

Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America

23-26 March 2016, New Orleans, Louisiana

Seminar 43: *Shakespeare and Montaigne*

Leaders: Lars Engle (University of Tulsa) and William M. Hamlin (Washington State University)

Seminar Members:

Barbara Bono (SUNY at Buffalo)

Rob Carson (Hobart & William Smith Colleges)

Timothy Duffy (New York University)

Patrick Gray (Durham University)

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Niels Herold (Oakland University)

Peter Holbrook (University of Queensland)

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Céline Pitre (University of Toronto)

Peter G. Platt (Barnard College)

Anita Gilman Sherman (American University)

Daniel J. Vitkus (University of California, San Diego)

Shakespeare and Montaigne: Collective Bibliography for SAA 2016

15 December 2015

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SAA 2016 Seminar, "Shakespeare and Montaigne"

Barbara Bono

Department of English, SUNY at Buffalo

Abstract and suggested readings

Happy, or 'I'll teach you how to flow" (Antonio, *The Tempest*, 2.1.218)

The rupture of the analogical and metaphorical "Great Chain of Being," the "untuning of the spheres" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, creates a lateral pressure toward contingency, metonymy, efficient causes, flows. My paper will trace this process and its effects in several key Shakespearean texts—the political movement from *Richard II* to *1 Henry IV*, the communication of desire in *Twelfth Night*, the shifting epistemological grounds of *Hamlet*, the transmigrations of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the voyages of *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*—and hint at their confluence with the vitalism, fideism and emphasis on freedom of thought in Montaigne. Most evanescent, it will discuss how what just happens amid the flows of time occasionally presents the conditions for "happiness."

My list of suggested readings includes two classics of early modern and Shakespearean criticism, and one idiosyncratic offering:

1. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (1987).
2. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981),
3. Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (3rd enlarged edition, 2003).

Prospectus for “Fellow-feeling in Shakespeare and Montaigne”

Rob Carson

Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Sixteenth-century English writers often talk about compassion or sympathy using the term “fellow-feeling,” a solid Anglo-Saxon translation of these Latin and Greek words. For Descartes, however, and for those of us who have inherited his philosophical vocabulary (which is to say: all of us), the idea of fellow-feeling can be somewhat problematic, and for two reasons. To begin with the second half of the term, feelings present a challenge to Descartes’s tidy bifurcation of the world of our experience into two discreet realms, the mental and the physical, since they would seem to fit into neither realm at all comfortably. Recent work in the History of Emotions has done an excellent job of highlighting the challenges that feelings pose to dualist philosophical models – not just Cartesian dualism, but also many binaries still common in current discourse, such as subjectivity and objectivity, the real and the constructed, and the material and the ideological. But perhaps even more difficult for Descartes (and perhaps for us as well) is the first half of the term, the idea of fellowship. The Cartesian model of the self as a fully discrete psychological atom, an essentially-thinking-thing certain only of itself, leads us to the bizarre idea that “other minds” are somehow enigmatical, a fly in the ointment, a problem that philosophy needs to confront. In a world of experience defined wholly in terms of subjects and objects, intersubjectivity becomes something elusive, fodder for skeptics, rather than something self-evident, our common ground (as the later Wittgenstein would have it).

In this paper I would like to explore the ways in which Shakespeare and Montaigne’s presentations of fellow-feeling can offer us a catalyst for moving beyond binary models in our own thinking, turning to these pre-Cartesian thinkers as a source for inspiration for our own post-Cartesian work. And in particular, I would like to think about the ways in which Monique Scheer’s discussion of emotions as a kind of cultural practice – as something intersubjective rather than subjective or objective, as something practical rather than real or constructed – offers us a third path outside of the familiar dichotomies, a reconfiguration of received binaries into something new, and a path, furthermore, one that runs parallel to ideas we find in Shakespeare and Montaigne. To put this idea another way: because of parallels that I find between sixteenth-century literary texts and new work in theory, I propose that the best way to read these texts historically is not by looking backward through distorted binary lenses ground in the Enlightenment, but by taking them on their own terms as best we can and putting them into immediate dialogue with ourselves in the present.

