus democratizing access to ideas and information.

Link to the online exhibition:
leicester.omeka.net/exhibits/show/introduction

References

- Audunson, R., Andresen, H., Fagerlid, C., Henningsen, E., Hobohm, H.-C., Jochumsen, H., Larsen, H., & Vold, T. (Eds.). (2020). *Libraries, Archives and Museums as Democratic Spaces in a Digital Age*. De Gruyter Saur.
- Baldwin, T. W. (1944). *William Shakspeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*. University of Illinois Press.
- Collier, J. P. (2000). *Shakespeare's Library: A Collection of the Romances, Novels, Poems, and Histories, Used by Shakespeare as the Foundation of His Dramas. Volume 2*. Adamant Media Corporation.
- Enterline, L. (2021). Schooling in the English Renaissance. In *Schooling in the English Renaissance* (pp. 1–20). Oxford University Press.
- Gillespie, S. (2004). *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources*. Continuum.
- Hamlin, H. (2018). *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Reprint edition). Oxford University Press.
- Marx, S. (2000). *Shakespeare and the Bible*. Oxford University Press.
- Miola, R. S. (2000). *Shakespeare's Reading*. Oxford University Press.
- Muir, K. (2014). *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (1st edition). Routledge.
- Scragg, L. (Ed.). (2009). Souce study. In *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* (pp. 373– 390). Oxford University Press.

THE VALUE OF ADAPTATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

HAFSA FAROOQ is an English teacher at Leyton Sixth Form College in East London. Having completed her PGCE in 2021, she has a particular interest in approaches to teaching Shakespeare and counteracting the perceived exclusivity of his plays.

The unflinching loyalty our education system has towards Shakespeare means that students begin with what has often been perceived to be a ‘tedious’ journey with him from Key Stage 3. And it is perhaps too often, in both its curricula and pedagogical approaches, that Shakespeare is deemed to be a cultural mismatch for students in the classroom. The sentiment is the same for my diverse group of A level English Literature students at Parklands School. Waiting for Shakespeare’s resurrection yet again with *King Lear*, these students made some unsurprising revelations, for Daud it’s ‘a bit irrelevant’ and for Zoya it’s the ‘same, long thing.’ My students were raising questions that were so obviously challenging: How does Shakespeare have a place in a world that seems so far detached from our own? How can we find ourselves in something that has so far been constructed as everything but?

Adaptations in the Classroom

I am acutely aware of how adaptations are often used to support the supposed ‘reading’ of Shakespeare (if indeed there is such a thing). Peter Brooks’ (1971) and Trevor Nunn’s (2008) respective versions of *King Lear* are often used to provide students with a sense of the play’s plot. Not only was I eager to break established conventions that resisted the wholesale conversion of plays, but I also wanted students to explore and value canonical texts in ways that sat outside these established practices. What I refer to here is the ways in which Shakespeare has been absorbed by people from all around the world because of his privileged status in the canon. It was important for my students to see how his plays have inevitably become sites of cultural imaginings, a way for others around the world to ‘seize’ his canonical status and express their own culture in a repackaged form relevant to them.

Secondly, it is what the dynamics of adaptation has to offer. What I refer to here is the ‘self-reflexiveness’ of adaptations. The performative nature of Shakespeare’s plays means that films have become the better-alternative to stagecraft (particularly for a covid-bound year). Yet

while film is equally important in this regard, I would also like to make a case for the novel as an appropriate medium for Shakespearean adaptation. Although the ‘performative’ nature of Shakespeare may prevent us from engaging with the novel form, what is often overlooked is the ways in which the novel can engage with more nuanced elements of performance – namely the translation of the soliloquy into a self-reflective paragraph, into a passage of free-indirect discourse and thus into an interrogation of perspective.

Informed by these decisions, I chose the following adaptations: Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran* (1985) and Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991) for my students to explore in class. It is a rainy Monday afternoon and students have already explored the opening scene of *King Lear* the lesson before. The gloomy weather outside could not be more appropriate for revisiting different versions of the ‘love contest.’ Students are asked to focus on two simple questions: *How is this similar or different to what you expected? Is the impact of the scene more effective or less effective than the scene from the play?*

Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran* (1985)

Often dismissed as a loose adaptation of *King Lear*, Akira Kurosawa’s blockbuster film *Ran* may at first seem like an abstract comparison for students in the classroom. Along with its narrative plot, the increased difference in medium, century and location can deter one from using the adaptation. I make a case for the film based on two reasons: first, it can show students how *King Lear* like any dramatic text, is an ‘unstable’ one and has therefore been reimagined in different ways. Second, I make a case for the adaptation itself – set in feudal Japan, the unsurprising emphasis on hierarchical clans, samurai codes, and a system of duty is one that closely resembles a medieval feudal system in Europe. And if we are to take Samuel Crowl’s view that the ‘English landscape is too tidy [and] too domesticated to capture a world as broad as Lear’s’ (1994: 111) then an attempt to find its equivalent in the open landscapes through film, can show students just how grave the whole situation is.

