

2018 SAA Seminar: Shakespeare and Twenty-First Century Poetics 1
Leader: Linda Gregerson, University of Michigan

Annelise Duerden, College of William and Mary

**"She lends them words":
Rewriting Shakespeare's Lucrece for the 21st Century**

I've long been drawn to a passage in one of Shakespeare's earliest works, his non-dramatic Rape of Lucrece, where, stuck waiting and reflecting on her violation, Lucrece turns to a painting of the fall of Troy, "art gave lifeless life" (l.1374). Considering the grief of Hecuba, "Lucrece swears he [the painter] did her wrong / To give her so much grief, and not a tongue" and so speaks for her; "She lends them words, and she their looks does borrow" (ll.1462-3, 1498). Here the poem participates in the classical competition of Horace's conflation between painting and poetry, "ut pictura poesis," yet loses none of its poignancy. It's the moment where the poet and the speaker come closest to brushing up against one another in that work, a moment that seems to invite response. The Rape of Lucrece, of course, has a contentious history of critical scholarship, which for the last four decades has questioned its rhetorical and metaphorical incitement to violence. Other scholarship on the poem situates it in a culture that silences and degrades victims of sexual violence. For my contribution to our seminar I propose to engage with this work in light of the 21st century, in a time and culture plagued by its own series of sexual predation, where the speech and silence of victims are still scrutinized. I intend to write a response to this moment of Shakespeare's (deeply self-aware) non-dramatic verse, engaging both creatively and critically (as a poet and a scholar). My response will take the form of one long poem or a series of shorter poems, and then a short paper making sense of my work in response to both Shakespeare's poem and the critical conversation surrounding violence and language in this work.

Stephen Guy-Bray, University of British Columbia

Sonnets and Para-Sonnets

For English-language readers and writers, Shakespeare's sonnets are usually seen as both the best and the most characteristic sonnets. Many contemporary poets have returned to Shakespeare's sonnets in order to refashion them, to adapt them to our own time, to bend them to their own purposes. In this paper, I look at two very recent (both were published in 2016) attempts of this kind: Lyn Hejinian's *The Unfollowing* and two of the poems from Stuart Barnes's *Glasshouses*. The two writers take very different approaches. Hejinian presents the sonnet-and, by extension, the sonnet sequence-as excessively logical and even as restrictive. In her sequence, which is probably not the right word for it, Hejinian privileges discontinuity and achieves a continuity at the thematic and imagistic levels rather than at the narrative one. In his poems, Barnes is at once more colloquial than Hejinian and more interested in seeing how the formal constraints of the sonnet can serve to give a structure to a series of thoughts or events that are not necessarily or obviously connected. Indeed, the arbitrary nature of connections of all kinds is one of the main themes in his collection. Although they are very different both stylistically and in their sense of what a sonnet is, both poets find the sonnet form something that is useful to think and to write with.

Joan Pong Linton, Indiana University

Poetics of the “Mouthtrap” in Giannina Braschi’s *United States of Banana*

In this mixed-genre work, Braschi sets out to devise a 21st century – post 9/11 poetics through her engagement with *Hamlet*, Segismundo (*La vida es sueño*), Zarathustra, and Socrates (*Symposium*). As Braschi notes, *Hamlet* gives her poetry; Zarathustra, philosophy; Socrates, the daimon Love; and Segismundo, the plot (of liberating him—and, symbolically Puerto Rico—from his prison under the skirt of the Statue of Liberty). In particular, she plays on Hamlet’s “mouse trap” in offering her own “mouth trap,” a multi-purpose device through which Braschi in Part I becomes “Giannina” in part II, moving from the confessional to the conversational, from stream of consciousness to a mobile, plural voicing that is “open to the traffic jam,” and from poetry as representation to poetry as event actualized in the audience’s participatory co-production of meaning. Refusing Eliot’s application to *Hamlet* of “objective correlative” as the standard of “artistic inevitability” (which the play fails), Braschi aligns with Hamlet’s “I have that within which passes show” as the play’s code of intelligibility. She further exposes the imperialist state’s use of objective correlative as a means to generate emotional conviction, thereby to impose mindless generalities in shaping public perception of reality and justifying its systemic injustices and terrors. In this connection, Braschi–Hamlet discovers the Ground Zero of language that silences by suspending speech between native and foreign tongues. Against such terror, Braschi offers a poetics that repurposes phrases and thoughts from diverse sources—including the texts named above—that have become popular cultural memes, putting them into dynamic relationships across time and cultures. Poetry thus invites readers and listeners, through the pleasure of re-cognition (familiar phrases carnivalized and dialogized in the remix) to entertain “particular thoughts,” and to activate the comic potential of this common language in imagining, beyond tragic circumstances, a viable future.

