The Explicator

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 0014-4940 (Print) 1939-926X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/vexp20

Disability and the Scene of Learning in Shakespeare, Lope, Ariosto

Laura Seymour

To cite this article: Laura Seymour (2025) Disability and the Scene of Learning in Shakespeare, Lope, Ariosto, The Explicator, 83:1, 52-60, DOI: 10.1080/00144940.2024.2409718

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2024.2409718

THE EXPLICATOR
2025, VOL. 83, NO. 1, 52–60
https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2024.2409718

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Disability and the Scene of Learning in Shakespeare, Lope, Ariosto

Laura Seymour

Birkbeck University of London

KEYWORD Shakespeare

Inducting *The Taming of the Shrew*, Christophero Sly (potentially performed, with characteristic self-burlesque, by the actor Will Sly) deploys Spanish and Italian to make claims to English ethnic superiority. 'Sessa' (Spanish 'cesa' or Italian 'cessa', cease!), he tells his landlady; he needs 'Paucas pallabris' (Spanish, 'pocas palabras', a few words) to convince her that he shouldn't pay his bills: viz. he is English. Sly's Spanish has a literary dimension; when he says 'pocas palabras' and swears 'by S. Ieronimie' coupling this with 'go by', he remembers Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1684–9; Kyd), canonizing its protagonist.[1] Sly bungles his claim to an old English name, saying 'the Slies…came in with Richard Conqueror', rather than 'William'. Both Sly and stage directions refer to Sly with an Italianate flourish as 'Christophero Sly' (all quotations Shakespeare, S2v–S3r; Shakespeare). Spanish was 'a theatrical resource' for English playwrights, often appearing alongside other languages (Montgomery, 77). Sly is a non-elite person—beggar, pedlar, cardmaker, tinker—whose playgoing helps interweave Spanish and Italian into his English. Exemplifying how, as Montogomery writes, on the early modern stage 'troubling foreign languages…are inseparable from English itself', with Spanish in particular allying itself with English stage devils (13), Sly prepares the audience for a play imbricating English, Spanish, and Italian.

Shrew is often read alongside Ariosto's *I Suppositi* [*The Substitutions*] (1509) and Gascoigne's English translation thereof, *Supposes* (1566; Gascoigne), the source of Shakespeare's Bianca subplot (see e.g. Loviasco). *Shrew* is more rarely read alongside a significant analogue, Lope de Vega's *La Dama Boba* [*The Daft Lady*] (1613) (de Vega). Accepting Sly's cue, I bring Lope into conversation with the English and Italian texts to illuminate unruly femininity, disability and pedagogy in *Shrew*. I propose neurodiversity as a future dimension for Spanish-English comparative literature, which has hitherto tended to focus on themes of roguery, honor, and English

Hispanophobia and fascination with Spain (Bood; Boro; Seymour 36–57; Weissbourd). Lope represents the disabled/neurodivergent woman Finea as unteachable according to normative standards; however, precisely because she is artful, learned, and experienced in her own neurodivergent way she ensures that Lope's plot is satisfactorily resolved with a chaste marriage rather than a seduction-by-pedagogue. This casts light onto Katherine's unruly femininity, which violently confronts the pedagogue-as-seducer. My inquiry initiates fruitful conversations for *Shrew*: might Katherine be a disabled character too? How does our teaching respond to the pedagogy depicted in early modern drama? What is helpful to teach with *Shrew*?

Whilst *Shrew* thematises education, present-day readers use the play to educate themselves about a variety of early modern topics: gender, marriage, comedy. Reading *Shrew* alongside Lope's similar-plotted tale illuminates the troubling content of some of this education. As Wiseman has recently analyzed, *Shrew*'s scenes of learning tap into wider European literary narratives about learning as seduction, Dante's Paolo and Francesca being a key example (Wiseman 4). However, Wiseman notes, Bianca's tutors are genuinely seeking marriage so these scenes 'play out' sinful seduction without being truly risky (6). I suggest that, cognizant of this European literary heritage, Baptista deliberately casts Bianca and her suitors into the role of seduced student and seducing tutor:

> Bap. Gentlemen content ye: I am resolud:
> Go in Bianca.
> And for I know she taketh most delight
> In Musicke, Instruments, and Poetry,
> Schoolemasters will I keepe within my house,
> Fit to instruct her youth. If you Hortensio,
> Or signior Gremio you know any such,
> Preferre them hither: for to cunning men,
> I will be very kinde and liberall,
> To mine owne children, in good bringing vp, (S4r)