Some Reading

Eric Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Oxford, 2010)

Hassan Melehy, *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject* (SUNY P, 1997)

Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (DS Brewer, 2012)
Zahi Zalloua (ed.), *Montaigne After Theory / Theory After Montaigne* (U Washington P, 2011)

Timothy Duffy
New York University

Sexuality, Morality, and the Amateur in Shakespeare and Montaigne

Abstract:

This essay explores the moral and theological treatments of sexuality in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Turning to Montaigne's essay on sexuality and culture, "On Some Verses by Virgil," I argue that Montaigne uses his status as an isolated and amateur observer to write on sexuality in a frank, secular, and universalizing way. Highlighting a moment in Petrarch's *Familiars* in which Petrarch also presents himself as an amateur observer of a sexual scandal in Thor, I turn to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* in light of both Petrarch and Montaigne's amateur textual observations of youthful sexuality to argue that Shakespeare, in a more conservative sense, depends on characters taking on amateur roles (Angelo, Isabella, and the Duke) in order to properly judge youthful sexual errors while maintaining the foundational integrity and morality of the Renaissance city.

Lars Engle
U. of Tulsa
Abstract of SAA Seminar Paper

“Montaigne’s Shakespeare”

When Shakespeareans turn to Montaigne for help, what do they seek?

My paper explores the possibility that Shakespeareans, especially those trying to grasp or present Shakespeare as a coherent and appealing thinker, turn to Montaigne on the whole to ground the possibility that Shakespeare shares with 21st-century Shakespeareans a set of attitudes common in our time but unusual in his. Those attitudes, I imagine, might be shared by most members of our seminar. Indeed, my argument founders, or at any rate staggers, if these attitudes are not ethically familiar, comfortable, and assumed as both creditable and ordinary among educated cultured moderns. A non-exhaustive list would include: eagerness to give ear and voice to the other; skepticism about knowledge and authority, and antipathy toward dogmatic absolutism; openness to exploration concerning sexuality and gender; and horror or dismay at human cruelty, whether familial or erotic or religious or political. If we want to attribute such proto-modern attitudes to Shakespeare, we need to find others in Shakespeare's time who assert the constellation of ethical positions I'm presumptuously attributing to 21st-century Shakespeareans. Moreover, we probably should be able to find such proto-modern voices, given that we scholars often call Shakespeare's time "early modernity." Montaigne fills the bill, and I can't think of another early modern thinker who is used as prominently as Montaigne to ground Shakespeare ethically and philosophically.

My paper compares Shakespeare and Montaigne ethically in terms of Hume's famous paragraph on *is* and *ought*. It suggests that both Shakespeare and Montaigne generally feature an *is*-oriented ethics over an *ought*-oriented morality.

The paper also suggests, however, that in just the situations where Shakespeare might be consciously reacting to Montaigne's protomodernity -- in plays like *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Othello*, *Lear*, and *The Tempest* -- he seems to react against it.

Bibliography:

Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2010. (Gives an appealing presentation of Montaigne as our ethical interlocutor.)

William Hamlin, *Montaigne's English Journey: Reading the Essays in Shakespeare's Day*, Oxford, OUP, 2014. (Traces actual reception of Montaigne via Florio in early marginalia; also discusses philosophic reception of Montaigne's ideas about custom.)

Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010. (Uses Montaigne as an ethical ground in roughly the way I've described, as do Dollimore, Greenblatt, Grady, and others.)

