

Queer Shakespeare

Seminar leader:

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The Queer Language of Size in *Love's Labour's Lost*

In the midst of playful banter with his servant Mote, Don Armado calls the outh "pretty, because little" (1.2.20). Finally admitting to himself that he is in love, the nobleman Biron laments his enslavement to the "giant dwarf" (3.1.165). The language of size and the language of love and desire intermix throughout *Love's Labour's Lost*, a comedy dominated by romantic and sexual deceptions that ends well before any certainty of marriage for its main plot protagonists. This paper explores the play as a queer comedy, arguing that the language of size plays a central role in the queering of the play's many couplings. Many characters use the language of size to discuss love in ways that locate desire and bodies defined by their size in addition to, or even instead of, their gender. This paper argues that size is not merely a category that describes the dimensions of a body on the stage, but is also a language underwriting queer same-sex and cross-sex relationships that refuse to move toward happy marital endings.

Brent Dawson
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"All's Obliquy": Timon and the Problem of Pleasure

After excommunicating himself from Athens, Timon launches a sustained invective against humanity. His harangue is uncompromisingly egalitarian, exploding "villainy" at every level of human social behavior. It is also stubbornly anti-redemptive, aimed not at correcting society but at exposing a rottenness at the root of interpersonal relations. Timon's egalitarian negativity derives from what I will call his queer social theory. Timon sees all human activity, from business to politics, as disguised forms of a thoroughly non-reproductive sexuality, a generalized pursuit of pleasure. If pleasure explains the ubiquitous pursuit of self-interest for Timon, it also exposes the impossibility of that drive for mastery over the world. This paper sets Timon's invective in the context of the renewed interest in Hellenic philosophy in the Renaissance, and with it, the practices of self-care that interested Foucault. The schools of Skeptical, Stoic, and Epicurean thought offer detailed consideration of the uses of pleasure. However, Timon offers an inversion of these views that, paradoxically, finds pleasure's greatest ethical and political use to be its recalcitrant uselessness.

John Garrison
Carroll University

Shakespeare's Elegiac Longing

Francis Meres, in his assessment of the state of English poetry in *Paladis Tamia* (1598), equates classical poets “famous for elegie” with English poets such as Drayton and Shakespeare. He describes these men as “the most passionate among us to bewaile and bemoane the perplexities of love,” suggesting that the most powerful of love poets were those composing elegies. Within Meres’ assessment, we can detect the crossing of two strands of the classical elegiac tradition—the funeral elegy and the love elegy—in “bewaile and bemoane.” His choice of phrase here underscores how outpourings of grief can appear similar to articulations of pleasure. Meres also calls attention to an intersection of particular interest to queer theorists today—the intersection between death and sex—while simultaneously opening a line of inquiry of interest to scholars of Shakespeare’s style: where in Shakespeare’s poetry do we see traces of the elegiac tradition not only in thematic mixing of declarations of love with lament for death, but also in deployment of elegiac meter and syntax? This essay traces stylistic elements drawn from the Roman elegiac tradition to explore unexamined intersections between death and eroticism in Shakespeare’s sonnets.

Am Greenstadt
Portland State University

“Was this inserted to make interest good?": Sodomy, Usury, and Intertextuality in
The Merchant of Venice

Early modern scholarship has recently turned its attention to the odd analogy between usury and sodomy. Critics agree that the comparison relied on the threat both sins posed to heterosexual procreation. Aristotle condemned usury as the unnatural breeding of money. So, the current logic goes, if usury made a sterile object breed with itself, sodomy was similarly unnatural in its sterile attempt to make one sex breed with itself. I show that this explanation misinterprets the sources. Renaissance writers compared usury to sodomy because they considered both to be forms of exploitation violating the communal ideals of Christian brotherhood and classical friendship. Opposed to these models of perfect union of sameness, the sodomy/usury dyad carried the threat of difference. Procreation in this context represented the troubling reality that all relationships, whether erotic or economic, depend upon mediating objects, reminders of the very alterity and alienation they are meant to overcome. The objects—be they money or words—may breed of their won accord, overwhelming the bonds they once enabled. I argue that while *The Merchant of Venice* ostensibly condemns such excessive generation in the figure of Shylock, the usurer who claims to “breed...barren metal,” the play recuperates artificial breeding in the figure of Portia, who generates new meanings from Shylock’s

bond exceeding his original intentions. Portia—whose imagination would presumably carry the power to shape the products of her own womb—becomes a figure for the playwright who transforms and incorporates his textual sources into his artificial offspring. Thus the play presents procreation as both bodily and imaginative, suggesting that breeding, whether of humans, money, or texts, is always queer.

