Face to face encounters are the essence of dramatic art. This collection shows us that close reading – knowing the score – is the condition of possibility for theatrical performance. The essays here feature some of the freshest and most original writing on Shakespeare I have seen in a long time.

Michael D. Bristol, McGill University

Explores the drama of proximity and co-presence in Shakespeare’s plays

This book celebrates the theatrical excitement and philosophical meanings of human interaction in Shakespeare. On stage and in life, the face is always window and mirror, representation and presence. A distinguished group of contributors examine the emotional and ethical surplus that appears between faces in the activity and performance of human encounter on stage. By transitioning from face as noun to face as verb – to face, outface, interface, efface, deface, sur-face – chapters reveal how Shakespeare’s plays discover conflict, betrayal and deception as well as love, trust and forgiveness between faces and the bodies that bear them.

Matthew James Smith is Associate Professor of English at Azusa Pacific University.

Julia Reinhard Lupton is Professor of English at the University of California, Irvine.

Cover image: Ian McKellen and Judi Dench in Macbeth, at the Other Place, Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1976 © Laurence Burns / ArenaPAL

Cover design: www.hayesdesign.co.uk

TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH SHAKESPEARE

Why Renaissance Literature Matters Now

EDINBURGH University Press
edinburghuniversitypress.com
Introduction: Making Meaning and Doing Justice with Early Modern Texts

Wendy Beth Hyman and Hillary Eklund

[Poetry’s end is] well-doing and not . . . well-knowing only.¹

Formal innovation (of the sort that matters in literature) is a testing of the operations of meaning, and is therefore a kind of ethical experimentation. To respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation: understand how little you understand me, translate my untranslatability, learn me by heart and thus learn the otherness that inhabits the heart.²

On January 22, 2017, in a “Meet the Press” interview that soon became infamous, Donald Trump’s advisor Kellyanne Conway defended the exaggerated claims made by White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer about attendance numbers at Trump’s presidential inauguration. According to Spicer, “This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period—both in person and around the globe.”³ Given the chance to correct Spicer’s exaggeration or supplant it with a less blatantly fraudulent form of presidential praise, Conway made the curious choice to double down on error, positing Spicer’s claim as an “alternative fact.” What universe was this? As citizens and journalists alike struggled to make sense of the prevarication, an answer soon emerged: it was a universe composed, to alarming degree, of these and other “alternative facts.”⁴ A new Orwellian era dawned, one poised to distort not only interpretation, but also memory—one in which history risked being not only difficult to understand but also increasingly difficult to recover.

The political lie, of course, is nothing new, even if it was never before delivered by such an unblinking propagandist. Conway’s and Spicer’s staggering adherence to information so demonstrably falsifiable, however, is new, and it bespeaks the emergence of a still-darker corollary
trend—a corrosive distrust of the sectors of our society devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. Where a class-conscious earlier generation might have identified “bosses” as antagonistic to their freedom and self-determination, that reviled position seems now to be occupied by “experts,” including researchers and educators. Informed dialogue in the United States is increasingly imperiled: replaced by ideological extremism, motivated reasoning, and vitriol. Increasingly, these trends are emerging with equal force in Europe, South America, and beyond.

This political climate has newly mobilized many within academia, both in the United States, where we reside, and among our colleagues around the globe. Beyond merely learning to identify quality refereed journals, students must now learn how to distinguish real from “fake news,” facts from “alternative facts,” legitimate experts from charismatic ideologues, diploma mills from reputable institutions. College campuses, like abortion clinics or political organizations, have been subject to new forms of subterfuge, secret recordings, and professor watch lists. Marching for science has become a radical act. In this cultural climate, helping our students evaluate evidence, parse rhetoric, and engage in a thoughtful contest of ideas forms a crucial bulwark against the forces of political expediency and anti-intellectualism.

Still, it is not enough. This collection has grown from the conviction that each of us must also use our expertise to promote justice in more direct ways. Just as we count on our colleagues in climate science to speak up against the voices that deny global warming, we humanists must counter the forces that denigrate knowledge-based discourses, threaten humane values, and whitewash historical events. Those of us who teach Renaissance literature specifically must refuse the appropriation of canonical figures or cultural formations to bolster nefarious ends. Shakespeare, perhaps more than any other literary figure, has been trotted out as a symbol of white cultural supremacy. It is incumbent upon us to call out and correct this dangerous lie. In a similar way, white power groups attempting to reconfigure European culture as a white monolith have availed themselves of medieval and Celtic symbols that, they believe, emblematize that idealized past. We need to help our students recognize such false associations. Countless examples illustrate the stakes of unresisted historical erasures: fatal encounters between unarmed black people and police officers, white supremacist rallies on college campuses, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment, anti-Semitism, the re-emergence of hate groups, and even explicit Nazism. It is a grim era for American and European democracy, and, for that reason, there has never been a more crucial time to articulate the ethical value of study, reflection, and engagement.
Yet at precisely the moment when expert knowledge and careful thinking are needed most, many of us find ourselves pressured to instrumentalize and monetize our work in the classroom. Burgeoning student debt and concerns about employment prospects have understandably prompted college-bound students and their families to seek the reassurances of pre-professional, skills-based instruction; institutions eager to attract new students roll out increasingly specialized programs deemed more practical than an expansively formulated liberal arts education. As a statement by faculty, students, and alumni from the University of Aberdeen argued in 2016, institutions of higher education find themselves at a juncture that offers two ways forward:

One is to follow the business model of higher education to its logical conclusion, in a competition for students, research funding and ratings that values constant change as an end in itself. The other is to rediscover the civic purpose of the university as a necessary component of the constitution of a democratic society, with the responsibility for educating its citizens and furnishing them with the wisdom and understanding that will enable them to fashion a world fit for future generations to live in.5

If the logic of the first path casts the study of literature as an unaffordable luxury—one at best ancillary to imperatives to train the workforce of the future—the logic of the second path insists instead on the centrality of literary and humanistic studies to fostering the prudent discernment required for civic participation.

