

Mario DiGangi
Address in New Orleans, 25 March 2016

Good afternoon, and welcome to the 44th Annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America.

I would like to begin by thanking retiring Trustees Kathy Rowe and Ayanna Thompson and retiring President Rebecca Bushnell for their dedicated service to the organization.

For the wonderful program we have been enjoying this week, we owe thanks to the Program Committee: Chair, Lyn Tribble; Holly Dugan, Zachary Lesser, Ellen Mackay, and Emma Smith.

Among the many events on the Program this year, I would like to draw your attention to tonight's very special event featuring Wendell Pierce, speaking on "The Wind in the Reeds: Shakespeare and New Orleans." Best known as Detective Bunk Moreland in *The Wire* and trombonist Antoine Batiste in *Treme*, Mr. Pierce is a Julliard-trained actor with roots in Shakespeare that go back to his early years performing in *The Winter's Tale* at the Tulane Shakespeare Festival. He has also appeared at the Folger Theater and the New York Shakespeare Festival. Mr. Pierce has become an important voice for New Orleans post-Katrina. He grew up in a neighborhood that was flooded out, Portchartrain Park, and he founded the Portchartrain Park Development Corporation to help rebuild that part of the city. He has recently published the book *The Wind in the Reeds: A Play, A Storm, and a City that Could Not be Broken*. The transformative power of art is his subject tonight.

Our meeting in New Orleans was generously supported by the incredible efforts of the Local Arrangements Committee, chaired by Catherine Loomis at the University of New Orleans; the members of the committee were Rebecca Ann Bach, Chris Barrett, Anna Riehl Bertolet, Mark Dahlquist, Hillary C. Eklund, Eva Gold, Oliver Hennessey, Emily King, Sharon O'Dair, Scott K. Oldenburg, Karen Raber, Abigail Scherer, Chad Allen Thomas, and Jennifer Vaught. I would also like to thank the Krewe of Rex for lending us the bust of Shakespeare.

Our meeting this year was supported by a generous award from the British Council, who is represented here today by Mr. Paul Smith.

The World Shakespeare Congress of the International Shakespeare Association takes place this year in the two locations that loomed largest in Shakespeare's life: Stratford-upon-Avon and London. The Congress, which takes place only once every five years, runs from Sunday, 31 July, through to Saturday, 6 August, starting in Stratford and then moving on August 4th to London. The theme is "Creating and Recreating Shakespeare," which will be explored and presented through exceptional plenaries, productions, and special events throughout the week, including a special Shakespeare service in Westminster Abbey. More information is available on-line under "World Shakespeare Congress."

This year we benefitted from the hard work of five ad-hoc committees. The January Bulletin includes initial versions of several new policies formulated by these committees, as well as the names of all the committee members who contributed their time to these important initiatives. In this forum, I have time only to acknowledge the five committee chairs:

Committee for Constitutional Review, William Carroll
Committee on Social Media Guidelines, Julia Reinhard Lupton
Committee on Academic Integrity Policy, Lars Engle
Committee on Strategic and Long-Term Planning, Jean Howard
Committee on Sexual Harassment Policy, Valerie Traub

We would not be here without the hard work of the SAA staff: Joseph Navitsky, Assistant Director; Donna Even-Kesef, Program Associate; and Bailey Yeager, our now-retired Senior Programs Manager. Bailey was responsible for developing and managing the new website, membership database, and online submissions forms that have helped the organization run so smoothly, and we will miss her.

However, we are also very fortunate to welcome a new Senior Programs Manager: Caroline Reich, who has hit the ground running. Caroline holds a B.A. in Dramatic Arts from St. Mary's College of Maryland, an M.F.A. in Theatre from Columbia University, and an M.A. in Drama and Performance Studies from the University of Toronto. Please join me in welcoming her to our community.

Of course, our greatest debt is to our Executive Director, Lena Orlin, whose "unrivalled merit" outlasts the "wreckful siege of battering days" and beggars reckoning.

It is now my pleasure to announce the winner of the Leeds Barroll Dissertation Prize. I invite the winner to come up to the podium:

Carla Della Gatta (University of Southern California; Ph.D. Northwestern), "Shakespeare and Latinidad."

Honorable Mention: Emily Shortslef (University of Kentucky; Ph.D. Columbia), "Shakespeare and the Drama of Complaint."