Shakespeare's Organon: Induction in Montaigne, Bacon, and Shakespeare

Bacon's epistemology is in part a reaction against the devastating scepticism Montaigne lays out in his *Essays*. At the same time, however, the answer to that problem which Bacon proposes, a new emphasis on induction, is itself modelled in part on Montaigne's reception of his sources: Montaigne's characteristic accumulation of instances, which he then sifts in light of experience, searching for exceptions. Montaigne's literary method, especially, his approach to claims about human nature, serves as a template for intellectual inquiry, which Bacon then applies in contrast to the realm of natural philosophy. Montaigne himself, however, is not the sole origin or inventor of this method. Instead, Montaigne as well as Bacon can be understood as drawing upon their many years of practical experience arbitrating cases of common or customary law. Seen in light of this intellectual genealogy, Montaigne's application of legal induction to historical claims about ethics and psychology can be better understood as an analogue, perhaps even a source, for Shakespeare's own more boldly hypothetical thought-experiments. Montaigne's speculations about Cato's and Socrates' emotions, for instance, as they kill themselves, resemble Shakespeare's exploration of Brutus's motives in *Julius Caesar*. Shakespeare's organon is Montaigne's, that of the law: the less-tangible forerunner and intellectual precedent of Bacon's more familiar, more materially-oriented application of induction.

Patrick Gray

Durham University

Revelation and Obligation: Relating to Others in Montaigne and *King Lear*

This essay looks very broadly at the challenges of relating to others in Montaigne's *Essays* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* and uses several major critics to facilitate this conversation. *Lear* has historically been a rich focal point for discussions of Shakespeare and Montaigne. The play is also a focus for Stanley Cavell, who is conspicuous for discussing Shakespeare and skepticism at length without evoking Montaigne as a significant intertext. Nonetheless, Cavell's treatment of *Lear* in "The Avoidance of Love" evokes interesting questions for Montaigne's *Essays*. Cavell characterizes shame as a force motivating many characters' efforts to avoid recognition. Meanwhile, shame and the avoidance of recognition seem antithetical to characterizations of Montaigne, who we generally prize for his blunt self-revelation. Through these intersections, I aim to re-evaluate our understanding of Montaigne's relationships with others and to think about how the essay in contrast to dramatic form influences the consequences of communication failures: most notably, Montaigne's essays seem to eschew the possibility of tragedy. I am also interested in thinking about Jean Starobinski's claim regarding Montaigne that "Obligation, at first suspect, becomes the general rule of all our relationships" (106) in the context of obligation-based relationships in *Lear*.

“Some Version of Pastoral: Reading Shakespeare Reading Montaigne Behind Bars”

Niels Herold and Hal Cobb, co-authors

Abstract

Because of the alternative shape and co-authorship of this particular paper, an abstract of its contents ought to mention the circumstances that suggested its writing—a concatenation of four events: Greenblatt’s “selected” edition of Florio’s Montaigne in 2014, which made “Shakespeare’s Montaigne” available to a Shakespearean actor behind bars (Hal Cobb, a published essayist himself about the Shakespearean stage); secondly, my own use of Montaigne in a recently published book on the rehabilitative uses of Shakespeare performance in prisons; and third, Hal Cobb’s deferment of 120 months at a recent parole board hearing, which means he will spend at least 10 more years behind bars; in other words, co-authorship as a palliative for despair. I suggested Hal and I read some Montaigne together, as an extension of ideas we had talked about when working on the book, and also as a way for the unparoled inmate to grapple plans for such lengthy time now behind bars. The fourth event was simply the SAA provision of this seminar, a most welcome event for all of us Shakespeareans who for years have been thinking about Shakespeare and Montaigne. These circumstances will give some sense of the motives of discourse and shape this submitted paper takes. We project a third section, as long as the first two combined, and we intend to publish. What is here is prologue, then, to a third part on *Parrhesia*, more particularly on the ways in which Montaigne the essayist (who contained all contradictions within himself, as Blakewell formulates the difference with Shakespeare’s distribution of those contradictions into a panoply of characters) served as Shakespeare’s hypothetical *parrhesiaste*; that is, a writing presence who provided Shakespeare with a point of dialogue for his own “care of the self,” or for those selves who would become his characters, including the soliloquizing poet of the Sonnets. (*Parrhesia*: was an institution of the ancient world Foucault juxtaposed to the Christianization of the self through confessional discourse). As co-authors, then, Hal Cobb and I argue (indeed, our thought emerges as care for each other’s self), that not only for Shakespeare but for many readers Montaigne serves as a *parrhesiastic* presence (as perhaps de La Boétie served for Montaigne—the circularity of influences is in perpetual motion). What is it in particular about the nature of Montaigne’s writing presence that gives his readers, over the *longue durée*, the sense that *we are Montaigne*?