Ange Mlinko, University of Florida

They That Dally Nicely: The Illyrian Mood in Contemporary Poetry

"They that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton" is a line I stole from *Twelfth Night* to title a poem partially about the failure of love, and partially about the false promise of newness that marks the turn of the year. When I used Illyria in the poem as shorthand for the temporary anarchy of a metaphor-laden New Years' fireworks show near the Gulf of Mexico, I hadn't yet read the Welsh poet Gwyneth Lewis' lecture "What Country, Friends, Is this" (published in *Quantum Poetics*, Bloodaxe, 2015). In it, she figures Illyria as "the place which all artists know It's not geographical but internal. It's pre-verbal and pre-lyrical. It's a wet place and is described, I think, explicitly in many poets' work." Her point is that it is "anathema to power," like other sites of fluidity and play in Shakespeare – the Forest of Arden, the wood outside Athens, Prospero's island. When W.H. Auden made a distinction between kinds of art, it was not the opposition of Apollo and Dionysus that concerned him, but the opposition between Apollo and Hermes – between the law-giver and the trickster. It is the trickster spirit that informs places like Illyria, "the place which all artists know," and it suggests that artists themselves must

remain "anathema to power," which includes their own tendencies to utopian prescriptions. This spirit of play, fluidity, and mischief informs such contemporary poets as Sinéad Morrissey, Paul Muldoon, and Joseph Brodsky – but is less often found in contemporary American poets, who haven't fully embraced the Shakespearean, Illyrian legacies of John Berryman and Wallace Stevens.

Richard O'Brien, University of Birmingham

**“Divergence of Perception,” or “Wat Person”:
Venus and Adonis in a post-Weinstein World**

Described by Jim Ellis as an “odd genre,” the erotic epyllion - of which Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* constitute the best-known early modern examples – is characterised by “an interest in rhetorical display, lush erotic description, and self-conscious wit” along with a common basis in Ovidian narratives of love (or lust) and transformation. Alongside a distinctively ironic or “Olympian perspective on desire,” Ellis argues that writers of epyllia “abandon instruction, delighting instead in rhetorical play and sexual adventure”; these adventures, however, frequently foreground misogynistic tropes and take place in a broader context whereby “the political implications of erotic scenarios” are mapped and articulated.

Our own cultural moment is heavily, and rightly, invested in “the political implications of erotic scenarios,” not least where sexual conduct intersects with the abuse of power. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there has been no corresponding boom in epyllia. This paper will explore if there is merit in reviving this fleetingly fashionable genre – which nonetheless gave Shakespeare his most resounding contemporary market success – and writing in the formal tradition of *Venus and Adonis* to explore poetically twenty-first century understandings of love, desire, and the complex political landscape in which they operate.

In doing so it builds on my previous project – a practice-based PhD thesis exploring the decline of shared-meter verse drama as a mainstream theatrical form, which considered its potential to speak to and for contemporary concerns – and my wider interest in what Caroline Levine calls the “iterable” and “portable” qualities of form itself, wherein, “picked up and moved to new contexts,” literary forms enter into “new encounters [which] may activate latent affordances”; that is to say, different things they can do to and with their political contexts.

Lauren Shohet, Villanova University

Ekphrasis, Remediation, and the Reflection of Milton's Eve

Interested in ekphrasis as a subset of remediation, this paper explores the Miltonic moment of Eve contemplating herself in the Edenic pool of *Paradise Lost* Book 4. I suggest ways that Eve's image works as a *vanitas* painting, drawing on a tradition invested in representing paradoxes of plenitude and privation, present and future, ephemera and eternity. The tradition of ekphrasis within epic offers affordances for addressing the Miltonic challenges of conveying prelapsarian

experience in fallen language without overlooking the radical alterity of Eden. Congruently, epic ekphrasis lets the poem connote the multiple kinds of subjectivity visible in Eve's claim of definitively "rectified" perception (upon instruction by an invisible Voice that her image is less beautiful than her intended spouse) that coexists with Eve's remark that she "oft remembers" a time before this was so. I suggest that thinking about ekphrasis as the traditional guise of what twenty-first-century poetics considers "remediation" grants purchase on some of these temporal and semiotic complexities.

I turn to the congruent work with medium, temporality, and historical change surrounding Homer's Shield of Achilles to suggest that in epic, ekphrasis may operate analogously to Wai-chee Dimock's loan-words and heuristic remainders, "generat[ing] a vital nonsynchrony." Temporal eccentrics irrupt in epic ekphrasis: the vignettes on the shield of Achilles are set in the Homeric past, and Virgil's shield of Aeneas shows the Roman future. Insofar as *Paradise Lost* imagines Christian myth as a story of media change – the epochal shift when direct divine presence withdraws after the Fall, necessitating mediation – it uses ekphrasis to take up the impossible charge to "see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight" (3. 54-5).