In the lesson, students are shown the ‘equivalent’ of the love contest in Kurosawa’s *Ran* – namely the scene when Hidetora decides to pass down his kingdom to his eldest son Taro and tests his sons’ ‘love’ or ‘loyalty’ through a bundle of arrows that are seemingly unbreakable. After having watched the scene, students are struck, taken

aback, with Daud explaining: ‘Damn if I spoke to my dad like that, he’d probably twist my ear.’ I ask Daud whether his earlier impressions of the scene have changed. Daud explains and I quote directly:

Daud: The dad has so much status, so it just really makes me think about why Lear got so mad with Cordelia in the first place.

Daud is beginning to unravel essential concepts related to the ‘Great Chain of Being’, the stressed “so” establishes the power of the patriarch in a household, however arbitrary it may be – perhaps Cordelia’s banishment is a justified one, disrespecting the family patriarch can in fact have serious consequences. His reading is informed by his experience of how families operate, with his comment on ‘ear-twisting’ being a reference to the punitive practices in his community. Second, while the ‘British’ location of *King Lear* is important, what Daud does here is see Shakespeare’s characters as individuals giving expression to all human experience rather than as representative of a particular social grouping or ideology – hence his own positioning in the story.

I ask students to think about the film’s location and whether the location is in any way surprising to them. I quote directly from Nuha in this regard:

Nuha: I thought the setting would be dark and in a castle. This setting is quite bright and open, like villagy, like rooted in land . . . When you think about the land actually being split, you realise how serious this all is when you see how much is being given away.

Nuha’s expectation that the setting would be a dark one is unsurprising. Given the limited affordances of stage craft, of course a nihilistic, contained setting would be both ideal and practical on stage. Her awareness of the film’s open landscape is something permitted by its medium, something she recognises by her ability to “see” how much is being given away. Nuha’s comment that the ‘villagy’ scene is more ‘rooted’ in ideas surrounding land is a sophisticated one- as if to say the concept of ‘land’ is much more concrete, imaginable, realistic there than in Britain, a country whose corporate suits and intangible inheritance gains make the play’s themes more distant. Following Nuha, Nabila offers her own comment regarding the film, one that is related to the film’s casting and audience. For her, and I quote directly:

Nabila: . . . it’s probably more accurate. It’s the whole fact that this adaptation uses sons instead of daughters, which is something more accurate probably for Shakespeare’s

day. Shakespeare’s decision to use daughters makes you think about the legitimacy of female power. It’s like of course it’s a tragedy, women are in power.

Nabila’s reading of the scene highlights the ways in which adaptations work in dialogue with its source rather than existing in a hierarchy. When viewed in this dialogic manner, adaptations can effectively destabilise the authority of the original text by enabling multiple and sometimes conflicting productions of meaning. Nabila’s response is in this regard is therefore an essential one. First, she aligns herself with Kurosawa’s own directorial intention: Kurosawa’s decision to substitute Lear’s daughters for sons was an imperative one: the ‘protagonist’s children had to be men; to divide a realm among daughters would have been unthinkable’ (Grilli 2008: 126). Nabila insistence that this version is ‘more accurate’ is an indication of how she understands the legal restriction most women experienced in the Early Modern Period. Second, what becomes more interesting is how she returns to Shakespeare’s text with a critical eye having seen this substitution – indeed, why did Shakespeare use women she asks. She attributes the very tragic essence of *King Lear* to gender – an example of how the adaptation has given her space to rediscover otherwise hidden truths in the play.

Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991)

In the second half of the lesson, I provided students with an excerpt from Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*, the excerpt being related to the same scene (2004: 19–21). Set this time on a Midwestern farm, *A Thousand Acres* reformulates William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* by giving the narrative female authority (Walker 1995:7), a conscious effort on behalf of Smiley to counteract the play’s history of reception (namely the particular ethical burden to explain Lear’s problems away). Like the previous activity, students were asked the following two questions related to the extract: *How is this similar or different to what you expected? Is the impact of the scene more effective or less effective than the scene from the play?*

Opposite is an excerpt from Kaylee, a student who was perhaps the most struck by the extract given.

Here Kaylee recognises the differences between the novel-as-form and play-as-form highlighting how she gets ‘more insight’ about Goneril from the novel. It is quite interesting how she equates the first-person narrative with the soliloquy – an astute reading of how a soliloquy can in fact reveal a characters’ inner thoughts in the same way a first-person narrative can. Yet, I believe she also goes beyond this and raises important questions on perspective – in the play for example, she highlights how we ‘don’t really hear

This is completely different to my initial impressions on King Lear and even my reading on Ran because it focused on two distinct characters more. Firstly because it's a novel, there is a lot more insight on how the characters' may feel, whereas in the play we don't really hear Goneril's point of view - she doesn't even have a soliloquy. Goneril/Ginny establishes Lear/Larry's status by saying he was the epitome of both "father and farmer" but when she describes him as being "afraid to look (at)," and his largeness, he is "too big and too deep," it ~~making~~ makes me imagine Lear as an old but imposing and overbearing man. In the ^{Play} ~~page~~, when Lear speaks through the imperative "Give me (the map)," and "Tell me" I realise how self-serving this all is, a means to establish his authority - and Goneril somewhat ~~cover~~ covers.

