Introduction: Firewalls and Activisms

In summer 2019, we found a room of our own. By ‘we’, I mean a group of seven Shakespeare students and me, their Shakespeare lecturer. The nexus of our identities is far more complex than the terms ‘Shakespeare students’ or ‘Shakespeare lecturer’ suggest because we are not defined by Shakespeare alone. I am a Shakespeare scholar and a woman of colour and a feminist teacher. The students are also scholars in various disciplines, including Shakespeare, and they are Black, Asian, and White women and men, some of whom identify as queer. This diversity is important to us and is something that we carry into our work. The room we found and founded was a digital room or, more specifically, it was a podcast. A podcast is a series of digital audio files (most commonly in MP3 or .wav format) that are distributed over the Internet using syndication, and it is also a space where these audio files are deposited online for subsequent asynchronous consumption. Thus, it can be understood both as an audio broadcast that listeners can subscribe and listen to as soon as it is released and a digital room where such audio files are collected to be enjoyed at leisure. We chose a podcast because we wanted to utilize both these properties that this medium-cum-space enables. In A Room of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf (1929) insists that women need a room for imaginative thinking and writing, and they require access to works by other women so that they can take courage from their predecessors. Through the podcast, we sought to create such a space within Shakespeare Studies which would both broadcast and store a range of women’s thoughts and voices. Therefore, the Women & Shakespeare podcast, which is now in its third series, features conversations with diverse women creatives and academics who are involved in making and interpreting Shakespeare.¹ We are not alone in this podcast universe or ‘podverse’ because, as Section 1 details, many Shakespeare podcasts are either created or hosted by or regularly feature women critics and practitioners (thereby

¹ www.womenandshakespeare.com. Deepest thanks to NYU for the Global Faculty Fund Award which financed the first series and to David Monteith – the best podcasting teacher ever.
emphasizing their scholarship and experience). In our collective desire to harness a podcast for gender equity, such Shakespeare podcasts can claim kinship with cyberfeminist academics, theorists, educators, practitioners, and activists who, as Jessie Daniels (2009) summarizes, have proved that ‘[i]nternet technologies can be an effective medium for resisting repressive gender regimes’ (101). Owing to this close alliance, this Element argues that podcasting technology is already playing or has the potential to play an important role in shaping a Shakespeare pedagogy that is empowering for women. In other words, this Element both envisions and analyses a feminist Shakespeare ‘podagogy’.

The term ‘podagogy’ is already in circulation; a slew of podcasts include the word in their names. For instance, Podagogies is hosted by Chelsea Temple Jones and Curtis Maloley, Podagogy by Austin Davis and Laura Milligan, Popular Podagogy by the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University, and Tes Podagogy by the writers and editors of the Times Educational Supplement. While none of these podcasters explain the term, it is evident that they are using this portmanteau word to signal that their medium is a podcast and their subject is Education research and practice. So, in invoking this term, they are not necessarily thinking about incorporating podcasts into teaching. Neil Verma’s employment of the term is closer to the way in which I am using it because he deploys it to discuss the assimilation of podcasts in classroom teaching. He makes a further distinction between ‘Podagogy 1.0’, which is when existing podcasts or bespoke podcast episodes recorded by the instructor are

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2 Although podcasts do come in different formats, this Element is concerned with podcasts that provide commentary on Shakespeare through conversations, lectures, or interviews. This focus reflects the most common formats adopted by Shakespeare podcasters.

3 www.ryerson.ca/centre-for-excellence-in-learning-and-teaching/teaching-resources/Podagogies/.


5 https://podcast.cfrc.ca/category/podagogy/.

