

SAA 2013, Toronto
Seminar 13: Knowing Language in Shakespeare's Poems
Leader: Bradin Cormack (University of Chicago)
Saturday, March 30, 2013

1. John Michael Archer (New York University)
"Shame Before Language, Law and Ethics in Sonnet 129"

The last word of sonnet 129's first line, *shame*, might well be *the* word or saying of that poem, as well as much of the putative cycle to which it belongs. Emmanuel Levinas is one of our chief philosophers of shame. Shame has little presence in the language of the law as such, yet it is a staple of the forensic oratory of accusation that sonnet 129 quickly assumes. And madness in possession does throw up one or two legal terms that turn out to frame shame in advance, and also after the fact, as a mode of possibility. Perjury implies and leads back to hell, lending divine justice a shamefully erotic tinge. Levinas's initial treatment of shame comes from a section of *Totality and Infinity* entitled "Truth and Justice." My paper's center-piece is a detailed interpretation of sonnet 129 through Levinas's well-known engagement with *Macbeth*, which I contend is also an engagement with the *Sonnets*. Apparition and equivocation both figure in Descartes's invention of the "evil genius" one of whose ancestors, demonic or divine, may also be glimpsed in sonnet 129. Descartes informs Levinas's *Macbeth* episodes as partial intertext between Shakespeare and the philosopher, a role Nietzsche completes. With Levinas himself an awareness of legal language is supplemented by language *as* morality or moral system and the language *of* ethics, the ethical relation of self and other that forms justice. But justice notoriously devolves into the patriarchal family's struggle with eroticism in *Totality and Infinity*. Shame is attached to the erotic by Levinas only in order to suffer expulsion from the ethical encounter as its bad or wasted potential. Similar claims have been made of Shakespeare as tragedian and sonneteer, although I'm not sure they stick.

2. John Garrison (Carroll University)
"Shakespeare and the Poetics of Aging Desire"

This essay examines the persona of the aging poet in Shakespeare's sonnets. Addressing the young man and the dark lady, the speaker seems to position the experience of desire as a means to deny time's passing. Simultaneously, the speaker takes up tropes from medical and cultural discourses that describe an aging man's desire as divorced from the ability to perform sexually. Thus Shakespeare's speaker underscores the urgency of the desired closeness between him and his addressees, while calling into question the ultimate payoff of closeness with the speaker. The speaker's dilemma makes him resemble some of the aging males of the late plays, such as Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* and Antiochus in *Pericles*, both of whom have resurgences of desire that lead to (perhaps) undesired outcomes.

3. Elizabeth Harvey (University of Toronto)
“Shakespeare’s Ornithology”

This paper begins with an exploration of the line from Sonnet 73 “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.” I consider avian discourse, the language of birds in *The Rape of Lucrece*, *The Phoenix and Turtle*, selected sonnets, and *Cymbeline*. I examine not only the nature of bird language as a set of utterances that communicate particular meanings, but also the long tradition that Shakespeare inherited and that he evokes in *Cymbeline* of augury, reading events by examining the flight (or entrails) of birds. My extra-literary texts include Francis Bacon’s thoughts on the extra-sensory perception of birds in *Sylva Sylvarum* as well as the comparative bird/human anatomies of such natural philosophers as Pierre Belon.

I explore what it means to have language and song, and how ornithological references overlap and become metaphoric transformations: when the speaker becomes a phoenix in sonnet 73 or Philomel in sonnet 102, Fidele becomes a dead bird in Arviragus’s arms, or Lucrece borrows Philomel’s voice to mourn her rape. To what extent do these transgressions of simile erode the species boundaries? How does Shakespeare extend Ovidian metamorphosis through the classical and early modern discourse of natural history? Using Derrida’s writing on the animal and Lacan as one theoretical matrix, I will claim that species crossing supplies Shakespeare with a lexicon of the passions and consciousness that extends the boundaries of the human, enlarging epistemological space and augmenting the idioms of desire and grief.

4. Galena Hashhozheva (Ludwig Maximilian University)
“A Language of Parts: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the Challenge of Plato’s *Ion*”

The earliest debate on whether poetry may presume to address what properly falls within the domain of other arts and crafts is recorded in Plato’s *Ion*. The dialogue is famous for Socrates’ theory of divine inspiration, but another issue constitutes the actual core of *Ion*: even though passages in Homer vividly describe the procedures and products of many arts (*technai*), Homer and his rhapsodes would betray, if quizzed, their incompetence in these arts. The votaries of poesy appear to be speaking expertly without really knowing the arts.

