

## SAA2015 – Seminar 37 – Shakespeare and Contagion – Abstracts

Seminar Leaders: Mary Floyd-Wilson (University of North Carolina) and Darryl Chalk (University of Southern Queensland)

### **Sabina Amanbayeva**

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“Falstaff’s Poisonous Affects: Politics and Physiology in *1 Henry IV*”

My paper is focused on the formation of intimacy through laughter in Shakespeare’s *1 Henry IV* (1597). Using the framework of historical phenomenology and affect studies, I show how Falstaff’s jokes about his own body can actually be read as physiological manipulation and a political act. Early modern texts consistently associate the formation of illicit attachments with the work of poison and the subtle cunning of underworld figures. For instance, Thomas Dekker’s cony-catching pamphlets *The Belman of London* (1608) and *Lanthorn and Candle-light* (1608) take it as their guiding principle that cony-catchers commit their villainies through “breathes” and “vapours” that insidiously spread everywhere. A similar tactic, I argue, is at work in *1 Henry IV*, where Falstaff’s jokes, called “vain comparatives” in the play, re-structure the relationship between the body and its environment by his successive spinning of new metaphors and thus new ways to imagine relations between self and other. The word-play between Hal and Falstaff becomes then a sort of titillation, playing with the body, as their mutual witticisms and jokes successively touch and re-touch each other’s contours. The essay contributes to the on-going conversation on affect and intimacy by bringing to the fore the physicality of early modern laughter and its ability to work like “poison” or contagious “vapour” in its creation of illicit intimacies.

### **J. F. Bernard**

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“Hamlet’s Story/Stories of Hamlet: Shakespeare’s Theater and Contagious Storytelling”

My paper understands theatrical publicity and disease imagery as the basic underpinnings of a narrative structure in Shakespearean drama, one

built on compelling, previously unacknowledged parallels between the business of theatre and the various illnesses that propagate in early modern England. I consider the ways in which imagery associated with the bubonic plague in *Hamlet* provides a direct reflection of its protagonist's drive for publicity and how the character's literary, cultural, and critical iconicity can be understood to mirror the play's own status as a primary agent of Shakespearean storytelling. The homologous depictions of virality and the circulation of information at the core of the play thus suggest that, in striving to insure its subsistence, early modern theatre mimics the contagion process by constantly seeking to infect new carriers. With a brief look to today's increasingly digital literary landscape, my paper ultimately makes the claim that Shakespeare's plays essentially went viral before "going viral" rose to cultural eminence

**John Estabillo**

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"Jonson's Humours and Contagious Atheism in the English Renaissance"

This paper considers the rich relationship between two different early modern cultural phenomena, both located at the intersection between material and spiritual worlds: atheism and contagion. At the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries, the boundaries between body and soul and the physical and spiritual events by which they are affected were in a state of relentless but productive flux, perhaps most of all in regards to a liminal category such as atheism. This paper examines a selection of early modern English texts that characterize the origins and spread of atheism through formal terms that resonate with early modern theories of contagion, and suggests that the surprising conceptual conversancy between atheism and contagion is due to their mutual entrenchment in both moral and material causes. These include polemical prose texts such as Adam Hill's *Crie of England* and John Abernathy's *Physicke for the Soule*, as well as two plays of Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Alchemist*. The affiliations of scientific, moral, spiritual, and literary texts that coalesce into "atheism" and "contagion" are not definite enough to be theories unto themselves, but they nonetheless present the modern critical investigator with substantial materials for interpretation.

**Jennifer Feather**

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“Every drop of blood / That Every Roman Bears”: Contagion and Cultural Difference in *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus*

In the early modern period, cultural difference was frequently understood in terms of bodily susceptibility, and Romanness in particular was associated with a masculine fortitude that ensured bodily imperviousness to contamination. *Titus Andronicus* obsessively meditates on issues of cultural purity and contamination, and as many scholars have pointed out it frequently does so in terms of bodily integrity and health. However, though this play deals most directly with the infectiousness posed by non-Roman figures, *Julius Caesar*, whose characters are all Roman, contains the most persistent reference to disease, sickness, and contagion of all Shakespeare’s Roman works. This essay examines what *Julius Caesar*’s language of contagion might help us understand about the issues of cultural difference explored so explicitly in *Titus Andronicus*.

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Kisses and Contagion in Early Modern Drama

In this paper, I survey evidence from early modern medical and religious figures in conjunction with dramatic representations regarding the exchange of breath and spirit in kisses in order to analyze what kinds of contagious dangers kisses might have been thought to pose. Ultimately, I conclude that in plays, at least, the cultural approbation of kissing as polite and courteous overwhelmed more pragmatic fears regarding the possibility of inhaling contagious miasmas in the act of kissing. Nevertheless, such anxieties could not be completely repressed and surfaced in such plays as *Troilus and Cressida*.