A spate of recent work has attempted to reimagine humanist—and in particular literary critical—thought amidst the rising cost and increasingly vocational emphasis of higher education. In The Work of Literature in an Age of Post-Truth, Christopher Schaberg contemplates the study and teaching of literature as an antidote to cultural forces that, in prizing speed, efficiency, and the superficial assimilation of information, dangerously elide the value of slow, careful reading. Schaberg views the classroom as a “resilient” space where students’ confounding experience of a changing world—including institutional pressures to adorn the “student experience” with newfangled innovations—can be thoughtfully considered. The aim, he writes, is for students to develop a critical habit of mind, “a comportment toward the world as it is, with a mind to changing it for the better.”6 If Schaberg paints the classroom as a site of utopian reflection, he does not discount its potential as a site of revolutionary action. Indeed, as Derek R. Ford proposes in Politics and Pedagogy in the “Post-Truth” Era, the mantle of “post-truth” can be appropriated “to agitate the political nature of truth and, more importantly, the pedagogy of truth,” enabling teachers and students
not just to understand “the power relations that compose truths” but also to explore how “we engage ourselves, each other, and the world in transformative processes as we formulate and realize these truths.”

As much as this book has been spurred by recent conversations, it is also deeply informed by a longer history of critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire outlines a model for learning and teaching that is oriented toward developing “critically transitive consciousness”: a more sophisticated interpretive framework for grappling with complexity, increased critical flexibility, heightened receptivity to new information and methods, and improved reasoning. Central to Freire’s model is dialogue, through which learners reflect on the problems that arise in their relation to the objects of study and the world. By leading students to see how they can change their relationship to the external world, Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” offers a model of both individual and social transformation. Similarly, what bell hooks terms the “pedagogy of hope” describes modes of teaching and learning that do “not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism or class elitism.”

Teaching, hooks posits, is “rooted in hopefulness,” as teachers believe not only that learning is possible, but also that an open mind will tenaciously pursue knowledge that is liberating. It is this same transfer of individual skill to social practice that education theorists have framed more recently as “social justice education” (for more on SJE, see Chapter 21 in this volume, by Todd Butler and Ashley Boyd), which aims, as Maurianne Adams puts it, “to generate active engagement with social justice content through learning processes that are consistent with the goals of social justice.” Accordingly, social justice educators cultivate equitable learning environments whose structures can be replicated in wider social contexts. These methods do not belong to any one discipline, and can be pursued across the curriculum.

Although these conversations have been ongoing for some time, for many of us who work with historical literatures the integration of teaching and justice is a newer undertaking. One reason may be a widespread perception that the material we teach does not contribute to current conversations about justice, at least not in the same way that contemporary texts or literary works emerging from underrepresented communities do. Another factor may be a tacit attribution of conservatism (academic or political) to those teaching in historical fields, which can further isolate early modernists from important conversations in which we have a vested stake. As a corollary, in many conversations about curriculum, historical requirements are singled out as most in need of overhaul or cutting. Without questioning the imperative to expand offerings in emergent fields or the need to appeal to diverse
student populations, we assert that historical literatures can speak to the demands of our current moment, and that, as specialists in older fields, we share responsibility with our colleagues in newer fields for doing that work.

The moment seems right for early modern studies to undertake a new kind of engaged truth-seeking and truth-making. At the 2017 Sixteenth Century Society Conference, a group of scholars convened a forum (the proceedings of which were later published in Sixteenth Century Journal) to exchange ideas about feminist practice in early modern scholarship and teaching. As co-conveners Kathryn Brammall and Whitney Leeson note, the forum appeared at a moment of resurgence for feminism in popular culture—in the wake of the 2016 election of U.S. President Donald Trump, the Women’s March on Washington, and the #metoo movement—and thus affirmed the opportunity those of us working in historical fields have to make our work matter to the prevailing concerns of the day. And in 2018, Shakespeare’s Globe theater hosted the symposium “Shakespeare and Race Across Borders,” which drew international attention to how “race is taught at university, discussed in the critical field and represented in performance.” Harnessing the London theater as a hub of thinking about Shakespeare’s cultural influence, the symposium identified the centrality of race to current conversations about Shakespeare. Even as this book goes to press, we are aware of at least two other collections in the making that resonate with our topic: David Ruiter’s Shakespeare and Social Justice and Timothy Francisco and Sharon O’Dair’s Shakespeare and the 99 Percent. As Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi have demonstrated in Teaching Shakespeare with a Purpose, learning about Shakespeare can be both empowering and relevant to the lives of our students. Likewise, we see this moment as opportune for rethinking what we do with early modern literature in the classroom, and to use those insights to contribute to an ongoing conversation about doing justice through teaching.

This collection offers a response to a crisis of information whose pernicious and even deadly consequences we now know too well, a situation which urges us to transform our classrooms into places that foster intellectual engagement and learning while also helping students see themselves as shapers of a more just and equitable world. Beyond the exigencies of our lived present, we wish to explore how teachers of historical literature can adapt to what will continue to be the changing needs of our students within the tumultuous and even threatened environment of higher education. As urgent as the political turmoil around us seems, we wish to move forward in a positive direction by resisting the polarization that feeds on that turmoil, especially where
the formation of our students is concerned. Our focus on preparing students for thoughtful engagement with the world around them is emphatically not about inculcating our own views in the minds of passive students. Nor is it confined to the horizon of those struggles in view from our specific location in space and time. We are seeking, instead, an understanding of justice in action that includes all modes of engagement through which we, and our students, can find meaning in making knowledge regardless of political affiliations.