Goneril's point of view.' What Kaylee does is raise important questions regarding the 'tragic' impetus of the play, indeed the very name of the play centralises King Lear's 'narrative' – even if this is not explicitly obvious. Here however, King Lear has been decentralised and so has his narrative power. Further in her response, Kaylee acknowledges Lear's status but it is this very status as 'father and farmer' that characterises him as 'excessive', something she recognises by drawing links between the words too in the novel and the imperative lines in the original. Goneril's flamboyant sentiment is no longer *just* a self-serving project to enrich herself, but also a response to a father that demands affectation, something which Goneril interestingly 'covers' too. Kaylee's choice of the word 'covers' draws attention to the asymmetric power structure in the play, the ways in which patriarchy can also elicit fear.

Concluding thoughts:

I ask the students which of these adaptations were more effective. Daud argues that *Ran* allowed him to imagine the situation better. Nuha agrees, it is something that justifies Lear, makes us feel sorry for him. Nabila is on the fence, she explains how she understands the family politics in *Ran*, but *A Thousand Acres* makes her question whether such a structure can survive – she takes note of her own outspoken nature. Ultimately, if Shakespeare was initially perceived to be the 'same,' 'irrelevant' thing, then what we have here is a new construction of Shakespeare, one that is unformidable, unconfined and inevitably relevant, an attribute related to the unconventional adaptations I used

“FINDING SPACE FOR MY STUDENTS TO EXPLORE *DIFFERENT* TYPES OF SHAKESPEARE FROM *DIFFERENT PLACES*, FROM *DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES*, CAN RESTORE FOR STUDENTS THE FAITH THAT SHAKESPEARE CAN IN FACT, BELONG TO US ALL.”

in the lesson. Indeed it is what these adaptations *permit*, a different version of *King Lear*, *Lears even*. Using them can engage students, can give them the tools to be critical thinkers and most importantly, can give them the space to position themselves in narratives that seem so far from their own lives. Finding space for my students to explore *different types* of Shakespeare from *different places*, from *different perspectives*, can restore for students the faith that Shakespeare can in fact, belong to us all.

References

- Crowl, Samuel. (1994). "The Bow Is Bent and Drawn: Kurosawa's 'Ran' and the Shakespearean Arrow of Desire." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1994, pp. 109–116. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43796627. Accessed 13 June 2021.
- Grilli, Peter. (2008). 'Kurosawa Directs a Cinematic Lear' In *Akira Kurosawa: Interviews*, ed. Bert Cardullo. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Kurosawa et al. (2006). *Ran*. Double disc special., U.K.: Optimum Releasing.
- Smiley, Jane. (1992). *A Thousand Acres* (Flamingo Originals). United Kingdom, Flamingo.
- Walker, Nancy A. (1995). *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition*. Austin: University of Texas.

When the world's theatres closed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital theatre, a nascent but hardly unknown medium, suddenly became the primary stage for Shakespeare. In its capacity to challenge the conventions of 'live' performance, with actors communicating in real time from different parts of the world, to upset the spatial boundaries of the 'set' through the use of green screens, and to resist the ephemerality of performance due to the sheer ease of recording on platforms such as Zoom, digital theatre offered an opportunity to see Shakespeare differently. Watching a performance could suddenly be a simultaneously public and private act, with plays viewed on a personal device, in a living room or bedroom. Audiences of digital theatre watch together, apart, knowing that the actors too are unable to touch or speak directly.

In response to social distancing, digital theatre, at the beginning of the pandemic at least, was concerned with interaction. Creation Theatre's *Tempest*, now an old example of pandemic theatre made in March 2020, required audiences to make its sound effects and so participate in world-building. The Show Must Go Online's live comment section allowed digital groundlings to make their voices heard in real time. Perhaps more accidentally than deliberately, digital theatre also came to offer a useful model for early modern audiences, who, as Tiffany Stern has shown, wandered freely around the playhouse, or, in the case of digital theatre, the house itself (Stern: 2000, 211-216). By being nowhere and everywhere, digital theatre has reframed our understanding of theatre space in a way that is particularly pertinent to early modern texts which were written with a certain spatial plasticity in mind, intended to be performed indoors and outdoors, on the road, or in the city. Digital theatre too is inherently itinerant in its global reach.

