Emma Smith’s *Shakespeare and Character* lecture Q&A

Janet: Do you have any suggestions about helping students at GCSE not to think about characters as real, but as character constructs? What ways in to the text would help them to do this?

As I said, I can’t claim expertise in the GCSE classroom and I am grateful to all of you who make that work and generate keen readers and A level students. But maybe a parallel with modern eg tv or YA fiction – what are the character types? – and working that out in relation to the play might work.

Vicky: Would you extend this approach to comedies like Taming of the Shrew where the central relationships are often read as quite problematic?

I think this is an approach that can work with all the plays. We move away from psychological realism and think instead about plot types and the stereotypical characters they require. Students are good at seeing characters in contemporary tv, film, and games who are cliches and can be liberated to see this in Shakespeare, rather than always working hard to fill out the characters into full people.

Joy: I teach English Language and Literature Access to HE students and is an intensive Level 3 course. We're studying Richard III. Are there particular interpretative approaches that you would recommend they become familiar with?

I think Richard III is great for studying through performance: I’d recommend the film directed by Richard Loncraine, or the resources at rsc.org.uk.

E. Mason: Do you think considering characters as concepts is something that could be applied to other Renaissance theatre? I'm teaching the Duchess of Malfi at A Level and there are some interesting considerations for characters in this as well!

I do think this works for drama of this period more generally. It might help with something like – why does Bosola repent/does B really repent? – by thinking about that more as a structural point for the end of the play than a psychological point. And is Cariola eg a real person or a foil for the Duchess? And why doesn’t the Duchess have a name?

Bridget: I really like the ideas about doubling. When teaching The Winter's Tale, I have always focused n this as a modern idea. Do you think Autolycus would have had an earlier double in the play? Thank you for such an interesting talk.

Autolycus is a really good example of a character who must have been doubled – some productions double him with Leontes, for instance. But he could be doubled with other members of the Sicilian court – Antigonus, or even Mamillius or Hermione, both of whom would be played by male actors, of course. In some ways it doesn’t matter what actually happened, but it can be fun to think about how it might work with different possibilities. Other interesting doubling – the bear (if you assume as I do that it is a man in a suit), Mamilius/Florizel or Mamilius/Perdita, Hermione/Mopsa etc.