

Teaching shakespeare in the context of renaissance women's culture

[Literature](#)



The first article that I discovered by using the MLA Database was " Teaching Shakespeare in the Context of Renaissance Women's Culture", by Jane Donawerth. ¹ Jane Donawerth is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Maryland at College Park, where she teaches Renaissance literature, history of rhetorical theory, and science fiction and utopias by women. In this particular article she explores the issues around teaching the subject of Shakespeare and the frameworks in which it is taught.

Donawerth wants to " build a course from a feminist standpoint in which students possess such authority. " ² Donawerth describes the content of her course and how she taught it, " I organized the content of the course in concentric circles of kinds of knowledge, rather than in linear fashion, and I limited to four the number of plays all students read. " ³ The idea of using only four plays to focus on relates to my dissertation topic, as I intend on only using a small number of plays to analyse and explore my topic, therefore enabling a greater depth of research than as if I was to study more plays.

Also, the idea of the concentric circles as a method of teaching and studying would be a very constructive approach to use for the dissertation, as it will help break themes down into certain categories, making it easier to look at and more straightforward to research. These concentric circles involved " close-reading of a play by Shakespeare, some useful theoretical tools for interpretation, early modern women's texts, and some relevant historical material about the position and roles of women.

I could use some of these ideas from this system to help me analyse certain themes in the different plays I am studying. In the article, Donawerth mentions that her class looked at Richard III, and that they, " emphasized the misogyny of the male characters and the division between the worlds of men and women as a sign of social malfunction. " 5 This could help when writing the dissertation, as I could use this idea and adapt it to my research when looking at Richard III.

Similarly, through discussion about The Winter's Tale their ideas, " centered on marriage and parent-child relationships," 6 therefore, I may be able to use this idea when exploring my own ideas about this play. Also, when reading the footnotes associated with the article, it is noted that Jeanne Addison Roberts suggests, " teaching Richard III, the comedies and, The Winter's Tale, since there are more women characters in these plays, and feminine perspectives are more often taken into account. " 7 This is reassuring, as these are some of the plays that I am analysing for the dissertation, therefore, on the right track.

Furthermore, Donawerth suggests feminist theory essays and texts that connect to women's issues in Shakespeare, which in turn relate to the plays studied, therefore could help in my research, as these books can be added to my bibliography and aid my research. Donawerth concludes the article by telling us that she has designed the course in the particular way she has so her students can read the text, and then go straight into researching the history and context surrounding it, rather than moving straight on to the next text and waiting till the end of the module to research it.

This enables the students to gain knowledge and will be able to use it when moving to the next play, whilst being confident in being able to " formulate their own intellectual opinions. " 8 This could be an approach that I may use; therefore rather than reading all the plays and taking brief notes on each of them and revisiting them, I could take look at each separate play and spend a defined length of time researching and exploring it.

I would do this in the time set aside for research in the Research Timetable. Overall, Donawerth's article has been both inspiring and informative; a great help in putting my research into perspective, and after reading this article I can use some the methods she uses for her students to aid research in my own work. Contrasting with Donawerth's article, the second article I looked at was not as helpful in aiding my dissertation research. The article by Mary Beth Rose, " Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare?

Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance" 9 focuses on the relation between " Renaissance sexual ideologies and dramatic genres: in particular on the ways in which motherhood is represented... in the various forms of Shakespeare's drama. " 10 It was the title of this journal article that attracted me to view it as a whole, however I find the title to be misleading; as it gives the impression that it will discuss the Mothers in Shakespeare as the main point, and then gender representation as a second to back up the argument.

In spite of this initial thought, the article focuses its point on the Renaissance women; as daughter/ wife/ mother, and goes into great detail about the idea of family and marriage. Although this to a certain extent is relevant to my

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dissertation topic, as I will have to discuss the context of Shakespeare's plays; it is not something that I am going to explore in great depth, therefore, this piece of the article is mainly irrelevant.

However, information such as, " Renaissance discourses on the family continue to conceptualize motherhood as a private, almost pre-social interaction between mother and baby or small child," 11 can be a useful piece of information as a starting point for minor research when looking at the topic and in particular relates to Donawerth's idea about The Winter's Tale being centred on marriage and parent-child relationships. The opening of the article appeared to be stimulating, as it discussed topics that I am interested in for the dissertation.

It indicated that it was going to be a very informative piece for my topic, as it mentioned Shakespeare's plays and gave various reasons why there are no mothers in the plays, such as: the fact that, since women were not allowed to appear onstage, female roles were performed by disguised male actors... the potential representational problem of fully grown women being portrayed by boys¹² and also the fact that childbirth could occur, as it was " not unusual- the reality of a dead mother. 13 These ideas are vague and are not explored at a great depth in the article, which would refrain me from using it in my dissertation unless researched further. Another factor that may be of help in my dissertation is Vive's analysis of the Oedipal plot, " the essential separation from the mother (and consequent identification with the father) that proves the enabling condition for a full adult life," 14 as in this the

mother is devalued, which in turn relates to the subject of mothers in Shakespeare.

The final feature that I found to be enlightening in the article was information about *The Winter's Tale*. There is a large paragraph describing the women in the play that I can use as research for my dissertation. This was the main piece in the article that I found striking and felt that it was relative to what I need to investigate. The particular quote that provoked my interest was: Hermione is the mother figure most fully and pointedly represented as traditionally maternal in Shakespeare's canon.

Pregnant, when the play begins, she is depicted not only as giving birth but as nurturing her young son, who dies when deprived of her presence. 15 Although it is a limited observation, Rose does present a valid point here, as it portrays the need for a woman's body. This relates to what will be analysed in *The Winter's Tale*, therefore has relevance to my topic and will help me. Overall, I found the article to be of interest, however, it did not give enough information about the women/ mothers in Shakespeare in particular, as the title did suggest.