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**Seminar #38.  
Ritual Shakespeare**

Leaders: Katharine Cleland (Virginia Tech) and Jay Zysk (University of South Florida)

**ABSTRACTS**

**Performing Revenge: Ritual, Interpretation, and Eucharist in *Titus Andronicus***

Stephanie Bahr

This paper examines the cannibalistic feast at the end of *Titus Andronicus* as a perversion of the Eucharist and argues it is the culminating moment of the play's larger interrogation of Reformation Biblical hermeneutics. Despite the state censorship that attempted to suppress any religious controversy on stage, I argue *Titus Andronicus* not only critiques Reformation sectarian violence, but also dramatizes its underlying hermeneutic basis *as* violence. Reformation disputes about whether to read figuratively or literally play out on stage as characters brutally literalize the conventional metonymic fragmentation of the body and as the Romans and Goths enact textual narratives on the bodies of their enemies.

These themes culminate in two theatrical rituals: Tamora's allegorical play and Titus's cannibal feast. When Tamora casts herself as "Revenge" in a show for Titus, the scene self-referentially performs the hermeneutic slippage at the heart of the Eucharistic controversy, which hinged on how to interpret Christ's words "Take, eat, this is my body." Tamora's play replicates these uncertain distinctions between literal and figurative and their fraught relationship with the "real." In turn, Titus's manipulation of these unstable divisions—literal & figurative, truth & falsehood—directly enables his ultimate act of vengeance: a cannibal Eucharist that embodies the hermeneutic controversy over the doctrine of transubstantiation. At the conclusion of Shakespeare's most brutal play, theatrical ritual is left as the only wholesome—and non-sectarian—possibility.

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**"Here Comes Our Gossips Now": Selfhood, Agency, and Ceremony in Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside***

Lilly Berberyan

In this paper I examine how the ritual ceremony of a churching depicted in Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* becomes a site of power for the female characters that take part in it. The scene is frequently interpreted, both by the male characters of the play as well as contemporary scholars, as demonstrative of the women's overindulgence and

subsequent loss of control. Rather than interpret the gossips' excessive performance on the stage only in terms of lack of female self-control, I argue that the women's skillful manipulation of the ceremony enables them to create a sense of community and derive individual agency from it. The women's leaking during the ceremony may be interpreted as a mere performance; familiar with the patriarchal stereotypes of female behavior, the women conform to these stereotypes because they know that feminine excess will drive away the male characters and enable the female characters to establish a female community. The christening scene of the Allwit newborn is, in fact, both a christening and a churching and as, such, combines the communal and the ecclesiastical components of welcoming a newborn into the world and celebrating the mother's survival of the childbearing process. While the churching in *Chaste Maid* is a social occasion, this ritual of celebrating childbirth is inherently a ritual of purification of the female body that has been defiled during birth. The women's acceptance that such a ritual is necessary and their willing participation in it enables them to gradually take over the ceremony. In the scene, the women have the authority not only to perform the cleansing ritual of the mother, but also the christening of the child without male disruption.

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### **Shakespeare and Fletcher's Reformation Play**

Rachael Deagman

The language of conscience thoroughly saturates John Fletcher and William Shakespeare's *All Is True*. The word appears twenty four times, nearly twice as often as in any other of Shakespeare's plays. In the famous divorce trial scene at Blackfriars, Henry VIII invokes conscience to escape his marriage with Katherine of Aragon: "...But conscience, conscience! / O, 'tis a tender place, and I must leave her (II.iii.142-3). Frequently we think of conscience as an intellectual act that, aided by emotion and practical experience, helps us to differentiate right from wrong. Henry wishes to leave his tender conscience, perhaps by privileging emotion over ethics, in order to divorce his wife. But his precise diction, his model of conscience as a place, merits further reflection. He posits conscience not simply as an intellectual act but rather as an interpretative space for ethical reflection. His ethical model signals a changing penitential discourse; the discourse, in turn, signals a massive revolution in both ritual and place. This essay takes up Henry's phrase – the place of conscience – to show how *All is True* invokes space as a hermeneutical paradigm through which to represent the changing nature of penitential discourse across the Reformation.

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### **"All the royal makings of a queen": Rituals of Queenship in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Henry VIII***

Susan Dunn-Hensley

In *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship 1445-1503*, Joanna Laynesmith argues that, through their participation in royal ceremonies of state (weddings, entries, and coronations) and personal rituals associated with birth and death, queens consort complemented, legitimized and enriched their husband's kingship, making them "an integral part of the

king's public body" (72). In the realm of royal ritual, king and queen could be presented in terms of divine right and Providential rule, with the queen frequently playing a role explicitly linked to the Virgin Mary. Not surprisingly, in early modern England, royal rites could be a site of contestation between the monarch, who desired to retain elements of ritual that support theories of divine right kingship, and those reformers who desired an end to superstition. In this paper, I will examine the ways in which ritual constructs the queen's royal identity; in particular, I am interested in how Shakespeare resurrects medieval imagery of the sacred virgin and complicates and problematizes the very rituals that define queenship. By way of example, I will consider his depiction of marriages, coronations, and other rituals of queenship in *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Henry VIII*. In addition, I will consider Shakespeare's treatment of female agency and consent in royal and aristocratic marriage.

