**Mary Steible, Southern Illinois University**

**Shakespeare’s Pessimistic Cleopatra**

If Shakespeare’s Timon, our seminar’s presiding spirit is a man for our time—Cleopatra, Timon’s pessimistic fellow creation in Shakespeare’s later tragedies, is a woman for our time. The storied “seductress” of Caesar and Mark Antony, Cleopatra baffles as historical figure. The last ruling Ptolemy before the sinking of Egypt into Roman rule after the battle of Actium in 43BC, the historical Cleopatra purportedly had children with both Roman generals/rulers, or as I prefer, imperialistic thugs. Per Shakespeare, Cleopatra wanted her children to secure property, the equivalent of a cash fortune we moderns value in legacies. Her venture failed. Unlike Timon, Cleopatra guesses her impending financial losses, her loss of station in life and from the play’s start, we hear the pessimism in the “nays,” “nots,” and “no’s” that permeate her utterances or we see her annoyance at betrayal in the physical assaults on messengers and subsequently upon herself. Like Coriolanus, Timon and Cleopatra are prone to fits of anger, moodiness, and plain old depression. They are spoiled, we would say, by their privilege; when no longer privileged, they seek isolation and death. However, privileged or not, they lose their connectedness to humanity through their failure to trust other humans. In Cleopatra, Shakespeare explores the emotional fracturing, the depression that follows a blow to our need to trust others. Cleopatra’s betrayal by both lover and political ally is no less significant than the Romans in Antony and Cleopatra betraying each other for mastery of a piece of the Earth. Shakespeare humanizes Cleopatra, giving voice to a character most would rather hear about than listen to.

**David Ruiter, University of Texas, El Paso**

**Negativity and Mortality**

In considering the idea of Shakespeare and Negativity, we might consider the actions that could but do not happen in Shakespeare—Hamlet could kill himself, but doesn’t; Portia could exonerate Shylock, but doesn’t; Othello could find out the truth, could believe his wife, but doesn’t. In these instances, the idea of not doing or of doing the opposite, the negative, results in real loss, the loss of real life. In other words, there seems to be a connection here between negativity and mortality, and this is the issue I would wish to explore in our seminar.

To be honest, this topic of Shakespeare and mortality is dogging me like Banquo’s ghost. And so are all those dead and dying bodies in Shakespeare, those embodiments of life and death, life and its other, its opposite, its negative. And this is on my mind partly as an early modern concern, and partly as a highly contemporary one.

So, I’d like in our seminar to think with others about the philosophical issue of mortality and its uses, both positive and negative. And while doing this thinking, I’ll try to also think through how some of these thoughts play out in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure*, especially.

**Amir Khan, Missouri State University**

**The Non-articulation of Justice in *Hamlet***

The idea of political consent, as articulated by Stanley Cavell, is less something one points to and rather something one knows in absence. The idea behind his defence of parliamentary politics, and even his critique of justice, is that however much we may crave or ask for perfection, we are destined, within parliamentary institutions especially, to come up short. No communal politics, parliamentary or otherwise, can corroborate fully a given individual’s desire for perfect justice. The apparatus of parliaments, then, provide scaffolding to consider, say philosophically, not what the just life is or could be (i.e., Plato’s *Republic*), but how or in what way to come to terms with our disappointments, hence to put on full and transparent display not our achievement of justice, but our everyday compromises with it. In short, what is on display is not any affirmation, but the veritable lack, of justice—not a performative depiction of our asking if we are achieving a more perfect union (in the case of America anyhow), but conversely, or coevally, if the life of good-enough justice is good enough. The question is if we can, or should, or ought to, bear such compromise.

Cavell discusses the above in relation to Hollywood marriage comedies; yet I want to apply this understanding of ‘consent-as-negative,’ as a lack, to a reading of *Hamlet*. In follow-up to my reading of the play, where I claim that the Ghost can be read as an ostensible correlate to a Kingdom that is forever and hermetically sealed off from full redress or justice, I further want to read Hamlet as a play that is exploring the nature of revolt, and that Hamlet’s seeming stupefaction is allegorical for a kingdom or regency fast losing, perhaps already having lost, the consent of its citizens, the achievement of which (i.e., consent) is only known not when it is declared, but after it is gone. Political consent, then (borrowing a bit from Locke), as something that can indeed be known or established, but (borrowing from Cavell and *Hamlet*) only in absence, or hindsight, once it’s too late.