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On the 400th anniversary year of Shakespeare's death, I want to share with you some voices both familiar and unfamiliar that attest to the continuing vitality of Shakespeare in our time.

The familiar voices are those of SAA members—many of whom are in this room—who have contributed to the extraordinary collection, *Shakespeare in Our Time*, the first publication ever produced by the SAA. The collection traces the history of the SAA by featuring lead essays by past presidents. Honoring the organization's 44th anniversary, the collection is aptly dedicated to J. Leeds Barroll, who founded the SAA in 1972, and to whom we all owe a great debt. We also owe thanks to Dymna Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett for the amazing work they have done in inspiring and editing an eclectic group of essays that will be sure to inform, delight, and provoke for some time.

If this collection represents the "state of the art" of Shakespeare scholarship, it also reveals how deeply our knowledge of Shakespeare, his times, and works continues to be shaped by the shifting frameworks of who we are and what we want from Shakespeare. For all my appreciation of the erudition on display in this book, I was struck by how often these writers drew attention to the messiness of grappling with Shakespeare, who appears to interpret us as much as we interpret him. In the hopes of enkindling your own engagement with these fine essays, and in the spirit of this organization's emphasis on the collaborative production of knowledge, I want to share just a few of the many moments from the collection that captured for me the worthwhile effort not to *comprehend* the meaning of Shakespeare in our time or for our time, but instead to *apprehend* the rough contours of the archival, editorial, and interpretive tools we employ; the vital energy of the ethical and political commitments we infuse into our projects; and the ever expanding galaxy of texts, histories, and biographical data we conveniently collect under the name of "Shakespeare."

Kathryn Schwarz on feminist criticism:

Dynamic and schismatic, vectored and edged, feminism remains a heterogeneous set of tactics. . . . This aggregate we call “Shakespeare” can still (I hope) be recognized less as an institution than as a constellation of skepticisms, improvisations, ambiguities, and fugitive propositions, open both to the efficacy and to the ethics of the fluid methodologies such capaciousness invites (18).

Barbara Mowat on the conflict between traditionalist and revisionist accounts of the texts of *King Lear*:

But whatever the fate of the two-text narrative and whatever the future of *King Lear* editing, that explosive moment in 1980 and its aftermath have had a markedly salutary effect on Shakespeareans’ relationship to the texts they study and teach. I would think it impossible for any such scholar today to be unaware of the basic facts about the kinds of choices editors make and the beliefs about the early printed texts that lie behind such choices. Shakespeareans now know that when they select an edition, they are deciding to trust its editor and his or her editorial beliefs and assumptions. We editors, too, have been sharply reminded that our assumptions about the quartos and the Folio have a powerful influence over our editorial practices (64).

James Bulman on film and media:

The digital revolution has further complicated the idea of what a Shakespeare film is. With a PC and other digital devices, one can view a film not only as a solitary spectator, but interactively; one can select images and move them about, juxtapose scenes, view the same scene from different film versions, even introduce material from external sources to create one’s own personal film Viewing Shakespeare on film, it would seem, will never again mean what it once did: a gathering of spectators at a cinema to watch on a large screen a performance that will not be available to them in any other medium. (95, 97).

Ian Smith on race:

Literary scholars are not immune to the cultural biases within white hegemony; as subjects working and writing under the historical and cultural influences just described, it would be nearly impossible not to be affected. Thus the pertinence and urgency of Othello’s request [to be represented accurately] must be restated as a major disciplinary concern. In the current state of American society, how might literary scholars reliably and responsibly tell Othello’s story or, more broadly, speak and write about race? And, given race’s deep historical roots, it does not appear that the subject can be avoided altogether—nor should it be (121).

Sarah Beckwith on sources:

An analogue provides a similar story but it is not clear to whom the story belongs. . . . No one seems to own it, yet everyone is telling it. Influence is disastrously woolly from the philologist’s point of view, and how much more so in a writer so porous to his surroundings, so generative of new worlds, whose nature is subdued to what it works in, like the dyer’s hand (136).

Gary Taylor on authorship:

We now know that any “Complete Works” of Shakespeare is also an anthology of selected work by Middleton, Fletcher, Marlowe, Peele, Nashe, Wilkins, and the “Anonymous” who was so important to the early English theatre from 1580 to 1594. This means that such editions offer teachers the opportunity to introduce students to many other instruments in the early modern orchestra. It also means that actors

and directors have often, without knowing it, performed scenes by these other, less familiar playwrights—and that audiences, without knowing it, have often applauded and admired the work of those other playwrights.We should not assume that soloist Shakespeare is always better than Shakespeare- in-company (149).

