

2018 SAA Seminar: Where Is Myth? 1
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Which Poets Write Of Mytheological Experience in *Richard III*

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare suggests a curious link between the roles of religion and mythology in shaping the imagination and the conscience. Following a terrible dream that anticipates his murder and dismal hopes for the afterlife—George, Duke of Clarence, describes his encounter of Charon—the “sour ferryman”—and other mythological figures like Furies in the landscape of hell. Clarence qualifies his reference to Charon saying, “which poets speak of,” signaling that his conscience has absorbed not only theological and doctrinal vocabulary to supply the terms of his guilt, but also literary and mythological. Clarence has internalized elements of his education and, perhaps, private reading, to forge the expressions of divine judgment. Clarence’s conscience re-appropriates the mythological drawn from moments of recreation and education, subverting them and recasting them as threatening and alien where once they had been familiar and, presumably, pleasant. There is, in this moment, some of what John Stachniewski describes as a power that can “invade the most intimate thought processes” and “persecute[e] its host.” This paper proposes that one of the places we can find the mythic in Shakespeare is in the mind and subconscious; inextricable from the individual’s mental processes, memories, and faculties of perception. Armed by the power of guilt, the mythic transforms in Clarence from the merely literary to the personally apocalyptic.

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Thinking about Myth and Movement: A Prolegomenon

Approaching *myth*, I’ve started with the meaning of this term and its history from ancient times to the present, a daunting exercise as it turns out. Nonetheless, this exercise has led me to emphasize a split between myth conceived as a timeless, conceptualized, or transcendent symbol and myth as a temporal narrative, or, in a more familiar English word for myth in the Renaissance, as a fable. This is a binarized split with broad implications that affect the construction and reception of myth over centuries. A term I use for it, whose multiply punning senses attracted Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson, and other Renaissance writers, is *still movement*. This term, or conception, holds together—in a doubled sense contains—the play of the binaries of stillness and movement. Since Shakespeare’s irreverent epyllion *Venus and Adonis* is surely one of his most specific, open, and extensive renderings of classical myth, I plan to touch on its parody with respect to still movement and the implications of this term. Doing so will entail the defining of parody—a further prolegomenous deferral. Space permitting, I’ll dip into *King Lear* and

2018 SAA Seminar: Where Is Myth? 2
Leader: Wendy Beth Hyman, Oberlin College, whyman@oberlin.edu

The Winter's Tale, hoping thereby to engage Christian, as well as classical, myth. My thought has been spinning in these directions.

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**Making the Myth of Britain:
National Identity in the British History Play**

While discussions of the early modern history play tend to focus on the works of Shakespeare and others that engage medieval monarchical history, there exists another strand of historiographical theater in the period: a body of plays that stage the quasi-mythical history of ancient Britain. These plays include, of course, Shakespeare's *Lear* and *Cymbeline*, but also Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (performed 1561), the anonymous *Lamentable Tragedy of Lochrine* (c. 1587), and Middleton's *Hengist, King of Kent* (c. 1615). The plots of these texts originate in Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle of legendary British rulers, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136), a work whose factual and historical validity was already being called into question in the early sixteenth century. In spite of the pseudohistorical/quasi-mythical status of their source materials, these plays, I want to suggest, share important points of continuity with more traditional history plays, especially in terms of articulating ideas about national identity. These texts explicitly engage British history as myth, and thus variously examine the ways in which myth and mythmaking figure into nation-making. Furthermore, I want to argue that, in drawing upon a body of distinctly British/English myths which they acknowledge to be mythical, these plays also seek to position themselves as part of a distinctly British/English theatrical tradition, one which can stand apart from the overbearing influence of the classical dramatic tradition.

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Antiquity Forgot? *Hamlet* and the Circulation of Classical Names in Shakespeare

Hamlet is a play deeply invested in antiquity. Critics often read its frequent invocation of the classical past as evidence of the prince's erudition and as demonstrative of his alienation from the historical moment of Elsinore: Hamlet emerges in these accounts as a tragic hero displaced from Senecan drama. I argue, however, that the citation of antiquity in *Hamlet* does not solely or even primarily refer to the classical past. *Hamlet* also points to contemporary Shakespearean drama and thus to the time and place of the play's theatrical production, whether that be early modern England or today. The play includes an astounding forty-two references to the classical past—that is, the names of forty-two persons and places that have their literary or historical origins in antiquity—and of these references, thirty-eight appear elsewhere in the Shakespearean canon. This paper focuses on the circulation of these classical names as they move across the canon, coexisting in varying playworlds and recast on different ontological planes. I suggest that the names would become readily familiar to an audience and accrue new resonances in their repeated citation, thereby forming a referential network between plays. In attending to the dramatic

2018 SAA Seminar: Where Is Myth? 3
Leader: Wendy Beth Hyman, Oberlin College, whyman@oberlin.edu

resonances of citational practice, this paper explores familiarity as a theatrical construct and how it functions among spectators with disparate personal histories of reading and theater-going.