Baptista performs his 'resolud' persona for Bianca then bids her leave, keeping her, ostensibly at least, innocent of his plot. The stressed position of 'Schoolemasters' allows him to deliver this word with heavy irony: 'I'm looking for some "schoolmasters", if you catch my drift'. Baptista then allows us to envisage Hortensio and Gremio *as* the schoolmasters—'Schoolemasters….If you Hortensio, Or Signior Gremio…'—allowing us ample time to imagine a verb ('if you Hortensio could pretend to be one? Or, Signor Gremio, could disguise yourself as one?') before an insinuating '…know any such'. Baptista adds that he prefers, and will generously reward, 'cunning men', connoting skillful schoolmasters or wily suitors. As 'kinde' can mean 'kin', Baptista is saying, 'cunning men will become my kin and I am kind to my own children'. Baptista activates the scene of seduction: who can be the wiliest suitor and

perform the seducing schoolmaster to Bianca? Whoever wins will become one of the family and get a reward. Baptista cannot officially allow anybody to court Bianca until Katherine is married, but he can without losing face allow Bianca to have tutors. Lope and Ariosto, who both explored the theme of the seducing tutor (Lope in various works including *El Maestro de Danzar* [*The Dancing Teacher*]), would have known exactly what this meant. More fully than Shakespeare, Lope explodes some of the biases and generic truisms involved in the early modern stock scene of learning-as-seduction.

In *La Dama Boba*, Octavio has two daughters: Finea is foolish, Nise well-read and learned. Finea's foolishness manifests as an artful recalcitrance to learning the simplest lesson (the alphabet) along normative lines—let alone progressing on to the reciprocal lessons in heterosexual love Bianca indulges in with Lucentio, or Lope's inspiration the Jewish Neoplatanist Ebreo models in *Dialogi D'amore* (1535). The tutor, Rufino, reminds us regularly that Finea is pretty [linda] and thus worthy of seduction. However, Finea's neurodivergence enables her chastity as it prevents Rufino from activating any normative educational script, including the script of seduction. Though Rufino insists that Finea is unteachable, she troubles him by highlighting the weaknesses in his ideas about rationality and the teacher-student relationship, throwing his prowess as a teacher and his pedagogical style into question.

RUFINO: These are also letters
FINEA: Are there so many?
RUFINO: There are twenty three.
FINEA: Right, get on with the lesson;
now I'll say it very well.
RUFINO: [*indicating a letter*] What is this one?
FINEA: That one? I don't know.
RUFINO: And this?
FINEA: I don't know the answer.
RUFINO: And this?
FINEA: This round one? A letter!
RUFINO: Good!
FINEA: So I got it right?
RUFINO: Pretty beast!
FINEA: That's it! By God, it was called 'beast', but I didn't remember.
RUFINO: This is errrr and this is I.
FINEA: Well, if you've made an *err*or…
NISE: [*aside*] How bogged down they are!
RUFINO: I've got here, 'g', 'o': 'go'
FINEA: Where are they going?
RUFINO: Give me strength!
FINEA: Weren't you saying that they were going somewhere?
RUFINO: They are letters, look at them properly!
FINEA: I'm looking.
RUFINO: G O, go.

FINEA: Where?
RUFINO: Where I never have to see you again!
FINEA: Go, didn't you say? Well, I'll be off then.
RUFINO: I'm losing my wits here! Learning is impossible! God above, I'll have to thwack your hand.

