

Introduction: Dancing (With) Shakespeare

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Abstract

The Introduction to this special issue on "Appropriation in Performance: Shakespeare and Dance" articulates the theoretical foundation and contribution to the study of both topics — Shakespeare *and* dance — and summarizes the essays' arguments and critical relation to one another.

This collection of essays addresses a burgeoning area of study: the relationship between dance and Shakespeare's plays. It does so in a deliberately wide-ranging manner, to indicate the scope of work being done on this topic. The work is interdisciplinary, moving beyond literary studies to incorporate studies of dance, music, theater, film, history, culture, and embodiment. The contributors draw on a wide range of source materials, from early modern dance and conduct manuals, to recent films and ballets, to the experiences and evidence provided by the dancing body itself. Interestingly, the studies tend to reference a particular group of Shakespeare's plays, to which the analysis of dance feels particularly germane. *Romeo and Juliet* provides the subject for the first four essays in the collection, partly because dancing occurs as metaphor and actual practice in the text itself, but also because it has been repeatedly adapted for the dance stage. *Much Ado About Nothing*, and its tragic counterpart *Othello*, are encompassed by the three essays that follow, again due to the prominence of dance in Shakespeare's comedy, as well as the temptation to insert it into contemporary film versions. Finally, the last two essays discuss the uses of dance in Shakespeare's late romances, particularly *The Winter's Tale*, in ways that move beyond language.

The authors of these essays attend to many different areas in which Shakespeare and dance intersect. Alan Brissenden's 1981 book *Shakespeare and the Dance* provides a significant starting point from which a number of the contributors develop their own arguments. Like Brissenden, some of the essays foreground the meanings dance takes on in both Shakespeare's plays and in early modern culture. Unlike Brissenden, whose book focuses solely on dance as literary metaphor, they consider how dance might be embodied in film and theater performances of the plays, but also through dance adaptations in which all or most of Shakespeare's language is removed in favor of movement. As Amy Rodgers notes in her essay, this poses a particular problem for scholars: "For

most Shakespeareans, Shakespeare *is* language . . . What, then, do we do with Shakespeare and dance?" Rodgers and her fellow contributors reveal the many different ways we might answer this question, and the variety of perspectives we can gain on the plays when we explore the embodied practice of dance.

Emily Winerock and Emma Atwood both address the use of dance as metaphor in two of Shakespeare's plays. Winerock argues that scholars would benefit from paying attention to the meanings of dance in plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, particularly "how Shakespeare used audio-visual forms such as dance to complement or complicate spoken dialogue." Atwood focuses on *Much Ado About Nothing* to argue that dance becomes an "embodied metaphor that bridges the gap between text and performance and extends to the larger themes of masquerade and mistaken identity that permeate the play." Both Winerock and Atwood extend beyond the Shakespearean texts to how the "embodied metaphor" of dance might be performed. Winerock brings her experience as a dancer and choreographer to bear on a discussion of *The Bard's Galliard*, her staged interpretation of scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry VIII* using early modern dance manuals. Atwood turns to Joss Whedon's 2012 film version of *Much Ado* to analyze how although it excludes Beatrice and Benedick from dancing, the film nonetheless uses aerial acrobatics to illuminate their relationship. Atwood skillfully connects Whedon's acrobats to the tradition of early modern rope dancing, which provides a visual reminder of "the precarious position of love extolled by the play."

Like Atwood, Linda McJannet and Madhavi Biswas are concerned with the ways in which dance is used in film adaptations of Shakespeare. McJannet, like Winerock, examines act 1, scene 5 of *Romeo and Juliet* (the Capulet ball) and its realization in twentieth century films by George Cukor (1936), Franco Zeffirelli (1968), and Baz Luhrmann (1996). She reveals that each film devotes "ten or more minutes to this pivotal scene" but ultimately creates "strikingly different effects." The ball scene provides opportunities for the directors to "put their creative stamp on Shakespeare's decision to rely on nonverbal communication . . . to establish and build the lovers' relationship." Biswas turns to the song-and-dance numbers in the 2006 film *Omkaara*, a Hindi-language version of *Othello*. She argues that a close look at the dance numbers reveals the expanded roles they provide for the women characters, particularly Bianca (here renamed Billo); yet they also testify to how women are the targets of scopophilia and surveillance. Biswas focuses on the ways in which an elaborate waist ornament worn by Billo, which is the equivalent of the handkerchief from *Othello*, becomes "a visual symbol of female sexuality both exploited as well as literally policed" in the dance scenes.