Yet, for all its global reach, digital theatre has proved to be inherently alienating, creating a double vision of intimacy and isolation. I use 'alienating' not in the sense of social distancing, although such distancing cannot be forgotten, but in the Brechtian sense of simultaneous 'affirmation and denial', a phrase borrowed from Josette Féral. Féral describes the ways in which the essential elements of the type of alienation effect operating in multi-media performance art do not touch so much upon representation itself, as they do upon the very status of reality. Nonetheless, while avoiding being ensnared by it, they put perceptive strategies into play that permit the deciphering of reality.

Digital theatre takes place on a two-dimensional screen which is at once an intimate portal to spontaneous real-time performance and inherently distanced from an audience who are scattered around the world. In this presence-absence of digital theatre, 'affirmation and denial' – the real and unreal – exist simultaneously in performance. The screen creates an emotional and cognitive distancing which allows for a conscious and critical engagement with the technologies of the theatre. Whether this is the domestic backgrounds typical of *The Show Must Go Online*, or the green screens used by Creation Theatre, the shifting 'rules' of theatrical setting can allow students to reinterrogate the so-called empty stage of the Shakespearean playhouse. When spatial cues like 'above' and 'below' mean little in the flat space of the screen, theatrical traditions – Juliet stands above Romeo on a balcony – which have no basis in the text itself, come under new scrutiny. The 'within' of the early modern playhouse can be reframed through Zoom, in which actors turn off their cameras to signify that they are gone from the stage but not from the playing space. I am conscious that, for my students, offstage may now mean simply beyond the boundaries of a screen. It may mean the palm of their own hand, as they hold their phone. The screen, despite its presence within domestic space, is therefore inherently a place of alienation, a place in which there is an uncanny sense that those who have left the stage are still present. In his monograph on pedagogy, Andrew Hiscock acknowledges that

One of the challenges surrounding these texts is how to "refresh" encounters in the university classroom with texts such as *Macbeth* or *Othello* when interpretative strategies may have become "fixed" by earlier encounters with the texts (2007: 70).

Digital theatre can offer just such a refresh, a wilful alienation that draws attention to the mechanics of theatre – its spaces, its exits, its improvisations – and which allows our students to both watch and, crucially, perform early modern plays which are usually confined to the page.

The 'alienating' capacity to induce refreshed readings has been further heightened by the need for innovation in the performance of lockdown digital theatre, which often took place in a cast's own bedrooms. I want to offer the example of Creation Theatre's *Henry VIII*, written by Shakespeare and Fletcher, which I had intended to direct (with funding from AHRC-TORCH) as a promenade performance

across the city of Oxford. When the pandemic hit, the performance was moved hastily online as a rehearsed reading, put together in a matter of hours and streamed live on YouTube, where it remains (www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFMh1jzzB9w). In the shared space of an online conferencing platform, binaries of actor and audience, here and there, present and absent, were blurred. In one scene, the dancing audience formed a crowd at the masque which Wolsey was hosting, with Wolsey himself simply one Zoom box amongst many. Like the theatregoers of Blackfriars, sitting on the stage, the audience was neither above nor below but alongside the actors, staking a claim in the playhouse.