[RUFINO: …Estas son letras también.
FINEA: ¿Tantas hay?
RUFINO: Veintitrés son.
FINEA: Ahora vaya de lición;
que yo la diré muy bien.
RUFINO: ¿Qué es ésta?
FINEA: Aquesta?… No sé.
RUFINO: ¿Y ésta?
FINEA: No sé qué responda.
RUFINO: ¿Y ésta?
FINEA: ¿Cuál? ¿Esta redonda?
¡Letra!
RUFINO: ¡Bien!
FINEA: Luego ¿acerté?
RUFINO: ¡Linda bestia!
FINEA: ¡Así, así!
Bestia, ¡por Dios!, se llamaba;
pero no se me acordaba.
RUFINO: Ésta es *erre*, y ésta es *i*.
FINEA: Pues, ¿si tú lo traes errado…?
NISE: (¡Con qué pesadumbre están!) [Aparte]
RUFINO: Di aquí: *b*, *a*, *n*; *ban*.
FINEA: ¿Dónde van?
RUFINO: ¡Gentil cuidado!
FINEA: ¿Que se van, no me decías?
RUFINO: Letras son. ¡Míralas bien!
FINEA: Ya miro.
RUFINO: *B*, *e*, *n*; *ven*.
FINEA: ¿Adónde?
RUFINO: ¡Adónde en mis días
no te vuelva más a ver!
FINEA: ¿Ven, no dices? Pues ya voy.
RUFINO: ¡Perdiendo el jüicio estoy!
¡Es imposible aprender!
¡Vive Dios, que te he de dar
una palmeta!] (ll. 325-50)[2]

Finea's learning process involves a garrulousness frowned upon in contemporary manuals on the education of women, which advised them to learn in silence (Nogués Bruno). Her responses have their own artistry ('a letter!', 'well, if you've made an error…'). Though he deems Finea a mindless beast, Rufino states that he is losing *his* sanity and human rationality '¡Perdiendo el jüicio estoy!' through his encounter with her, implicitly acknowledging that he is not

the yardstick of learning and reason he initially believes himself to be.[3] Rufino's violent response—essentially punishing Finea for making him feel inadequate—is typical of many societies' pushback against neurodivergent ways of thinking and learning (which can look to ableist society like a failure or a refusal to think and learn), what Bridget Bartlett (Bartlett) has recently analyzed as early modern notions of 'towardness' (on the continuing use of rhetorical teaching to stigmatize and exclude neurodivergent people see Price; McRuer 146).

Shakespeare and Lope's work both rest on that of humanist Vives, whose early-sixteenth-century notions (along with Erasmus's in *Christiani Matrimonii Institutio*, 1526; Vives) that for women chastity, obedience, and honesty were more important than learning resonated throughout Europe for several centuries.[4] Vives emphasizes that women should only read books that improve their morals, both before and after marriage (2.116, 2.132). Both Shakespeare and Lope's scenes of seduction-through-learning evoke this ideal: it does not matter if women learn little, provided they are sexually moral Christians; any learning they gain should enhance their wifely traits. Finea's initial 'unteachability' could be a deliberate strategy of resistance both to suffocating norms about female behavior and to her tutor's attempts to follow *comedia* tradition and seduce his pupil. Actresses playing Katherine have had to work to encode irony and jokes into her capitulation speech, to recuperate it from the stark misogyny in Shakespeare's text. Contrastingly, Lope centers his text around Finea successfully keeping within generic *comedia* bounds as a marriage-motivated female protagonist, whilst undermining Rufino's rhetorical strategies that paint her neurodivergence as sub-human.

Lope's interest in neurodivergence can prompt us to pay more attention to disability in *Shrew*. Petruchio seems tell us that Katherine is physically disabled:

Pet. 'Twas told me you were rough, and coy, and sullen,
And now I finde report a very liar:
For thou art pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous,
But slow in speech: yet sweet as spring-time flowers.
Thou canst not frowne, thou canst not looke a sconce,
Nor bite the lip, as angry wenches will,
Nor hast thou pleasure to be crosse in talke:
But thou with mildnesse entertain'st thy wooers,
With gentle conference, soft, and affable.
Why does the world report that Kate doth limpe?
Oh sland'rous world: Kate like the hazle twig
Is straight, and slender, and as browne in hue
As hazle nuts, and sweeter then the kernels:
Oh let me see thee walke: thou dost not halt.
Kate. Go foole, and whom thou keep'st command.
Pet. Did euer Dian so become a Groue
As Kate this chamber with her princely gate (S6v)

