

Shakespeare Association of America Seminar  
“Shakespeare and Confession”

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Objects of Wonder: Shakespeare’s Confessing Characters

Confession is commonly theorized as a way of constructing interiority or “individual” subjectivity. I propose that the opposite can also be true: confession can suggest, at least temporarily, full knowledge and reconciliation with one’s nature as mere sign, as human character sketch, allegorical personifications-in-the flesh, or what Erich Auerbach calls *figura*—an instrument of communication for God or the playwright or some higher power. Shakespeare’s confessing characters are self-knowing figures, though arguably often “flat” as literary personae (because, at moments of confession, nothing about them is hidden), are neither uninteresting nor pitiable. Their confessions, in acknowledging them as figures, as signs or instruments, turn them into objects of wonder, both because they comprehend their places in the book of nature (or, as Foucault would have it, the power relations of the state) and because they accept themselves. My argument hinges on the literal meaning of confession, “speaking the same,” or “with-speaking,” which is always implicit, whether the word refers to shriving by a priest, legal admission of a crime, admission to feelings or intentions, or homiletic articulation of already-established religious doctrine. In all circumstances, “confession” is expression that makes someone or something known, *exactly as is*, to others. Indeed, it implies that the discursive story or description constituting the confession is already so true, already so analogous, to the very *things* being confessed that it is only recitation, not interpretation, an echo of what is already “said” by one’s life and actions. Confession as a concept thus highlights an assumption that the *things* confessed are *like* language—indeed *are* language—in that they already speak via their very being, and can thus be translated into words or other signs that are true to them.

In this regard, figures such as Aaron the Moor, Tamora, Puck, Titania, Iago, Shylock, Don John, Old Hamlet’s ghost, and Edmund come to mind. There is heavy, though obviously not exclusive, representation among such confessing characters of the Shakespearean descendants of medieval vice figures, allegorical personifications of evil. Immediately recognizable as things to be made examples of, intentional transgressions are much easier than errors of judgment or yieldings to temptation. Yet even when the allegory of evil is central to it, successful confessors’ self-comprehension requires a self-acceptance that astonishes and creates an aura of the supernatural. Partial confession, or confessions of questionable success, including private confessions that require the help of a priest, as well as inaccurate or drawn-out confessions (Claudio’s in *Measure for Measure*, Juliet’s in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mowbray’s *refusal* of confession in *Richard II*, Othello’s description of self at the end the play, Macbeth’s tortured soliloquys, the reading of Hero’s true nature by the Friar Francis, Beatrice’s and Benedicks confessions of love for each other in *Much Ado*), may well create a sense of “interiority” or “subjectivity.” Such phenomena capture the *challenge* of coming to

terms with oneself as mere sign and semblance, and entail semiotic struggles—interpretive moves and moments of aphasia. It is through these that Shakespeare's *dramatis personae* can invite identification, as opposed to admiration. Obviously the essay will not be able to explore all of the examples suggested above, but I hope to examine with some thoroughness at least one example of true confession and one of partial confession and their implications for Shakespearean characterization.

Sara Eaton  
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“Brother unkind”: Annabella's Heart in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

Giovanni's, the audience's, and hence critical attention to the contents of Annabella's heart, from the beginning of the play to its grisly end, also structure the play. We follow Giovanni in his nervous pursuit of who Annabella *really* is and what she *really* means, finally ending up in her bedroom, the scene of incest and her murder. But, as the Lady and the Whore in her dramatic world's construction of the rhetoric of Courtly Love, avoiding the real is Annabella's role. Despite—or because of—her numerous confessions of guilt, Annabella's sincerity is in question and she personifies early modern concerns about doubleness, the potential disparity between appearance and interiority. She becomes symbolic of the (in)sincerity at work in the Courtly Love scenario as she embodies its contradictions.

Christine Gottlieb  
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Desdemona's Equivocal Corpse

This paper considers how Desdemona's corpse is constructed as an equivocal text by Othello, as well as by Desdemona herself. Othello's decision to kill Desdemona in a way that leaves her body unmarked is unlike his earlier desires (which are typical of jealous stage-husbands) to anatomize, torture, and dismember her. Rather than anatomically wrenching a confession from Desdemona's body, Othello adopts a strategy of equivocal erasure.

Desdemona's dead body expresses interiority not through anatomical display, but through language. Poised on the threshold of resurrection, Desdemona is a speaking corpse. She does not communicate like the cadaver depicted in anatomical texts that reveals and gestures toward the secrets of its interior, or like the corpse in a murder trial that bleeds to condemn its murderer. Instead, she does quite the opposite, claiming language to obscure meaning with her paradoxical last words: “Nobody; I myself. Farewell! / Commend me to my kind lord” (5.2.124-25). Our final glimpse into her interiority is an act of equivocation.