Stephen Guy-Bray
University of British Columbia

Cymbeline

In some ways, *Cymbeline* is an obvious choice for a queer analysis: its status as lesser—or even bad—Shakespeare, its focus on disguise, on fractured families, on disobedience at various levels, and its frequently torturous language and almost crazily elaborate narrative, might all seem to make the play inescapably queer. On the other hand, the play contains no homoeroticism and remarkably little homosociality and ultimately reaffirms marriage, the family, and the naturalness of the social hierarchy. From this point of view the play might thus seem to rank as one of Shakespeare's more conventional plays. My purpose in this paper is not to settle this question. I do not intend to pronounce that *Cymbeline* either is or is not queer Shakespeare (or, at least, queerer than any other of his plays). Instead, I want to use the play as a test case to think about the ways in which we define queerness: subject matter is the most obvious of these, but we should also include the use of language and narrative and the relationship among these and other factors. I want to consider the extent to which what we think of as queerness and what we think of as normativity can coexist.

Anthony Guy Patricia
Concord University

Queering the Principal Source for *Othello*: III.7 of Cinthio Giraldi's *Hecatommithi*

As its working title suggests, this essay for the Queer Shakespeare Paper Seminar will focus on the story of III.7 of Cinthio Giraldi's *Hecatommithi*, the principal source text for Shakespeare's *Othello*. The main seminar question it seeks to answer is: When and how do Shakespeare's queer sources make Shakespeare's texts even queerer, less queer, or not queer at all? The approach to the task at hand, queering *Hecatommithi* III.7, incorporates Madhavi Menon's strategy of interpreting texts without being hindered by the "only homosexuality itself, in deed or spirit, automatically equals queerness" paradigm. Thus III.7 can be read in relation to Shakespeare's *Othello* in a queer way that, borrowing phraseology from Alan Sinfield, "activates those textual cues that make sense in a queer context." The piece begins by considering Cinthio's treatment of women's sexuality in relation to men's sexuality in the frame portion of *Hecatommithi* III.7. Women's sexuality has always been radically circumscribed in this male-centred way of life: what makes this a queer matter is the fact that queer sexuality—in

whatever form that sexuality has taken for individuals in time and space—has also always been policed in brutal and hypocritical ways. Shakespeare, via the character of Emilia in *Othello*, throws the queerness—insofar as queerness is understood as a/an (in)direct challenge to all things heteronormative—of Cinthio’s understating of the way proper relations between men and women ought to be—into sharp relief. From a theoretical and an analytical perspective, a more recognizably queer interpretive scenario presents itself in the consideration of the relationship between the Moor, the Ensign, and Desdemona in III.7 of Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*. Careful study of the dynamics at work amongst these figures reveals a classic Sedgwickian triangle in operation that can be understood in queer terms. The essay then proceeds to consider that, despite how firmly grounded *Hecatommithi* III.7 is in heteronormativity, Shakespeare still managed to produce a text, *Othello*, based on its predecessor that is attentive to queerness. This is most apparent in *Othello*’s representations of male homoerotic desire between Iago and Othello, representations that are, arguably, most prevalent in 3.3. of Shakespeare’s tragedy. Indeed, it is these depictions that make *Othello* and *Hecatommithi* III.7 queer texts despite the fact that they appeared long before the construction of heterosexual/homosexual and queer/straight binaries occurred in the 19th century.

