

<b>Institution:</b> Royal Holloway, University of London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 27 English Languages and Literatures		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Jo Shapcott: a poet informing public, medical and creative understanding of cancer and the body in sickness and health		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2005-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Jo Shapcott	Professor of Creative Writing	August 2005 – October 2019
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2019		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Jo Shapcott's attention to the body was the focus of her Costa Prize poetry collection <i>Of Mutability</i>. Shapcott has played a leading role in bringing poetry into health settings, enabling professionals and patients to understand how embodiment is experienced in sickness and health. Through her poetry, workshops, and readings Shapcott has 1) enhanced the lives of people living with cancer and their carers through the power of poetry; 2) enabled cancer patients and NHS staff to use poetry to articulate experiences of illness in poetry, 3) inspired artists and audiences through readings and creative projects at the National Gallery, Keats House, Royal Festival Hall and other venues, 4) built audiences for poetry via the school curriculum.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>In <i>Of Mutability</i> (R1) Shapcott's experience of cancer impelled her to investigate the felt body as it is transformed by disease and subjected to scientific scrutiny, and to explore the way that a 'cellular madness' opens up new perceptions of our fragile, animal being. Later work including the Addenbrooke's poems in <i>Taking Note</i> (R4) continue to explore the interface of medicine and bodily experience.</p> <p>In responding to cancer, Shapcott's work investigates the boundaries of bodies (skin, hair, membrane, lips, breath, urine); it meditates on received myths of transformation in the context of illness (Ovid's stories; Orpheus; the loss of memory; the arrival of death); and it links human and the natural world (bees, trees, scorpion, R1, R2). It seeks 'the exact place where the self and the other touch, where there's the possibility of either transformation or stasis' (Shapcott, Poetry Archive website). The human response to change and mutability is at the centre of her work, though in a mode removed from the dry language of cancer grades, T-cell counts, and remission. Poems such as 'Hairless' and 'Deft' open up questions about being and becoming, and in so doing allow readers to meditate on the experience of sickness and change, and see the richness of possible responses to the body's simultaneous vulnerability and enduring strength. As one reviewer wrote, 'one of the most striking things about this collection of 45 poems is a sense of heightened physical awareness, down to the microscopic cellular level' (<i>Telegraph</i>, 27 Jan 2011).</p> <p>Shapcott applies a similar scrutiny to the non-human body, exploring what links human and non-human, cellular and environmental. The bee poems, a series of tree poems, and 'Slender Loris' exemplify this questing connectedness in which 'the self becomes increasingly aligned to everything else in the universe' (Iain Twiddy, <i>Cancer Poetry</i>). The 'elemental' body is explored via Helen Chadwick's 'Piss Flower' sculptures in <i>Of Mutability</i> and in 'Callisto's Song' (R3), her response to the <i>Metamorphosis: Titian 2012</i> exhibition.</p>		

In formal terms, Shapcott works across disciplinary and perceptual boundaries, touching on science, art and music. The coming together of 'self and other' is explored through her poetry in several technical ways. Her deployment of dramatic monologue is one mode in which Shapcott articulates normally unimaginable perspectives, but often there is a permeability of perspective articulated in which 'the self and cognition is free-floating' (Iain Twiddy). Her lyric poetry draws the language of science into the service of poetry and the emotions, and the language of feeling into exploration of nature. Her combination of the colloquial and the fantastic works to expand the imaginative reach of readers in relation to embodied experience.