Petruchio sets up the situation as one of sarcasm: he states that he has heard that Katherine is a shrew but now meeting her (during which meeting she has struck, insulted, and verbally threatened him) he sees she is not. In performance Petruchio's list of things Katherine is not (biting her lip, frowning, speaking quickly) may refer to what she actually is doing at that moment. This suggests that when Petruchio says that Katherine does not 'limpe' or 'halt', he is continuing his sarcasm and she in fact does do these things. Petruchio makes a particular meal of Kate's 'princely gate', suggesting that the actor is to perform some gait-related business. At the RSC in 2003, Petruchio (Jasper Britton) tied Katherine (Alexandra Gilbreath) to a chair so when she tried to walk away she did 'halt' and 'limpe'; he mocked her 'princely gate', hobbled by the chair. Katherine is rarely performed as physically disabled, but she could be, recognizing Schaap Williams' call for more disabled performers to play both disabled and abled characters in Shakespeare (226; Schaap Williams). A disabled gait is certainly princely and divine and Petruchio may be speaking with genuine admiration. However, in conformity with his previous lines, his description of Katherine's walking is more likely an ableist joke at her expense, or a manipulative use of tender words of affection and admiration she rarely hears. A disabled Katherine would lead to exciting—and perhaps, for actors and audience, emotionally challenging—new versions of the play in the context of its violent scenes of education-as-seduction.

Whilst Petruchio sharpens his rhetoric on Katherine's body and defines her disabled gait, Lope foregrounds the unruly woman's own disabled rhetoric and artistry. Though cured of her daftness when she falls in love with Laurencio, Finea decides to feign daftness in order to shake off an unwanted suitor Liseo and thus engineer her marriage to Laurencio. This invokes and inverts two common trends in early modern literature: able-bodied people faking disabilities (as Row-Heyveld has illuminated; Row-Heyveld), and disabled people (as Bearden explores, 56–75) concealing their disabilities. Siebers defines this as 'disability drag': an able-bodied person performing the role of a disabled person (Siebers 114–6). The actor playing Finea might perform disability drag if they are a neurotypical person cripping up to play a neurodivergent woman. Finea ironizes the concept of disability drag by including a personal twist: she crips up to perform the role of her past self, crediting her disability as a source of knowledge and of her ability to navigate the marriage-market to get what she wants.

Pretending that she is still daft is easy for her, Finea explains to Laurencio, firstly because she was daft for a long time and so knows how to go through the motions of speaking and behaving in a divergent way, and secondly because as a woman she is naturally inclined to feigning:

> I was (daft) for a long time,
> and blind people know how to traverse
> the place where they were born.

In addition, we women
have such a ready nature when it comes to feigning
—either lovingly or fearfully—,
that, before we are born, we feign

[lo fui mucho tiempo,
y el lugar donde se nace
saben andarle los ciegos.
Demas destos, las mujeres
naturaleza temenos
tan pronta para fingir
o con amor o con miedo,
que, antes de nacer, fingimos] (2489–94)

Finea uses language of disability as a metaphor for her ability to feign disability. She leans on the idea that though blind people might be disabled in unfamiliar environments, they are less disabled when traversing terrain they know well. Being daft gave Finea thorough (or in Bearden's terms, ibid., 'intimate') knowledge of daftness, so that she can return to this territory and feign daftness with ease. Her description of blindness and womanhood as natal and natural conditions ('they were born…we have such a nature' ['se nace…naturaleza tenemos']) positions feigning as a natural artistry, or an artistry that adjusts, draws on, and skillfully performs with and on the natural (what Dolmage calls 'disability métis'; Dolmage). Rufino, and Finea's dancing teacher, define Finea's bobería as resistance to learning. Finea recasts her years of bobería as a learning process: during all the time that she was 'una boba', she was learning about disability and how to work with it. How might Katherine be performed in this way in the future?

Returning to *I Suppositi*/*Supposes*, now we can see the way that Gascoigne represents anagnorisis as a recognition of foolishness. His characters frequently judge each other's cognitive abilities—'a man of smal sapientia', 'a cods heade', 'a blockehead'—, testing who can trick and who can be tricked (1573, D4v, D2v; Gascoigne). In later editions, Gascoigne protects his reader from charges of foolishness with marginal notes helping us identify supposes, including 'a doltish suppose' and 'a right suppose' (1587, C8r, F1v). Foolishness is constructed rather than absolute in *Supposes*; it occurs when a person does not have enough information. In the margins, Gascoigne is our informative tutor.