My paper will ask whether the poet in Shakespeare’s sonnets, who avails himself of many different arts and their technical vocabulary, can incur the same blame as *Ion*. I touch on the role of mimesis and knowledge (*epistēmē*) in: 1/ narrative descriptions of the operations of the various arts as opposed to 2/ the use of the languages of the arts to generate rhetorical effects. Relevant will also be the critical debate on whether the main force of language in the Sonnets is descriptive or performative. I focus on the series of sonnets devoted to the rival poet (78-86), and among those most closely on sonnet 80. The navigation metaphor of 80 is the most extended metaphor using another *technē* in the entire sonnet sequence. Unlike *Ion*, Shakespeare’s poet can effectively bring another art face to face with his own. Significantly, in sonnet 80 the poet breaks down into despair over his disadvantage in the competition with the rival. Yet even this perceived inferiority does not cause him to lose confidence in his capacity as a verbal artist, part of whose know-how includes the harnessing of other arts and their expressive forces.

5. Paul Hecht (Purdue University North Central)
“Shakespeare’s Unpastoral Sonnets: The Case of 73”

This essay explores the relationship of Shakespeare’s sonnets with pastoral literature, which they have not much been associated with. After addressing the place of William Empson on this topic (who wrote influentially about both), the essay focuses on Shakespeare’s sonnet 73 and one Elizabethan pastoral, Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar*, as well as the ancient pastoral tradition, especially Virgil’s first eclogue. Next to the “Januarye” eclogue in the *Calendar*, the first quatrain of sonnet 73 starts to look like a compressed, heightened version of two Spenser stanzas, with Spenserian metaphor and sound effects taken to dazzling extremes. Next to Virgil’s first eclogue, the progress and resolution of the sonnet display what Erwin Panofsky called a “vespertinal” quality that he famously attributed to Virgil’s bucolics. The essay concludes by suggesting the relationship with Spenser is competitive, Shakespeare perhaps consciously outdoing Spenser in similar territory on a variety of levels. The relationship with Virgil is more distant and seems participatory or interpretive. But at any rate, the essay concludes, the comparisons in this particular “case” yield results worth considering.

6. Bill Kerwin (University of Missouri)
“Distractedly Commixed”: Humoral Trauma and *A Lover’s Complaint*”

The Renaissance had no language for trauma. Or rather, the human experiences that constitute what we now call trauma had other linguistic expressions, reflecting a different world. Recent years have seen a proliferation of thoughts about how the period’s imaginative literature, especially the drama, represented responses to violence and pain, and trauma theory has been both “applied” and creatively adapted for Renaissance literature. Trauma theory offers a rich set of models for human psychological reaction, and I intend to consider it in relation to complaint poetry, and specifically Shakespeare’s *A Lover’s Complaint*. How does this poem give shape to the experience of trauma, of an unforgettable and un-representable experience? What language or languages does it reach for?

7. Andrew Mattison (University of Toledo)

“‘Tongues on Every Tree’: John Benson and Shakespeare’s Genres”

This paper seeks to define Shakespeare’s sense of poetic language, and its implications for his mostly posthumous career as a printed poet, by looking at an extreme case of the category of Shakespearean poetry. The bookseller John Benson’s 1640 edition of Shakespeare’s poems contains many that are not nowadays included in the canon of Shakespeare’s poetry, including ones he didn’t write, as well as various songs and other poems from the plays. This raises some interesting questions: what is a Shakespeare poem? What evidence is there of Shakespeare’s own sense of that question? These questions help define the interpretive problem of the distinction between dramatic and poetic language at work in Shakespeare. Ultimately, Shakespeare’s aesthetics—particularly in relation to the vexing question of literary value—is at stake. I would like to explore these questions by looking at one poem in particular in the 1640 volume, which is, in fact, one of Orlando’s love poems to Rosalind from *As You Like It*: “Why should this Desert be” (Benson’s version lacks the “a” that appears before “desert” in all editions of the play). It is useful to think about because it is a poem from a play, thus apparently bridging the gap between dramatic and poetic language. But it is also of interest because it is bad, and by being bad serves as a useful foil to figure out what Shakespeare’s poetical aesthetics might be. The poem is thus an opportunity to consider several aspects, both practical and theoretical, of genre: the relationships between genre and audience, between genre and context, and between the histories of genre and the printed book.

8. Roderick McKeown (University of Toronto)

“‘Every (?) Wise (?) Man’s Son Doth Know (?)’: Proverbs and Collective Wisdom(?) in Feste’s Songs”

In this paper I use two of Feste’s songs to demonstrate the ambivalent role played by proverbial language in both constructing a linguistic community and establishing hierarchy within that community. In “O Mistress Mine,” Feste at once appeals to the social logic of Illyria implicit in the structure of the play while at the same time holding that logic up to the scrutiny of the offstage audience; the proverbs invoked in defence of romantic love are sharply ambivalent. In contrast, when speaking as the spokesman for the company in the epilogue, Feste’s proverbs serve primarily to establish a reciprocal relationship between the audience and the players who strive to please them, offering a theatrical experience that reflects and renders palatable the rain of every day.

9. Randall McLeod (University of Toronto)

“Chalaura”

My essay will deal with the graphic representation of renaissance poetry (sonnets in general and Shakespeare’s in particular) from the time of composition through to modern editions, with an extensive discussion of Sonnet 129. The title – an example of “scriptio semicontinua” – comes from the start of a verse in Petrarch’s “Non al suo amante piu”.