**Amy Kenny**

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“‘A deal of stinking breath’: The smell of contagion in the early modern playhouse”

How did the playhouse smell to an early modern nose? The theatre is often reimagined as an incubator of infection in several writings from the period, which warn about the dangers of play going because of the “bad air” and noisome smells circulating in an overcrowded space. This paper will explore the embodied experience of attending such a performance by examining smell as an indicator and site of contagion in the early modern mind. I will explore how the body is susceptible to corruption from filthy air and stench in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* before considering the implications of a stinky playhouse at this time.

**Tripthi Pillai**

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“Feeling and Talking, Or, Loving and Fearing: Affective Contagion and Infection in *Othello*”

This paper offers a close reading of the aesthetics of punctured location and nomadic movement of human and non-human beings (objects/things) in *Othello* that are mapped out through the discourses of infection and healing (homeopathic and other) on the one hand and Deleuzian, rhizomatic, contagion on the other. In particular, my paper explores the relations of infection and contagion that, in the play, are charted along lines of affective, physical, and social movement. Throughout, characters mobilize a medical discourse—a language of infection and cure, of course, but also a language rooted in emergency—in order to localize matter and contain its relations to other objects and beings. Iago, for example, states that he practices “(his) medicine” on his “sick fool Roderigo” and on the “many worthy and chaste dames” and “credulous fools ... caught” within and by the discourse of infection in order to return them to identifiable Venetian spaces that follow a “molar” structure of relations and networks. However, even as infection dominates the play’s environment (notably, miscegenation too is constructed as infection in the play), contagion erupts in language that is undesigned, that is, from discursive leaks and seepages that mark the non-

localizable and nomadic movements of objects in the play. The unreliability of the details of news regarding the strength of the Turkish fleet, the unanticipated actions of nature that undo the Turks' "designment," the fantastical narratives of Othello's past, and the unlockable history of the handkerchief's origins and powers are just few of the examples of contagion that puncture or "wound"—to use Barthes' language of laceration that he uses in *Camera Lucida* to discuss the unstructured ocular experience of photography—the infected and infectious systems/environments, offering characters lines of flight, unmarked spaces where the full force of "molecular" and pre-organizational relations among beings might be experienced tentatively.

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"It's Complicated: The Etiology of Lovesickness in Illyria"

This paper explores the implications of the trope of "love as plague" in *Twelfth Night*, both how it does and does not fit, and focuses specifically on the various causes of lovesickness, as lovesickness is epidemic in the play. After considering Darryl Chalk's claim that "[w]hile the notion that love is generated through the eyes is a commonplace in Shakespearean drama, the association between lovesickness and airborne contagion is made explicit several times in his plays, most notably in *Twelfth Night*," I argue that there are no explicit references in *Twelfth Night* to pathogens transmitted from the eyes of a beloved to the gaze of the lover (though the idea does appear in other plays and poems by Shakespeare). While the idea of the contagious interlocking gaze can be found in treatises on lovesickness written by Jacques Ferrand (1610, expanded in 1623, and translated into English in 1640) and Robert Burton (1621)—both citing Marsilio Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (1484), this contagious mechanism is not the only etiology they mention. For Ferrand and Burton, lovesickness has both internal and external causes, and both authors at times describe some forms of the illness as almost entirely endogenous, an idea that is at times suggested as well in Shakespeare's plays, particularly in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in Feste's song "O Mistress Mine." Although *Twelfth Night* does not present love as transmitted via eyebeams from beloved to afflicted lover, it does suggest other kinds of attraction (if not infection) that are not based on physical appearance. In addition to intuitive, mysterious sympathies between characters (related, for example, to unspoken grief or lovesickness), the play presents in Orsino an example of what Nancy Frelick calls "textual

contagion.” Orsino reminds us that how subjects love and even whom they love—indeed love itself—is to a great degree (if not entirely) a social construction. Nevertheless, Orsino shows signs of recovery from his affliction in the final scene, though in his promise to make Viola his “fancy’s queen,” the play suggests he still has a way to go.

