SAA 2016 New Orleans
Seminar 51: Shared Practices and Shakespearean Communities (Matt Kozusko and Steve Mentz)

Abstracts

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Weaver Poets in the Sixteenth Century

ABSTRACT: Part of a larger project on William Muggins, author of London's Mourning Garment (1603), this essay establishes the existence of a circle or community of weavers who wrote poetry in the sixteenth century. The reputation of weavers to recite, sing, or compose poetry is registered (and perhaps parodied) in the popular culture of the period in figures like Nick Bottom of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Born of shared practices in weaving, the three weaver poets discussed here present a poetics apart from the more canonical works of aristocratic patronage. They thus provide a window into the literary lives of commoners in early modern England.

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From Table Books to Tumblr:

Recollecting the Microgenres of the Early Modern Stage in Social Media

In this essay, I examine the fragmentary writing and performance traditions that circulated in what I will call "microgenres," extractable dramatic materials such as songs, jokes, set pieces, jests and aphorisms. For early communities of readers and viewers, these materials were as popular and important as the larger works from which they were taken. Today's readers and viewers engage with Shakespeare's works in online communities that once again value fragments; they watch brief scenes, amateur performances, and share favorite quotations with friends and followers. Read historically, these adaptations are not so much innovations—Shakespeare's proleptic, anachronistic mastery over yet another media form—as they are a reinscription of early practices. Today's media, this essay argues, in which passages are marked, abridged, remixed, and shared, in fact unlocks features of the Shakespearean text that have been obscured by centuries of performance and print history.

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Class and Community in *King Lear*

In the Quarto version of *King Lear*, the Earl of Gloucester's servants call for a salve of egg whites and flax to treat his wounds, an act of tenderness a step beyond the retaliation delivered to the Duke of Cornwall. The bold selflessness of these anonymous commoner characters typifies the non-noble figures (including Kent as Caius and Edgar as Poor Tom) introduced into this tale of British mythology. In his *De officiis*, Cicero identifies generosity or *beneficentia* as inextricable from justice; justice, he says, is only possible by "avoid[ing] *iniuria*, the doing harm contrary to right," and is the basis of a societal common good. In *King Lear*, society defines itself by way of such an individual morality after the traditional systems of order have broken down: hospitality is violated, inheritance is diverted, and divine right is compromised. More than a duty bound by social hierarchy, in this paper I will argue that the altruistic deeds performed throughout the play serve to humble the aristocracy and to promote a community defined by magnanimous actions instead of noble blood.

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"For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so": Shakespeare, fans, and tumblr's knowledge making communities.

The intertextual affordances of the popular micro(re)blogging website tumblr manifest the concepts of fan community whereby interest in a desired object, individual, or group draws people into shared experiences. Tumblr Shakespeares are arguably made up of micro-communities whose interest in (the cultural afterlife of) Shakespeare's body of work defines them as fans of Shakespeare and/or its adapted use and/or its agents. The now 25-year old canon of fan studies underlines the demonstrable truth that fans persistently seek new ways to critically engage and interact with the object of their interest. Shakespeare, as a wellspring for fan energies, becomes an occasion for fan activity with tumblr serving as both a multidimensional platform for creativity *and* a gateway to inter-community engagement with blog posts, videos, text, GIFs, conversation, and other forms of media accommodated on tumblr's interface. Tumblr offers Shakespeare studies insights into the broader reverberations of fan community activities, and the website's rhizomic (Lanier), meta-critical, collective knowledge practices—practices that fan studies critics argue mirrors, or parallels, the critical and analytical activities that take place in institutional organizations (like SAA?)—have implications for how scholars might theorize the oncoming wave(s) of pop-culture Shakespeares.

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Pericles and Its Buried, at Sea

In this paper, I will consider depictions of death at sea in *Pericles* in light of thalassological theory, but also as evidence of Shakespeare's engagement with contemporaneous debates about funerary practices. My paper derives from the thalassological scholarship of critics like Steve Mentz and Daniel Brayton.[1] These critics propose, quite convincingly, that life at sea was often less bound to the financial limitations and psychological traumas predominant on land. And so, sea-based life (both individual and communal) is worthy of dedicated investigation, and as a means to challenging existing scholarship that often does not recognize its own land-based presumptions and biases. A case in point is recent scholarship on death, which has astutely examined the transformational spaces of English graveyards, and post-Reformation, communal burial practices in Tudor-Stuart England; but which has not considered the ramifications of historical evidence suggesting that coastal life was affecting how terrestrial burial was being perceived and conducted.[2]

I will suggest that Shakespeare, unlike contemporary critics, was imagining the thalassological and the funerary as intertwined. My approach will avail of the metaphoricity of Shakespeare's ocean to consider how its 'global' scope and scale did not necessarily preclude the possibility for communal belief and practice amongst the sea-borne. At the same time, this approach will consider shared community spaces from a less land-biased (more coastal) perspective.

