

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Theatrical Skepticism**  
**Lauren Robertson, Columbia University**  
**Anita Gilman Sherman, American University**

**Christopher Crosbie**  
**North Carolina State University**

**“*Communitas* and the Problem of Other Minds: Reading Intent in *Julius Caesar*”**

My current research examines the ethical demands the unknowable intentions of others place on moral agents in Shakespearean drama. An early foray into this topic uncovered the surprisingly positive valences such unknowable intention could carry, the ways such epistemic uncertainty, that is, could serve as a mechanism for actually fostering reconciliation within given communities. In this paper for SAA, I shift to consider how the deliberate performance of skepticism could itself serve as the authorizing ground for definitive moral action. Taking *Julius Caesar* and *Richard II* as test cases, I examine, first, how the Roman conspirators address the dangers of Caesar’s malign intent not-yet-made-manifest by arrogating to themselves a political warrant rooted in their very doubts about the future welfare of others, a move of self-authorization that appeals to the certainty of intent even as it depends upon its ultimate unknowability. I then turn to Bolingbroke’s seizure of the crown to investigate Richard’s marked *refusal* to entertain doubt about his rival’s intentions. By resisting the conventional performative gestures of skeptical uncertainty, Richard ensures the moment of deposition will bring the competing claims of voluntary and involuntary action to open scrutiny, and denies Bolingbroke, thereby, full access to the authorizing fictions such uncertainty could otherwise enable. A moment of Tudor historiography that, I will argue, ultimately trades on the Aristotelian notion of the non-voluntary, that third category of action representing neither the voluntary nor the entirely unwelcome, *Richard II* reveals, as does *Julius Caesar* in its own way, the political utility of the individual agent’s unknowable intent for constructing narratives of continuity and order out of historical moments of profound upheaval.

**Robert Darcy**  
**University of Nebraska at Omaha**

**What Are the Rules of Ghosts?**  
**General Particularity and Spectacular Skepticism in *Hamlet***

“Thou art a scholar,” Marcellus ventures in an attempt to embolden their visitor to a conference with the ghost, “Speak to it, Horatio.” Horatio’s credentials as a scholar from Wittenberg would seem precisely to us to be a disqualification of his suitability to speak to the ghost. Scholars, after all, are trained skeptics—refuters of folk wisdom and superstition. “Thou art a scholar. *Disprove* it, Horatio.” Indeed, Horatio stammers at the sight before him, and concludes he would not have believed it “Without the sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes.”

The challenge posed by the ghost is to resolve in a describable way how what is generally known can reasonably encompass what is particularly experienced. In the extremest corners of academic thought, such as in the field of physics, the general theory must have

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the capacity to accommodate all local phenomena. If it cannot, either the particular anomaly has broken the rules or the general theory is flawed or incomplete. If the original appearance of the ghost is tolerable to audiences, his reappearance in a nightgown with the capacity to permeate walls and engage in selective invisibility (Gertrude cannot see him), inspires a rejection of the particular phenomenon as a symptom not of catastrophic reevaluations of human knowledge but of an unreliable and local madness in the prince. An audience's empirical skepticism is exercised to a profound degree as it tries to process the rules of ghosts and either embrace new game-changing truths or else discredit these affairs as those of a mind broken from rational experience.

**Hillary Eklund**  
**Loyola University New Orleans**

**Sufficiency and Supposition in *The Merchant of Venice***

In the first act of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock claims almost in one breath that Antonio is a "sufficient" credit risk and that the merchant's "means are in supposition." Shylock's appraisal of Antonio captures the contingent economic climate of Shakespeare's Venice, where social and material transactions proceed on the basis of risk and reward. But it also speaks to the play's broader interest in various forms of contingency and substitution. As Shylock numbers Antonio's ships and the risks that threaten them, audiences recall the rich description of their precious cargo of silks and spices (1.1)—merchandise that will, we suppose, transform into money with which Antonio will repay his debt. Shylock's "supposition," in other words, refers as much to an anticipated mutation as it does to uncertain outcomes. Supposition, therefore, yokes skeptical doubt with acts of imagination grounded in knowledge that is always provisional.

This essay reads supposition and sufficiency in *The Merchant of Venice* together with George Gascoigne's *The Supposes* to uncover a skeptical practice that works alongside an imaginative one. Both plays' cascading substitutions, exchanges, and transformations place exaggerated limits on characters' ability to interpret situations. Where they lack certainty, only the exercise of imagination permits them to act. Supposition, I argue, connects the material climate of Shakespeare's Venice not just to the (much discussed) moral and social lives of the characters but also to the work of comedy, which conventionally relies on disguise and mistaken identities to resolve conflicts while forestalling the most socially destabilizing outcomes (death, war, political collapse). At its rocky conclusion, *Merchant* invests unabashedly in an uncertain future whose only hope for sufficiency is through supposition.