We see teaching in the humanities as uniquely suited to this work, precisely because humanist thought is not ideological but instead allows for multiple and competing approaches to socially relevant problems. Jennifer Summit articulates a view of humanism not as a philosophy but as a broad set of social and scholarly practices that privilege integrated processes of inquiry, rather than rarified objects of knowledge. These practices fuse speculative knowledge, technical skill, and practical wisdom. On the one hand, “one value of humanities scholarship derives from its curatorial oversight of its objects”: the works of art and literature, performances, and scholarship that we study. But even more saliently, “beyond the intrinsic value of their objects, the humanities exist as a disciplinary matrix because of the questions, methods, and practices that scholars bring to them in order to make those objects legible and meaningful.” Literacy learning, specifically, ought not be about the veneration of any particular text or object, but the cultivation of a way of looking at the world (and not least because of the elusive nature of our “objects” of study; as the old quip goes, “if the Mona Lisa is in the Louvre in Paris, where is Hamlet?”). Prioritizing modes of inquiry over the unquestioned veneration of celebrated objects (like Shakespeare, the First Folio, or any other thing) allows humanists across the disciplines to address issues of justice—to confront racism, misogyny, and lack of diversity in the canon, and more broadly to open up the richness of the past as a prod to action in the present.

Within the broader multidisciplinary context of the humanities, we see unique opportunities in the teaching of literature and historical sources like Shakespeare’s in particular. Because our interpretive work rests on literary texts that are themselves sites of contested meaning, we can reproduce in our classrooms smaller, less risky versions of the struggles present in other aspects of our institutional and social lives. The literature classroom can function as an ideal laboratory for responding to those struggles experimentally. For example, one of us regularly asks students, “What can you change your mind about today?” The low-stakes testing of assumptions and taking of risks in the classroom prepare students for higher-stakes ethical and creative responses to their
experience of the world. But historical literature offers us something additionally fruitful: the chance to defamiliarize our own lived experience, a topic taken up explicitly by the essays in Part I of this book. As L. P. Hartley famously noted, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” The study of historical literature affords students particular encounters with the far-away, encounters that defamiliarize their modern lives and foster ethical engagement with the strange or remote. The “foreignness” of the historical offers a disruptive estrangement from the present; from the alternate viewpoint of the early modern, after all, it is we who are strange. (One suspects Shakespeare knew this, too, given that nearly all his plays are set at a geographic or temporal remove from early modern England, and, moreover regularly thwart Aristotelian “unities,” yoking together heterogeneous localities and temporalities). Even Shakespeare’s language detains our modern ears with nuances that forcefully expand our interpretive resources, and etymological surprises that defamiliarize our own English. The past, in other words, teaches us that knowledge—then as now—is contingent and provisional. One of the most valuable elements of studying Shakespeare and Renaissance literature is this constant reminder that things can and do change: from the social structures we take as a given, to the very language that we use.

However alien the early modern may seem to our students today, we are inversely reminded that, as Faulkner wryly puts it, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Here, too, we see rich opportunities. The multifarious and extensive performance history of Shakespearean drama in particular transforms the distant past into an ongoing and polychronic now. As Thompson and Turchi argue, Shakespeare’s texts only “get more complex over time because of the layering of meaning” through performance. From the ethereal films of the silent era to the condemned 2017 production of Julius Caesar which figured the doomed monarch as a Trumpian doppelganger, stage and film productions function as interpretations that can, themselves, be interpreted and historicized. Theater historians therefore recognize the liberatory potential of there being multiple Shakespeares, existing across a wide range of temporalities, locations, and idioms. Comparing these instantiations affords us critical distance from our own troubling era. These fluctuating meanings affirm again our capacity to effect change.

While we recognize Shakespeare as multiple, contingent, and evolving, we are also aware of the dangers of overly universalizing “Shakespeare” as a social institution. Too often, Shakespeare’s “universalality” has meant white/European cultural supremacy. As Michael Witmore, Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, observed at the Shakespeare Association
of America’s 2017 “Color of Membership” panel, that great library was founded in part to shore up an anti-immigrant agenda by augmenting an ideology of European superiority.20 Similarly, in Chapter 5 of the present volume, Jason Demeter delineates how the American educational system trumpeted Shakespeare “as a common cultural and linguistic touchstone . . . under the banner of a homogenized whiteness, all while excluding non-whites from Shakespeare.”21 To the best of our ability we have sought to avoid replicating these constructs in this book by recovering and expanding upon this fact: Shakespeare has long been many people’s Shakespeare—indeed many Shakespeares.

Even as the contributors to this volume problematize the notion of a timeless, universal Shakespeare, they demonstrate confidence that Shakespeare’s works can speak to a wide range of issues related to justice, partly but not only because he thematizes justice so often in his plays. While Shakespeare’s enduring status as a shared cultural text should not be a bludgeon for fashioning whiteness or privilege, it does create common discourses that themselves yield opportunities for exchange.22 As legal scholar Kenji Yoshino writes, “one reason current discussions of justice are so impoverished is that our heterogeneous society does not have many shared texts. Shakespeare’s plays are among the few secular texts that remain common enough and complex enough to sustain these conversations.”23 The essays that comprise this volume bear this out, as they bring a range of pedagogies and perspectives into conversation around this literary material that we collectively own. And although the early modern texts discussed in this volume are not limited to Shakespeare or drama, it is worth noting that drama itself has an explicitly social function. As theater scholars Kelly Freebody and Michael Finneran write, social change and pedagogy are baked into dramatic form itself.24 The study and teaching of plays, therefore, afford a clear opportunity to engage in conversations about social justice that risk being “relegated to the margins under the burden of current social trends, the restlessness of contemporary political movements and the sheer speed of societal change.”25 Accordingly, the contributors to this volume recognize the unique potential, as Adhaar Noor Desai puts it, to “make the Shakespeare classroom a site for social engagement and action, rather than a place to understand our world through the veils of aesthetic and historical distance.”26 In this way, we aim to treat Shakespeare’s texts not as monoliths but as “living documents,” to borrow Thompson’s and Turchi’s phrasing, whose meanings are “always in flux,” and thus invite ever-new modes of critical, imaginative, and ethical engagement.27