We locate our answer in both Montaigne’s approach to the ethical and personal problem of a repenting self-forgiveness and in the historical circumstances Andrea Marie Frisch has described: Montaigne’s rejection of a “monumentalizing” and “universalizable” understanding of what is worthy (*digne*) of memorability, in favor of something else that is peculiarly Montaignean. For Cobb and Herold, “Montaigne on memory” constitutes an important use of the past for reforming inmates, who must find a way to acknowledge the severity of their crimes while living forward in a present that is not detained by the past.

Michael Mack
Catholic University of America

Shakespeare and Montaigne: Dueling with Dualism

Shakespeare shared with Montaigne a preoccupation with constancy. This quintessential Stoic virtue came with a well-developed set of opinions on fundamental questions of the time, including the relationship between reason and the passions and, by extension, between the mind and the body and between the eternal and the temporal. In this brief essay, I focus on Montaigne's critique of Neo-Stoic constancy in his early essay by that name (I.12) and on Shakespeare's treatment of love's constancy in Sonnet 116. Montaigne defends one's natural right to flinch, and from this modest foothold goes on to defend the goodness and fittingness of our embodied condition, with all of its vicissitudes. Shakespeare presents an idealization of love and undermines it—not cynically but, rather, in order to defend the right to love with a less-than-perfect love. Both works are formally complex and intentionally invite misreading, creating interpretive challenges that put the reader and his or her ideas of constancy to the test. They are designed to liberate readers from unrealistic (and thus inhuman) ideals and to open up the possibility of a constancy that can accommodate inconstancy. Ultimately, both subvert the Stoic ideal in favor of a vision of life lived according to “the common human pattern.” Revealing the error of perfectionism, they offer the possibility of genuine “perfection,” which consists of nothing more—and nothing less—than “know[ing] how to enjoy our being rightfully” (“Of Experience”).

SAA Seminar 2016: Shakespeare and Montaigne

Title:

Mingled Yarn: Contradiction in Shakespeare and Montaigne

Abstract:

Beginning with Shakespeare's most famous borrowing from Montaigne (Gonzalo's speech on the New World in the *Tempest*), this paper explores the significance of contradiction as a mode of thought and expression in both Shakespeare and Montaigne. Drama, of course, thrives on contrasts between opposing characters, emotions, ideas, and world views. Contradiction is also a central feature of Montaigne's *Essais*, rooted both in the contradictory nature of its subject (Montaigne himself) as well as in the accretive process by which the *Essais* were revised and expanded. Whereas modern thought tends to see contradictions as problems to be resolved, such was not always the case in early modern intellectual culture. Arguing opposite sides of a question was central to early modern schooling. Intellectual works of the period often present opposing views from various authorities with no attempt at synthesis. What does it mean to embrace contradiction as the fundamental ground of human existence?

Bibliographical citations:

Phillipe Desan, *Montaigne: Une Biographie Politique* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2014)

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Pierre Villey, *Les sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne* (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1976).

Céline Pitre
University of Toronto
SAA 2016 Prospectus

“Suicide Through the Language of Montaigne and Shakespeare”

According to MacDonald and Murphy, the early modern period saw “a deepening ambivalence toward suicide,” its moral, religious, and legal status, even though various prohibitions against the act continued on, as many do to this day. Many factors account for this “deepening ambivalence,” such as increased literacy, the advent of secularism, and the rise of medicine, and indeed many studies pursuing this thesis have plumbed Montaigne and Shakespeare to track those social changes. However, this essay will track the intersection of aesthetic and ethical concerns in depicting suicide. More specifically, I will examine the rhetorical devices, grammatical constructions, and sardonic tone, attending two particular suicide scenes: Razias in Montaigne’s “Coustume de l’isle de Cea,” and Antony in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. I detect in their aesthetic an ethical engagement: for both Montaigne and Shakespeare, suicide becomes a limit case through which to examine the efficacy of art in cultural transformation. These texts seem to be asking the same questions: can depictions of suicide actually *do* anything? While theologians and philosophers made cases for or against the absolute prohibition against suicide, these writers used a discussion of suicide to examine the relationship between art and society. Indeed, in their depictions, the question of whether or not suicide *does* anything runs parallel to whether or not art achieves anything beyond attending its own aesthetic parameters. These questions seem to culminate in considering who or what kills Razias and Antony, and what role the text plays in their deaths.

