

ABSTRACTS

SAA Seminar: Ovid in Early Modern Culture
April, 2015

Anthony Barthelemy
University of Miami

TITLE: Threatening the Gods: Marlowe, Ovid and Theology

In *Edward II*, the overreacher Mortimer assumes a godlike indifference to human suffering, and his overwhelming hubris prompts him to quote Niobe from Book Six of *The Metamorphoses* just before she is about to experience the wrath of Latona, Diana, and Apollo. Marlowe's use of Ovid at this moment in the play demonstrates the playwright's ability to use Ovid to accomplish multiple effects. The literate amongst Marlowe's audience might gasp at Mortimer's stupidity at quoting Niobe because the quotation forecasts his demise. Thus the moment is richly ironic. Yet Marlowe could be taunting his contemporaries who liked to display erudition without fully comprehending the meaning of the texts they quote. As events quickly spin out of Mortimer's control the audience must reinterpret the role of providence in shaping events. I am interested in Marlowe's use of Ovid to accomplish critiques of culture, politics and religion during this self-conscious historical moment. I plan to focus primarily on *Edward II* and *Tamburlaine* because those two plays provide the richest moments for interrogation of the metatextual dynamic and interplay. Like Mortimer, Tamburlaine torments those underneath his sway as his vainglorious pursuits justify his actions and motives. The same could be said for the Guise and Faustus. But Tamburlaine's religious evolution and examination expose him as a thinker moving toward a theology informed by Ovid's anti-divinity. Marlowe was infamous for his confession of atheism, and Tamburlaine's enthusiastic slaughters as the Scourge of God reminds us of the caprice of the denizens of Olympus. Like the ironic use of Ovid by Mortimer, Tamburlaine's articulations of a theology provide the playwright the opportunity to undermine Christian orthodoxy and religious justifications of monarchy through the articulation of Ovid's mythology. It is too early for me to know where my examination of Ovid and Marlowe, power and punishment will lead me, but I think it will elucidate another aspect of Ovidian intertextual play.

Christian M. Billing
University of Hull, UK

TITLE: 'Rape and Resistance in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*: Reading Female Agency in Recent Stage and Film Performances.'

Abstract: Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is a play that draws much of its political and gender-political cohesiveness from a sophisticated deployment of Classical historical and poetic sources. Yet this relationship between the early modern play-text and its numerous Roman intertexts seems difficult for modern theatre and film directors to realize. This paper looks in particular at the use and omission of Ovidian narratives relating to the character of Lavinia and, with a

particular case study centered around Julie Taymor's film *Titus* (1999), considers the gender-political implications of cutting Ovid's tongue in current film and theatre productions of Shakespeare's play. Questions that will be addressed by the paper include: how reliant is Shakespeare's text on an understanding of wider Ovidian narratives and representational structures? What happens when Ovid is cut from modern performances of Shakespeare? What is at stake in taking a highly developed metaphorical and allegorical text such as *Titus Andronicus* and rendering it naturalistic or realistic in rehearsal and performance?

Ed Gieskes
University of South Carolina
SAA 2015—Ovid and Early Modern Culture

TITLE: "Ovid, whom I thought to see the pleader, become Ovid the play-maker!":
Ovid, Pleading, and Plays

Jonson's *Poetaster* opens with Ovid, Faustus-like, in his study, being berated by his father for turning his attention to play-making rather than legal study. Over the course of the play, Ovid comes to represent one (less than ideal) model of authorship and of literature, and ends up being exiled for participating in a masque that Augustus takes as blasphemous. His reputation for license, based on his elegiac poetry, makes him a kind of stand-in for Marlowe (as does Jonson's use of Marlowe's translations of the *Amores*). At the same time, his work was central to early modern pedagogy and circulated widely among writers with very different attitudes toward the stage.

In this essay I will be less interested in Ovid the figure as a kind of example of how to be (or not to be) a writer, than in how his work gets deployed by early modern dramatists as a resource for plot and, more importantly, for structure or form. Jonson's character will be one example of how playwrights appropriated Ovid, but I will also discuss ways that Ovid's work functions less overtly—in ways of constructing plots, for example—that point to his influence and that of classical literature more generally.

Fran Helphinstine, Ph.D.
Morehead State University
Ovid in Early Modern Culture SAA Seminar

TITLE: Epistles of Complaint in Ovid's *Heroides* Transformed in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*

The intertextuality of Ovid and Shakespeare's works is well-documented. Shakespeare transforms myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to emphasize character development whether to portray the suffering of Venus in *Venus and Adonis* or to have Leontes discover that his statue of Hermione is real, unlike the ivory statue of Pygmalion. Shakespeare similarly transforms Ovid's *Heroides*. *Heroides*, a collection of letters from mythological women to the male lover who has abandoned them, is among the few classical depictions of heterosexual love from the female perspective. In "Shakespeare's Ovid" Jonathan Bate indicates the imitation of these letters in the *Heroides* would have "helped the student Shakespeare take his first steps in the art

of dramatic impersonation.” (xli). In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia, after being abandoned by Proteus [while in disguise as Sebastian], tells Sylvia that she once enacted the role of Ovid’s lover Ariadne abandoned by Theseus (*Two Gentlemen of Verona* 4.4.165ff) so well that the emotions were real to “him.” In Shakespeare, males flaunt the prestige of being a courtly “gentleman” to augment the persuasive power of their “love” letters, which deepens the real pain for the one fancied if she is abandoned.