In thinking about practical pathways ahead, we acknowledge the cautionary admonitions of scholars who have identified the disenfranchising
Introduction

effects of malign—and seemingly infinitely replicating—power structures. A Foucauldian critique of power, for example, identifies the forces that impede justice as ubiquitous and hegemonic. It is a society’s institutions, including those where we work, that realize both justice and injustice, and that control access to power. Effecting a more just world requires operating from within those institutions to promote critical analysis of power, and to expand access to that analysis. Critical pedagogy must therefore be “grounded in critique as a mode of analysis that interrogates texts, institutions, social relations, and ideologies as part of the script of official power.”

Interrogating these symbolic and material signs of power is already idiomatic to our scholarly generation’s critical habitus. But while acknowledging that “every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes,” we also want to avoid falling prey to the insidious passivity and even despair that such totalizing paradigms can give rise to. Even as we acknowledge that we are interpolated within a system, we own that it is interpolated within us. We must therefore recognize our responsibility not just to critique things as they are—potentially a sterile and self-serving practice—but also to transform them. As Henry Giroux maintains, “while it is important to politicize the process of schooling and recognize the gritty sense of limits it faces within a capitalist society, what is also needed to supplement this view is an ennobling, imaginative vision that takes us beyond the given and commonplace.”

Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare: Why Renaissance Literature Matters Now aims to effect this transcendence on an individual as well as a social level.

This book is thus primarily about praxis: the implementation, through teaching early modern texts, of a set of hopeful ideas about the potential of education, with the aim of making those ideas both better understood and materially significant. Such a practice of teaching can take aim at structures that cause suffering and social inequality, degrade the nonhuman, and make power and profit the only sources of value. It might explicitly identify the key actors in this grim state of affairs: late capitalism, structural racism, and patriarchal power foremost among them. But we do not assume a singular definition of “justice” that is fixed by a timeless ideal or presentist ideology, nor do we adhere to an exclusively redistributive emphasis for social justice as pertains to “the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges.” We prefer an expanded understanding of justice, one that resists the subjection and instrumentalization of learning and intellectual exchange. Instrumentalizing imperatives can undermine even the best-intended responses to our contemporary crisis. In an era increasingly hostile to
the value of humanities—hostile even to education itself—we do not want to cultivate the belief that the justice-oriented classroom must “produce” anything, including activists. What we do wish to enable, however, is the making of “citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially responsible way.” Essential to this process is a model of education that inspires students to recognize themselves as agents, to cultivate skills of responsiveness over dogmatism, to have the humility to learn from history and each other, and to feel intellectually prepared to take action against injustice.

Another essential feature of the approaches to teaching described in this book is a regular practice of confronting “who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge,” both within and beyond the classroom. Critical pedagogy, crucially, brings democratic methods and ideas into the space of the classroom. As several chapters in this volume describe, this comprises activities like service learning, working with incarcerated learners, and other community partnerships that encourage students to make connections between the classroom and the world beyond it—and to examine their assumptions about a range of social, racial, economic, and environmental issues and the people they affect. As chapters in this book point out, critical pedagogy is also about the habits of mind that enable students to be thoughtful consumers and makers of knowledge. Gathering information from multiple sources and through multiple senses, evaluating data without bias, reevaluating previously held beliefs, being asked to teach material to their peers, and recognizing motivated reasoning all help students become aware of how they are processing knowledge. Similarly, communicating precisely and framing ideas as sites of curiosity rather than as possessions help students to be deliberate about the kinds of knowledge they are making and to cultivate a willingness to revise that knowledge. Developing these habits of mind is an essential complement to more traditional modes of developing students’ intellectual autonomy, such as training them to make claims and defend their arguments with evidence.

The essays in this volume reflect the scope of these habits of mind, seeking a balance between reflection and action. The volume offers no false choices between intellectual rigor and community engagement, between practical strategies and theoretical questions, or between “traditional” and experimental or multimodal pedagogies. We believe that, if pursued in good faith and responsive to a dynamic classroom, a truly wide array of pedagogical practices can be harnessed toward liberatory ends. Several of our authors address the expansive potential of very traditional classroom practices, such as close reading, rhetorical
analysis, or unraveling the thought experiments posed by paradox and ambiguity. Other chapters explore emergent practices that productively disrupt teacherly authority, experiment with new media, prioritize collaboration, and reach beyond traditional classroom spaces. This heterogeneity reminds us that although there may be such a thing as “bad” pedagogy—inert, bullying, shaming, misinformed—there are many modalities in a classroom that prioritize justice. Identifying them in a quickly shifting educational landscape requires an adaptable, creative mental framework, rather than a dogmatic model of any kind. *Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare: Why Renaissance Literature Matters Now* begins with the conviction that we can teach Shakespeare and Renaissance literature in ways that are vital to the pursuit of justice, while also doing literary texts *themselves* justice. As these chapters show, there is great variety in the ways we can “affirm, model, and sustain socially just learning environments for all participants and by so modeling, to offer hope that equitable relations and social structures can be achieved in the broader society.”37 We offer this book as a vote of confidence for the liberatory potential of debates sparked by these linguistically rich, historically remote, and intellectually complex texts. It is in this spirit that we enthusiastically turn now to the chapters in this volume.

