

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Panjwani, Varsha, creator and host. Women and Shakespeare

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Volume 46, Number 2, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109453ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i2.42305>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Santos, K. (2023). Review of [Panjwani, Varsha, creator and host. Women and Shakespeare]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 46(2), 189–192. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i2.42305>

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Panjwani, Varsha, creator and host.

Women and Shakespeare.

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Every episode of *Women and Shakespeare* begins and ends with the jarring but empowering sound of shattering glass. Signifying both the breaking of the glass ceiling and the smashing of the patriarchy, this sonic bookend reflects the deliberately disruptive nature of an urgently needed podcast created and hosted by Shakespeare scholar and teacher Varsha Panjwani. In an introductory episode preceding the start of the first series (“[Introduction: Bonus Episode](#)”), which premiered in March 2020 with the support of an NYU Global Faculty Fund Award, Panjwani recounts that she “increasingly began noticing [...] that, despite the overwhelming number of women students and scholars in this field of study, a very small percentage of women scholars get cited in essays and presentations.” She observed, moreover, that fewer women than men have been invited to be keynote speakers at conferences or public commentators on Shakespeare and that “women actors still have to really fight for their interpretations, because all the focus is on male characters.” In response to what she experienced as a “collective silence of women experts on Shakespeare,” Panjwani explains that she “wanted to create a platform where women scholars of Shakespeare could be heard loudly, clearly, and proudly.”

Panjwani’s remarks about the origins of the podcast in this bonus episode were offered not as a single-voiced prologue but rather as answers to questions posed by interviewer Apurva Kothari, one of seven students enrolled in Panjwani’s Shakespeare course at NYU London in the summer of 2019 when the podcast began to take shape. This collaborative pedagogical context was critical to the creation and production of *Women and Shakespeare*, as many of the podcast’s conversations were recorded in Panjwani’s classroom (or Zoom room following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) and reflect the questions and contributions of her students. In her recent book, *Podcasts and Feminist Shakespeare Pedagogy*, Panjwani riffs on Virginia Woolf’s famous 1929 essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, to explain that she and her students successfully found a digital room of their own to create a space within Shakespeare studies that “would both broadcast and store a range of women’s thoughts and voices.”¹

1. Panjwani, *Podcasts*, 1.

Aligning their work with the activism of cyberfeminists who have proven that “the online sphere is an opportunity to restructure or resist marginalization in the offline world,”² Panjwani and her students also succeed in opening up their digital room well beyond the walls of the academy. As Panjwani notes in this introductory episode, they explicitly chose the medium of a podcast with relatively short, jargon-free episodes in order to create access to knowledge for those who do not have the institutional resources or time to read books or attend the latest productions of Shakespeare. Episodes, which are available with a full transcript on the *Women and Shakespeare* website as well as on Apple Podcasts and Spotify, are typically between 25- and 35-minutes long. Podcasts, Panjwani reminded me while I was walking to work earlier this year, are powerful conveyors of knowledge that can be listened to “while commuting, cooking, gardening, whatever, really.” The fact that full transcripts are also available to those who wish to read the episodes is a testament to Panjwani’s commitment to accessibility in many forms.

Currently at the beginning of its fourth six-episode season, *Women and Shakespeare* has featured conversations with a diverse range of women whose critical and creative work intersects with the ongoing and often fraught legacy of Shakespeare. As they detail their experiences with interpreting and remaking Shakespeare’s works across various media and in several languages, these women offer insights and testimonies that raise important questions about long-standing systemic issues of silence, consent, and discrimination, even as they celebrate the joys of engaging with Shakespeare’s plays in books, on stages, and in classrooms. What Panjwani’s thoughtful questions and strong hosting abilities open up are genuine conversations about how women navigate the complexities of the Shakespeare industry and chart paths towards a more equitable future.

In much the same way that I came to anticipate and delight in the sound of shattering glass on either end of each episode, I found myself looking forward to every guest’s answer to the question that Panjwani asks as a matter of course: “When did you first encounter Shakespeare, and what was the nature of that encounter?” For most of the women she has interviewed, that encounter took place, perhaps unsurprisingly, when they were young students or audience members, but what I especially enjoyed about the guests’ answers

was the honesty with which they reflected on their initial delight, distaste, or ambivalence in response to Shakespeare. As I have learned in my own teaching, it is essential to create space for all of those reactions and to listen carefully when the very same people who were once—or are even still—sceptical of Shakespeare tell us why they find value and purpose in the act of engaging with his works today.

While I learned a great deal from all 19 full-length episodes that have aired thus far, I wish to highlight just a few as a means of illustrating the impressive range of guests that Panjwani has invited into the expansive digital room of *Women and Shakespeare*. Joined by interpreter Linda Bruce in [S2: E3](#), Deaf actor Nadia Nadarajah discusses the challenges and the interpretive opportunities of playing roles such as Celia in *As You Like It* and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*. In the following two-part episode ([S2: E4: Part 1](#) and [S2: E4: Part 2](#)), Adjoa Andoh describes the extraordinary process of staging and starring in an all-women-of-colour production of *Richard II* in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, a dark candlelit space that was not designed with Black and brown bodies in mind. In [S3: E3](#), Yarit Dor offers insight into her work as a fight director and intimacy coach, highlighting the importance of thinking about how to keep actors safe when performing violent and sexual encounters—two modes of embodied engagement that are often closely related in Shakespeare's plays. It was equally fascinating to hear from academics such as Naomi Miller ([S2: E5](#)), Mary Bly ([S2: E6](#)), and Emma Whipday ([S3: E4](#)), who have published creative works in addition to—and sometimes in direct relation to—their scholarly publications. Given the rich variety of topics and forms of expertise showcased and celebrated on *Women and Shakespeare*, I believe that every Shakespeare syllabus would be enhanced by an episode of this podcast, whether teachers wish to include interviews that address specific plays or those that invite students to think about aspects of Shakespearean performance, adaptation, or pedagogy.

In the first three seasons that have been produced since *Women and Shakespeare* began, Panjwani has absolutely delivered on her promise to create a platform where women scholars can be heard “loudly, clearly and proudly.” But what is also remarkable about this digital project is that it serves as an aural archive of women's vast contributions to the multifaceted field of Shakespeare studies. If the Shakespeare industry is to move forward in ways that are ethical, sustaining, and inclusive, that archive will need to grow so that we can listen to women of all kinds, and particularly to women of colour, queer and trans

women, disabled women, and women from non-anglophone communities. For my part, I hope that I will have many more walks ahead of me, and I am eager to keep hearing the sound of shattering glass as I learn from women in Shakespeare along the way.

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<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i2.42305>

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