### 3. References to the research

- R 1.** The main output is Jo Shapcott, *Of Mutability*. Faber & Faber. 19 August 2010. ISBN 9780571254705 (HB), 9780571254712 (PBK), 9780571268566 (etext), 9780571277940 (PBK reprint), ISBN 9780571352357 (2019, Faber Anniversary Edition). Available from HEI on Request. Its print run of over 30,000 copies (2010-2019) is described by the literary agent Georgina Capel as 'extraordinary for a volume of poetry.' (S1) Recognition of standing via major awards: Costa Book of the Year prize, 2010; Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, 2011. Also internationally via translations: Italian *Della Mutabilita* (Del Vecchio Editore, 2015); sections published in German and Polish. Reviewed widely and a focus in several academic studies e.g. Iain Twiddy, *Cancer Poetry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Fiona Cox, *Ovid's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing: Strange Monsters* (OUP, 2018).
- R 2.** Jo Shapcott, Six Bee Poems [2011], The Poetry Society, <https://poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/six-bee-poems/>. Reprinted in the international anthology *If Bees are Few: A Hive of Bee Poems*, ed. James P. Lenfestey. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. ISBN 978 0 8166 9806 6.
- R 3.** Jo Shapcott, 'Callisto's Song' for *Metamorphosis: Titian 2012*. Commissioned by National Gallery, London. Available from HEI on Request, an example of the poetry can be found from Youtube [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isY\\_cl6L5\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isY_cl6L5_U) and the National Gallery webpages <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/past/metamorphosis-titian-2012/poems-inspired-by-titian>
- R 4.** Jo Shapcott, three poems in Jo Shapcott, Eve Lacey, Rebecca Watts, and Caddie Benyon, *Taking Note: Poetry in Moments*. Cambridge: Cambridge Poetry and Imagination, 2018. ISBN 978 0 9926259 5 5. Available from HEI on Request or via Issuu [https://issuu.com/cambridgecandi/docs/taking\\_note\\_booklet\\_web\\_version\\_pag](https://issuu.com/cambridgecandi/docs/taking_note_booklet_web_version_pag)

### 4. Details of the impact

Shapcott's poetry elaborates new ways of speaking about cancer and the body, facilitating dialogues between artists, medics, and patients; helping professionals and patients to articulate the lived experience of bodily malfunction; and through its educational use and galleries influencing understandings of health and embodiment by school pupils and the wider society.

Since its publication in 2010, *Of Mutability* has had a lasting impact on those working with and experiencing cancer. It has extended and enriched public discourse on sickness by challenging negative perceptions of cancer patients as self-preoccupied 'sufferers', replacing this with an innovative view of how living with cancer enables people to be opened to the world.

#### **Facilitating discussion of illness and influencing dialogues between the arts and medicine at Medicine Unboxed, Keats House, and Addenbrooke's Hospital**

Shapcott's work on the poetics of the body stimulated an interest among healthcare professionals in how patients describe bodily experience. She has directly inspired health professionals **to generate new ways of thinking and talking about illness**. Her work informed the development of the charity **Medicine Unboxed**, which brings the arts and medicine into dialogue. As its founder the oncologist [text removed for publication] comments, '[text removed for publication]'. (S2)

As Founding Patron and Advisory Board member, Shapcott contributed and gave thematic direction to Medicine Unboxed's annual symposia, enabling them to grow from 80 to over 300 medics, artists and writers at the Parabola Arts Centre, Cheltenham, supported by Gloucestershire NHS Trust and the Wellcome Trust. (Themes were: 2013, Voice; 2014, Frontiers; 2015, Mortality; 2016, Wonder; 2017, Maps; 2018, Love.) **Shapcott inspired front-line NHS staff to reassess the values of medical practice**, and to **promote the arts** to enhance their goals. A survey in 2016 showed that participants [text removed for publication]'. (S2) Medicine Unboxed extended their work to digital audiences (2551 Twitter followers, approximately 30,000 G+ page views, 1,200 Facebook followers, 10,000 Soundcloud/ iTunes plays of podcasts, 1000 Vimeo plays), and was featured in *The Guardian* late 2013, June 2014, and in 2017 (circulation June 2014, 200,256; readership 748,000), on BBC Radio 4, and in two curated essays for *The Lancet* (2014 to 2015).

Shapcott expanded Medicine Unboxed's work through 'its two most successful collaborations' (S3): with **Keats House** (Hampstead) and *The Poet in the City* (2013). At Keats House Shapcott **advanced public understanding of Keats the poet-doctor-patient**, expanding the museum's audiences and profile as Poet in Residence 2013 to 2014. [text removed for publication]'. Keats House continued to benefit from her workshops (2014, 2017) and an International Woman's Day event (2017) which again broadened audiences. Her reading at the Keats-Shelley House in Rome (2017) facilitated external links.(S3)