The chapters are grouped in five parts. Understanding that such groupings necessarily impose separations where there is continuity, we do not intend these headings to prescribe how you read this book. Think of them instead as invitations to begin connecting these chapters and the strategies they describe, with room to add improvisational linkages of your own. Part I, “Defamiliarizing Shakespeare,” takes as its point of departure the necessity to confront cultural forces that reify the “Bard” into something students may suppose they already know. Often such familiarity may take the form of unthinking adoration, intimidation, or resentment: presuppositions that impede receptivity. The authors of these chapters propose constructive ways to unreify and defamiliarize Shakespeare, and thereby help students to set aside presupposition and embrace challenge. Likewise, they discuss the benefits of creating room for curiosity and learning.

Adhaar Noor Desai addresses these issues head on, asking what we can do to make the Shakespeare classroom a site for social engagement and action, rather than one overly invested in historicizing or aestheticizing Renaissance literature. “Topical Shakespeare and the Urgency of Ambiguity” suggests that one possible answer is letting students *themselves* decide what Shakespeare’s plays can offer them. Taking his inspiration from James Baldwin (“Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare”),
Desai describes a classroom that does not exalt Shakespeare but enlist
him as a “witness.” Desai’s strategy is to liberate “close reading” from
a results-based search for meaning and focus instead on its potential
as a “risky, collaborative, and urgent exercise.” He does this by en-
couraging a process of experimental free association he calls “riffing,”
which entices students to trust their instincts and the text’s volatile
ambiguities. Experimental, collaborative, and empowering, its goal is to
give students, not Shakespeare, authority in the classroom.

As the rhetoric of gender and trans theory has made its way into
Shakespeare studies, critics and practitioners increasingly reach for
“trans” as a lens through which to read and produce Shakespeare.
Sawyer Kemp’s “Shakespeare in Transition: Pedagogies of Transgender
Justice and Performance” points out that although both Shakespearean
performance and criticism rely fundamentally on the rhetoric of trans
people and their bodies, actual trans people and bodies are predom-
inantly absent from discourse and performance. This essay looks to
readings of the “transgender” in Shakespeare as a way of grappling with
both historicist and presentist methodologies, asking us to look beyond
“the pants” of cross-dressed heroines to more subtle signifiers of gender
nonconformity. The essay then tracks some ways in which education
and outreach departments can engage trans and gender-nonconforming
communities at the level of production.

Allison P. Hobgood’s essay, “Shakespeare in Japan: Disability
and a Pedagogy of Disorientation,” describes what happened in her
Shakespeare classroom at Tokyo International University in the wake
of a deadly stabbing attack at a residential care center for people with
disabilities in nearby Sagamihara. Hobgood discovers that the import-
ance of Shakespeare in processing and responding to the Sagamihara
attack was, paradoxically, his relative non-importance to her students,
as compared with Shakespeare’s elevated status among U.S. undergradu-
ates. Her model of a “feminist disability pedagogy of disorientation”
decentralizes stoic analysis and mastery in favor of “immersive, deeply
affective, real-time experiential learning.” By juxtaposing irreverent
adaptations and selected close readings from Macbeth with frank
discussions of cultural attitudes toward disability, Hobgood and her stu-
dents carved out a space for Shakespeare to speak to their disorienting
present, fashioning in their responses to Shakespeare a framework for
more just thought and action.

In “Global Performance and Local Reception: Teaching Hamlet and
More in Singapore,” Emily Griffiths Jones describes her experience
teaching a Shakespeare seminar in Singapore through MIT’s Global
Shakespeares project. The “entrenched Western interpretive tradition”
Introduction

and its assumptions of a “supposedly universalizing psychological realm,” are, Jones argues, “ripe for global reconsideration.” Her chapter shows how the comparative deployment of digitally archived multicultural performances leads students to engage with Shakespeare’s works in a way that “transcend[s] the myth of monolithic textual authority.” Through interpreting, comparing, and responding creatively to global Shakespeares (including, as in Espinosa’s classes mentioned below, making their own short films), students used Shakespearean performance to address social issues relevant to them, from immigration to LGBTQ rights.

The essays in Part II, “Decolonizing Shakespeare,” explore intellectual and artistic movements that either enshrine or challenge traditional associations of Shakespeare with racial and cultural superiority. Will Shakespeare always be marked by a forbidding canonicity and Eurocentrism, or can he be seen as intersectional: perhaps just as aligned with liberatory futures as a figure like Audre Lorde? How can Shakespeare be made accessible to readers who may see his work as belonging to someone else? What can we learn from nineteenth-century pan-Africanist autodidacts who laid claim to Shakespeare as an instrument of aesthetic pleasure, community building, and racial uplift? These chapters explore the troubling past of Shakespeare studies and the potential for transformation that we must aspire to.

In “African-American Shakespeares: Loving Blackness as Political Resistance,” Jason M. Demeter reflects on a course designed to historicize and challenge Shakespeare’s deployment in U.S. educational contexts “as an instrument of white racial consolidation and non-white marginalization.” Demeter offers a concise summary of Shakespeare’s positioning as the pinnacle of “universal” white, Western cultural values before detailing a course that combines Richard III, Henry IV Part I, and Othello with responses to Shakespeare’s works by black artists such as James Baldwin, August Wilson, Toni Morrison, and Djanet Sears. Though he hoped that placing African-American literature and Shakespeare “on equal footing” would provoke critical interrogations of Shakespeare’s privileged place in the literary canon, Demeter finds Shakespeare’s whiteness and universality difficult myths to dismantle, and offers his ambivalent experience as a way to frame key questions about the relation between Shakespeare pedagogy and social justice.