By staging Desdemona's dead body as an equivocal text, one that hides its interior violence and erases its identity, *Othello* posits a new form of subjectivity for dead bodies. The casuistic strategies employed in the representation of Desdemona's death elude and critique the anatomical quest for stable signifiers of female sexual experience. I will link Desdemona's equivocal corpse to the dynamics of purity in the play, as well as to debates in criticism regarding Desdemona's virginity, married sexuality, and miscegenation.

Musa Gurnis  
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Heterodox Whore: Dramatic Form and Confessional Hybridity  
in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

John Ford's 1630 *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, a response play to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which the star crossed lovers are brother and sister, stages the collision of conflicting models of repentance. The play sets Giovanni, a young Protestant casuist struggling with incestuous desire under the spiritual direction of a Catholic priest, with tragic consequences. While *'Tis Pity* gives Isabella, the sister/lover, two scenes of repentance, one markedly Catholic in which she kneels at the Friar's feet weeping efficacious tears like the penitent Magdalen while being directed through a Jesuit meditation exercise, the other markedly Protestant in which she soliloquizes on the self-examination of her conscience, it also persistently muddles together these competing discourses, insisting on the limitations and failures of both spiritual practices. Incompatible religious discourses in this play are as monstrously entangled as the incestuous lovers themselves. This unstable mixture of competing penitential systems is not only symptomatic of the *de facto* heterodoxy of early modern London, it also demonstrates the productive force of the pressures of dramatic genre and theatrical technologies of audience engagement on Post-Reformation culture, the theater's special ability to form ideologically contradictory but emotionally powerful forms of religious hybridity.

Zorica Jelic  
University of Belgrade

Confession as a Form of Self-Accusation and Seduction in *A Lover's Complaint*

This paper presents an analysis of reversed male/female sexuality, seduction, and consent in William Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint*. In this work, the young woman consents to the wooing of her lover and in the end is abandoned by the same. The paper focuses on the complaint as a confession and as an act of self-accusation. It shows how sexuality derives from it when it is employed by the female Lover as a means of seduction. Also, I argue that it is no coincidence that Shakespeare presents the Lover's confession in nature (the green world), which apparently gives a woman freedom from the restraints of a male-dominated society and captures the ethos of his time. I look into the use of the yonic symbol "O" and liquid imagery in the text as symbolically feminine, and I explain how they are used by both the female and male lover as a means of seduction. Thus, the paper examines the male lover as well and shows how he utilizes his feminine looks, florid speech, and tears to conquer and attain the young women. It shows how his masculinity slowly diminishes and morphs into a female form, while the same techniques are utilized, later, by the female Lover to seduce the priest, which brings to the reversal of the discussed societal male/female roles.

David Marno  
University of California, Berkeley

### Hamlet's Holy Attention

My paper offers an account of attention's role in early modern devotional practices by looking at various instances of distraction in *Hamlet*. I suggest that the cultural context of Hamlet's and Claudius' distractions in the play is the widespread belief in the period that the efficacy of one's devotional action depends on whether the individual has achieved what one early modern commentator calls "holy attention." To possess this holy attention, I argue, was the practical, experiential equivalent of having divine grace, and meditation, prayer, and other devotional actions were conceived of as exercises to seek and establish it.

I look at devotional literature (Thomas Becon, Lancelot Andrewes) as well as other Shakespeare plays (*The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*) to elucidate this notion of holy attention. I suggest that even though attention's role in devotion had a long tradition going back to the early Church Fathers, the post-Reformation era showed a particular interest in the concept because it promised to give an answer to some of the difficulties surrounding the theological concept of grace. This new interest in attention is, I suggest, what explains the thematic unity of *Hamlet*. Much like Claudius in the famous prayer scene (3.3), Hamlet also seeks to relinquish all his distractions in order to perform the revenge as requested by the Ghost. And just like Claudius, he also fails to do so until the very end of the play. Why he fails first, and how he eventually succeeds are the questions that I focus on in my conclusion.

Jamie Paris  
University of British Columbia

### Try what confession can: The Dramaturgical Function of Unhappy Confessions in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*

Shortly after murdering King Duncan, Macbeth informs Lady Macbeth about overhearing two children "say their prayers, / And addresses them again to sleep" (2.2.23-24). Macbeth, in despair, reports that an "Amen stuck in [his] throat" (2.2.32) and a fear that he hath murdered "innocent sleep" (2.2.35). Like Claudius, Macbeth's offense is rank and "smells to heaven" (3.3.36). But why do Claudius and Macbeth struggle to pray? Claudius's and Macbeth's unhappy confessions show a limit to the Lutheran conception of personal atonement through faith alone. Claudius and Macbeth commit unforgivable acts that produce "stronger guilt" that defeats their "strong intent" (3.3.40) to confess their sins and request absolution. They cannot find what Claudius calls a "form of prayer" to "serve [their] turn" (3.3.51-52). Are sins like regicide too rank for atonement?