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“Contagious Words and The Choice of Ethical Empathy in *Coriolanus*”

*Coriolanus*—and *Coriolanus*—have often proven intensely unlikeable. As Peter Holland puts it, “Intransigent, intractable, often difficult to love, sometimes difficult to like—it is striking how often words and phrases that aptly describe *Coriolanus* also fit *Coriolanus*.”<sup>1</sup> But at key moments the play and its protagonist also prompt an opposing (and surprising) reaction from audiences onstage and off: empathy.<sup>2</sup> This is not, of course, a reaction effortlessly achieved. Given *Coriolanus*’ often boorish and off-putting behavior, his bull-headed insistence upon “let[ting] it be virtuous to be obstinate,” the audience must frequently struggle to empathize with the man who is inarguably Shakespeare’s thorniest protagonist (5.3.26).<sup>3</sup> Doing so accurately requires that we exercise our powers of what philosopher Kevin Houser calls “ethical empathy.” As Houser defines it, ethical empathy is a comparatively minimal affective response requiring solely that the conditions of suffering which an “empathetic witness” observes stimulate a reaction of ethical “ought-not-ness.”<sup>4</sup> This is the understanding that, as Hauser explains, “Your suffering, understood as a

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Holland, introduction to *Coriolanus*, by William Shakespeare (London: Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, 2013), 1.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I take the word “empathy” to mean, as defined in the *OED*, “The ability to understand and appreciate another person’s feelings, experience, etc.,” particularly as it applies to the emotional, phenomenological and interpretive faculties of audience members watching and responding to a dramatic performance. *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, March 2014), <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/61284>, s.v. “empathy, *n.*” (accessed June 29, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> All Shakespeare quotations are from The Arden Shakespeare, 3d ed., *Coriolanus*, ed. Peter Holland (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), and cited in the text by act, scene, and line.

<sup>4</sup> I wish to clarify here what I mean by the term “empathetic witnessing.” I argue that when we witness onstage violence, we move past a mimetic, one-sided relationship to the performance (the actors touch us, we do not, generally speaking, touch them) towards engaging with the performance as a series of interactive sites, each of which rebound our gaze back onto ourselves. While obviously not reciprocal in the traditional sense, the exchange of affect between actors and audience is there: we feel it on our bodies and in our minds, even if we cannot respond “in the moment” to the actors provoking our feelings. When this reaction is achieved, the audience moves past “mere” spectatorship to a more affectively engaged version of it: “empathetic witnessing.” Triggered by the audience’s instinctual response to an act of onstage violence, empathetic witnessing shocks its members out of their viewing complacency, requiring them to re-calibrate their interpretation of the performance by evaluating, and validating, their affective responses to what they witness.



perfectly individual imperative—strikes me as normatively illegitimate—and does so quite apart from my sharing with you, or having for myself some particular reason I might articulate... This is to posit a kind of ethical necessity—i.e. to claim that your suffering *necessarily* offends... And this is to say that, whatever else we do or do not share, we share this *ought not to be!*”<sup>5</sup> Requiring that we divorce ourselves from our subjective (and at times emotionally overwhelming) responsiveness to what we witness in order to form objective judgments (often predicated by the structural dictates of the play itself) our response of ethical empathy becomes a compelling form of affective—that is, oral, aural and spectatorial—contagion. If the play is majoritively defined by “The Rage of Coriolanus,” it is also shot through with expressions of loneliness, pain, alienation, and isolation, with repeated suggestions that this is the tragedy of a man inhumanely denied his right to be human—who cannot help but be so. This is why it is up to us, as audience members and ethical eyewitnesses, to judge Coriolanus correctly, to pay attention to moments that compel our empathy for him even when his behavior might logically appear to repel it. For if we do our job as good ethical empathizers (operating as theatrical collective of empathetic witnesses), the play and its protagonist provoke our indignant conviction that despite—arguably even because of—Coriolanus’ faults: “This ought not to be!”

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“Search this ulcer soundly:” Blood, Infection and Transgression in The Changeling

This essay examines the language of blood in Middleton and Rowley’s 1622 tragedy, *The Changeling* in the context of its Spanish setting. Focusing on the convergence of the play’s evocation of Spain and its rhetoric of infected blood and contagion, I examine how a discourse of impure, tainted or corrupted blood functions to cast miscegenation as “infection,” thus highlighting how discourses of male autonomy and national purity are mutually reinforcing in the play.

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Houser, “Persons as Reasons: A Model of Ethical Empathy,” (working paper, Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 2010), 15.

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“The Hungry Meme and Political Contagion in *Coriolanus*”

Meme theory describes how powerful ideas replicate and spread like genes and viruses in human populations. In *Coriolanus*, the embodied condition of hunger linked to the political meme of equitable food distribution connects the dangerous dialogue of the First and Second Citizens to contagious ideas already in the minds of early modern audience members who were aware of food shortages and associated revolts. According to this model, the meme is like a live political virus which replicates through contagious exchanges, both through theatrical acts of oral transmission in the citizens’ dialogue and in the minds and bodies of the audience, some of whom may have been hungry while they watched the play. Thus, meme theory offers a model which describes how contagious ideas function both dramatically and realistically, participating in a mimetic cycle which operates in multiple hosts, before, during, and after the theatrical event.