Ruben Espinosa’s “Chicano Shakespeare: The Bard, the Border, and the Peripheries of Performance” illuminates how questions of race, ethnicity, power, and identity are not “marginal” to the study of early modern texts, but are indeed central to the work of teaching Shakespeare to students living along the U.S.–Mexico border. Lack of
visibility and access regularly alienates Chicanx, Latinx, and other students who have never been invited to imagine Shakespeare as “theirs.” This chapter details an innovative strategy for addressing this problem: student-directed productions (five-minute films) that incorporate original Shakespearean language with dialogue of the students’ own, in which students are free to address contemporary social issues. The result is creative projects that help students feel visible, surmount linguistic barriers, and put the issues that matter to them on the “map.”

Kim F. Hall’s “Intelligently organized resistance: Shakespeare in the Diasporic Politics of John E. Bruce” describes an outline for the study of Shakespeare propounded by the black journalist and organizer John Edward Bruce in 1916. Hall situates Bruce’s inaugural address to “The Friends of Shakespeare,” a black organization for the study and performance of Shakespeare, in the wider U.S. context of migration, the rise of white nationalism, and pan-Africanist thought. An autodidact, Bruce advocated for a collaborative approach to studying Shakespeare’s works in their historical context and alongside works by black authors. Comparing Bruce’s collectivist and historicist strategies for using Shakespeare as a vehicle for racial uplift, with radical pedagogies described more recently by Joyce E. King and others, Hall argues that the study of Shakespeare, then as now, can equip students for “intelligently organized resistance.”

Part III, “Ethical Queries and Practices,” lays out some of the more polarizing and also the most activating questions in teaching Shakespeare and early modern literature today. Is there a place for trigger warnings in the classroom? How do we defend the humanities without merely instrumentalizing them, and how can we meet students where they are without succumbing to a pedagogy of low expectations? How can we help students who not only feel alienated from early modern literature, but believe that the study of the humanities itself constitutes a kind of cultural betrayal? These chapters explore best practices for approaching difficult topics in the classroom with both rigor and care, and the necessity of making room for complexity and ambiguity.

“Sexual Violence, Trigger Warnings, and the Early Modern Classroom,” by Kirsten N. Mendoza, tackles the controversial subject of trigger warnings, which she sees as an ethical practice that, deployed correctly, can augment rather than shut down discussion. As Mendoza explains:

I not only expect but hope for productive contention and discomfort in the classroom. However, I have come to realize that in order to create an environment in which such conversations are possible, a basic ethos of trust
needs to exist; trigger warnings have not hindered but have helped me to cultivate such an atmosphere.

This chapter takes seriously both depictions of early modern violence and their connection to students’ experiences, and it provides strategies for using affective responses to support aesthetic and intellectual analysis.

How do professors connect Shakespeare to “something like social justice and democratic practice” when students see higher education as suspect and “learning as an act of cultural betrayal”? This is the challenge faced by many of those teaching early modern texts to first-generation economically disadvantaged students in rural communities who have been raised to doubt that “the arts and humanities have any positive value at all.” In “Rural Shakespeare and the Tragedy of Education,” Jeffrey Osborne observes that the first step in engaging such students is helping them see that their disaffection is the result of their having actually been “the objects of an injustice.” Osborne describes a general education seminar in literature and philosophy which gives students space to temporarily “suspend and question their values.” Here, the tragedies of Shakespeare and other authors enable the kind of productive disorientation (aporia) that enables rediscovery and leads to a hunger for justice.

How can the study of literary form shape students’ understanding of ethics, justice, and community? Mary Janell Metzger addresses this question in “Shakespearean Tragedy, Ethics, and Social Justice,” which describes a course she developed yoking Shakespearean tragedies to ethical philosophy from Aristotle to Patricia J. Williams. Through these pairings, students compare the benefits of cognitive and affective learning, consider questions of epistemic injustice, reasoning, and belief in historical moments of epistemological crisis, and question the roles of individuals and collectivities in precipitating tragic outcomes. Detailing her approach to teaching Othello alongside Williams’ “The Obliging Shell,” Metzger illustrates the importance of historicizing the construction of whiteness in order to illuminate the effects of systematized injustice.

In “Teaching Environmental Justice and Early Modern Texts: Collaboration and Connected Classrooms,” Rebecca Laroche and Jennifer Munroe offer innovative approaches to teaching the embodied and collective history of human impact on the planet through early modern texts and contemporary ecofeminist theory. Combining Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” (a way to understand environmental destruction over long periods of time) with an ecofeminist approach that
“interrogates mutual forms of subjugation,” Laroche and Munroe stress how humans inhabit collective environments with other human and nonhuman entities. Their intersectional teaching strategy reflects this attitude by elevating collaborative scholarship, forging links between distinct classroom communities, and empowering students to historicize environmental problems, from water quality to wildfires. Students collaborate across geographic and institutional differences, and with scholarly efforts like the Early Modern Recipes Online Collective, to develop a heightened sense of both place and global interconnectedness.

What are the perils and rewards of teaching Shakespeare during a U.S. presidential election year, in the midst of political upheaval? Steve Mentz’s “Failing with Shakespeare: Political Pedagogy in Trump’s America” shows us how good Shakespeare is to think with during times of crisis and failure. This chapter proposes new pedagogical implications for the old story of Shakespeare’s dramatic ambivalence: both by connecting the current political situation of the U.S. to critical moments in the past, and by exploring the range of available ethical responses to the experience of uncertainty, failure, and defeat. After all, as Mentz notes, “Politics is always violent and theatrical,” making a course structured around analysis of live theatrical productions particularly generative in the current climate. Mentz also unflinchingly addresses an experience so many of us have had of feeling like we are “failing,” and guides teacher-scholars toward an adaptive methodology that makes room for our own sense of disorientation and frustration.