6 https://uk-podcasts.co.uk/podcast/tes-podagogy.
introduced and discussed in seminars to supplement lectures or reading material, and ‘Podagogy 2.0’, which ‘emphasizes the integration of podcast creation on the part of students’ (Verma, 2021: 142). Thus, in Podagogy 2.0, students ‘learn “by” podcasting rather than “through” the podcasts of others’ (142). I am taking advantage of the rising currency of and Verma’s theorization of this term while also extending its purview and its application in feminist teaching. Feminist podagogy, as I am defining it, involves thinking about and practicing ways in which podcasts usher feminist ways of teaching and learning. So, feminist podagogy includes using podcasts as repositories of information that is useful in feminist teaching in the sense of Podagogy 1.0, and it encourages students to create their own feminist podcasts along the lines of Podagogy 2.0. But it also entails putting more pressure on affordances of podcasts such as amplification, community building, or archiving that align with feminist methodologies in order to facilitate a gender-inclusive mode of teaching and foster feminist conversations.

Feminist approaches such as these are necessary for Shakespeare Studies because women have not been well served by Shakespeare higher education. One of the spaces in which this becomes visible in academia is the arena of conferences and public talks. For instance, in 2016, at the World Shakespeare Congress (WSC), which is perhaps ‘one of the largest gatherings of Shakespeareans and early modernists on the planet’ (Williams, 2016), this marginalization touched a nerve with many women delegates. Nora Williams (2016) reports how ‘out of seven advertised plenary speakers … there were two women and two people of colour – Ayanna Thompson, as a black woman, counts for one in each category, and she wasn’t even speaking on her own’. This statistic was felt keenly by Williams, and she wondered ‘to what extent are we complicit in perpetuating … all-male, all-white panels, unbalanced plenary line-ups, and the comfortable notion that “working on it” is enough by our mere attendance? … What but our continued, insistent presence can change the demographics of the decision makers?’. She was not the only one. Several others felt let down and took to the social media platform, Twitter, to air their dissatisfaction. One of the accounts which adopts the persona of William Shakespeare – that is, it imagines how Shakespeare might have written/tweeted were he on Twitter – tweeted
satirically that ‘when we hadn’t any women on the stage, we’d at least dress up a few of the boys and fake it. #WSCongress16’.7

Furthermore, women whose identities intersect with other marginalized groups find themselves even more disadvantaged in Shakespeare higher education owing to a host of systemic factors. Wendy Lennon, founder of the ‘Shakespeare, Race & Pedagogy’ initiative and online event (2021), is a schoolteacher as well as a doctoral student in the United Kingdom (UK), and she writes about her ‘anger and sadness at being silenced’ (Lennon, 2021: 7) as a woman of colour from a working-class background. She explains that ‘out of [her] supervisor’s four students’, she was the only one ‘not to receive funding’ for her research and reports that it was only in 2019 when she was first ‘taught by a woman of colour’ (Lennon, 2021: 7, 6). She recounts,

the reason I wanted to create my event is because I didn’t feel that there was a space for me and so I had to create my own. Even though I had made attempts to be involved, my voice wasn’t allowed or welcomed. But, I feel that this work is so important. I know that it’s beneficial for everybody and so I felt that I needed to do this and not just for me.8

Similarly, Farah Karim-Cooper, Co-director of Education at Shakespeare’s Globe confides, ‘growing up in the Shakespeare industry as an undergraduate, grad student, I didn’t feel powerful as a female and perhaps a woman of colour as well. That feeling stays with you for quite some time and you get imposter syndrome, and you think “I don’t belong in this field”’ (Karim-Cooper, 2020). To these voices, I will add my own. Although I was lucky to be taught Shakespeare by a woman of colour as an undergraduate student,9 I remember how much of a stranger I felt at Shakespeare conferences as a doctoral student and decided to avoid these events, even though these were deemed significant both to find a foothold in the field and to keep abreast of current research. As

7 See tweet: https://twitter.com/Shakespeare/status/761535087494230018.
8 Personal Communication, Informal Interview, January 2022.
9 I will forever be indebted to my lecturer Amina Alyal who taught me how to engage with Shakespeare.
further examples in Section 1 demonstrate, this was because, like the 2016 WSC, the keynote speakers were overwhelmingly men despite the number of female academics in ‘English Language & Literature’ area in the UK outweighing the number of male academics according to the data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the period from 2014/15 to 2019/20 (HESA, 2021). So, the reverse statistic in conference keynotes signalled to me that voices such as mine were not worthy of an audience of Shakespeare experts.