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### **Negotiating the Supernatural: The Performativity of Magical Ritual as Critique in Doctor Faustus and The Tempest**

Nathaniel Leonard

The staging of magic in English Renaissance plays offers a unique opportunity for the playwrights of the period to comment on mundane ritual logic. Inherent in the process of dramatizing the supernatural, specifically the formulae used to construct magical efficacy, is the possibility to model the logic that governs magic on rites that would have been recognizable to an early modern English audience. This paper will discuss the specific manner in which Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Tempest* use magical ritual as a means of exploring the inner workings of other, more common, dominant cultural logics. However, the two texts explore very different elements of English Renaissance culture. While *Doctor Faustus* utilizes the models of religious performance and theatrical ritual, *The Tempest* operates on a paradigm that builds off of social structures associated with political hierarchy. In effect, both texts use magical ritual as a medium to interrogate the inner workings of cultural hegemony through a discourse built on the details of performative language. Starting with J. L. Austin's work on performativity, this piece will discuss Marlowe's emphasis on the thin line between conjuring and prayer, as well as his focus on the necessity of intent, ritual, and a corresponding internal state, which contrasts starkly with Shakespeare's emphasis on hierarchy and feudal vassalage, as well as the importance of competence in Prospero's interactions with Ariel. Both of these texts demonstrate the manner in which the presentation of ritual logic creates a quasi-metatheatrical effect that models the potential efficacy of rituals within the virtual world of the dramatic work.

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## Greek Sacrifice in Shakespeare's Rome: *Titus Andronicus* and Euripides' *Iphigenia*

Penelope Myers Usher

This paper examines the Greek elements of the depiction of ritual sacrifice in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and argues that Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* figures as an important intertext for the play. As critics are increasingly demonstrating the importance of Greek sources—and Greek drama in particular—to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, this paper will argue for new ways of understanding the interaction between early modern playwrights and the Greeks via ritual. Shakespeare's collaborator on *Titus*, George Peele, was an avid scholar and translator of Greek tragedy, having composed a vernacular translation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* roughly a decade earlier. Whether or not Shakespeare himself read *Iphigenia*, however, and while *Titus* is by no means a simple re-writing or adaptation of *Iphigenia*, *Titus* engages in complex ways with the depiction of sacrificial killing Euripides' play. In its depiction of parents sacrificing children, of the rite of *hiketeia* (ritual supplication), and of ritual modes of sacrificial killing, *Titus* calls up and puts into play the elements of Greek tragic sacrifice staged in *Iphigenia*. The recognition of these points of engagement between *Titus* and *Iphigenia* allows us to bring different ideas to bear on our understanding of Shakespeare—in this case, to our understanding of the meaning of sacrifice, and of ritual killing, in revenge tragedy.

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## “Redeeming Time” – The Carnavalesque Revisited in Shakespeare's Plays

Milla Cozart Riggio

Beginning with the concept of time, this paper will call into question some of the basic distinctions between rule and “misrule” that tend to govern our thinking about the cultural function of the carnivalesque or by extension the “festive” in Shakespeare's plays. Beyond the notions of festive Time as “liminal” but also as seasonal, organic, fluid and flexible, this paper will look at Shakespeare's consistent emphasis on the values of merriment or the “merry” (as in *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice*) as well as the cathartic healing power of music, poetry, dance, and, of course, drama itself. Rather than analyzing one or two plays, this paper will trace cathartic values that are not only restorative but are also basic to individual and cultural identity formation in representative plays throughout Shakespeare's career. These will include *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *A Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night*. Prince Hal's concept of “playing holidays” corresponds to some Renaissance notions of “misrule” or of liminality – “time out of time.” However, this paper will illustrate ways in which the Shakespeare canon consistently valorizes rituals of “play” or activities of leisure as central to human existence, in opposition to what is often seen as the sterility of public advancement and the personal ambition that drives that force. Julius Caesar's fear of Cassius because he “loves no plays” and “hears no music” is consistent with Shakespeare's overall perspective on the rituals of play.