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[1] "In his vividly imagined depictions of the marine environment as spaces in which humans partially belong, Shakespeare imagines a profound ontological relationship between humanity and the sea that is not merely metaphorical but material. His ocean is deeply yet obscurely involved in human existing, contributing to the stuff of the human body, changing the course of individual and familial lives, providing a reservoir of metaphorical material from which to forge meaning, and frequently taking or transforming characters' lives." Brayton, 4. Brayton's scholarship attempts to "excavate the idea of a strange kinship between humanity and the ocean – an idea that destabilizes the notion of an entirely terrestrial human ontology and of the biblical cosmology of "the deep." (4)

[2] *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe.* Peter Marshall and Bruce Gordon (eds). Cambridge UP, 2000. Peter Marshall argues that English Protestants' aversion to the Catholic 'geography' of the afterlife in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries may have played a significant role in the formation of more recognizably 'modern' constructions of life after death in general. An important result of the abolition of Purgatory and prayer for the dead in Protestant states was a kind of 'secularization,' or at least 'naturalization' of the memory of the dead. (9)

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   The business of early modern English theater--driven by the pursuit of what Hamlet calls "reputation and profit" (2.2.318)--shaped Shakespeare's encounter with the Elizabethan theater community as much as it did the experience of his first audiences. The period during which Shakespeare wrote was, as Jean-Christophe Agnew observes, one in which "the residual boundaries separating market from other forms of exchange were rapidly dissolving." This professional development resulted in the creation of modern audiences, communities of cultural consumers who were familiar not only with the plays they watched but were also conversant with the backstage culture of the writers and actors who produced them. In the wake of the creation of a mass market for drama at the end of the sixteenth century in England, emergent groups of theater professionals and informed enthusiasts--sometimes reluctantly and with qualifications--began to consider commercial drama to be a powerful artistic medium through which one might obtain a literary reputation. It was at this time that writers began to conceive of themselves as occupying what Pierre Bourdieu has famously called "the field of cultural production." This essay examines the extent to which Elizabethan consumers identified commercial playwrights such as Shakespeare as authors and the manner in which theater and print constituencies overlapped.

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"Shakespeare as Shibboleth: Shakespearean Citation and the Founding of Vertigo Comics"

Over the course of the late 1980s and early 1990s, DC Comics editor Karen Berger recruited a number of British writers, including Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, Jamie Delano and Peter Milligan, as writers for a range of defunct or moribund comics. Eventually, in 1993, the comics that these writers were hired to work on (Swamp Thing, Sandman, Animal Man, Hellblazer, among others) became the nucleus of DC's "Mature Readers" imprint, Vertigo Comics. Even before this, though, the comics signalled their commitment to a more "mature" approach to the form through the persistent, and anomalous, use of notably detailed allusions to and explicit citations of Shakespeare and his works. Beginning by tracing these allusions, this essay examines the extent to which this community of writers comes to be defined by their association with Shakespeare. It then turns to a reading of two later Vertigo comics, Bill Willingham's *Fables (*2002-2015), and Brian K Vaughan's *Y: The Last Man*(2002-2008), reading in their ironic (even outright hostile) allusions to Shakespeare a rejection, but also a replication, of the literary aspirations and/or pretensions of their predecessors.

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Romancing Deaf Cultures: Pre/Modern Communities in Contact

This paper reflects on some of my experiences as medievalist engaging with Deaf culture.
I address a few American Sign Language (ASL) and gestural adaptations of medieval
romance and end with a brief discussion of recent productions of *Pericles* by Wilkins and
Shakespeare. Drawing upon my own interactions with Deaf culture through institutional
settings (Gallaudet University and the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC)
and para-academic collectives (BABEL Working Group and Medieval Electronic
Multimedia Organization), I consider how communities invested in premodern literature
can create "meetspaces" for Deaf and hearing worlds. Deaf-oriented productions of
medieval romance can integrate scholars and nonprofessional actors (hearing and Deaf),
generating reconfigured, multifaceted modes of knowing (or "cripistemologies") that
repurpose the affective and political power of pageants and dumbshows. Ongoing
collaborative Deaf/hearing remediations of *Pericles* have the potential to morph the
play's maritime and theatrical spaces into rich contact zones of languages, spoken and
signed.

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"We Must Follow the Leaders": Shakespeare and Leadership at the American
Shakespeare Center

Since 2003, the American Shakespeare Center Education Department has offered a
leadership program for parties ranging from government bureaucrats to lawyers, from the
British Embassy Naval Contingent to management at multi-national corporations. Back
then, it was a trendy topic for discussion: several books co-authored by practitioners in
Shakespeare and and teachers of Leadership appeared on the shelves of major bookstores;
sons-of-the-famous and professors-of-literature were organizing conducting one-off
workshops; even the first season of the Canadian TV show about a Shakespeare
company, Slings and Arrows, reveled in it. The ASC was a reticent joiner, but, being a
non-profit without much in the bank, we eventually overcame our objections and
investigated how we could find some sense, and some money, in a program that furthered

our mission, and do so without compromising our morals. This paper will discuss the journey that ASC Education has gone on and the unlikely communities we formed along the way.

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Shakespeare in Montana: The Story of Poker Jim Butte

In southeast Montana stands a 2500-foot butte; the nearest town is called Birney, with a population of 25. For 43 years, during one evening in July the residents of ranches, reservations, and tiny towns from a radius of a hundred miles have made their way to the top of Poker Jim Butte to watch a Shakespeare play. The company that puts on this play is Montana Shakespeare in the Parks, which features 10 professional actors who travel thousands of miles to bring Shakespeare to Montana and surrounding states every summer. In the long history of the company, however, no place is talked about more than Poker Jim Butte; after the show the actors eat a potluck dinner provided by the locals and then sleep on the stage under the stars. The stories of this isolated, yet magical outpost where Shakespeare unexpectedly draws such a community together are legendary. In this paper I'll be telling the story of Poker Jim Butte, weaving together accounts from actors and spectators of this event over the past four decades.