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978-1-108-97216-1 — Teaching Shakespeare and His Sisters
An Embodied Approach
Emma Whipday
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Introduction

What are we teaching, when we teach Shakespeare? Today, the Shakespeare classroom is often also a rehearsal room, which encourages students to 'minimize the distinction' between literary and theatrical ways of approaching these plays (Bevington, 2016, p. 44). We therefore teach Shakespeare plays as both literary texts and cues for theatrical performance. Much of this approach has been pioneered by the education departments of theatres and cultural institutions closely identified with the works of Shakespeare, often with a school-centred focus on a 'rehearsal room pedagogy' that involves putting Shakespeare 'on its feet' (Winston, 2015, pp. 53–74) and in 'students' mouths' (Folger Shakespeare Library, 'The Folger Method'). As Fiona Banks writes,

> Reading his plays without any form of active engagement, without his words in our mouths and emotions and actions in our bodies, is like trying to engage with a piece of music by looking at the notes on the page but not listening to the music itself… (2013, p. 3)[1]

Each of these approaches – to 'feet', 'mouths' and 'bodies '– takes embodiment as the central framework through which the works of Shakespeare can be taught. Rex Gibson, in his influential *Teaching Shakespeare*, likewise suggests that 'a Shakespeare script is a blueprint', and that 'active learning' is necessary to enable students to engage with Shakespeare's 'plays as plays' (1998, p. vi). These authors argue that Shakespeare's plays are written for embodied performance, and therefore reading these plays with and through bodies and voices enables an understanding of the plays that isn't accessible via silent reading or text-based study.

An emphasis on Shakespeare's plays as best understood in performance is also increasingly common in English Literature university classrooms, although a focus on what Milla Cozart Riggio calls the 'theatrical values' of Shakespeare's plays (1999, pp. 3–4) is still more likely to be theoretical than practical. Neil Thew's 2006 survey of fifty-one higher education institutions

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[1] See also Cohen, 2018, which offers the motto 'always perform'.

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in Britain revealed that 'performance activities are relatively little used [in the teaching of Shakespeare] at present' (p. 18); as Edward Rocklin argued in 2005, teaching Shakespeare through performance involves 'reframing' the 'practices traditionally employed in the literary study of drama' (p. xvi). Nearly two decades later, my own experiences (and those of colleagues) have suggested that some students (and, indeed, teachers) of English Literature at university level may be wary of the reframing and disciplinary boundary-crossing involved in participating in drama exercises in the literature classroom.[2]

Teaching Shakespeare and His Sisters: An Embodied Approach argues for such reframing and boundary-crossing. This Element explores the possibilities of active, embodied learning as a tool to inform literary analysis; such an approach does not 'minimise' the distinction between the literary and the theatrical, but, rather, demonstrates how an informed theatrical approach to a Shakespearean playtext can open up possibilities for literary analysis. An 'embodied' approach involves invoking the senses (particularly sight, hearing, and our 'sixth' sense, proprioception – the sense of the body in space), and inviting students to engage with playtexts as situated in (and shaped by) the time, space, and structures of performance.[3] *Teaching Shakespeare and His Sisters* offers a range of practical pedagogical activities to demonstrate how such an approach can provide a kinaesthetic way of unpacking the language, staging, and ideology of Shakespeare's plays – and those of his 'sisters'. In so doing, this Element suggests that teaching through performance and embodiment can do more than draw attention to the theatrical context of the playhouse; it can also offer an opportunity to engage with the wider performance contexts of early modern England – contexts in which women, as well as men, participate in play-making.

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[2] I am grateful to my Literature and Drama colleagues at Eleanor Rycroft's University of Bristol event on Early Modern Digital Practice, 16 December 2020, for discussing the differing disciplinary expectations brought by students (and teachers).

[3] See Swale, 2015, p. xvi. On the benefits of an embodied approach to learning, see for example Wagner Cook, Mitchell, and Goldin-Meadow, 2008; and Abrahamson and Sánchez-García, 2016, pp. 203–39.

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There are political and pedagogical reasons for teaching Shakespeare in the context of the theatre-making of his sisters: as an act of feminist historical recovery that seeks to introduce students to marginalised voices from the past, and to animate these voices through embodied reading. Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi note that one twenty-first-century habit of learning is the 'explicit exploration of identity' (2016, pp. 5, 1): teaching Shakespeare alongside his sisters enables students to explore the questions of identity that 'preoccupy' our twenty-first-century students, while offering a more complex, more nuanced, and more informed understanding of both early modern theatrical culture, and women's experiences in early modern England. Over the past fifty years of teaching Shakespeare, feminist perspectives have, as Phyllis Rackin puts it, 'transformed how we teach Shakespeare's plays' in relation to 'evidence of life experiences of women in Shakespeare's England' (2016, p. 10). Yet students are still likely to bring to the classroom certain assumptions about the 'oppressed' nature of women in the period, and about how Shakespeare's engagement with this is shaped by the 'all-male' early modern stage (a version of theatre history that has been challenged by recent research).[4]