Large hospitals, including **Addenbrooke's** in Cambridge, are primarily concerned with clinical outcomes. This means that the emotional experiences of illness and the 'felt' body can be overlooked. Shapcott's poetry addressed this by **inspiring patients, staff and visitors to deepen their understanding of the emotional experience of sickness**. Patients, staff, visitors and audiences at readings encountered her work there via the 2017 'Taking Note Initiative', a collaboration between the arts organization Cambridge Curiosity & Imagination and Addenbrooke's, where Shapcott was one of three residents. Her poems on medical science ('Drosophila Song') and hospitalization ('The Patient') were available to an estimated 28,000 staff, patients and visitors over seven weeks. Over 6000 poem cards from the poets were distributed on National Poetry Day (Sept 2017) and commissioned poems published as *Taking Note: Poetry in Moments* (R4), 1,000 printed with additional postcards and bookmarks; 1,164 impressions/314 reads on *issuu*). [text removed for publication] writes: '[text removed for publication]'. (S4) Those 'ripples' include a **raised profile for poetry in the hospital**, with continued display of the work since then, and a legacy hospital poetry project for staff (S7). [text removed for publication]'. (S4)

### Enhancing public understanding of living with cancer

Through her poetry, Shapcott has demonstrated its capacity to voice the emotional experiences of cancer and the effects of illness. Her poetry resonates widely with readers, including people living with cancer, carers, and health professionals. *Of Mutability*, has become a powerful way for people to connect with the complex emotions cancer generates. It is **recommended on many cancer support websites**, the Hants, Bristol and Northern Healthcare Trusts and Macmillan Cancer Support's Reading Well. Andrew Perkins, in a 2014 report for Macmillan Cancer Support, notes 'If you just read one thing, make it *Of Mutability*'. (S6). The Poetry Exchange podcast demonstrated how reading Shapcott's poetry enhanced the lives of people undergoing cancer treatment. One contributor, Hannah, described how *Of Mutability* 'became in a very literal sense a friend [...], when I didn't really know who my friends were and how to talk about anything. It was like a moment of recognition.' The Poetry Exchange team report that [text removed for publication]'. This podcast has been listened to [text removed for publication]. (S7)

Healthcare professions have recognised the importance of poetry as a result of reading her work: '*Of Mutability*, taking beautiful inspiration from experience of cancer treatment & mortality' (tweet by Tracey Bleakley, Chief Executive, Hospice UK). The surgeon, author, and television presenter Gabriel Weston in *The BMJ* in 2018 (629 full article views) was asked 'What book should every doctor read?' and replied 'Anything not related to medicine. A good novel, such as

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid, or a good collection of poetry, such as *Of Mutability*.' (S6)

**Public understanding of the experience of cancer** has been stimulated by Shapcott's poetry. 'Hairless' was *The Guardian*'s 'Poem of the Week' (13 November 2017, annual circulation 156,756), with 208 comments including: 'Of Mutability is the only poetry book I've sat down and read in one sitting [...] the sense of a body, the poroplastic casing of it, cupping its inner currents and divisions, seen out on the street, in a corridor, against a chair back, had been heightened.' (S1) 'Era' is reprinted in Anthony Wilson's anthology *Lifesaving Poems* (Bloodaxe, 2015). Wilson comments 'I was deeply moved my *Of Mutability* when it came out. And I return to it often [...] Jo's example gave me a model of developing a prismatic approach to writing about my experience of cancer'. He adds in his introduction that 'It takes a special kind of sensibility to link unasked-for changes in the body to global issues of the kind we find here, not least that of climate change'. (S5)

### Inspiring art practitioners and reinterpreting artworks; engaging diverse audiences

Shapcott's work has led to collaborations which enhance and disseminate experiences of art as it depicts embodied experience. 'Callisto's Song' (2,515 total YouTube views), a response to Titian's *Diana and Callisto* for the *Metamorphosis: Titian 2012* exhibition, brought the work's Ovidian bodily politics and terror into focus for an expanded, indeed international, audience. Shapcott is the only poet in Frederick Wiseman's *Días de Cine*-awarded and César-nominated documentary feature *National Gallery*, premiered Cannes 2014, at 40 Film Festivals worldwide, screened on BBC4 May 2015; box office to March 2015 USD1,600,000. Richard Brody's *New Yorker* review (November 2014, paid circulation over 1,000,000 in 2014) described her reading of the poem as the core of the 'sacred flame of obsession, passion, invention, creation' revealed by the film. Martina Knobben noted in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (one of Germany's largest daily newspapers, circulation of 380,000 in 2017) that 'she [Shapcott] finds the gaps: where language does not contribute to understanding, but hinders it'. (S8)