Mary Floyd-Wilson on fairy knowledge:

Do we gain a different perception of early modern emotion and embodiment if we account for preternatural influences? . . . Critics have read Bottom’s union with Titania as a commentary on cross-class relations, sodomy, and bestiality, but Shakespeare’s audience may have been most titillated by the play’s more overt question: how do these airy entities interact with mortal bodies? How, demonologists asked, did spirits copulate without flesh (185)?

Jyotsna Singh on Shakespeare in Calcutta:

We have come a long way from accessing Shakespeare mainly through the mythos of Burckhardt’s “Renaissance Man,” though the grip of this Anglo-centric approach has not been adequately loosened in many English Departments. Attending the conference on “Global Shakespeares” at Presidency University, the former bastion of the colonial education project, brought home to me the importance of an experiential (and not purely discursive) sense of history that accretes to locations and objects—a set of buildings, photographs, portraits, and dusty books sold on pavement stalls. Such literal spatial and temporal trajectories of travel, I believe, are also analogous to the cultural transmutations of early modern travelers crossing cultures as they traversed the globe (175).

Frances Dolan on the contexts of Shakespeare’s plays:

Might we think of a play itself as a kind of historical “evidence”? It is often a useful exercise to consider: If I had only a given play, what might I think I knew about early modern attitudes toward grief or marriage, sexuality or kingship, or anything? Now that it is so easy to find answers on the Internet, the questions we ask have become more pressing (199).

And, finally, Henry Turner on the notion of a “group person”:

We may, like Claudius, call this group person the “distracted multitude”: we hear its echoes offstage when Laertes re-enters in Act 4. After the pioneering work of Paul Yachnin, we may call this group person a “public.” We may call it an ensemble, or a company. We may call it an association, even the Shakespeare Association of America. But its original word was *universitas*, and we may well wonder whether here, too, something has become rotten. As an institution for producing and protecting public knowledge, will the *universitas* become a shell, a virtual avatar or automaton, a mere “machine”? Or will the *universitas* come to its senses and embrace its identity as a group person endowed with purpose, will, and life (292-3)?

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I said at the start that I wanted to share with you voices both familiar and unfamiliar that attested to the vitality of Shakespeare in our time. The unfamiliar voices I’d like to present reveal that Shakespeare functions as a source of desire and identification, pleasure and authority, creativity and inspiration, for young queer people who encounter his plays in the classroom, on film and other visual media, or through live performance. Although I appreciate that many of you here today approach Shakespeare through lenses other than that of sexuality, it is important to remember that the inclusive and

supportive culture of the SAA, from which all of us have benefited, nurtured the growth of lesbian, gay, and queer Renaissance studies in the early 1990s. At my first SAA, in 1993, I was a graduate student participant in a seminar led by the late Gregory Bredbeck, on “Shakespeare and Unauthorized Sexual Behavior.” Brilliant, witty, and often outrageous, Greg was a fabulous mentor and guide to the pleasures of collaborative Shakespeare scholarship. Among my many memories of socializing at the SAA, I will never forget how, at the following year’s conference in Albuquerque, Greg led a contingent of us on an exploration of the city’s nightlife; first stop: a local bar called Fox’s Booze and Cruise. Some of us thought Fox’s Booze and Cruise.... a bit seedy. Greg relished its seediness, and our discomfort with its seediness.

In the spirit of Greg’s pursuit of “Shakespeare and unauthorized sexual behavior,” and of the SAA’s support of adventurous approaches, I want to introduce you to a tumblr blog called “Fuck Yeah Queer Shakespeare!” This remarkable blog was brought to my attention by a former graduate student, Louise Geddes, now a Shakespeare professor at Adelphi University, who is writing about it for a project on Shakespeare and creative fan activism.

The posters to this blog, who seem primarily to be of high school and college age, use it to engage with Shakespeare in various ways. They express enthusiasm for the gender and sexual experimentation they discover in Shakespeare’s plays; they offer shrewd reinterpretations and revisions of Shakespeare’s plays against the grain of heteronormativity; they report their strategic efforts to queer Shakespeare through papers, projects, and performances; and they share their outright fantasies of putting Shakespeare’s characters into all kinds of inventive sexual, gender, and anatomical configurations. I’m going to ask Heather James to help me perform a few excerpts from this blog. I will be reading individual posts and Heather will be reading the blog administrators’ responses to the posts. With some very minor editing for time, everything we say is taken verbatim from the site.

