

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Desire and the Nonhuman
Jean E. Feerick (John Carroll University)
Shannon Elizabeth Kelley (Fairfield University)

Benjamin Bertram

“Becoming-Bovine: Butchers, Animal Desire, and the Resistance to Toxic Masculinity in Shakespeare’s Henry VI Plays”

Focusing on the figure of the butcher in the *Henry VI* plays, and in particular on an extended simile used by the young king to describe Gloucester’s victimization at court (2:3.1.210-220), this essay argues that animal suffering plays a more important role in this trilogy than critics have allowed. The essay builds on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming animal” as a way to think about desire circulating through human and nonhuman bodies and spaces. Henry’s tableau, I argue, allows him to *become* bovine rather than *be* Henry. Or, to put it another way, to be Henry means to become bovine. The longer version of the essay, which I summarize, focuses on “becoming animal” more generally, and employs queer phenomenology to rethink Henry’s familial and social bonds. By examining the interrelationships among human and animal motions, orientations, and forces, we can better grasp the politics of reproduction, especially the parental defense of family blood lines.

Shannon Garner-Balandrin

“Honey Desire: Environment, Gender, and Housewifery in Early Modern Beekeeping”

Michael Pollan, in *The Botany of Desire*, famously considers whether sweetness may be the prototype of *all* desire. This paper explores the nonhuman relationships formed around the desire for honey in the early modern period. Early modern English housewives, as the primary beekeepers, were key participants in this art of sustained and intimate collaboration across species and environment. Beehives, traditionally situated within the housewife’s kitchen gardens on the edge of the male-dominated orchard, function in a liminal space between the domestic and the wild, the profitable and the pleasurable, and the masculine and feminine. For early modern housewives, keeping bees meant keeping in mind not only the needs and desires of the bees, but keeping in practice the embodied knowledge that transferred between the household and the hive. This paper highlights the ways women’s bodies and efforts become enmeshed with the bodies, desires, and labors of these unique insects.

Jason Hogue

“Vegetal Desires in Arden and the ‘Thorny Wood’”

As You Like It and *3 Henry VI* have little overlap in generic and thematic similarities. However, both plays involve forests, to some extent. The greenwood setting, of course, is primary in *As You Like It*. The “thorny wood” of *3 Henry VI* appears only twice in the play, but Richard, Duke of Gloucester’s linking of the thorn and his ascent to the throne

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warrants further attention. My paper argues these forests transport desires across human and vegetal bodies (and body parts). The trees of Arden, for example, bear the writings of lovelorn Orlando, while comparisons between characters and acorns pull those characters toward arboreal modes of sexual desire and reproduction. What Richard desires is power, and his foray into the vegetal is a thorny one, registering an affectively intense vegetal sharpness that cuts into human bodies and proliferates through their wars and amidst their politics.

Lynn Maxwell

“Waxing Desire: Ovid’s Galatea and Spenser’s False Florimell”

In my paper, “Waxing Desire: Ovid’s Galatea and Spenser’s False Florimell,” I will explore the relation between the animated wax female forms of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, ultimately arguing that these hybrid women trouble the distinction between human and object, and interrogate the nature of desire, while also revealing early modern anxiety about automata. Taking up a posthumanist lens, I read these figure in conversation with Donna Haraway’s notion of the cyborg. Ultimately arguing that by substituting successfully for human women, these wax simulacra reveal the extent to which early modern women were also constructed objects, and suggest that desire might depend on art and beauty more than it depends on the humanity of the beloved. If space allows, I might also read the false Florimell in relation to Spenser’s man of iron, Talus in order to further interrogate the extent to which gender enters into this discussion.

Kristen McCants

“ ‘Poore silly fish’: Fishing and Desire in Lady Mary Wroth’s *Urania*”

There are five fishing scenes across both parts of Mary Wroth’s wandering romance, *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* (1621). As is characteristic of the *Urania*, each scene is swimming with crosscurrents of desire, loss, and love, and superimposes excess meaning onto the most quotidian of situations. Each fishing scene is also an exploration of the vicissitudes of human desire: for instance, the Fishing Lady’s story of unfulfilled love ripples with echoes of the fraught love of Pamphilia and Amphilanthus. My paper aims to tease apart the connections between and among leisurely fishing and the entanglements of human desire. Why is fishing in the *Urania*—an activity engaged in by women, unlike hunting, which is a gender-inclusive activity throughout the romance—a situation so conducive to reflecting upon the difficulty of human relationships? What desires flow from human to fish and back again during the symbolic activity of fishing while lovelorn?