Adding Lope to the conversation demonstrates the value of foolishness. Lope has much to offer Shakespeare studies in general, and vice versa, as has been discussed (Wheeler 2–5; Della Gatta, 122). His depiction of queer characters is one example beyond the scope of this essay. I have argued that Lope and Shakespeare both explore the violence of normative pedagogy. Wiseman notes that Shakespeare draws on familiar scenes of violent shrew-taming from ballads and jestbooks in the service of misogynist humor (23). Choosing a different intertext and reading *Shrew* alongside Lope highlights the potential

for foregrounding disabled agency and artistry in future productions of *Shrew*. Moreover, Finea's refusal to be seduced by her tutor models a farcical situation in which we often still find ourselves: as Traub has argued, early modern equations of pedagogy and sexual seduction continue to obtain (Traub 294–324; cf. Ahmed; Srinavasan). Perhaps this is why Wiseman calls Sly 'the optimal learner' (20); like Finea, by getting mixed up he makes a point—the very point that started this essay.

Notes

1. 'Hieronimo, beware, goe by, goe by' (Kyd, G4r).
2. All translations mine.
3. Jüicio could mean sanity, the ability to distinguish true from false and good from evil, and the more general ability to reason logically and make judgements.
4. Richard Hyrde translated Vives' treatise into English as *Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1529).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by University of Oxford. The British Society for Literature and Science.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Complaint!* Duke University Press, 2021.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook.* Penguin, 2023.

Bartlett, Bridget. "Developmental Disability as Material, Metaphor, and Essential Difference in an Elizabethan Morality Play." *Shaping Intellectual Disabilities in Early Modern English Literature*, edited by Alice Equestri. Edinburgh University Press, 2024 [forthcoming].

Bearden, Elizabeth. *Monstrous Kinds.* Michigan University Press, 2019.

Bood, Rena. "The Barke is Bad, but the Tree Good." *Literary Hispanophobia and Hispanophilia in Britain and the Low Countries (1550–1850)*, edited by Yolanda Rodríguez Pérez Amsterdam University Press, 2020, pp. 145–64.

Boro, Joyce. "Lame Humor". *Performing Disability in Early Modern English Drama,* edited by Leslie Dunn. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 209–32.

Della Gatta, Carla. "Adapting *La Dama Boba* and *The Taming of the Shrew* for a Foreign Audience." *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, vol. *67*, no.1, 2015, pp. 119–29. doi:10.1353/boc.2015.0010.

de Vega, Lope. *La Dama Boba*, edited by Diego Marín, 33rd ed. Cátedra, 2018.

Dolmage, Jay Timothy. "What is Metis?" *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. *40*, no.1, 2020, doi:10.18061/dsq/v40i1.7224.

Gascoigne, George. *A Hundreth Sundry Flowers.* For R Smith, 1573.

Gascoigne, George. *The Pleasauntest Workes of George Gascoigne.* For Robert Barker, 1587.

Kyd, Thomas. *The Spanish Tragedie.* Edward Allde, 1592.
Loviasco, Domenico. 'Ariosto, Gascoigne e *the Taming of the Shrew*' *L'analisi linguistica e letteraria XVII*, 2009, pp. 71–92.
McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory.* NYU Press, 2006.
Montgomery, Marianne. *Europe's Languages on England's Stages 1590–1620.* Routledge, 2012.
Nogués Bruno, María. "El Silencio en la Educación de la Mujer a la Luz de *La Dama Boba* de Lope de Vega." *Lectora*, vol. *13*, 2007, pp. 29–44.
Price, Margaret. *Mad at School.* Michigan University Press, 2011.
Row-Heyveld, Lindsey. *Dissembling Disability in Early Modern English Drama.* Palgrave, 2018.
Seymour, Laura. *Refusing to Behave in Early Modern Literature.* Edinburgh University Press, 2022.
Schaap Williams, Katherine. *Unfixable Forms.* Cornell University Press, 2021.
Shakespeare, William. "The Taming of the Shrew." *William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies.* Isaac Jaggard and Ed. Blount, 1623.
Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory.* Michigan University Press, 2006.
Traub, Valerie. *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns.* Michigan University Press, 2015.
Srinavasan, Amia. *The Right to Sex.* Bloomsbury, 2021.
Vives, Juan Luis, *De Institutione Feminae Christianae (1524)*, edited by Charles Fantazzi and C. Matheeussen. Brill, 1996.
Weissbourd, Emily. "Shakespeare, Race, and Spain." *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, edited by Patricia Akhimie. Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 274–90.
Wheeler, Duncan. *Golden Age Drama in Contemporary Spain*. University of Wales Press, 2012.
Wiseman, Susan. "Educating Shrews." *Actes des congrès de la Société Française Shakespeare*, vol. *41*, 2023, doi:10.4000/shakespeare.8158.