Elizabeth Hutcheon
Huntingdon College
SAA 2015: Ovid in Early Modern Culture
TITLE: Ovidian Echoes in *The Merchant of Venice*

This paper uses the figure of Medea as she was refracted into Shakespeare’s work through Ovid, as well as other sources, in order to show how Shakespeare managed the tensions and contradictions that arose when early modern culture made use of classical texts.

The first part of the paper explores such tensions and contradictions by examining Ovid’s position in early modern English pedagogy. Texts like the *Heroides* were standards of the early modern classroom, while *Ars amatoria* (often bound in the same volume) were explicitly banned, and schoolboys were discouraged from reading it (although of course we know they did). Ovid is thus both institutionalized and othered, co-opted into the norming process of the pedagogical project while simultaneously excluded from this scene.

Familiar to the period through Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides* and Seneca’s *Medea*, Medea’s relationship to the early modern pedagogical tradition is vexed, like Ovid’s. Figured as the frightening mother figure that early modern schoolboys were invited to abandon in favor of the homosocial world of humanism, she also was used as a rhetorical model for boys, who were invited to compose speeches imitating *Heroides* XII. How can she be both?

The second part of the paper reads Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, the play in his corpus with the highest number of explicit references to Medea, as an attempt to manage such tensions. What is she doing in this play? I argue that different characters in this play embody different aspects of the Medea legend: daughter, outsider, *rhetor*. In this way, Shakespeare neutralizes the threat she might pose, while at the same time allowing her to have a voice.

Joseph M. Ortiz
English Department
University of Texas at El Paso
TITLE: Thomas Heywood and the Democratization of Ovid

This paper will consider Thomas Heywood’s extensive use of Ovid in his plays, translations, and polemic. In particular, I will consider the proposition that Heywood’s approach to Ovid is distinctly opposed to that taken by someone like Ben Jonson, whose Ovidianism is marked by a commitment to philological and textual rigor. Heywood’s more flexible and free-wheeling use of Ovid—which can often

include indecorous alterations and miscontextualizations of Ovid—has often been read as evidence of Heywood’s intellectual laziness, deficiency as a Latinist, or both. However, as Richard Rowland has clearly shown, Heywood is an incredibly subtle and accomplished Latinist, particularly in his understanding of Ovid. Thus, another reason must be suggested for his flagrantly un-Jonsonian treatment of Ovid and other classical writers. Using the early modern sense of poetic “license” as a starting point, I propose to toy with the idea that Heywood plays freely with Ovid as a way of commenting on issues and conflicts that are more relevant to early modern London than to classical Rome. In this respect, Heywood reveals an Ovid who can be “translated” to speak to a contemporary theatergoing public, extending well beyond the province of rhetorical, allegorical, and philosophical study

Michael Slater
SUNY Brockport

TITLE:The Insignificance of Lesbianism in Donne’s “Sappho to Philaenis” and Ovid’s *Heroides XV*

This paper will examine Donne’s alleged recuperation of Sapphic desire in “Sappho to Philaenis,” a poem that in its depiction of female homoeroticism appears in some measure to re-write Ovid’s *Heroides XV* (Sappho to Phaon). Sometimes described as “the first female homosexual love poem in English,” “Sappho to Philaenis” is often praised for its positive or even idealistic treatment of female-female love. In contrast to the Ovidian tradition, in which Sappho abandons her desire for other women upon falling desperately in love with the male Phaon, Donne’s portrait of Sappho ostensibly restores to her both homosexual longing and incredible poetic prowess. I argue, however, that Donne’s re-writing of Ovid may not be as radical as it initially seems; the essay will attempt to disclose the extent to which Donne’s poem—or, more accurately, Donne’s representation of Sappho’s poem—obsessively performs its own failure, what James Holstun and Valerie Traub both characterize as the poem’s “insignificance.” But while “Sappho to Philaenis” confirms rather literally Traub’s thesis about the insignificance of lesbian desire in early modernity—which, she claims, “found a space for expression within the decorum of maidenly modesty” since it failed to threaten “penetrative logics”—it also simultaneously challenges her claim that insignificance entailed a lack of social concern. Rather, Donne’s poem belies the extent to which a masculine insistence upon the “insignificance” of lesbian desire might also mask a deep anxiety about a love that cannot speak precisely because it is “unspeakable.” Donne’s version of Sappho’s poem, not unlike Ovid’s version of her letter in *Heroides*, thus effectively dismisses both female-female desire and its corresponding poetics.