Part IV, “Revitalizing the Archive and Remixing Traditional Approaches,” posits that we can mobilize early modern literary works to become better thinkers ourselves. The authors in this part consider the potentially progressive role of traditional paradigms like ethical philosophy, classical rhetoric, thought experiments, and close reading to make early modern literature new again. These chapters suggest that early modern literary texts help us think about thinking itself, and they seek to underscore that epistemological savvy may be the most vital of activists’ tools in an era of “alternative facts.”

Rachel E. Holmes’ “Teaching Serial with Shakespeare: Using Rhetoric to Resist” brings the wildly popular 2014 podcast into conversation with Shakespearean tragedy (Romeo and Juliet; Othello) and problem comedy (Measure for Measure) through the unexpected lens of Aristotelian rhetoric. By first introducing the conventions of the classical persuasive arts, Holmes enables students to analyze the legal and interpretive crises that plague Renaissance literature and contemporary court cases alike. This combination empowers students to question the construction of cultural and legal narratives when truth itself seems precarious.
Matthew Harrison’s “Adjunct Pleasure: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the Writing on the Walls” explores how the radical contingencies of Elizabethan sonnets and academic employment can mutually inform pedagogical practice. As he notes of Sidney, “the poems enact a phenomenology of contingency,” tracing the “contortions of selfhood when an individualistic idea of value confronts a world operating on other logics.” This chapter diagnoses how readily structural shortcomings are masked by fictions of personal exceptionalism or failure, and it proposes several practical strategies that “invite students to . . . replace postures designed for obedience with active and bodily engagement with each other’s ideas.”

Carla Della Gatta’s “Confronting Bias and Identifying Facts: Teaching Resistance Through Shakespeare” foregrounds the essential role of critical analysis in an era when facts, feelings, opinions, news, and propaganda have become increasingly hard to disambiguate. Shakespeareans are in an excellent position to help our students navigate this terrain, thanks to our field’s “lengthy, cross-cultural, and international history of determining, disputing, and reinterpreting facts,” a habit that can be put to especial use in identifying various modes of misinformation and bias. This chapter relates exercises in introductory scholarly editing and comparative theatrical/film analyses that enable students “to be makers of knowledge.” Such practices put primary sources directly in students’ hands, empowering them as they apply rigorous analysis to solving interpretive problems. Such skills enable them to “gain confidence in their ability to question what was previously perceived as venerated authority or fact,” with obvious payoffs for both understanding of Renaissance literature, and also informed encounters with “fake news,” biased sources, or unresearched content.

As important as it is to discriminate the factual from the fake, studying Shakespeare and Renaissance literature also provides opportunity to mobilize imagination for its transformative potential. Where early modern writers traffic in imaginative inventions, they often do so with the aim of effecting positive change. Debapriya Sarkar’s chapter, “Literary Justice: The Participatory Ethics of Early Modern Possible Worlds,” puts pressure on the ethical relation between literature’s celebration of possible worlds and the pedagogical value of such imagined realms for the reader—and, by extension, for the student of early modern literature and culture. The chapter exemplifies how we might tap into the ubiquitous presence of imaginary worlds in early modern literature; these “golden” worlds of the imagination, Sarkar argues, simultaneously practice and theorize ways of knowing and being in the actual world. What she calls “participatory readerly ethics” reveals
“the radical potential of poiesis” to help us transform what is into what might be.

In an educational landscape where proliferating programs and tracks offer an increasingly customizable student experience, and where the humanities are pressed to demonstrate their relevance by preparing students for “useful” employment, it can be difficult for students to situate their individualized trajectories of learning in the context of community. The essays in Part V, “Shakespeare, Service, and Community,” describe innovative uses of digital methodologies, community engagement, and students’ own experience to enlist students in recasting Shakespeare’s cultural significance as a tool for community-based learning and activism.

Hillary Eklund’s “Shakespeare, Service Learning, and the Embattled Humanities” provides an evolving model for uniting educational practices often believed to be quite remote: service learning and literary analysis. Although one mode ostensibly attends to utility while the other dwells in academic abstraction, pursuing both in tandem reveals more shared interpretive practices than one might expect. This chapter argues that “when we free ourselves from the burden of proving the relevance of Shakespeare,” and instead create frameworks that collate classroom and community learning, we “heighten both the intellectual and civic stakes of our teaching.” Key to this model is a process that compares “problem-solving frameworks” as a way to foreground metacognition and self-reflection.

In “Teaching Shakespeare Inside Out: Creating a Dialogue Between Traditional and Incarcerated Students,” Jayme M. Yeo explores the possibilities for teaching Shakespeare within and outside of the criminal justice system by putting these communities of learners into substantive dialogue. In contrast to many “prison Shakespeare” programs, a social-justice oriented approach “privileges learning over therapy” and “fosters dialogue and equal participation among both populations.” Success in such a program “yields positive social results, including increased activism and decreased stereotyping,” but difficulties can be profitable too; as Yeo puts it, an egalitarian reading community “should value not only common understanding but also misunderstanding, through the uncomfortable dissonances that occur when diverse populations interact.” This, she argues, is where Shakespeare faculty can best transmit their skills to students, “for multivalence and conflict accurately describe the work of literary interpretation itself.”

Rooting his pedagogy in an Orwellian commitment to exploring the relation between writing and the cultural forces that shape it, Eric L. De Barros takes up linguistic complexity itself as a pedagogical model
in his chapter “‘Shakespeare’ on his lips: Dreaming of the Shakespeare Center for Radical Thought and Transformative Action.” De Barros sees Shakespeare’s texts as a “weapon” to use against a range of lazy habits of mind, from bardolatry to consumerist approaches to higher education. He describes how he invites students to examine their own subject positions and ethical priorities in conversation with Shakespeare’s plays; how this engagement spurs conversations about issues from racialized beauty and consent to social mobility and criminality; and finally, how students parlay these insights into practical strategies for addressing related issues in their own lives. Fusing thoughtful intertextual engagements with close reading and autobiographical student writing, De Barros seeks to develop a “personally inflected, politically responsive” Shakespeare capable of combating cultural forces that discourage potentially subversive thought and action.