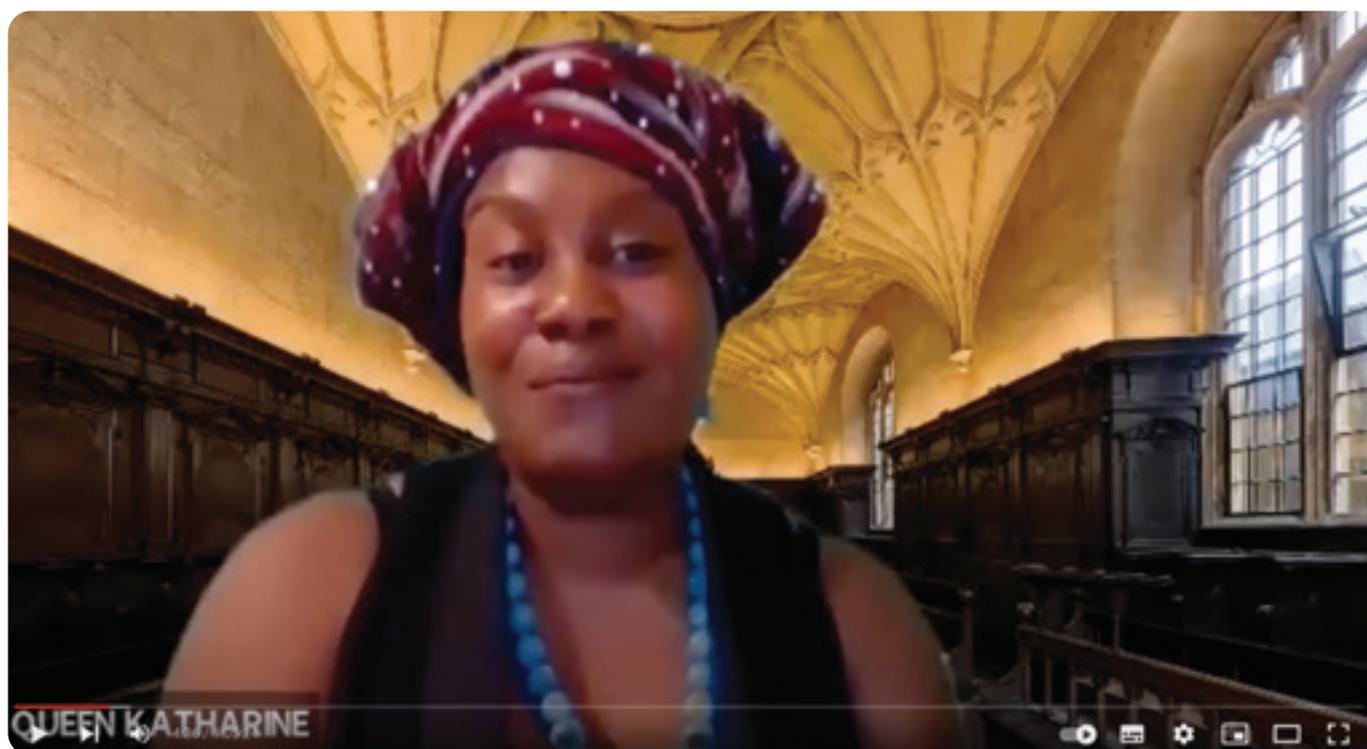
Alongside the innovative methods of performance that actors in digital theatre have developed over the past years, experimenting with digital theatre has also offered a kind of pedagogy of performance, a way of thinking through scenes by making them. I showed the opening scene of *Henry VIII* to my students recently and was surprised at their reading of it. Here, Katharine of Aragon is challenging Wolsey on the matter of national tax, and I had expected my students to recognise the Divinity Schools in Oxford which are placed on the green screen behind her. The image was chosen for its pomp and circumstance. What my students said, however, was that they found the scene dissonant and oddly sad, that this highly ornate public space was not imposing while it was empty, that the seats behind Wolsey were not filled, and yet that the scene was taking place surrounded by watching Zoom boxes. They were in short, alienated by the dissonance of an empty public space, of a screen that was at once static and moving. Was this private

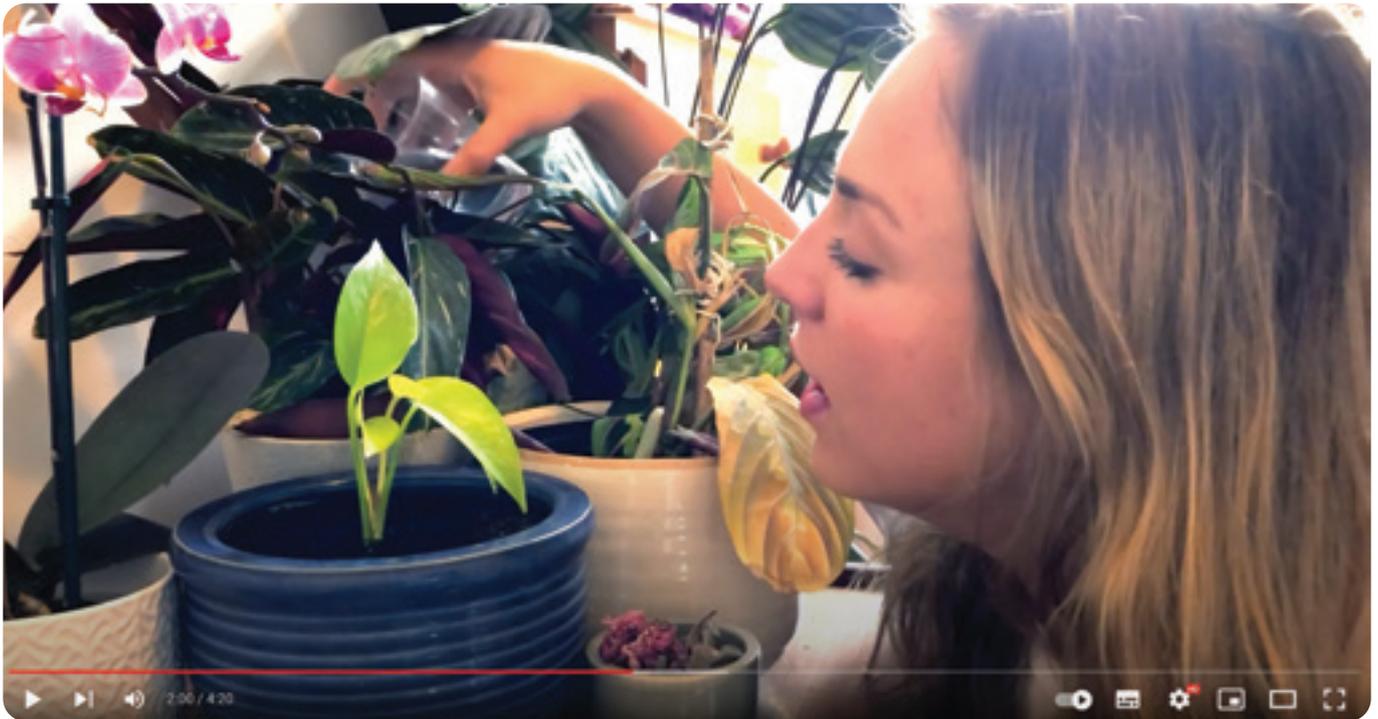
or public, busy or still? What difference would it make if, as might happen at the click of a button, those backgrounds were made a podium – a bedroom – a corridor? What if the audience had their cameras on so that Katherine was speaking to a listening public?