While film adaptations add dance to the plays and retain spoken language (although not always Shakespeare's language, as in *Omkaara*), theater and ballet adaptations can dispense

with words entirely, relying on choreography and the bodies of dancers to tell the stories. Sheila Cavanagh investigates how Washington D.C.-based Synetic Theatre creates wordless dance-focused productions of Shakespeare that "push against definitional boundaries," using their 2014 performance of *Much Ado About Nothing* as a representative example. Although Synetic's productions are highly choreographed and use dance imagery that is both enjoyable and accessible for their audiences, Cavanagh reveals how they also convey meaning through "shared cultural references" that incorporate film, visual arts, popular music, and mainstream media. She also notes that Synetic has been successful despite resistance to excising Shakespeare's language, demonstrating that "these stories can be told effectively without vocalization."

Amy Rodgers, Nona Monahin, and I examine ballet adaptations of Shakespeare in our essays; like Cavanagh, we engage with the multiple meanings of dance productions that eliminate spoken language. Rodgers and Monahin both analyze ballet versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, albeit from different perspectives. Rodgers looks at John Cranko's 1962 production for the Stuttgart Ballet, particularly at the creative partnership between Cranko and his Juliet, Marcia Haydée. She draws a productive analogy between their collaboration and "the kind of collaboration early modern playmaking demanded," in order to inspire collaborations between scholars in the fields of Shakespeare and dance studies. Rodgers argues for Haydée as a co-producer of the ballet, attending closely to the choreographic process between Haydée and Cranko, to conclude that dances (and plays) are made by and through the bodies of those that perform them, not simply by isolated off-stage creative geniuses. Monahin turns her attention to a further collaborative aspect of the *Romeo and Juliet* ballet that has a significant impact on audience responses: the Sergei Prokofiev score used by Cranko and many other choreographers. She attends to the pros and cons of using an established score to create a ballet version of the play, especially a score as complex and intricate as Prokofiev's. In particular, she reveals how the problems are compounded by the original "happy ending" of the score, which was eventually changed for the original staging by Leonid Lavrovsky in 1940, noting that "choreographers who are drawn to the Prokofiev music are . . . confronted with several 'original sources' to work with, sources that at times may be at odds with one another." Finally, my own essay considers two recent ballet adaptations of the late romances — Alexei Ratmanský's *The Tempest* (2013) and Christopher Wheeldon's *The Winter's Tale* (2014) — in light of Brissenden's work on the metaphorical meanings dance takes on in the plays. Like Rodgers and Monahin, I attempt to bridge the gap between literary and dance studies by considering how choreographers and dancers have embodied the clash between concord and discord, order and disorder, that Brissenden identifies as a hallmark of the late romances.

Although a number of the contributors — particularly Winerock and Rodgers — pay close attention to the role that performers play in creating these varied dance adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, the final essay in the collection focuses primarily on physical practice. Lisa Dickson's piece, written with choreographer Andrea Downie, uses both literary analysis and journal entries to recount her process of creating and performing a solo based on the character of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. Interspersed with commentary by Downie, Dickson's writing considers what the individual body's experiences with choreography can tell us about the character, the play, and Shakespeare. Her account vividly demonstrates that the "'kinaesthetic imagination' is a powerful interpretive tool that allowed [her] to explore an aspect of this play that [she] had not considered before [she] began to breathe like Hermione." Dickson and Downie's performative experiment provides an illuminating and necessary practice-based perspective to round off the essay collection.

References

Brissenden, Alan. 1981. *Shakespeare and the Dance*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.