Indeed, in his survey of UK university English teachers, Thew noted that '[t]he great majority of respondents discussed their sense of needing to help students examine and challenge their prior assumptions about Shakespeare; [and] his literary and historical contexts' (2006, p. 6).[5] These prior assumptions can be a Shakespeare teacher's greatest challenge; Derval Conroy and Danielle Clarke note that 'the sense of familiarity engendered by the presence of the Renaissance in popular culture' can be an 'obstacle' to student 'engagement with the specificities of a particular historical moment' (2011, p. 1).[6] The prevailing assumptions about early modern performance culture are, I find,

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[4] Rackin, 2016, p. 10. See Korda, 2011; A Bit Lit, 2021; and the work of Cockett et al, n.d.

[5] I am grateful to the school teachers and academics at the RSA Conference on Innovative Online Teaching, 30 June 2021, for sharing their own experiences of this, and enabling me to reflect on mine.

[6] Conroy and Clarke focus on teaching in the UK, the United States, Europe, and Australia. On the political implications of failing to defamiliarise the past, see Eklund and Hyman, 2019, p. 7.

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encapsulated by the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love* (though today's students are unlikely to have been born when that film was released). The only women who exist in Tom Stoppard and Mark Norman's vision of the theatrical world are: the nameless prostitutes who are moved spectators of *Romeo and Juliet*; a lusty seamstress who is passed around between the men of the company; Elizabeth I, who becomes Shakespeare's patron; and Viola de Lesseps, who cross-dresses as a boy in order to act in Shakespeare's play, but must then return to her elite world. Women, and their talents, exist only as sexual objects, or to enable or appreciate men's genius; it is the men who, ultimately, *are* the theatre. This is the narrative that many students will bring to the classroom. Exploring wider possibilities for female agency, creativity, and performance can offer students the opportunity to engage with questions of identity, to challenge the marginalisation of female voices in the past, and to attain a more nuanced understanding of how Shakespeare's plays engage with gendered experiences in early modern England.

An embodied approach to teaching Shakespeare, then, not only enables students to explore Shakespeare's theatrical potential by reading his plays as plays, but offers three further pedagogical benefits:

(1) In close reading: embodied activities are tools that can help students to close read literary and dramaturgical elements of early modern plays, from direct address and stage directions to gendered power dynamics.
(2) In reading Shakespeare's plays in relation to theatre history: an understanding of early modern cultures of performance (in and beyond the professional playhouse) can enable students to comprehend how these cultures shaped Shakespeare's playtexts.
(3) In accessing and analysing women's theatre-making: theatrical tools more commonly used to analyse plays for the professional stage can be applied to female-authored plays, female performances, and 'lost' female voices.

This Element demonstrates how an embodied, performance-based, active approach can assist students in developing insights about a historicised Shakespeare, situated within early modern cultural and performance contexts. In so doing, it provides practical instructions for incorporating this approach into the English Literature classroom.

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Teaching Shakespeare and His Sisters offers examples of, and reflections on, pedagogical strategies that are equally applicable to school students preparing for university, and to undergraduate English Literature students. The activities in this Element can also be, and have been, used in primary education, postgraduate education, rehearsal in a theatrical context, and teaching in a heritage context, but this Element does not focus on these contexts. Rather, its emphasis is on approaches to Shakespeare for students of English Literature, seeking to develop advanced skills in literary analysis and in a historically-informed understanding of Shakespeare. Such skills form the focus of many Shakespeare classrooms and seminar rooms at A-Level (in the UK), Advanced Placement (in the United States), or International Baccalaureate, as well as in undergraduate courses internationally. While many of these activities may be of use to Drama teachers, the emphasis here is not only on how these activities and approaches may facilitate a theatrical understanding of Shakespeare's plays, but also upon how they enable a literary, feminist, and historical understanding of Shakespeare's plays (and of early modern English culture more broadly). While some of these activities involve a form of reflective writing (Activity 1) or creative writing (Activity 7) less common to the Literature classroom, all of the activities in this Element are designed to facilitate the kinds of literary skills – close reading, the use of supporting textual evidence, engagement with pertinent historical and theatrical contexts – assessed by traditional forms of literature assessment, such as the essay.[7] They are not designed to function as a replacement of or alternative to literary analysis, but rather, to inform such analysis.

The teaching in this Element is 'research-led', in that it shares materials from my own research; I therefore signpost my research (as well as that of others), and point the reader towards the practice-as-research experiments that have informed the development of these activities.[8] It is also 'research-oriented'

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[7] These activities can also prepare students for more creative forms of assessment; Thompson and Turchi offer a rich range of creative assessment possibilities (2016).