My students could (and did) try this out for themselves. In a way which has never been possible – or at least not without a huge amount of space, time, and resources – students can play out scenes with any backdrop (or none, as we tried while negotiating the world-building language of *The Tempest*). I'm not assuming all students have access to a personal device, whether a phone or laptop, and that is a frustrating digital inequality. But for those who do, Zoom offers an astonishingly practical method through which to engage with early modern theatre as the experimental and innovative staging ground it is. In "Freezing the Snowman": (How) Can We Do Performance Criticism', Emma Smith offers the methodology of imaginative criticism, sounding the call for critics to 'replace theater archaeology with fantasy' as a means of imagining early modern performance (Smith: 2008, 283). Online conferencing platforms can be repurposed as an education tool for this kind of fantasy, with no commitment: students aren't building sets, or working purely with imagination, but finding an experimental space somewhere in between.

Actors, at least under lock down conditions, also have to create a world within the limits of their own domestic spaces. This limitation is an opportunity, a chance to reframe familiar images. If my students are interested in

Photo © Creation Theatre





the reception of Shakespeare in art, for instance, they're likely to know 'Ophelia', by Sir John Everett Millais. This painting, now 170 years old, continues to dominate the reception of Ophelia on the stage and in the pages of our criticism.

Millais's painting allows me to begin a conversation in class about Ophelia's offstage death. It allows students to think about the visual details – the near ecphrasis – of Gertrude's description of Ophelia as she sinks, seemingly passively, beneath the water. But it is, nonetheless, a fetishisation of Ophelia's death, an aestheticisation, even romanticisation, of suicide: in short, an image which has become integral to a critical reading of *Hamlet* but which does not properly interrogate Ophelia's agency.

Again, digital theatre has provided an answer, in the form of a four-minute film made by 'Shakespeare in Isolation' in July 2020 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=AoJieU8WuNg). Here, Ophelia is in lockdown. The only interaction Ophelia has is with her brother Laertes, who is physically removed not only because he is in Paris, but because he is on Ophelia's phone screen even as her screen is on the viewer's screen. The double distancing effect speaks to the isolation of Ophelia within the text, the Ophelia who rarely speaks with her father and brother, but rather is spoken to by them. Moreover, Laertes is in Paris for 'clown school' and is dressed as a mime, his costume denoting silent communication, a foregrounding of the physical over the verbal (the verbal itself in the piece is deliberately silly faux-Shakespeare, to further underscore the short play's anarchic reworking of *Hamlet*). Finally, Ophelia grows tired of watering her plants (with an echo of

Shakespeare's flower-giving scene, 'there's rue for you'), and takes a bath. For a brief second, the bubble bath – a space made visible by the phone's selfie mode – becomes the nightmarish water of Millais's painting. Ophelia slips below the surface, helpless . . . only to emerge, laughing, moments later.

The message of this lockdown Shakespeare is simple: traditional criticism does not need to proscribe future readings of the text. Ophelia's 'To Do' list, made visible onscreen, is, like that of all theatre companies in the past eighteen months, short: it reads 'survive'. Digital theatre – a medium that for many companies began as a means of staying afloat during the pandemic – has emerged as a sharp critical tool for reinterrogating and 'refreshing' Shakespeare, one which can be employed in classrooms to **References** performance as pedagogy ever more possible.

- Emma Smith, "'Freezing the Snowman": (How) Can We Do Performance Criticism?' in *How to Do Things with Shakespeare: New Approaches, New Essays*, ed. L. Maguire (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 280–99.
- Tiffany Stern, "'You That Walk I'th Galleries": Standing and Walking in the Galleries of the Globe Theatre', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.2 (2000): 211–16.
- Josette Féral (trans. Ron Bermingham), 'Alienation Effect in Multimedia Performance', *Theatre Journal* 39.4 (1987): 461–72.
- Andrew Hiscock, 'Shakespeare: The Tragedies' in *Teaching Shakespeare and Early Modern Dramatists*, eds. A. Hiscock and L. Hopkins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 54–74.