Considering that Shakespeare carries immense cultural capital and is a prominent presence in the curriculum for English, Drama, and Liberal Arts degrees, the fact that women students and educators are made to feel outsiders in this field is worth pausing over. This situation is especially troubling since there is a long history of critical interventions in the field from the perspectives of Feminist Shakespeares, Queer Studies, Global Shakespeares, Postcolonial Studies, Early-modern Critical Race Studies, and Disability Studies, accompanied by struggles for diversity in casting and creating in Shakespeare cultural industries through which marginalized communities have both claimed a stake in the ownership of Shakespeare and demonstrated the value of interrogating his texts in relation to gender, race, sexuality, culture, and disability. However, due to structural and systemic inequalities, it takes more than the existence of scholarship or radical performances to produce a cultural shift. Speaking at the ‘Shakespeare, Race & Pedagogy’ event, Nandini Das points out that for her ‘one of the most positive things that has emerged over the last couple of years’ in academia is the recognition of absolute bedrock scholarship [in relation to Shakespeare and Race] that had already happened, in some cases, a couple of decades before this. Foundational work by people like Kim Hall, by Imtiaz Habib, by Jyotsna Singh, those are beginning to be examined and celebrated in a way that they hadn’t perhaps been done in the wider academic network or academic landscape.

(Das & Price, 2021)

Although Das is hopeful, her statement indicates that there is a gap of time before critical fields and scholarship that challenge race and gender
hegemonies make their way into the mainstream critical trends, curricula, and teaching practice. It is telling that 2 out of the 3 scholars identified by Das are women of colour as it can take decades before research by women of colour is given acknowledgement and they get invited as keynote speakers or even given their due as experts in our classrooms. Another reason why developments in scholarship or performance do not automatically impact pedagogy either in practice or theory is that

[despite formal education being the most common way in which the population encounters his work, and hence formative of attitudes towards it, education has been historically under-examined in scholarly Shakespearean publications and at international conferences. This is especially conspicuous in comparison to the volume of titles and seminars on performance history, literary criticism and the textual study of Shakespeare.

(Olive, 2015: 4)

Perhaps this is why even monumental shifts in scholarship are often not examined in relation to pedagogy. For example, a Shakespeare academic notes how ‘[a]s a student of literature in the early 2000s, I did not encounter books such as [Kim F. Hall’s] Things of Darkness or Ania Loomba’s Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama’ (Refskou, 2021) even though these monographs were first published in 1995 and 1987 respectively. As Kimberly Anne Coles, Hall, and Ayanna Thompson remind us, ‘[r]ecognition matters. In both our classrooms and in our research, it is important to remember John Guillory’s maxim – the syllabus is the canon’ (n.d.). So, this time lag and reluctance in recognition are, in turn, responsible for feelings of disempowerment that scores of women, including scholars such as Williams, Lennon, Karim-Cooper, Refskou, or I, have felt as students and educators in the field of Shakespeare Studies.