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## The Hunting Hell-Hound and the Harrowing Women in *Richard III*

Tina Romanelli

My book project examines the ritualization of the Harrowing of Hell by unlikely Christ-figures who attempt to counter oppression by embodying Jesus's defeat of Satan between the crucifixion and the resurrection. In the hotly debated and continuously circulating accounts of the Harrowing of Hell, Christ is variously depicted as debating with Satan, tricking him, robbing him, and even binding him and leaving him bereft in hell. Building on the research of early modern scholars like Beatrice Groves and Kurt Schreyer who analyze the influence of the late medieval Harrowing cycles on Shakespeare's work, I argue that Shakespeare draws on the harrowing mythos when he depicts corrupt or tyrannical monarchy by creating intersectional characters that perform interdiscursivity. For example, in *The Winter's Tale*, Paulina draws on the discourses of hagiography, midwifery, and witchcraft to expose and subdue Leontes' madness. She becomes a kind of Christ-figure who harrows the monarch of his right to absolute power over his royal line. For the section of my work that I am revising for SAA, I argue that the female characters in *Richard III* (Elizabeth, Margaret, and the Duchess of York) attempt similar harrowings to rid England of the usurper. Especially in Act IV, scene iv, these women meet to discuss revenge against "hell's black intelligencer" and learn to "how to curse [their] enemies." As it does in *The Winter's Tale*, my interpretation of this history play locates female agency in the ritualization of Christ's rhetorical and subversive (rather than military) actions.

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## Shakespeare's Tables Turned

David Ruiter

In terms of social justice, hospitality, diplomacy, and the public weal, tables are literally and symbolically significant in politics, history, and story, probably most memorably within Arthurian legend where the Round Table comes to symbolize the confluence and potential harmony in these three strands of cultural life. So it is likely of little surprise to find that tables also function importantly in Shakespeare's plays. With some of Shakespeare's most remembered table settings—those of Titus, Macbeth, and Prospero—we find both bread and brokenness at play in rather vicious, even deadly, transactional gatherings. In these moments and places, the table appears to become a location of "pretend" social and political care, a staged event that does not do what it purports to do, does not welcome, nourish, or enjoin. There is displacement, disappearance, and indigestion, but little that can be considered healthful or community-inspiring breaking of bread.

I will examine the impact of each of the tables just mentioned, and consider why it is that the staging of tables and banquets in Shakespeare ultimately creates more anxiety than true access, more famine than feast, more breaking of bodies and souls than true communion. And I will then consider how we, as those who continue to feast upon the bounty of Shakespeare, are doing in creating a festive welcome to the Bard's table, a place that has great and ongoing potential as a setting for the discussion and enactment of social justice.



### **Death by Ritual: Exploring the meaning and use of ritual in Shakespeare's *Pericles* and other plays**

Elizabeth Sharrett

In Scene 11 of *Pericles*, the Prince of Tyre laments the loss of his wife Thaisa who has died at sea in childbirth. Adding to the sting of her untimely end is the absence of ritual meant to accompany her through the final rite of passage, as Pericles is forced to cast her overboard in a coffin. But as the audience soon learns, Thaisa is not actually dead, and if Pericles had been able to “give [her] hallowed to [her] grave” (11.58), such ritual would have killed her by burying her alive. It is the absence of ritual, then, that saves her. Later in the play, however, Cleon and Dionyza manipulate ritual to convince Pericles that his daughter Marina has died. Thus there seems to be a questioning of the meaning and use of ritual within the play. As Edward Muir suggests what rituals are and what they do is precisely what the Reformation debate centred upon. John Foxe’s criticism of ritual in his *Acts and Monuments* (1570) referenced the emptiness of its meaning: “containing no manner of doctrine, nor consolation necessary for that time, but only certain ritual decrees to no purpose”. This paper explores the manner in which Shakespeare and other playwrights exploited the potential superficiality of the death ritual to create dramatic effect.



### **“Apt punishments for his proud presumptions’: Skimmington Rituals in Lyly’s *Gallathea*”**

Kristina Sutherland

I will be exploring skimmington rituals, and how the punishment of Cupid in John Lyly’s *Gallathea* represents (and possibly burlesques) this tradition of public shaming. While the OED’s earliest example of this word (in the sense of a person impersonating the figure of shame) is 1623, and the earliest example of this word used as the procession itself is Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome’s 1634 *Late Lancashire Witches*, there were earlier dramatic scenes in which public shaming took place. The most notable is perhaps Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which culminates in the public masquing of the villagers, who pinch, burn, and verbally abuse Falstaff for his attempted pursuit of Mistresses Ford and Page. In general, a skimmington (or charivari, which is the French version) involved public humiliation of an offending party (a shrewish wife, a henpecked husband, and even domestic abusers of both sexes) who had outstepped their domestic roles. Music was typical, with lyrics designed – or improvised – for the offense; some accounts include descriptions of pots and pans used as percussion instruments while the offenders – or impersonators of the offenders – were paraded around town. In the case of Lyly’s *Gallathea*, scholarship on the mythological figures has focused around their possible uses in Lyly’s court ambitions. When scholarship has not focused on Diana, Neptune, and Venus, it has mainly examined the main plot in which two girls, dressed as boys, fall in love in the woods. While the sexual play of the dialogue and the ending, in which these two girls leave the stage to be married (Venus will turn one male after the wedding, and refuses to say which), I have