**Loren Cressler,** **University of Texas at Austin**

**A Critical History of the Early Modern Stage Malcontent**

Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (c. 1607), opens on the play’s central character proclaiming of his father, “surely I think he died / Of discontent, the nobleman’s consumption.” Middleton’s protagonist resolves that he will avenge his father’s ‘discontent,’ among other crimes, upon the corrupt duke who would not advance his father. In this particular drama, discontentment passes from father to son as an inheritance, consisting not of landed holdings and incomes but rather in denied advancement and criminal subornation. Middleton’s play distributes discontentment among the noble characters and suggests that, rather than material deprivation, the duchy faces a famine of contentment. The dramatic solution is the violent overthrow of the court by scheming, dispossessed courtiers who speak with moral authority even as they wade deeper into criminal plots. Early modern drama, and especially tragedy, is populated with scores of such “malcontents,” characters who aim to redress a real or imagined grievance through retribution often exceeding the original injury.

In this essay, which will become the introductory section of my dissertation project, I argue that the type of the malcontent became a stock character, both in and beyond drama, that arose from local, political reference points because of its flexibility in expressing heterodoxy. As Bernard Spivack, David Bevington, and others have argued, early iterations of the malcontent built upon the morality play tradition’s scheming Vice, a figure that frequently revealed itself to be the devil incarnate. A key development in the drama of the 1580s was the humanization of the Vice, ascribing evil to human, rather than supernatural, causes. According to the narrative constructed by New Historicist and Cultural Materialist scholarship, this development caused an increase in “inwardness” and “subjectivity” on the stage, and dramatic characters began to appear as representations of persons or subjects rather than stock types.

My project intervenes in this story of dramatic development and argues that, rather than abandoning stock characterization, Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights developed a stock character so versatile that it could operate across genre boundaries and enable the development of new dramatic genres. Unlike the Vice, who was thoroughly evil and ungodly, a malcontent displays protean positions on specific policies united by opposition to dominant orthodoxy. Thus, to be malcontent is not an emotional or impassioned condition, so much as a relational narrative position inhabitable by any figure, male or female, who opposes centers of power. The malcontent arises from a revolutionary drive born of displacement, alienation, and lack. While the small body of previous scholarship on the malcontent has conflated the character with the melancholic, I distinguish behaviors and narrative from pathology. By approaching dissatisfied or dispossessed characters relationally, rather than psychologically or physiologically, my project centers on a class of characters united by shared formal features and provides insight into the dramaturgical concerns inherent to characterization. I especially welcome comments on theoretical or methodological questions, since the paper I am submitting will discuss the methodology of my dissertation in progress.

**Greg Sargent, University of Massachusetts, Amherst**

**To hear my nothings monstered”:**

**(No)things and the Political Problem of Negativity in *Coriolanus***

In the titular quote, Caius Martius’s “nothings” are his feats in battle as he led the Romans to a victory over the Volscians. In a fashion that proves to be characteristic, he bucks the practice of having to sit through a catalogue of his martial deeds, naming such a thing monstrous, “To point out as something remarkable” (OED, “monster,” def. 2). Though the use of the verb to monster is interesting, I am more intrigued by the way in which Martius denigrates his recent war record to mere “nothings.” To say that such things are no things at all is either a surprisingly deep gesture of modesty or an indication of a dangerous affective relationship with the political body of Rome. These deeds matter to the militarized political culture of Rome; yet, why should Martius so thoroughly negate them? Further examples of this kind of capability of negativity occur in such lines as when he would seem to embrace a kind of nothingness, like, “I shall be loved when I am lacked” (4.1.15), or when Cominius says it plainly, “He was a kind of nothing, titleless” (5.1.13).

In this paper, I want to explore the power of negativity that Shakespeare imbues his character with as it coincides with the matrix of affective political relationships. Instead of positing a kind of nihilism or ultimately damaging hubris, I argue that Martius is a character that fascinates in the way he wields the power of negation. As Cutrofello explains, “The capacity for self-affection is rooted in a more fundamental power of negativity” (2). Martius’s power of negation is tied to his failed political potential. He must say deny all (Rome, family, friends) to be his fully realized self. His tragedy is that only his “nothings” remain.