However, we are beginning to see a change and the interest generated by the ‘Shakespeare, Race & Pedagogy’ online event, which attracted 619 online attendees and over 500 views of the recorded sessions, exemplifies the increased focus on linking cutting-edge research with pedagogy. Sometimes this impetus has come from educators, although often ‘our students are demanding it. They
want these conversations to happen’ (Karim-Cooper, 2020). But as we adopt digital technologies and Web 2.0 (or the participatory web) resources in our teaching, do we facilitate or hinder these advances? This is a question that has not received due attention from either Feminist Shakespeares or Shakespeare Digital Humanities (DH). The otherwise comprehensive and invaluable second edition of *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* (Callaghan, 2016) does not include a chapter on the interaction between digital tools and feminist theory, practice, or teaching. Digital Humanities in general has also been slow to take stock of pedagogy in its discussions. As Brett D. Hirsch (2012) argued, pedagogy is often an ‘afterthought’ or ‘tacked-on’ (5) in critical discussions of digital humanities. In *Digital Humanities Pedagogy*, he urges that ‘we owe it to ourselves (and indeed to our students) to pay more than lip service to pedagogy in our field’ (Hirsch, 2012: 6). Since Hirsch’s call to action, several books and articles on digital tools have explicitly addressed pedagogical questions in Shakespeare Studies. Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan’s edited collection *Shakespeare and the Digital World* (2014) and Stephen O Neill’s *Shakespeare and YouTube* (2014) both carve out space for discussing digital Shakespeare pedagogy. The recently published *Shakespeare and Digital Pedagogy* (2022), edited by Diana E. Henderson and Kyle Sebastian Vitale, is entirely devoted to pedagogy, as the title suggests, and its contributors explore intersections between digital resources and the way in which these can be used to discuss gender, race, identity, culture, and performance, thereby strengthening that important connectivity between diverse Shakespeare scholarship and digital pedagogy. *Podcasts and Feminist Shakespeare Pedagogy* inserts podcasts into this conversation. While scholars in the Henderson and Vitale collection and elsewhere devote entire chapters or monographs to digital technologies such as blogs (Kirwan, 2014a), YouTube (O’Neill, 2014), Wikipedia (Moberly, 2018), databases (Ng-Gagneux, 2022; Rogers, 2022), virtual learning environments (Sullivan, 2014), and virtual reality (Wittek & McInnis, 2021) in Shakespeare teaching, the use of podcasts has not been discussed at length despite (or perhaps because of?) its attractiveness to women scholars and creatives. In this

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10 Cyrus Mulready is the only contributor to include more than a brief reference to podcasting in Shakespeare teaching within these recent publications. He mentions that three of his students ‘recorded a rich discussion about gender power
Element, I examine how digital humanities, Shakespeare, and feminist conversations intersect in twenty-first-century teaching through a detailed discussion of feminist pedagogy or using podcasts as cyberfeminist educational tools in Shakespeare Studies.

One of the reasons for my optimism regarding podcasts is that the very technology that enabled it was born out of resistance. As Stommel (2014) reminds us, ‘we are better users of technology when we are thinking critically about the nature and effects of that technology’. The origin story of podcasting indicates that the ‘nature’ of this technology might be amenable to feminist purposes. In 2001, Christopher Lydon and Mary McGarth were working on a radio show, ‘The Connection’ for WBUR, a station owned by Boston University. When they insisted on an ownership stake in the programme that they were making, Lydon and McGarth were suspended on grounds of insubordination. At the very time that they were looking for an alternative distribution outlet, Dave Winer, a blogger, had become successful at transporting sound files through RSS – the syndication technology that enables users to subscribe to a newsletter, blog, or a podcast and be notified when it is published. Winer, Lydon, and McGarth decided to collaborate and the latter’s audio programme was shared through RSS feeds, giving birth to the podcasting technology in June 2003. So, podcasting was born out of resistance to ownership by a mainstream radio station. Lydon asserts that ‘podcasting is different to radio – institutionally as well as functionally’ (quoted in Frizzell, 2016). He elaborates that it ‘was born out of the despair around the Iraq War. It was a political response to a giant breakdown in the American conversation, in the world conversation. I went to New York to and politics, following [their] study of Twelfth Night in the form of a podcast episode. It is interesting that his students chose podcast as a medium for their discussion of gender power and politics as part his Digital Scribes assignment even though they had the choice to respond via ‘a video, a multimedia webpage, a podcast, a collection of memes, an alternative lesson plan, a series of tweets, or other social media expressions’ (Mulready, 2022: 19, 14). However, Mulready does not remark on the link or discuss podcasts any further.