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Shakespeare was queer? I thought he only had affairs with ladies. What dudes did he get it on with?

ADMIN: OH U SWEET SUMMER CHILD

So remember those sonnets, you know, about one hundred and twenty-six of them, the whole thing about “shall i compare thee to a summer’s day” written to a *hot male earl*, dude....

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Comedy of Errors. Queer Dromios. That is all.

ADMIN: Beautiful.

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I just found this blog and I am in love. Queer, queer love. Also, bi Rosalind exploring all sorts of gender norms and forms of expression while in the greenwood ftw!

ADMIN: Hell yeah, hell yeah! Consider also: bi Orlando. I saw a great production of *As You Like It* where Rosalind and Orlando kissed before Rosalind had revealed herself as a woman. It was fantastic.

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I was in a (truncated, vaguely Mafia-themed) class production of *The Winter's Tale* about a year ago, and I played Paulina as hella gay.

ADMIN: We are all very proud of you.

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Henry V lets Montjoy the Herald get away with using the intimate “thee/thou” on him, instead of the more formal “you.” He doesn’t let anyone else do that. I read Henry V as bi, what with Scrope in his past, Montjoy in his present, and Katherine in his future.

ADMIN: Queer Shakespeare + early modern English grammar nerdery = you win submissions for the day.

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So my school is putting on a production of *Macbeth* and not enough guys tried out so instead of having a girl play male Macbeth, our director said, “Fuck it, we’re doing Lesbian *Macbeth*.”

ADMIN: This is the best possible solution.

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i may or may not have accidentally just submitted a paper on the *Merchant of Venice* while it was still titled “Merchant of Gayness Amirite ladies?”

ADMIN: Oh my god anon that’s amazing and I’m so proud of your accidental submission.

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[This next one needs a little explanation. “Aro” means “Aromantic” and “ace” means “asexual.”] aro Benedick and aro/ace Beatrice who are sick of people being smug about how they’re totally going to fall in love with someone someday and just go “fuck it” and get married so people will stop talking about it and then happily snipe at each other for the rest of their lives

ADMIN: Yes.

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So I saw the current RSC version of *Merchant of Venice* a few weeks ago, and it is seriously queer. Like, Antonio and Bassanio frequently making out on stage, stripping each other, Portia basically accepts she’s cuckolded at the end queer. It was done incredibly!

ADMIN: That’s amazing *oh my god*. No, but Portia just has to get with Nerissa, obviously. Honestly that whole group is just a big polyamorous conglomerate with some incidental marriages tbh. Everyone’s in love.

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I'm doing a project in my scenic arts class where we have to do a Shakespeare play and change the ending and my group is doing one where Desdemona defends herself and kills Othello when he tries to kill her, reveals she's Emilia's lover, and the two proceed to kill Iago and the other assholes in the play.

ADMIN: Oh my god that's fantastic anon. I hope it goes off amazingly, break a leg!

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Dude, I had a dream last night that Tybalt was in love with Mercutio, but Mercutio was in love with Romeo (who, obvs, is in love with Juliet) and then Puck appeared and did his whole magic thing and it was like *Midsummer Night's Dream 2.0*. (I don't know if the whole thing got resolved or not bc my roommate and his boyfriend just had to MAKE CHILI AT 4 AM AND ENDED UP SETTING OFF THE FIRE ALARM, THUS WAKING ME UP AND ENDING THIS GLORIOUS DREAM! smh)

ADMIN: I have been desperately convinced that Tybalt has a thing for Mercutio for *years*, thank you for this anon. What a glorious crossover. I'm so sorry about your chili-making roommate (I hope he at least gave you some of the chili).

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We were reading *Othello* in AP Lit last year and I convinced the entire class that Othello and Iago had a thing. I wrote a paper detailing their love and got extra credit points for it, the teacher read it aloud to the class, and I have "forever ruined" *Othello* for her. I feel proud.

ADMIN: You should be proud. You done good.

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And, finally, a joke:

Shakespeare walks into a gay bar.
Exit, pursued by a bear.