In “From Pansophia to Public Humanities: Connecting Past and Present Through Community-Based Learning,” Tania Boster describes a course that explores the public humanities by combining service learning with historical documentary analysis. Students pair with community partners working to address a range of pressing local, national, and global issues. Through analysis of public and historical records, they develop broad strategies for understanding and contextualizing “competing views of social justice, radicalism, patronage, network analyses, structure and agency, and the practical application of the liberal arts.” They then deploy similar strategies in analyzing digitally archived primary sources on seventeenth-century polymath Samuel Hartlib and his pan-European circle of scholars. Comparing the circle’s utopian ideals of *pansophia*—universal wisdom—with its more severe proposals for reform amidst the turbulent contexts of war and social change, students historicize these discrepancies and gain critical purchase on contemporary approaches to solving similar social problems.

Todd Butler and Ashley Boyd, in “Cultivating Critical Content Knowledge: Early Modern Literature, Pre-service Teachers, and New Methodologies for Social Justice,” give new reasons for attending to pedagogical training in literary studies classrooms. With so many English majors planning to enter secondary classrooms of their own, Butler and Boyd highlight the potential impact that combining social justice and content knowledge pedagogies can have on generations of classroom learners. At the same time, they claim that including teaching methodologies in undergraduate literature courses builds pedagogy as a habit of mind for all undergraduates, encouraging them to consider issues of social justice in their readings, and how those issues might be effectively conveyed to others.
If our book demonstrates the intellectual benefits of teaching social justice through Shakespeare, Ayanna Thompson’s Afterword meditates on the personal and emotional costs of doing this work. The conversation we have begun here might generate many others. But as we go forward, Thompson reminds us, we must also prioritize self-care. For if we are to sustain and embed social justice in our pedagogical and scholarly practices, we must also care for individuals doing this work. Fortunately, communities of care can transform difficult work into work that is also gratifying, energizing, and buoying.

The conversation we have initiated here is necessarily incomplete; for every topic addressed in these essays, there is another approach we would love to have added. The topics covered here—as broad as they are—in no way exhaust the scope of possibility for the justice-oriented pedagogy we advocate. Indeed, from the start we have been surprised at how this project has expanded in scope. Its growth has challenged us to think more broadly about what it means to teach social justice through Shakespeare. It has revealed how many of our colleagues are already doing and reflecting on this important work. This gives us great hope. At a time when we encounter so much discouraging news about the state of global political affairs, planetary health, and our institutions of higher learning, it has been buoying to think with colleagues who, in collaboration with their students, are making these old texts speak in ways that directly address our most pressing social problems.

The work is not done; the work will never be done. This fact, though humbling, should encourage as we each move our collective venture into the future. We therefore readily admit some caveats to the present volume. For one, this book is not really directed at educators skeptical of social justice as a teaching tool (although we hope some of them find their way here, and are intrigued enough to try out some of its methods!). We aim instead to encourage those already doing this work—or hoping to—with specific, applicable strategies for teaching social justice through Shakespeare. We hope it will provide you, as it has us, a greater awareness of the community of similarly committed scholars. We also know it won’t solve the social problems in our sights, that it neglects to address the growing economic challenges to higher education, and that it does not speak to legislative opportunities for change. We very much hope others will take up these charges. What we believe we are contributing to is a slow but steady cultural shift, one that sees “time’s up” for instrumental, exclusionary approaches to higher education, and which reimagines early modern texts as potentially fundamental to collaborative meaning-making and liberatory action. Reading the essays contained here, we have renewed confidence in
the “infinite variety” of ways that the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries can be deployed for social justice pedagogy, and great admiration for the tenacity and creativity of our colleagues’ engagement with the causes of equity and social change.

Notes


22. In their edited collection *For All Time? Critical Issues in Teaching Shakespeare*, Paul Skrebels and Sieta van der Hoeven see Shakespeare’s enduring yet dynamic importance in secondary and higher education as an opportunity to reconsider the influence of critical theory on Shakespeare pedagogy. Contributors’ strategies for integrating theory into the teaching of Shakespeare activate students’ awareness of his contested and evolving cultural status and equip them to define for themselves what uses Shakespeare’s works have in the present. Paul Skrebels and Sieta van der Hoeven, *For All Time? Critical Issues in Teaching Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2002).


24. Kelly Freebody and Michael Finneran, “Introduction,” in *Drama and Social Justice: Theory, Research and Practice in International Contexts*, ed. Kelly Freebody and Michael Finneran (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1–2. However, as Hyman has noted elsewhere, Renaissance poets sometimes “erect spaces as consciously constructed as those of the theater . . . Early moderns well knew that the transgressive could be and sometimes had to be acutely private. Works appearing in manuscript sometimes had audiences of one, yet were still not necessarily partitioned from the experiences of the everyday.” Wendy Beth Hyman, *Impossible Desire and the Limits of Knowledge in Renaissance Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 17.


32. For Freire, praxis is essential to critical consciousness: “being aware of objects as things is merely realization of their existence and does not mean knowledge of them. On the other hand, human beings (who cannot be apprehended without their relations with the world, seeing that they are ‘beings-in-a-situation’) are also beings who work and transform the world. They are beings of ‘praxis’: of action and of reflection. Humans find themselves marked by the results of their own actions in their relations with the world, and through their action on it. By acting they transform; by transforming they create a reality which conditions their manner of acting.” Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 90.
35. Ibid., 5.