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Versions of Actaeon in Shakespeare and Spenser

This paper brings together allusions to the myth of Actaeon in Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the Faunus and Molanna episode in Spenser's *Cantos of Mutabilitie*. Versions of the Actaeon myth in antiquity and the Renaissance vacillate on the question of whether the hunter's intrusion upon Diana's sacred grove is accidental or intentional, and one sees this distinction in the difference between Shakespeare and Spenser's respective invocations of it. Whereas Bottom figures forth Actaeon as a hapless bumbler, Faunus embodies the hunter's cunning transgression. Through comparing these two versions, I will highlight some of the meanings the Actaeon myth took on in the early modern period, particularly its association with the quest to uncover the secrets of nature typical of the 'new science.' I will argue that in the figure of Faunus, Spenser takes up Actaeon as a figure of proto-scientific curiosity, while Shakespeare is more interested in the elements of the myth having to do with cupidity.

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Pastoral and Mythical in Shakespeare and Marlowe

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare recognizes Christopher Marlowe by quoting from *Hero and Leander*, by attributing that quotation to the "dead shepherd," and by using a comparison that includes "a great reckoning in a little room" (3.5.80; 3.3.11). This paper explores how these echoes (between the play and the narrative poem) reverberate when taking into account the ways that both texts depend on and build myths. I am interested in exploring how *Hero and Leander* (and Marlovian verse more broadly) plays with combinations of the pastoral and the mythical and in examining how *As You Like It* reincorporates both approaches to literary form to reiterate the tensions between the two.

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Theseus and the Uses of Imagination

I aim to address the "where is myth?" question by further asking Theseus, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, to help me with it. With the seemingly arbitrary patriarchal determinations of the play's first scene, Theseus early stakes a claim as an exemplar of charter-mythology—an idea anciently implied by his name as one who "lays down" the law. He is charmingly oblivious to this resonance and to other distinctive features of his portrayal that are conspicuous to us (as it were) modern, theater-savvy Elizabethans. This inquiry will involve indirection because Theseus' magisterial pronouncements—for instance, regarding reason and imagination—are in themselves not very well-informed. For one thing, he owes

2018 SAA Seminar: Where Is Myth? 4
Leader: Wendy Beth Hyman, Oberlin College, whyman@oberlin.edu

his own existence to the imaginations of ancient poets. I will try to connect the pins dropped by this and other Theseus-centered ironies in hopes of glimpsing something more sublime in *MND*'s discourse, drama, or performance that Theseus might be oriented towards.

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Myth and Community in *The Rape of Lucrece*

Critics argue that Lucrece's identification with mythical figures such as Philomel and Hecuba provides her with a means to cope or is a reflection of her own grief. These arguments, however, overlook whether Lucrece's recourse to myth is actually successful, considering that Lucrece ultimately scratches at the deception she finds in the painting of Troy. My paper addresses this moment of rejected myth as an exploration of what artistic mediums can achieve. Because Lucrece contemplates suicide throughout the poem, I will explore Lucrece's recourse to myth as a way to extend not only her own life but also her social community. In this way, the life-like painting takes on a new dimension as "living" image because it becomes an alternative to death and isolation. And yet, Lucrece's resistance to the disingenuous rendering of Sinon points to a larger issue at stake: the puzzling ability to emotionally identify with inauthentic or fictional characters. Rather than understand Lucrece's identification with the painting as a foolish mistake—the inability to recognize art's inherent deception—I will argue that the poem probes the extent to which the painted companions can exist on the same ontological level as Lucrece.

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Myth and History: Shakespeare's History Plays

Seeing the "Tudor myth" as the structuring principle of Shakespeare's and embedding their reading in the Elizabethan "providentialist" understanding of history, as was done in Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture*, has, as Jonathan Dollimore put it years ago, "been discredited." This paper has no interest in reviving Tillyard, or a providentialist understanding of medieval English history, either in or outside of Shakespeare's history plays. It does, however, take an interest in re-examining the meaning that might be available in a broader understanding of what the word "myth" might mean in "Tudor myth." It seeks to explore what Shakespeare does in the plays as constructing a mythopoeic negotiation between the natural and supernatural, much along the lines of what his classical forebears did in tragedy and epic. The paper will suggest that the line between myth and history is much more fluid for Shakespeare (at least in dramaturgical practice) than it is for modern criticism, and that this is particularly the case inasmuch as he is developing a dramatic genre on the fly, so to speak. The paper will not touch on issues of political or religious propaganda in the plays, but will seek to understand what the intersection of myth and history means for a dramatist in the Renaissance looking to stage a story of his nation's ethos.

