

2017 SAA Seminar: New Directions for Historicism Abstracts
Leader: Neema Parvini, University of Surrey 1

Neema Parvini, University of Surrey



Introduction to the Seminar

This short prompt piece asks three crucial questions to the group:

1. Does 'the truth' matter? And if so, should we hold on to positivism and reject more subjectivist modes?
2. As Shakespeare scholars is our primary function to service an ever-clearer, ever 'more accurate', ever fuller picture of his time and place, or is it to connect readers and theatre goes with what these plays say about 'us', whatever that might mean?
3. Does our answer to the first question necessarily dictate our answer to the second, and vice versa?

Evelyn Gajowski, University of Nevada



2017 SAA Seminar: New Directions for Historicism Abstracts
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The Contemporary Historicist/Materialist/Presentist/Feminist Theoretical Nexus

This paper traces the origins of both positivist and ‘anti-positivist’ as well as historicist and presentist approaches to early modern literature. In the process, it summarizes and articulates the crucial distinctions between them. It then turns to look at the ‘problematic of subjectivity’, which is resolved in the great scope afforded to the ‘active agent’ in feminist, queer, race, and postcolonial theory. The paper stresses the importance of recognizing female subjectivity *in resistance* to patriarchal structures as being central to Jacobean drama, especially in *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The White Devil* by John Webster, and *The Broken Heart* and *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore* by John Ford.

Ivan Lupić, Stanford University



Historicism, Subjectivity, Counsel

Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) continues to hold its place as the most eloquent and influential treatment of selfhood in early modernity. What is remarkable about it is that it is not a book about counsel. When Greenblatt mentions counsel, which always happens in passing, the word is used in its least interesting sense: a piece of advice to be taken and followed; a slice of hardened wisdom repeatedly, and often obnoxiously, forced down one’s throat. For Greenblatt, the Renaissance self is fashioned under conditions that include, among others, submission to an external authority and a relation to the Other that “always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self” (9). Its home is primarily language, and its artful construction is to be studied alongside the variety of cultural discourses that participated in its shaping without necessarily eliminating its own power to form. I want to argue that the best Renaissance word to describe this process is, in fact, counsel—not as we understand the term, but as it was examined and understood in the early modern period. I want to ask what kind of history of the Renaissance subject we can tell if as our starting point we take not the Foucault Greenblatt drew on, but the Foucault we know from his late lectures—Foucault, Greenblatt’s contemporary.

**2017 SAA Seminar: New Directions for Historicism Abstracts
Leader: Neema Parvini, University of Surrey 3**

Joseph Bowling, The CUNY Graduate Center



Forming History, Aestheticizing Myth in Eumnestes's Library

In “Has Historicism Gone Too Far,” Andrew Hadfield argues that the over extension of Jameson’s dictum to “always historicize” has desiccated literary study. At the same time, Hadfield is wary of an unhistorical swing of the pendulum toward presentism. He recommends, ultimately, for the re-centering of form. This paper takes up Hadfield’s proposal by turning to work on myth, from Barthes to—most recently—Chiara Bottici. In “Myth Today,” for instance, Barthes outlines a semiotics of mythic signification that identifies the dialectic of form and content as constitutive of myth. Barthes’s semiotic system, however, lead to a technically rigid and limited application of Barthes in which only the effect of myth upon discourse may be accounted for. To recoup his approach, I turn to Cornelius Castoriadis, Hans Blumenberg, and Chiara Bottici to develop an aesthetic of myth—*aesthesis* understood in its etymological meaning of perception—that allows for the category to account for the interaction between individual and myth, i.e., how myth constitutes a field of mediation. This aesthetics of myth thus seeks to offer a means of thinking beyond new historicism/cultural materialism by reevaluating the agency of the subject in relation to history, ideology, and power. To provide some substance to this methodological reflection, this paper will end with a reading of Eumnestes’s library in book 2 of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, specifically the formal relations between the *Briton Moniments* and *Antiquity of Fairy Lond*, and the mythic histories Arthur and Guyon read.

2017 SAA Seminar: New Directions for Historicism Abstracts
Leader: Neema Parvini, University of Surrey 4

Philip Goldfarb Styr, University of Chicago



History's Own Historicisms: The Historicism of Setting

When historicists talk about the past, we usually talk about how that past differs from our own time: how they thought, how they acted, what they believed. We strive to overcome the distance between our own culture and that of the past, while remaining aware that this distance can never truly be overcome, and that we must therefore always be mindful of the shifts in meaning and understanding inherent in understanding the past. This approach is often described as the desire to speak with the past: to hear what it has to say on its own terms.

I suggest that this approach misses an important element in understanding past cultures: those cultures' own understandings of cultures different from themselves. If we look to speak with the past, we can lose the opportunity to eavesdrop on its conversations with *its* past. We should, in short, pay attention to the historicist perspectives already present in history, and to the ways in which their historicist understanding of the world before them affected what they wrote. This is particularly pressing in regards to texts set in times and places other than where they were written—like most of Shakespeare's plays. When interpreting the plays, we need to keep in mind what Shakespeare and his contemporary audience might have known or believed about life in the time and place of the setting: medieval Scotland for *Macbeth*, for instance. This allows us to see how the action of a play is different within its own particular historicist context. I call this the historicism of setting, because it requires thinking not just about the difference between ourselves and the past, but between the past and its own depictions of other cultures.

2017 SAA Seminar: New Directions for Historicism Abstracts
Leader: Neema Parvini, University of Surrey 5

John Higgins, Case Western Reserve University



“Critical theory and the emergence of an early modern public sphere”

My paper will explore recent scholarship on the Shakespearean theater and the emergence of an early modern public sphere, specifically asking what role theoretical and philosophical concerns play in our understanding of publics as a topic of scholarship. In many respects, one might expect that the interest in the connection between the early modern theater and a public sphere would focus largely on a theoretical understanding of publics as articulated by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Scholars interested in this topic often acknowledge that they draw the terms “public” and “public sphere” from the writing of Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. While both Habermas and Arendt discuss the history and genealogy of Western notions of a public, the concept clearly represents a philosophical ideal for both writers. Nevertheless, scholarship on an emergent, early modern public sphere often takes a more archival approach. Historians and literary critics alike frequently focus on early printed documents on current events – newsletters, verse libels and broadside ballads – and frequently place the the idea of a public sphere alongside somewhat less anachronistic discussions of aristocratic “popularity.” One might, I think, reasonably ask, “Has this work has remade a philosophical conception of a public sphere into a more archival and evidence based subject of inquiry?”

My paper argues that, in the most important respects, the answer to this question is, “No.” Specifically, I will argue that scholarship on the early modern public sphere generally engages two theoretical questions. First, this work engages in an on-going interrogation of the notion of a public sphere itself, specifically focusing on whether this ideal emerges to serve the interests of elite classes, or whether it emerges through a cultural and dialectic struggle between different social groups. Second, scholarship on the emergence of a public sphere in early modern Europe forwards an often-underappreciated theoretical project underlying the writing of history and historicist literary criticism. Studying emergent cultural categories draws attention to the

2017 SAA Seminar: New Directions for Historicism Abstracts
Leader: Neema Parvini, University of Surrey 6

constructed nature of these categories themselves, serving as an important reminder to scholars and students that men and women make their own history, though not under circumstances of their own choosing.