**Caro Pirri, Rutgers University**

**Settlement Aesthetics:**

**Theatrical Failure in *The Tempest***

My paper examines Early American prose narratives and seventeenth-century British drama to consider how public theatre became a conceptual tool for reckoning with the failures of early settlement. These failures, including navigational miscalculation, mistranslations of Amerindian language and custom, and inaccurate assessments of terrain, environmental conditions, and climate, characterized the years between the Roanoke Colony and the Great Migration of the sixteen-thirties. I argue that English writers responded to the material and representational challenges of early settlement by creating partial and occasional forms that captured the uncertainty of the settlement project itself: failure here becomes a repertoire of aesthetic practices – a settlement aesthetic – introduced in early prose writing and formalized in drama. I turn to *The Tempest*, to explore how dramatists harnessed the representational imperative of theatre – its need to show as well as tell – to point out the explanatory limits of the new forms of knowledge that New World texts aimed to codify. *The Tempest* highlights critical miscalculations in the movement between *forma*, the visual appearance of a thing, to *genre*, the kind of thing that it is, staging scenes of knowledge production as, instead, articulations of ignorance, disorientation, strandedness, and illiteracy. By borrowing the structure of New World documents – their narrative and spatial incoherence, their dislocation from a stable position in Britain – The Tempest reflects on the process by which knowledge comes to be marked as such, and how settlement experiences become subject to (or resist) theatrical representation.

**Drew Daniel, Johns Hopkins University**

**Another End of the World Is Possible:**

**Extinction and Suicide in *Timon of Athens***

I am interested in the multiple ontological scales of “Timon of Athens”: planet, polis, and human body are all apprehended as subject to change, exposed to fantasies/threats of irreversible destruction. How might we bring the the play’s opening invocation of a world that “wears as it grows,” into relation with Timon’s declaration that “graves only be men’s works, and death their gain”? The first remark would seem to mark planetary entropy as a material process that precedes what will return in Christianity as “the decay of the world,” and the ancient setting offers a space for Middleton and Shakespeare to speculate outside the redemptive transcendental frame of Christian confessions. Within that opening, Timon questions the claim of human dignity, and defaults upon not only his debts but upon the terms of human fellowship, calling upon “Destruction” to “fang mankind.” But in ending with suicide, we seem to hit a wall: are the play’s authors suggesting that one cannot hold such views and live? I want to use the occasion of this seminar as chance to try to bring extinction as planetary scenario, misanthropy as civic attitude, and suicide as personal choice into alignment. Is suicide the necessary consequence of misanthropy? What precipitates the passage from ideation to action? Do people really kill themselves out of commitment to sweeping generalities? Though I am not yet sure about whether it will bear fruit, I want to see if contemporary suicidology has any useful purchase upon the play’s presentation of Timon’s death.

**Lindsey Row-Heyveld, Luther College**

**‘A Deformed and Scurrilous Grecian’:**

**Disability and Criticism in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida***

What is the relationship between the disabled body and the powerful negativity of Thersites in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*? My project first examines the textual, performative, and literary evidence concerning Thersites’s disability. I argue that, in spite of some ambiguity, Thersites is demonstrably deformed and that his deformity serves as a metaphor for his critical language. I also argue that the symbolic and symbiotic relationship between Thersites’s disability and his negativity anchors Shakespeare’s complex dramatic project in Troilus and Cressida, where the strategies of symbolism usually embodied only by disability are extended to non-disabled characters and even the text of the play itself. Materializing metaphors threatens the subjectivity of other characters in Troilus and Cressida, flattening them into inconsistency and incoherence. Thersites is the exception. His body is overloaded with symbolic meaning, so that Thersites becomes a literal figure of angry, virulent speech. But because Shakespeare expands the shadow of mythic materiality to cover the nondisabled characters in the play, Thersites’s disability provides him with a unique instrument of resistance. Instead of limiting him, his metaphorically overdetermined form grants Thersites a stability of subjectivity rare among the characters in *Troilus and Cressida*. In materializing the role of the critic, whose physical difference facilitates his bitter language, Thersites maintains his subjectivity even against the deforming force of symbolic overdetermination that Shakespeare applies to the whole of *Troilus and Cressida* in order to reshape the myth of the Trojan War.