Bibliography:

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“The Web of our Life is of a Mingled Yarn”:
Mixed Worlds and Kinds in Montaigne’s “We Taste Nothing Purely” and
Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*

Peter G. Platt
Barnard College

The so-called problem plays highlight instability and, in their hybrid forms, focus on the blendedness of the world. Exploring playworlds that are “mingled yarns” of “good and ill together,” these plays mix comedy and tragedy as well. They seem especially informed by Montaigne’s “We Taste Nothing Purely” (2.20), seem to be dramatic enactments of the opening sentences of Montaigne’s essay: “The weakness of our condition causeth that things in their natural simplicity and purity cannot fall into our use. The elements we enjoy are altered, metals likewise, yea gold must be empared with some other stuff to make it fit for our service.”

The paper will provide a brief overview of the critical history of the problem plays; a close reading of Montaigne’s essay; and an examination of a few key moments in *All’s Well*. I will argue that the play stages an engagement, both intellectually and formally, with Montaigne’s central thesis, laid out in the opening paragraphs of the essay: “*Of the pleasures and goods we have, there is none exempted from some mixture of evil and incommmodity.*”

Anita Sherman
Literature Department
American University

Facing [off] the Violent in Montaigne and Shakespeare

This essay juxtaposes the two anecdotes that conclude Montaigne's penultimate essay, "Of Physiognomy," with a few moments from Shakespeare's comedies in order to compare how each writer approaches reactions to mortal danger: how to behave in emergencies when death seems imminent. I look at Valentine in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Barnardine in *Measure for Measure*. In both writers, the crisis exposes the "natural" man negotiating his survival with his body and his voice. Issues of class, kinship, comportment, and interpretation arise. Barnardine's case seems to undo the lessons Montaigne derives from possessing "a favorable bearing." Barnardine's reprobate presence crows those around him, deterring the state's death sentence by sheer force of will for nine years. Yet his face is fungible; he is the first candidate considered for the head-trick—his dead head to be substituted for Claudio's. While Barnardine may be a brute and Parolles contemptible, they have a life force and a scrappy defiance that carries them through their ordeals. In them Shakespeare shows a vital "essence" that refuses to be extinguished. Montaigne seems less certain of how that essence operates. While he views the "natural" man as an aspirational ideal in "Of Physiognomy," he acknowledges that aspects of cultural performance persist in extremis. Despite these differences, both writers ponder similar ethical questions: how best to behave in violent times and at what price survival? Each also grapples with the challenges of a skeptical epistemology: the physical body as a problem of knowledge and a slippery signifier of internal states.

Daniel Vitkus (UC, San Diego)

The Transmission and Adaptation of Discontinuous Identity from Plutarch to Montaigne to *Antony and Cleopatra*

The paper will trace the transmission of a fundamental philosophical concept, what Jonathan Dollimore has called “discontinuous identity.” This concept originates in Plutarch, becomes an autobiographical description in Montaigne’s “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” and then a way to present a theatrical character on stage in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Through the adaptive strategies of Montaigne and Shakespeare’s Renaissance humanism, a modern definition of subjectivity and consciousness emerges. The paper will focus on the appropriation and transformation of this idea and will analyze the ways that these texts carry forward and translate Plutarch’s philosophical conception. At the same time, the paper will examine the variety of specific cultural, historical, and textual forms that this conception takes on as it moves from Plutarch’s “On the Meaning of EI” to Amyot’s translation of Plutarch to Montaigne’s essays to Florio’s Montaigne and finally to an innovative tragic form in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. 3rd edn. Duke UP, 2003.

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