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Ben Moran

“The Love Below”

Pastoral has long been maligned by ecocritics as a model of idealization and stasis. Because the genre (usually) involves characters on break from their professional commitments, pastoral has been caricatured as aloof to or actively concealing the realities of rural locales, including hard labor, environmental degradation, and otherwise less-than-idyllic conditions. As the most famous pastoral elegy in English, Milton’s “Lycidas” has, as you would imagine, endured similar critiques. But in this essay, I want to reimagine new environmental possibilities for “Lycidas.” While the elegy may not be an accurate reflection of the natural environs, it nevertheless consistently *thinks* in environmental terms, especially with respect to its speaker’s twin concerns for poetic fame and longing for the departed Lycidas. Rather than fixating on the speaker’s turn to apotheosis, I want to explore how the various locales recalled in the poem (the reedy Cam, the shore of Wales, the “valleys low...of shades”) insect with and mediate the evolving terms of poetic and homoerotic desire.

Lisa Robinson

“Uprooting the Forest: Anti-Pastoralism and the Boar’s Desire”

Desire is often a complicated need, especially when it comes to bonds of the human and nonhuman. Utilizing Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, I will explore the potential desire between Adonis, Venus, the boar, and the forest. Although this poem usually aligns itself with positive pastoral readings, I argue that the true potential for nonhuman desire grows with anti-pastoral analyses. By stepping away from the image of Venus as non-normative seducer, the natural environment grows as the true site of desire and need. Imagining a mid road between scholars like José Muñoz and Lee Edelman, I locate a queer future that sees positivity in the nature-laden death of Adonis. One where the posthuman provides a productive future for the forest; a call to desire that breeds new life through death. Proving in the end that nonhuman desire does not require the longevity of human bodies to reach fulfillment.

Molly Beth Seremet

“The Collectible Ofelia: The Taxonomy of a Green Girl’s Souvenirs”

In this paper, I apply object-oriented ontology to Q1 *Hamlet* to explore Ofelia’s strategies for surpassing the human through the collection of tokens she culls. Ofelia becomes a flâneuse, strewing sensory markers in the landscape out of a desire to craft her own object permanence. Ofelia’s objects resist easy classification, however, because they become *more than* props or souvenirs; instead, they are physical touchstones of metonymic embodiment. Consider, for example, the double life of Ofelia’s lute as both musical

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instrument and vessel that memorializes her voice and the touch of her fingers, even after death. In this way, Ofelia auto-archives her own presence on the periphery of the play, a desire that is then emulated by the men who “collect” her body inside her grave. I argue that Ofelia’s entanglement with objects invites a posthuman intervention into *Hamlet*’s landscape focused on an agential Ofelia that curates her own afterlife.

Christine Varnado

“Shakespeare's Revenant Babies”

I plan to approach "Desire and the Nonhuman" by writing about the complicated desires that form around, and for, not-yet-human, once-human, and not-quite-human forms of life -- dead babies, ghost babies, murdered babies. A host of liminal, apparitional, disappearing children haunt Macbeth; my essay will read Macbeth (and other possible dramatic sources, yet to be decided) alongside the domestic tragedies staged in 17th century infanticide pamphlets ("The Penitent Murthress") and ballads ("The Cruel Mother"). I want to ask *what*, exactly, these early modern not-quite-children are figured as being, in terms of their ontological statuses and relations to the category of the human. And, following from that, what forms of *desire* do they incite? What does desire do in these stories? (I will consider both desires *for* the dead babies; and, uncannily, the sometimes-legible desires of the dead babies themselves.) These narratives can be read as a particular transmutation of the ancient myth of the Furies, who pursue with particular vengeance the murders of family members and murders that overturn the natural order. I look forward to searching for other instances of desire for (and of!) not-quite-human beings in other Shakespeare texts as this paper takes shape, and to pondering why they might or might not be found in the Shakespeare corpus.

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