[8] On 'research-led' teaching, see Healey, 2005, pp. 67–78. On 'practice-as-research', see for example Purcell, 2017. I am grateful to James Harriman-Smith for his insights when teaching our co-taught MA module 'Thinking Through Performance'.

(Healey, 2005), in that it enables students to experiment with the methodologies offered by the teacher. Practice-as-research in the study of Shakespeare and early modern drama can offer what have been described as ‘fleeting encounters with the past’ (Dustagheer, Jones, and Rycroft, 2017, p. 173) as part of ‘a living process where theatre is experienced as having a vibrant existence beyond texts’ (Cave, 2003, p. 11).[9] Engaging students in practice-as-research offers them the opportunity to experience the theatrical vibrancy of these historicised encounters. Furthermore, as Rocklin argues, a performance-framed teaching model calls attention to theatre as an ensemble practice, and to ‘the ways in which the players and playgoers must function as co-creators of the performance’ with the playwright (Rocklin, 2005, p. 73). This Element explores how students can themselves become ‘co-creators’ of the insights and analysis produced through these activities, offering the students the opportunity to become a source of authority in the classroom, as Section 1 further explores.

This Element is personal, drawn from my own research and teaching experiences, but it is also informed by pedagogical literature (both general and subject-specific) and by conversations with university and secondary-school teachers, both formal and informal. The activities in this Element are not my own – or rather, not uniquely my own. Teaching is collaborative, and many of these activities were developed with colleagues, created within the context of co-taught or team-taught modules, or inspired by the ideas of others. I am grateful to the colleagues in a range of teaching and performance contexts across universities, schools, and rehearsal rooms, whose expertise and generosity have shaped my teaching in general and these activities in particular.[10] Jessica Swale notes that no collection of drama games is original: ‘games, like the plots of plays, are continually shared, borrowed, adapted and recycled' (2015, p. x) – and this is equally true of these activities. The embodied approach itself was inspired by my own experience of learning from actor and theatre-maker Philip Bird, whose playful, enactive teaching methods inform many of these activities. And the most significant influence of all is that of my students: their engagement in shaping these activities has been integral (and some of their insights are quoted in Section 3 and the Conclusion).

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[9] See also Cox Jensen and Whipday, 2017.

[10] My debts of gratitude are too many to enumerate here, and many are specified in relation to particular activities below. I am particularly grateful to colleagues and collaborators at Shakespeare’s Globe and the American Shakespeare Center; to my teachers and colleagues at Oxford, UCL, King’s College London, and Newcastle University, with especial thanks to Helen Hackett; to Gill Woods, for her inspiring work in running Shakespeare Teachers’ Conversation; and to both Gill and Liam E. Semler for their transformative feedback on this Element.

Teaching Shakespeare and His Sisters offers a practical toolkit for school and university teachers seeking to incorporate creative, embodied, performance-based activities in the teaching of Shakespeare. This Element contains nine activities across three sections. Section 1 focuses upon teaching Shakespeare and embodiment through a playhouse context; Section 2 explores embodied ways of teaching female play-making and performance; and Section 3 reflects upon the possibilities for teaching Shakespeare through embodiment online, in the context of the shift to online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. To make the less familiar historical materials in Section 2 more accessible, explanations of the genres (masques, closet dramas, and witch trial accounts) are provided, and modern spelling extracts are available in the online appendices. Each activity in Sections 1 and 2 offers an optional follow-up activity; in Section 1, this offers a way to further develop the skills acquired in undertaking the original activity, while in Section 2, this offers a way to use the previous activity to explore a female-authored text. The activities in Section 3 are less specific, and therefore more broadly applicable; they can be applied to any early modern play.

The embodied activities in this Element are designed to develop a mode of reading: a way of paying attention to bodies in texts, and to plays as embodied texts. All the activities in this Element can be adjusted to accommodate disabled students for whom the requirement of movement through space might be a barrier to participation; in cases where this is not self-evident, I suggest ways it can be done. All activities are open to students using mobility aids. The activities in this Element aim to foster a playful, supportive, inclusive learning environment; this kind of embodied learning can be particularly helpful for students who prefer a kinaesthetic learning style, or for whom sustained text-based work and quiet classroom conditions can inhibit learning (see Whitfield, 2020). For students unable or unwilling to participate in the activities in Sections 1 and 2, Section 3 explores the ways in which an embodied approach can be facilitated digitally; the activities offered in this section can also be incorporated into a text-based classroom approach.