**Lara Bovilsky, University of Oregon**

**‘Not All That Bear the Name of Men’:**

**Human Exclusion and the Limits of Exceptionalism**

Despite a wealth of recent work recovering early modern beliefs in commonalities between humans and nonhuman beings, including plants, animals, and minerals, scholars generally continue to presume that early modern ideas of humanness reflected exceptionalist models. Even scholarship that contests an exceptionalist cultural model that uniformly celebrated unique human qualities, such as Laurie Shannon’s important work documenting “human negative exceptionalism” (humans as defined by unique deficits), understands early modern concepts of humanness through the lens of the special case. This essay argues that exceptionalist thought represents just one strand of early modern ideas about humanness. To body forth some alternatives, I turn to a broad archive – accounts of humanness that praise seemingly definitional human traits and abilities only to note that a large number of humans of all kinds lack them and are not truly human. Surprisingly (or not), the most common individual deficits noted by pessimistic early modern theorists are those of rationality and moral orientation, the core traits that we associate with their definitions of humanness.

If writers of the early modern period assumed that most “humans” lacked definitional human traits, what follows? Here, among masses of humans deemed no better than beasts, is where I may paradoxically relinquish the negativity of the seminar. In texts by Pierre Boaistuau, Arthur Golding, Lodowick Bryskett, and Walter Raleigh, we find far more flexible and varied understandings of humanness than those we have come to expect. While many scholars have rightly connected early modern human exceptionalist beliefs to destructive modern forms of anthropocentrism, in an archive of human failure and difference we find understudied veins of modesty about humanness alongside more idiosyncratic and even tolerant accounts that do not tie species understandings to expectations of human superiority or dominance.

**Richard van Oort, University of Victoria**

**Negativity and Love in Much Ado About Nothing**

Resentment has many allies. Envy, jealousy, contempt, hatred, malice, cynicism—all plague Shakespeare’s protagonists. Opposed to negativity stands love. If the protagonist stays true to love, he wins the fight against the many faces of negativity.

The tragedies tell the story of the hero’s failure to remain constant to love. Brutus ignores Portia’s pleas, Hamlet rejects Ophelia, Othello accuses Desdemona, Lear disowns Cordelia, Macbeth murders his king, and Coriolanus would burn all of Rome. Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt about the consequences of the hero’s decision. He might have been saved, but in the end he fails both himself and those closest to him.

Yet it might not have ended this way. The pattern need not have been one of doom to dusty death. Shakespeare wrote life-giving as well as death-dealing plays. The comedies depict a similar struggle with the forces of negativity. Here, too, the protagonist is tested and found wanting. It is clear the story might take the same path as tragedy. But there is a crucial difference. The heroine does not die. She may die a symbolic death, which is Shakespeare’s way of indicating the fragility of the hero’s allegiance to love. The forces of negativity are strong and the threat to the protagonist’s soul constant. But in the end love prevails and resentment is overcome.

This fundamental conflict between love and resentment may, I think, be found in all the plays. Here, I shall try to demonstrate how Shakespeare elaborates the conflict in a single comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*.

**Jennifer C. Vaught, University of Louisiana at Lafayette**

**The Architectural Place of the Mind in King Lear**

My essay investigates the overlap between projection allegory—Spenser’s signature technique that Shakespeare often borrows—and the ecocritical, posthumanist extension of vital agency to things. Posthumanism defines personhood in terms of qualities such as agency not limited to humans but mutually exhibited by other creatures, the environment, and objects found there. Similarly, projection allegory frequently blurs the distinction between characters, animals, and landscapes. *King Lear* exposes the inner workings of diabolical, unhinged, or despairing men and women in terms of their placement amongst ruined architecture and inhospitable surroundings. In this tragedy homelessness and exposure to harsh elements manifest negative states of mind. The lack of an estate or coat most animals bear provides a physical manifestation of despair over utter placelessness and alienation from a medieval worldview of analogical connections between the macrocosm and microcosm. Despairing Gloucester and mad Lear, who lose their houses or wits respectively, gain affective and kinetic insight as a result. Edgar teaches his father how to “see . . . feelingly” after his attempted suicide near the cliffs of Dover (IV.vi.145). Lear, who is wearing a crown of wild flowers near Dover, intuits, “Then there’s Life in’t . . . You shall get it by running” (IV.vi.198-99). Shakespeare thereby anticipates the Cartesian divide of body, mind, and world and the emergence of a new epistemology based on phenomenological understanding through sensation and bodily movement. Attending to the language of place as expressive of personhood in King Lear calls for a Heideggerian ethics of dwelling mindfully.

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