2018 SAA Seminar: Where Is Myth? 5
Leader: Wendy Beth Hyman, Oberlin College, whyman@oberlin.edu

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**‘A Living Drollery’:
Nehemiah Grew’s Mythical Natural Philosophy**

This paper examines how late 17th century cosmology was invested in understanding how material objects could be represented by and ordered in language. The paper charts the trajectory of collection from medieval and early modern cabinets of curiosities to what begin to look like modern museums near the end of the 17th century. Locating Nehemiah Grew's text, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis* within its historical and scientific context, the paper argues Grew’s ambivalent investment in science and art endorsed rationalism without abandoning the influence and value of classical and scientific texts on scientific practices. Grew’s *Musaeum* was written for the reemergence of the Royal Society, and Grew’s self-proclaimed task was to catalogue the material collection the Royal Society possessed, and correct written categorical mistakes. Ostensibly, Grew is working to index a more accurate mode of categorization, to winnow out truth from falsehood. In this task, Grew routinely charts how myth both accurately and inaccurately informs categorical descriptions.

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**Shakespeare’s White Gods:
Staging Cultural Difference and the Origins of Hierarchy**

This paper identifies in several of Shakespeare’s plays a way of representing social hierarchy with important roots in the new myths arising out of cross-cultural encounters in the New World. Among the most significant impacts of the New World on the imagination of the Old was the reconfiguration and articulation of origin stories based on an idea of primitivity developed through ethnographies of cultural difference in conjunction with traditional myths such as the Golden Age. One such myth that proliferated in New World ethnographic writing, the “myth of the white gods,” depicts instances of failed recognition in cross-cultural exchange that provide insight into the perceived operation of social hierarchies, and reveals a way of thinking about cultural difference that could be used to interrogate the origins of hierarchy. Shakespeare’s staging of temporarily inverted social worlds in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *2 Henry VI* transfers this way of thinking about cultural difference to hierarchical social arrangements in England, framing the plays’ investigations of status around posited mythic histories of cultural development.

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The Evolution through Myths of the “fame” of “Lucrece the chaste

Like his Roman plays, Shakespeare’s narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* critically examines the Roman mythos influencing his culture and still impacting ours. A man’s cultural ideal allowed for a large range of accomplishment, starkly contrasting that for a

2018 SAA Seminar: Where Is Myth? 6
Leader: Wendy Beth Hyman, Oberlin College, whyman@oberlin.edu

woman, which was limited to maintaining chastity and total devotion to father and then husband, by whom she was owned as a possession. In the ‘wife test,’ Collatine had won the “victory” and Lucrece the “fame” of most chaste Roman wife. This narrowly circumscribed area of achievement contains Lucrece in its mythos until she is robbed of her marital chastity by Tarquin, who threatens her with another kind of “fame,” that of an unfaithful wife, as he rapes her. The crisis provokes her to re-examine her identity, and she seeks both solace and answers from myths, particularly of Philomela and of the Trojan War. She enters into the realm of myth by wishing to join with Philomela to form something like a woman’s shelter and by mentally and physically engaging with the Troy story through the painting. Myths become “real” to her and are an integral factor in her ultimate self-actualization: in first extracting a promise from her male witnesses to serve justice for the crime against her *and* those against other women, she kills herself and thereby *becomes* a mythic figure: both a political icon to reform Roman monarchy to become a republic and a feminist icon in asserting control over her life and ultimate “fame.”

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Heywood, Myth and Cultural Capital

Thomas Heywood’s *Age* plays set out explicitly to demonstrate the moral and aesthetic appeal of mythology. This paper discusses both the publication history of *The Iron Age* plays in particular and the specific ways that Heywood treats myth in the quintet. I develop Benedict Robinson’s idea that Heywood’s desire to produce his own easily accessible annotated edition of the plays was to appeal to the relatively roughshod audience at the Red Bull theatre. I add that, further to the planned edition having this educative project in mind, the texts themselves also demonstrate this. The plays themselves and the attitude presented in the planning of the edition suggest a nascent desire to bestow a level of cultural capital onto an audience that was, in part, attaining literacy for the first time. As well as discussing the more sociological approach of distribution of myth and capital, this paper also addresses the adaptive and appropriative treatment Heywood gives the mythological material in question, using several representative case studies. One tool for this dissemination of adapted mythology was a use of intertextuality, because as Sanders observes “there is much pleasure in tracing the relationships and overlaps between [...] two texts” (27).