The most significant barrier to incorporating embodied activities in the classroom can be student discomfort, particularly among students who, in choosing a literature module, did not expect to learn through their bodies. The activities in this Element are designed to alleviate this discomfort through creating a participatory community in which students can work together, rather than a theatrical environment in which students might feel they are required to perform and be judged. These activities are designed to be performed by students simultaneously, so that there is no sense of some students being 'on display' to others; while many activities involve possibilities for students to volunteer to perform before the group, this is never a requirement, and in small group work, there are both 'actor' and 'director' roles available.

Active approaches to early modern performance, as Miranda Fay Thomas has observed of teaching with 'cue-scripts', offer students a way to embrace mistakes and the possibility for failure, and to 'liberate themselves from modern ideas of theatrical "perfection"' (2019, p. 128). Early modern playing conditions – including extremely limited rehearsal and a visible, audible, judging audience – required a playful, improvisatory, risky approach to the possibilities for failure, within a sociable performance context. Creating a supportive, playful learning environment that mimics the risk-taking, pleasure-seeking environments of early modern playhouses – where there is no expectation of rehearsed, polished performances, where all students are equally involved in experimenting together, where 'play' is emphasised, and where community is developed – can go a long way towards mitigating student anxiety, and building embodied confidence in the classroom. Inviting the students to imagine themselves as 'stepping back in time' can frame such activities in a playful way, while explaining how each activity develops historical awareness and skills in literary analysis can demonstrate the value of this approach.

This is not to suggest that discomfort can be avoided altogether; rather, that working through discomfort around embodied learning in a supportive environment can offer students (and teachers) both pedagogical and personal benefits. Student reflections on a third-year research-led module I co-designed and co-taught with Kate Chedgzoy, 'Gender, Power, and Performance in Early Modern Culture', suggest that discomfort need not be a barrier to participation. On this module, students were introduced to embodied learning in the first seminar, when they were invited (though not required) to participate in the first activity offered by this Element (Activity 1). This activity asks students to imaginatively 'embody' early modern men and women (of varying statuses), and then to reflect on their own embodied experience of intersecting identities, and how this shapes their experience of historicised embodiment. Further performance-based activities were incorporated into subsequent seminars. In an assessed reflective portfolio at the end of the module, many students noted that while they were 'initially apprehensive' about participating in Activity 1, they found embodied learning in practice was 'less daunting than [they] anticipated', and 'gain[ed] confidence' through participation. One student offered a particularly insightful reflection:

> I can remember my horror when we were asked to stand in the first seminar and enact the strides of different theatregoers . . . returning to our seats, my anxiety changed to determination – I wanted to enjoy participating in performance activities without feeling overwhelmed with discomfort when taking up space . . . Throughout this process of growth, I have gained a better understanding of staging relevant to Early Modern theatre, as well as a palpable increase in confidence that I will take through life.

Some students may feel apprehensive or daunted, or even (as in this case) horrified, at the possibility of participating in any kind of embodied learning in the literature classroom. This student frames her anxiety about embodied participation in relation to her expectations of a seated, text-based classroom (Monk et al., as proponents of 'Open-Space Learning', might describe this

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as learning ‘with chairs’ [2011, p. 6]); her ‘horror’ and ‘anxiety’ is invoked by being ‘asked to stand’, to leave the familiarity of learning in her seat. As this example demonstrates, leaning into this discomfort can enable students to gain both a ‘better understanding’ of early modern theatre and increased confidence in (and beyond) the classroom. This student went on to say:

> As a working-class woman, I have sometimes struggled to find confidence in academic settings . . . I have learned that I deserve to and should take up space (verbal and physical) . . . Active and unabashed participation is empowering[.][11]

For this student, paying embodied attention to historicised power dynamics enabled her to reflect on – and to transform – her experience of these dynamics today, ‘tak[ing] up space’ with both her body and her voice. The activities in this Element offer students the opportunity to ‘take up space’ in the Shakespeare classroom – and, by extension, in the academy, and even in the world beyond. ‘Active and unabashed participation’ in such activities can be confidence-building, ‘empowering’, and offer a way to reflect on (and even to mitigate) the societal inequalities that are likely to be present in the spatial and vocal politics of our teaching institutions.

The activities in this Element can be used independently, or in any order, with one exception: Activity 1, with which I suggest all teachers begin. Sonya Freeman Loftis argues that ‘Shakespeare criticism . . . often conveys a sense of the author as a disengaged and disembodied critic who reads the works of Shakespeare from an imagined impersonal viewpoint’ (2021, p. 2): inviting students to reflect on their own intersecting identities, and indeed, reflecting on our own identities as teachers, can be a first step towards a form of ‘engaged and embodied’ criticism, interrogating how these texts

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[11] I am grateful to all the students on the module for their active and engaged participation in difficult circumstances, and I am particularly grateful to those who generously permitted me to share their reflections here. I am also grateful to Kate Chedgzoy, with whom many of these seminars were co-taught, and whose teaching on this module has influenced – and inspired – my own.