Ian Frederick Moulton
Arizona State University

As You Like It or What You Will: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Beccadelli’s
Hermaphroditus

This paper juxtaposes Antonio Beccadelli’s collection of Latin epigrams, *Hermaphroditus* (c1425) with Shakespeare’s sonnets to interrogate notions of queer historiography and to query what useful relationships can be established between texts across temporal and linguistic boundaries. Beccadelli’s collection draws on models of classical erotic epigrams to express a range of licit and illicit desire in a socially acceptable mode of discourse (elegant Latin poetry). Shakespeare’s sonnets do the same work in the later elite genre of the English sonnet sequence. What is to be gained by bringing these two collections in dialogue with each other? While Beccadelli’s and Shakespeare’s collections of poems both center on questions of queer desire, sonnet sequences as a genre have little to do with collections of epigrams and there is no reason to believe that Shakespeare had any knowledge of Beccadelli’s work. Yet, I will argue, both collections can serve as crucial markers for the possibilities of articulating queer desire in early modern Europe.

Kirk Quinsland
Fordham University

The Sport of Asses

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick never uses the word “queer” in *Epistemology of the Closet*, referring instead to her approach as “antihomophobic theory.” The word “antihomophobic” positions this essay—which proposes that the rejection of the inset “Pyramus and Thisbe” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* functions as a staging of antitheatrical writing’s homophobic rejection of early modern theater, and that this staging draw on antitheatrical style as much as content—somewhere in between source study and philology. This ventriloquized antitheatrical homophobia expressed by Theseus and the court turns on Shakespeare’s linguistic insistence that the inset play is a “sport”, a piece of bad theater available for mockery. (Whether or not “Pyramus and Thisbe” is actually bad is, in this essay, an open question; it may well be that the entertainment’s stylistic badness is an metatheatrically antihomophobic strategy for exposing antitheatrical homophobia.) The mockery itself fuses together antitheatrical concerns about homosocial groups of theatermakers, who cannot be comfortably integrated into the community because of their sexual depravity/abnormality, with *Midsummer’s* larger concerns about marriage and reproduction, ultimately positioning theater as a site of deferred heterosexuality.

Nathan Szymansky
Simon Fraser University

Lightborn and the Marlovian Intertext

Did you know that, since the resurgence of *Edward II* productions in the 1970s, the role of Lightborn has been variously cast with the same actor (within a production) who played Gaveston, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Bishop of Winchester? Yet, despite Lightborn’s dynamism and meaningfulness for directors of theatre and cinema, the bulk of early modern queer scholarship does not engage his character. Might this inattention to Lightborn signal, in part, a scholarly adherence to residual New-Historicist understanding of Lightborn’s “public executioner” (Karen Cunningham)? My paper distances its exploration of Edward’s murder scene from such limiting New-Historicist analogues by recontextualizing Lightborn. I focus, specifically, on how Lightborn troubles traditional historical sources (he is not in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, for example), and I posit new intertexts to demonstrate how Lightborn heralds models of authority and desire that are thoroughly theatrical. Ultimately, my paper attempts to open an interpretive space for queer critics to think about Lightborn as a character who responds *both* to contemporary discourses of sodomy *and* to Gaveston’s opening fantasy to “draw the pliant knight which I may please” (I.i.52).

Christine Varnado
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Queer Nature: Uncanny Generation in *Macbeth*

There is, I propose, something queer about the way generation and animation of material life works in *Macbeth*. This paper comprises part of an ongoing project (still in its formative stages) on the mechanism of reproduction and birth in early modern literature, beginning with the problem of what counts as a child—the problem of the human—in *Macbeth*. For this seminar, however, my focus will expand to investigate figurations of non-anthropomorphic life in the play—not only the myriad mechanisms of plant and animal generation, but the animate qualities ascribed to forces in the natural (or unnatural?) world, and to forces of affect, as in the powers Macbeth ascribes to witches: “Though you untie the winds and let them fight/Against the churches...though the treasure/Of Nature’s germins tumble all together/Even till destruction sicken, answer me” (IV.i.52-60). Theoretical approaches I will engage for this exploration include new vitalism (Jane Bennett) and non-dualistic and Neoplatonic thought (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick). My method of attending to ecological forces in order to complicate the cosmological underpinnings of a text is inspired by Eve Sedgwick’s practice, in her posthumously published essay “The Weather in Proust,” of close-reading the weather as a central character in a non-dualistic, thoroughly vital material universe. I will ultimately contend that *Macbeth* constructs a queer universe: tending toward similitude rather than sexual difference; powered by asexual proliferation and antagonism as modes of reproduction; and moving toward “unlineal” collapse rather than futurity.