'We are such stuff as dreams are made on' and the company dares to live that dream by taking each production to ever greater heights. *The Tempest*, built on existing experience within the group and also the talents of those joining for this latest production with significant set design and a soundscape which underpinned the performance. As the audience entered the Visits Hall they were greeted by a six-foot high ship constructed of card and paper which broke apart as Ariel stirred the tempest to greater violence. The ship was dismantled by Ariel's spirits to form the set of the island where the rest of the action took place. The scenery was created piece by piece in-cell and then constructed in-situ during the sessions leading up to the performances. The creative ability of the men involved cannot be underestimated and despite the limitations of the environment the staging was ambitious and well-received by the audiences.

The musical talents of a number of the actors led to a highly melodic production with new songs, musical scores (pictured on the previous page) and a range of instruments being created to add an additional dimension. Ariel's entrances were accompanied by wind-chime sounds while a rhythmic undertone pulsed beneath Caliban's chanting and Stephano entered singing a mournful dirge about the loss of his ship-mates in the storm. Audience feedback commended the professionalism of the performances as well as the appreciation for the musical elements and this feedback will be incorporated into the forthcoming production of *Julius Caesar*.

Whilst the cast take great pride in the performances much of the magic of Emergency Shakespeare occurs during the

rehearsal process where the participants are encouraged to engage with theatre and with the character they are playing. In acting out a role authentically an individual needs to explore the motivations and flaws of their character which for many people encourages an element of personal reflection. The term Sue Jennings coined 'dramatic distancing' (1992) often allows participants to see elements of their own behaviour and identity through the lens of the character in ways which may otherwise be too painful or difficult for them to cope with.

The rehearsals provide the space to rekindle the feeling of being a normal human being again. Confidence, achievement, self-respect, team-work, passion, dedication and belief all come alive in a place where they are often in short supply. The power of the group is evident from the commitment shown by the actors, many of whom describe it as the best thing they have done since coming to prison. It unites, empowers and lifts up those involved, placing them in a space of new possibilities. They constantly strive to learn, develop and become more than what they were; it is a place for those who want to be more or to loosen the grip that prison has on them and their identity. Whilst it may seem an unusual location for a collaborative theatre company perhaps prison is one of the places where such an endeavour is needed the most. The worth of the company cannot be truly measured in words, it has to be experienced to see the passion with which these men commit to their productions and themselves as they dare to believe, often for the first time in years or decades.

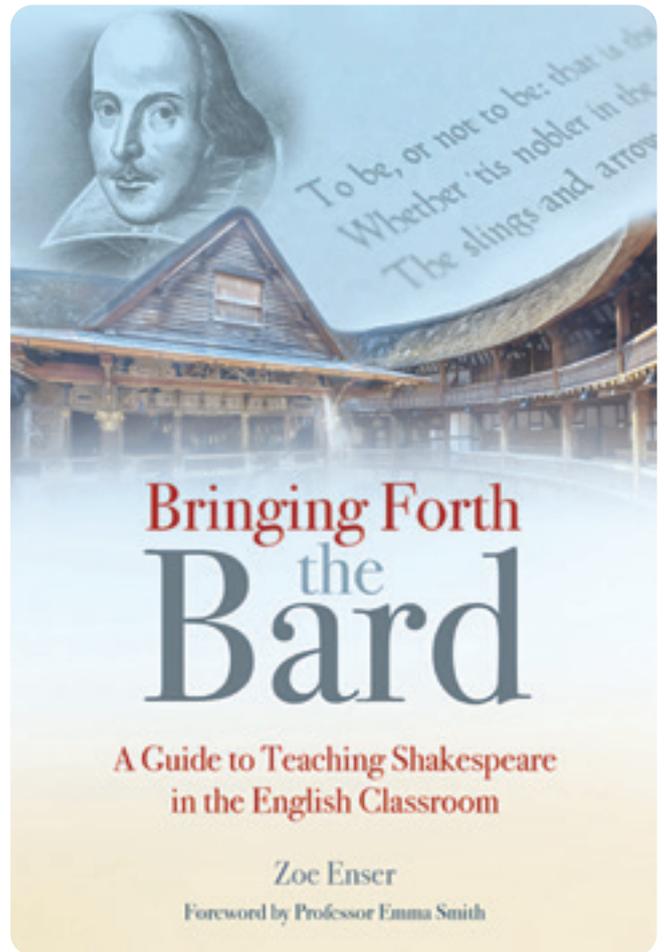
eXTRACT FROM *Bringing Forth the Bard: A guide to teaching Shakespeare in the English classroom.*
© Zoe Enser and Crown House Publishing, 2022

BRINGING FORTH HIS THEMES (PP. 81–83) SEXUALITY

When Carol Ann Duffy talks about her own reimagining of Anne Hathaway in her poem of that title, she presents Shakespeare as a sexual man. In her poem she explores the mutually pleasurable sexual relationship between the two, and this is something she takes not only from biographical details of their lives, albeit ones which had long periods of separation, but from his writing. He is the man who wrote poetry whilst others 'dribbled' prose, and it is from his writing that she draws this inference. As much as Shakespeare writes of romantic love and gender relationships, he writes about sexual relationships. From bawdy double entendres in plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*, to the heartbreaking melodies of Ophelia in *Hamlet* (Act IV, sc. v), and deeply passionate sexual relationships in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Othello*, he is as keen to explore this aspect of human interaction as he is to examine others.