Shapcott's collaborative work has **enhanced musical culture** and enabled wider participation in music-making. In 2014 the Royal Festival Hall commissioned Shapcott and Sir Peter Maxwell-Davies to launch its refurbished organ. *A Wall of Music* for organ, brass and choir was premiered at a gala concert 18 March 2014, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 (2,090,000 weekly listeners, March 2014). Shapcott's 'Questions for the Machine' benefitted the Hall, musicians, and four school choirs assembled by the South Bank Centre's Voicelab, as well as audiences worldwide, in performance opportunity and an enriched sense of the organ as non-human body (*vox humana*). Jess Henshaw (Arts Coordinator, St Augustine's, Manchester) reported: 'This project is **really significant for our school** as we are in an extremely deprived area of Manchester and this is likely to be a once in a lifetime opportunity for our pupils.' (S9)

### Building audiences and benefiting teachers and students via Examination Boards

The educational use of Shapcott's work builds audiences for poetry and allows teachers and students to develop analytic skills and work on understandings of culture, language and embodiment. Her poetry was named on DfE Statutory Orders for two iterations of GCSE (to 2016) and *Of Mutability* poetry was prescribed in the Eduqas 'Unseen Poetry' component. *Of Mutability* was set for the International Option Baccalaureate 2017-18. It was also prescribed for the 'Relationships and Change' component in the OCR A Level English Literature Specification (2017), and 'Somewhat Unravelling' (from *Of Mutability*) is a central subject of the post-2016 Edexcel A/AS Level 'Student Exemplar Response', allowing students to explore unfamiliar structures of feeling and the language of dementia. (S10) A teacher from Chingford Foundation School reports using the resource and comments: '[text removed for publication].' (S10) *Of Mutability* poems feature heavily in online exam preparation blogs. (S10)

Shapcott's work has continued influence at both a local and global level. Her Bee Poems have been shared online and praised for their imaginative investigation of bee-lore and ecology by international sustainable beekeeping organisations The Honeybee Conservancy and Bees for Development, among others. (S6) Impact continues to flow from such sites as the Poetry Archive website and the *Newcastle* Centre for the Literary Arts archive, and well-received readings: in 2019 readings in Surrey (Watts Gallery), Dorset, Newcastle, London (South Bank, Kings Place), Wicklow, and Cologne; as well as her poem 'Census,' filmed as part of Royal Holloway's celebration of the suffragette Emily Wilding Davis in the cramped cupboard in the crypt of the House of Commons in which Davis hid during the 1911 census – a poem in which pain, privation and nutrition are explored.

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1.** Statement by Georgina Capel, Literary Agent, with collated notable reviews and mentions of *Of Mutability* and *Della Mutabilità* in the general press (7 articles, including *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *Corriere della Sera*).
- S2.** Testimonial and indicators of reach provided by [text removed for publication] at Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and [text removed for publication] Medicine Unboxed.
- S3.** Statement and a timeline of Shapcott's work provided by the curatorial team at Keats House and 2 reports documenting Shapcott's collaborations.
- S4.** Testimonial and indicators of reach provided by [text removed for publication], Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination, and citation from [text removed for publication] Clive James, poet, author and critic.
- S5.** Shapcott's 'Era' from *Of Mutability* reprinted with commentary in the anthology *Lifesaving Poems*, edA. Anthony Wilson (Bloodaxe Books, 2015) pp. x-xi. Additional testimonial from Anthony Wilson.
- S6.** Dossier of notable engagements with *Of Mutability* by charities, cancer support websites; blogs by people affected by cancer (7 sources) and significant recommendations of Shapcott's poems in social media (18 Twitter and Facebook posts).
- S7.** Testimonial and online visitor numbers provided by The Poetry Exchange podcast team. The podcast is available at: <<https://www.thepoetryexchange.co.uk/podcast/episode/bfd8a341/of-mutability-by-jo-shapcott-poem-as-friend-to-hannah>>.
- S8.** Collated reviews in the general press of Frederic Wiseman's *National Gallery* with commentary on Shapcott's reading of 'Callisto's Song' (7 items, including *The New Yorker*, *Die Zeit* and *Tribune de Genève*).
- S9.** Statement by Jess Henshaw, Reading Recovery/SENCo/Arts Co-ordinator, available at: <<https://curiousminds.org.uk/stapoats/>>; BBC coverage of premiere of Sir Peter Maxwell-Davies's A Wall of Music: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-26613078>>.
- S10.** Testimonial from a teacher from Chingford Foundation School, with collated examples of the educational use of Shapcott's *Of Mutability*.