as yet been unable to examine the punishment of Cupid closely. While in the original 1592 printing, no songs were included – and thus would render his shaming a different tradition than the skimmington, Edward Blount’s 1632 compilation of Lyly’s plays, *Six courte comedies*, does include a song sung by the nymphs to the audience, and there are suggestions that such a public ritual is taking place whether the song is considered or not. For this session, I will be looking more into skimmington rituals and their uses to explain this scene.

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### **“Shouts, Slogans, and the Ritual of Consent in *Coriolanus*”**

Thomas Ward

This paper looks at (and listens to) Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* in relation to the soundscapes of early modern Parliamentary elections. Complicating the notion that the vocal acclamation by which voters signaled their support for Parliamentary candidates was “merely” ceremonial, I examine how Shakespeare’s play imagines the power of theatrical noise in relation to the loud civic performances that was the early modern election ritual. Focusing on the scene in which Martius solicits – and is ultimately “whooped out of Rome” by – the Roman citizens (whom he refers to synecdochically as “voices”), I argue that *Coriolanus* stages the election ritual not so much as a contest over who will represent the people politically, but as a more fundamental dispute over what counts as language in the first place. By reading the play against first-hand accounts that draw attention to the relationship between election shouts and other forms of inarticulate noise (including war-cries and the “hue and cry”) I suggest that Shakespeare locates the realm of the political in the contested space between speaking and making noise.

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### **“Counting No Old Thing Old”: Ritual Consolation in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets***

Leila Watkins

While scholarship on Shakespeare’s drama has enthusiastically embraced ritual theory, work on Shakespeare’s poetry has proved more resistant, reiterating an entrenched model of criticism that regards early modern lyric as a genre that fashions a distinct authorial self. This paper argues that Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, in fact, rely heavily on ritual elements of lyric, such as scripted language and communal utterance, to offer *readers* a model for managing difficult emotions. In a study of the lyric sequence, Roland Greene describes the genre as a dialectic between fictional and ritual phenomena. In Greene’s hybrid model, most erotic sequences, including Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, favor fictional literary modes over ritual modes, offering well-developed characters and distinct narrative arcs. While some lyric sequences give more weight to the ritual aspects of poetry, they are almost always devotional in function. In this paper, I reverse Greene’s claims to focus on the centrality of ritual language to Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. Erotic sonnet sequences like Shakespeare’s certainly focus on the desiring self, but I argue that their special ability to console readers as well as writers lies in their deployment of the ritual aspects of lyric. Paying closer attention to the ways in which Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*

use ritual forms can help us understand how early modern readers might have approached these poems (and others) as sources of consolation for managing their own emotional lives.

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“Hester Pulter’s Escape: Authorial Power and the Lying-In”

Amanda Zoch

For decades, scholars have debated the degree of female agency enabled by the early modern lying-in, and it is now commonplace to view this birthing ritual as a site of social resistance in addition to physical recuperation. While Natalie Zemon Davis characterizes this resistance as “women on top,” a carnivalesque power inversion, others have shown how the lying-in authorized women’s, rather than men’s, conspicuous consumption of food and other goods. Such empowering and celebratory conceptions of the lying-in are part of feminist scholarship’s efforts to establish women as dynamic and vital participants in a patriarchal society that often sought to render them voiceless, and yet many of these interpretations are based on second-hand accounts, thus overlooking the experience of the ritual’s primary subject: the mother. Therefore, I contend that for some mothers the lying-in was more stifling than festive, with its gradual reintegration into society agonizing rather than luxurious. This is not to revert to earlier claims that asserted the lying-in as a patriarchal effort of containment. Rather, I argue that women could experience the period after childbirth as a heightened state of uncontrol, as a present overcome with fear and pain and the loss of autonomy, even when both mother and child survive. To illustrate my claim, I turn to the recently discovered manuscript of Hester Pulter’s poetry and other works. The manuscript contains several poems written during her last lying-in in which she narrates herself out of her pregnant memory and into a remote fantasy. Pulter’s poetry reveals that it is not the lying-in, but the authorial transformation of that ritual into poetry that enables the mother to manage the precarity of pregnancy and regain control over herself. This act of agency affirms an individual’s narrative self-presentation as a successful alternative to the collective empowerment of the lying-in.