Shakespeare certainly enjoys a pun too, toying with innuendo as well as more serious explorations of the consequences of unfettered sexual desire, untampered by the bonds of marriage. Perhaps most strikingly we can see this in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play very much reimagined by the Victorians as one which was both suitable and accessible to children, with the promise of magical folk and fairy tales. However, the implied sexual relationships in the play are complex, with partner swapping, the aggressive sexual desire of the women in the play who are prepared to submit or dominate to their satisfaction, and even bestiality in the form of the Titania and Bottom interlude. As Titania draws Bottom to her 'flowery bed' and kisses his 'large donkey ears' (*Mids. N D.*, IV, i, 1 and 4), the performance can either underplay or emphasise the implications for the audience. Whilst what would be shown on the stage would have been limited due to censorship laws, the connotations here are strong and would not be lost on the audience.

This is not to say these relationships are not unproblematic ones. As much as Helena, seeking to be beaten by her love interest if that means he will love her, talks of a particular desire, it also speaks volumes about the gender roles too, once again reminding us of the dominance and submission



“sexuality and sexual violence are always something we need to reflect on in terms of how much to explore this in the classroom. it is a question we need to grapple with as teachers.”

in plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew*. Sexuality and sexual violence are always something we need to reflect on in terms of how much to explore this in the classroom. It is a question we need to grapple with as teachers; there are both references to and actual rape which takes place within his stories, and we need to gauge how we approach this in terms of the maturity of our students and sensitivity of approach. In terms of references to sex, students often delight as they see the double meanings emerge at the start of *Romeo and Juliet*, as the servants draw their 'naked weapon,' but are understandably horrified at the further references to maids who will be thrust against the wall and 'maidenheads' (I, i, 29). Once they begin to examine the words of the Porter in *Macbeth* as he muses on the effect alcohol has on desire and the ability to do the deed, they are equally amused.

They are also often intrigued by the discussions around Shakespeare's own sexuality – especially those which emerge from studying Sonnet 20 – as the mystery of the man behind the art is always an appealing one, but this will remain for us to judge how far to explore what that tells us about the writer (something to approach with caution) as opposed to that of the form and context (advice to a younger man as opposed to one which reveals same-sex desire). But to study *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (with the inclusion of 'nothing' often used during this period to signify the sexual organs, both piquing students' interest as well as setting them up for the focus of the play) without making reference to the more risqué elements would be to lose something. As always, though, in your curriculum you will need to make a decision about what to include, and when, in order to ensure students can engage with the most important elements of his writing without becoming derailed into supposition or concerns about the more adult themes.

How to teach it

Exploring themes is central to all we do in English literature, especially as we delve into conceptual understanding and the relevance of the text to the modern audience. We both want students to see the relevance of the texts to their daily lives, as well as to engage with the debates and discussions which surround the concepts, spanning not only Shakespeare's work but the work of many, many writers since.

“IN YOUR CURRICULUM YOU WILL NEED TO MAKE A DECISION ABOUT WHAT TO INCLUDE, AND WHEN, IN ORDER TO ENSURE STUDENTS CAN ENGAGE WITH THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF HIS WRITING WITHOUT BECOMING DERAILED INTO SUPPOSITION OR CONCERNS ABOUT THE MORE ADULT THEMES.”

One important thing to note is how quickly many of the themes which will be central to his plays are drawn out in the first scenes and speeches. So, if we were to look at the opening speech of *King Lear* we will see he introduces us to the division and disorder which will become the focus of the play, and *Macbeth* tells us immediately not to trust what we are about to see, plunging us into uncertainty and unnatural events, where duplicity is the order of the day with the witches' line 'fair is foul' (*Macb.*, I, i, 9). These are the main points to focus on as we then see the action unfold and a close study of openings, once students are familiar with plot and character, can yield a great deal of insight into what these themes are.

References

- Carol Ann Duffy, 'Anne Hathaway' in *The World's Wife* (New York: Macmillan, 1999), p. 24.

HAVE YOU READ ALL 22 ISSUES OF TEACHING SHAKESPEARE?



Visit www.britishshakespeare.ws/education/teaching-shakespeare/ for more information and access to all issues