10. Stephanie Murray (Carnegie Mellon University)
“What’s Black and White and Read All Over? *Lucrece*”

Shakespeare’s *Lucrece* privileges sight as a means of knowing, a poetic approach that turns people into visual objects whose internal qualities are made into ocular proof. The poem’s persistent language of vision produces an interpretive context that values visual evidence over verbal accounts. “Color” stands as a term both of visual perception as well as a method of persuasion in a rhetorical and legal framework. The poem takes advantage of the tension between the visual and the textual to do with words what drama does with bodies who speak those words.

11. Stephen Orgel (Stanford University)
“The Sense of No Ending”

This paper focuses on the notional couplet at the end of the six couplets of Shakespeare’s anomalous Sonnet 126, indicated in the 1609 quarto by two pairs of empty brackets. What constitutes a conclusion in the emotional and typographical world of *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, and what might be considered missing from it; and if the brackets do not imply something missing, what else might they imply?

12. Danila Sokolov (University of Alberta)
“The Language of Erotic Contagion in Shakespeare’s Sonnets”

This paper investigates the traces of early modern medical discourse of venerology, notably syphilography, in Shakespeare’s sonnets, and discusses the significance of the mechanism of erotic contagion for the structure of subjectivity in the sequence. As I suggest, the sonnets assign venereal disease, both literal and metaphorical, to all three agents of desire (speaker, young man, and dark lady). Moreover, the intersubjective dynamic of the sonnets is predicated upon the possibility of infectious transference from one character to another and results in a subtle elision of identitarian distinction among them. Consequently, the discourse of early modern syphilis (and the nascent medical category of contagion in general), with its high communicability and ability to penetrate and even dissolve identitarian bulwarks such as gender, age, or class, emerges as offering critics a useful interpretive framework for an understanding of the process of subject formation in Shakespeare’s sequence. In particular, it calls for a reassessment of Michael Schoenfeldt’s influential argument (in *Bodies and Selves*) that erotic disease in the sonnets is a matter of individual humoral imbalance. Rather, the unique structure of Shakespearean subjectivity emerges out of an experience of intersubjectivity – or more precisely, given the sonnets’ obsession with the categories of disease and health, venereal contagion.

13. Goran Stanivukovic (Saint Mary's University)

“The Frame of Speech: Deliberating and Doubting Desire in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*”

Starting with an analysis of desire in Sonnet 4, the paper reminds us that logic and rhetoric were inseparably interknitted in the Renaissance. On the examples of sonnets 2, 3, 4 this paper explores the two key elements—deliberation and doubt—of the system of logic, in relation to how they shape the argument about and objections to desire in *The Sonnets*. The philological analysis is framed by Dudley Fenner’s treatise, *The Artes of Logike and Rhetorike* (Middleburg: 1588), used for reasons of its popularity and because the prescriptive arguments about household government and the application of logical descriptions on the ‘logic’ of Household echo deliberative strategies in these sonnets. Discussing the interrogative format of reasoning why beauty and sex should not be self-consumed but extended through procreation, I illustrate the extent to which this form of structuring thought and argument also asks questions about beauty and sex, and deliberates the value of desire, when doubt and deliberation are used in the service of procreation. Sonnet 2, in which the youth is imagined as already forty years of age, is discussed as an instance of the self-censoring of desire, of cancelling the possibility of same-sex desire early in the collection. Yet against the background of other sonnets that urge procreation, this cancelling of desire can also be seen as a way of interrupting the argument, the reasons for, procreation, thus opening a possibility for an alternative form of desire to circulate in these poems. In these and other examples, Shakespeare’s distrust of logic contrasts his trust of daring, of reasoning about desire beyond the bounds of procreation. The paper continues with a brief reading of Hamlet’s monologue “To be or not to be” (3.1.57-89), as a speech that shows Shakespeare turning the theoretical precepts of logic into the rhetorical and cognitive structure of his drama. I suggest that the dialectics of this speech presents Hamlet’s mind as that which has not yet fully mastered the complicated structures of reasoning offered by logic, but a mind, too, that plays with the difficulties of reasoning for the purpose of performance as well reasoning. The examples addressed in this paper are offered as instances of the power of doubt within Shakespeare’s creative imagination and his habit of thinking thoughts and of crafting meaning in a textual culture increasingly shaped by logic and rhetoric as resources for ideas and for speaking and writing strategies.

14. Andrea R. Stevens (University of Illinois)

“In the eyes of all posterity’: Commonplace Wisdom”

This short essay is the first step in a longer article on how plays represent the circulation of various forms of ‘commonplace’ wisdom, from the moralizing couplets and aphorisms discussed here, to other forms of the commonplace: jokes, especially cuckold jokes; ballads and songs; and gossip or hearsay (i.e., the repeated refrain ‘they say’ in *The Winter’s Tale*). I am especially interested in how speakers of different sexes take up, make use of, and are affected by the commonplace.