This account of podcasting’s origin story is largely based on Sterne, Morris, Baker, & Freire (2008).
Podcasts and Feminist Shakespeare Pedagogy

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demonstrate and *The New York Times* didn’t even cover it. Podcasting was about people speaking up in a time of traditional media oblivion’ (quoted in Frizzell, 2016). Therefore, opposition to traditional forms of power and media is encoded in podcasting’s DNA, making it a tool suited to feminist use.

Another reason to celebrate podcasting is that women are tuning in – at least in the United States of America (US) and UK. A special study on women podcast listeners in the US (Edison Research & Triton Digital, 2019) showed that the gap between men and women podcast listeners was rapidly closing in 2019. In a bid to dive deeper into podcast listener trends, they surveyed ‘rookie’ (those who started listening in the last six months) and ‘veteran’ (those who started listening three or more years ago) monthly podcast listeners, they discovered that although the number of men who are veteran listeners is higher, the majority of rookies are women – a further testament to women’s increasing adoption of the medium. Moreover, it was revealed that women, on average, listen to more podcasts per week and spend significantly longer time with podcasts compared to men. The 2020 study (Edison Research & Triton Digital, 2020) was more promising because the gender gap in monthly podcast listeners closed completely. The statistics are less impressive in the UK, with the 2020 Spring MIDAS (Measurement of Internet Delivered Audio Services) report (RAJAR – Radio Joint Audience Research, 2020) revealing that 46% of podcast listeners are women as compared to 54% men, but this data, too, is reflective of the US trend because this is an appreciable growth from the figures in the 2018 report (RAJAR, 2018) where women were only 37% of the listening population in the UK. Cumulatively, these figures are good news because there is a high chance that teachers will find women engaged and interested in this digital technology.

However, the sense of optimism at the heart of this Element is not jejune. The early cyberfeminists were enthused by the ‘subversive potential of human/machine cyborgs, identity tourism, and disembodiment’ (Daniels, 2009: 101) that could be offered in cyberspace, but the critiques of these cyberfeminisms as well as the everyday experience of women using digital technologies have made it evident that offline oppressions of race and gender are persistently present online. This should be an important consideration for digital Shakespeare pedagogy. According to Claire Battershill and Shawna Ross (2017),
when we think about using new technologies in the classroom, the hardest part is getting started. This is not because of a lack of available tools and methods, but rather a surfeit: when there are so many possibilities for activities, platforms and resources, it can be tremendously difficult to separate the useful from the useless and the time-saving from the time-consuming. (1)

It seems that Shakespeare educators have overcome the hardest part and employ a dizzying range of digital technologies in their teaching. Twitter, for instance, is a popular tool amongst academics because it functions ‘as an asynchronous conference that never ends and takes all comers’ (Ross quoted in Battershill & Ross, 2017: 185), and by using it in tandem with their seminars and courses, educators can include students in this conference. However, it is alarming when we juxtapose these educational possibilities with statements made by Twitter CEOs through the years:

We suck at dealing with abuse and trolls on the platform and we’ve sucked at it for years . . . We lose core user after core user by not addressing simple trolling issues that they face every day. I’m frankly ashamed of how poorly we’ve dealt with this issue during my tenure as CEO. It’s absurd. There’s no excuse for it. (Dick Costolo, former Twitter CEO, quoted in Tiku & Newton, 2015)

We see voices being silenced on Twitter every day. We’ve been working to counteract this for the past 2 years . . . We prioritized this in 2016. We updated our policies and increased the size of our teams. It wasn’t enough. (Jack Dorsey, current Twitter CEO, 2017)12

We love instant, public, global messaging and conversation. It’s what Twitter is and it’s why we’re here. But we didn’t fully

12 See his tweets: https://twitter.com/jack/status/919028949434241024.