This paper will address unhappy confessions through Martin Luther's argument in *The Larger Catechism* (1530) that authentic prayer originates from distress, an admission of need, and submission to God. Can divine atonement be gained by characters who cannot hope for earthly forgiveness? This study of unhappy stage confessions is situated within the turn to religion (Jackson and Marotti 2004) and will consider how staged prayers are theatrically

appropriated (Dawson 2009). What dramaturgical work do Protestant influenced stage confessions enable for the arguably secularizing early modern theater?

Kathryn Swanton  
University of Chicago

#### Repentance, Restitution, and Reconciliation in *The Winter's Tale*

In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes spends sixteen years performing regret on a daily basis while his supposedly dead wife “preserves” herself in secret only to emerge and forgive Leontes upon their daughter’s homecoming. Since Perdita’s return prompts Hermione to reconcile with Leontes, the duration of Leontes’ penance seems rather arbitrary, and its purpose opaque. In other words, it is not that sixteen years is the amount of time required for him to make himself worthy of Hermione’s forgiveness or that Hermione and Paulina deem sixteen years of penance to be proportionate repayment for Leontes’ sins. Rather, sixteen years happens to be the duration of Perdita’s absence, and Hermione chooses to re-enter society and reunite with her husband only when it becomes possible to see their daughter again.

Hermione’s revivification as a statue in a chapel suggests the influence of a Catholic model of forgiveness. In this paper I will try to gain insight into the purpose of Leontes’ excessive penance in the context of the Catholic sacrament and its three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. I will first examine and rule out interpretations of his penance as satisfaction, which I think is the way that many would be inclined to understand it. Relative to Leontes’ confession and the timing of Hermione’s forgiveness, I will demonstrate that Leontes’ long penance is more consistent with contrition, and raises a particular aspect of contrition known as restitution which designates his debt to Hermione, but also suggests that she owes companionship and information to him.

Jane Wanninger  
Vanderbilt University

#### Riddling Shrift in *Romeo and Juliet* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

In this paper, I pursue the cultural afterlife of auricular confession in post- Reformation England as it takes shape in the dramatic figuration of the friar as he appears in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and Ford’s *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633). These intertextually linked plots hinge in large part on the roles played by Friars Laurence and Bonaventura respectively. Friars were historically associated with, among other things, confession and penance, and these plays together reflect an early modern exploration of the dislocations of confessional authority and efficacy associated with the sharing of secrets in theatrical contexts in which further plotting, rather than spiritual expiation, seems to be the driving goal. I am proceeding from the foundational observation that even after the Reformation eliminated the institutional role of auricular confession in England, the ritual maintained a powerful and dynamic cultural legacy in the English dramatic imaginary. I posit that theatrical appropriation of confession as a cultural construct hinges in part on the tensions between disclosure and privacy, and ideological and personal power/knowledge at its heart. Early modern theatrical representations, in pressing the flexibility and permeability of the figured subjective boundaries of confession, tend to probe its limits and underlying

logic. In what follows, I trace through the figure and office of the friar some of the key dynamics of confessional subjectivity in these plays in an effort to further our discussion of how Shakespeare and his near-contemporaries (to take Friar Laurence out of context), “riddle” confession and shrift.

Jacqueline Wylde  
University of Toronto

### Confessing Sin(g)s in *Misogonus*

My paper for this year’s SAA conference focuses on the theatrical representation of goodnight ballads. Characterized by moving stories of repentance, salacious details of murderous deeds, religious piety and catchy tunes, goodnight ballads were public confessions purported to have been written by a penitent convict, sung on the scaffold, and then printed on broadsides and set to music. This paper will contend that the ballads were not only popular, commercially successful pieces of public entertainment, but also public displays of pious confessions, and as such, effective forms of (predominantly Protestant) religious persuasion.

But there is a tension between the sincerity of the musical confessional mode and the performativity—on the scaffold, in the market or on the stage—required to be convincing of such sincerity. Such a tension is at the heart of the representation of a goodnight ballad found in the 1577 Cambridge play *Misogonus*. The play contains a musical moment of confession in the form of a parody of a well-known goodnight ballad, but while the original ballad was designed to be sung in front of an interactive audience, in *Misogonus* there is no stage audience. Instead, the song is a private, reflective, almost religious moment used by the playwright to convey the singer’s completely sincere repentance in the face of utter disappointment and debasement. Such privacy ignores the social negotiation and participatory interaction between singer and listener so essential to the goodnight ballad, rendering the ballad perhaps more sincere, but also less communicative and persuasive.