Lisa S. Starks-Estes
University of South Florida St. Petersburg
SAA 2015, Ovid in Early Modern Culture

TITLE: Ovidian Specters: Apparitions of Lovesickness and Trauma in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*

Ovid had a remarkable, all-pervasive, spectral presence for Renaissance writers and visual artists—particularly Shakespeare who, like Marlowe, bases his own poetics on Ovidian principles of metamorphosis. Ovid provides Shakespeare and others a venue for exploring multiple forms of sexuality and metamorphic bodies and for examining depths of painful love. Elsewhere, I have analyzed direct and indirect influences of Ovid on Shakespeare’s Roman poems and plays. In this paper, however, I turn to more spectral traces of Ovid in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*—particularly the elegies, as in his depiction of Romeo as melancholy lover, and the tale of Myrrha from *Metamorphoses*, as in his characterizations of Juliet and her Nurse. Through his innovative appropriations of Ovid, Shakespeare creates an underlying atmosphere in his *Romeo and Juliet* that is permeated with transgressive Ovidian resonances, suggesting a much more traumatic experience of lovesickness than the tragedy’s main sources may allow. In this way, Shakespeare employs Ovid to explore early modern notions of lovesickness and the interrelationship of desire and death. On the dominant plot level of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare treats these issues by reworking and extending Ovid’s tale of Pyramus and Thisbe from *Metamorphoses*, a tale that he treats comically in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (both *Midsummer* and *Romeo and Juliet* were written in late 1590s, most likely back-to-back). Ovid’s Pyramus and Thisbe also forms the basis of the long line of textual sources that lead up to Arthur Brooke’s *Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), Shakespeare’s main source, which provides the rough outline of the story and characters for his *Romeo and Juliet*. I contend that, following the early modern model of Ovidian poetics, Shakespeare radically transforms his primary source, Brooke’s *Romeus and Juliet*, by infusing it with the spirit of Ovid. Shakespeare incorporates multilayered, nuanced intertexts of Ovidian poetry—not only Pyramus and Thisbe but also the elegies and the tragic story of Myrrha—into his *Romeo and Juliet*. The latter tale, which deals with Myrrha’s incestuous desire for her father and the devoted love of her Nurse, suggests a much more transgressive and painful instance of lovesickness than the play’s main source, haunting Shakespeare’s tragedy in a spectral and yet intensely powerful way.

David Summers

Capital University

TITLE: Voyage, Pathos and Exile: Ovid’s Ceyx and Alycone and the Shakespearean Imagination

One of the most poignant episodes in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* comes in his Book Eleven account of Ceyx and Alycone. Ovid employs his famous skills at *copia* to represent emotional states during Ceyx’s sea-journey away from home for what will prove to be the last time. Ceyx’s prescience about his fate never to see home and Alycone again make the passage something for the reader that Ovid could never have anticipated, since our hind-sight insists on seeing Ovid’s own future voyage of exile in the mental state of Ceyx. Shakespeare undoubtedly would have felt the ironic and pathetic force of the episode. This brief essay—and exercise in what Jonathan Bates calls “unapologetic . . . reconstructed humanism”—seeks to ask how that moment of reading this episode in Ovid informs Shakespeare’s own complex

notions of nostalgia (in its original sense of longing to return home) in passages as diverse as the imagined wreck of Antonio's *Andrew*, to Hamlet casting his lot with pirates, to the sea-voyages that dominate the late plays. The sea voyage in Ovid conveys a rich and complex matrix of associations, most notably for my purpose, the fragility of human happiness and juxtaposition of the timelessness of the sea with the transience of the human.

William Weber
Centre College
Working Title: "Pop Culture Ovid"

Abstract: Susan Wiseman's recent book, *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance: 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), takes Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as its starting point for a fascinating and nuanced discussion of the complicated position occupied by metamorphosis in the cultural and literary history of early modern England. Wiseman places Latin poetry and vernacular folklore traditions in productive dialogue, but by treating Ovid as a primary example of esoteric learnedness this account threatens to oversimplify the diversity of creative interactions that English authors and audiences had with the *Metamorphoses*. My paper will seek to examine different formal and generic uses that authors found for Ovid and Ovidian metamorphosis, and how these allusive experiments affected – and potentially effected – the meaning that Ovid held for early modern audiences. Focusing on Shakespeare and the public stage, I want to ask how popular receptions and conceptions of Ovid changed over the course of the playwright's career, and what factors contributed to these developments. Were Shakespeare's Ovidian allusions aimed primarily at literate audience members? What did Ovid mean to those who had never read his poetry? How did Shakespeare's allusiveness change with the advent of the Blackfriars theatre and the increased role of private entertainments? Was the renaissance fascination with Ovid a privilege of the elite, or was there room for a popular and populist understanding of the poet and his works?