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**Lars Engle**  
**University of Tulsa**

**Animality and Cruelty in Montaigne and *King Lear***

Asking “how did you come to believe that?” offers a well-travelled and fruitful route for skeptical inquiry, also possibly a path to unbelief. Asking “what will it cost you to lose belief in that?” offers a perspective on, and perhaps a plot for, tragedy. I propose to examine the belief that humans differ from animals both as a pathway to productive skeptical inquiry – pursued by Montaigne in the *Apology* in and other essays – and as a source for tragedy, pursued by Shakespeare in *King Lear*.

We humans notoriously brand our worst traits by identifying them with animals. While many know that Montaigne speaks up for animals and at least entertains the possibility that what is worst about human beings is distinctively human, Shakespeare’s relation to human animality remains controversial and elusive. My paper will argue that *King Lear* resembles Montaigne not only in its focus on the alienating ugliness of human cruelty, but also in its treatment of human-animal identification and kinship. The argument will show how the reflective, potentially liberating question “how did you come to believe that?” and the circumstantial, potentially excruciating question “what will it cost you to lose belief in that?” are explored in treatments of cruelty and animality in *The Essays* and *King Lear*.

**Jonas Gardsby**  
**University of Minnesota**

**A Spell Unbroken: Shakespeare’s Skepticism of  
 Performance in *Antony and Cleopatra***

*Antony and Cleopatra* is founded on Shakespeare’s skepticism of something on which his career as a playwright depended: performance. This is a play that questions its own form and enactment, and causes spectators to become skeptical—to distrust performance and the emotions it evokes. Both in content and form, it echoes Francis Bacon’s warning of play-going as “a kind of musician’s bow by which men’s minds may be played upon.” This is possible because, he continues, “the minds of men are more open to impressions and affections when many are gathered together than when they are alone.” Shakespeare consistently disrupts the group-think induced by the dream of the play. He often pulls spectators out of potential emotional engagement with the performances and instead makes them think critically and self-consciously about what happens onstage. He even uses a clown figure to interrupt and disengage the spectator’s emotional engagement with Cleopatra’s performance at the climax of the play. Shakespeare also uses metatheatrical references to encourage the spectator to be critically engaged rather than lulled into a suspension of disbelief. He reminds spectators of the artificial nature of the art, taking them out of the dream and making them think of the play at a literal level: as actors

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pretending to be characters. He deliberately confuses spectators, seemingly trying to shake them out of their suspension of disbelief by, for instance, jumping quickly between countries. He may not have been attempting to make playgoers quit the theater, but the play does cultivate a healthy skepticism about the powerful of theatrical performance.

**Ani Govjian**  
**University of North Carolina**

**Skepticism and the Failures of Proof in Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay***

In Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, the audience witnesses several scenes of fruitless magic. The bungled displays result not from a lack of precision when casting spells, but through poor judgment when using them. Further, much of the magic that Friar Bacon employs uses his secret knowledge of the supernatural to reveal secret knowledge of others' lives. Twice Bacon uses a magic mirror to display the undisclosed goings-on of others in the play. Twice, then, the audience is put in the position of watching others watching others. These moments could be offered as an imaginative exercise with actors responding to a prop or they could be dumbshowed onstage. This staging of a double-viewing creates a space for audience skepticism even as it overtly seems to ask for credulity. Viewers are invited to witness others witnessing, and when an audience sees characters who – after acting upon “truths” represented in the glass – meet deadly ends, the audience's own readiness to be captivated by theatre comes into question. Is attending the theatre safe? Can they believe what they see? Was this magic or legerdemain? To what extent was the play itself a spectacle born of Friar Bacon's power? Assessing the stakes of their own belief is a participatory act that moves the audience away from being passive observers and provides an opportunity for them to make their own meaning rather than simply respond to meaning made for them.

**Nicole Hagstrom-Schmidt**  
**Texas A & M University**

**“That which you hear you'll swear you see”: Reporting and Doubt in *Hamlet***

Since its classical origins, Western drama has heavily utilized spoken reports of off-stage events to achieve various effects, whether that be to inform the audience of key information, to retain the unity of place, to present an act of horrific violence. In early modern drama, the latter two are less common, especially for Shakespeare who does not mind at all whisking his audience off to France or staging multiple bloody deaths. Nevertheless, reporting remains a constant in Shakespeare's toolkit. In this essay, I explore proof-by-report—that is, testimony—and its role in relation to the viewing audience in *Hamlet*.

In early modern drama, a report, unless coming from a declared unreliable source (say Iago or Richard III, for example) is considered to be a fairly stable source of dramatic

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truth. Reports, by dramatic nature, are reliable evidence that the audience may use to ground themselves in the action. However, as I argue, Shakespeare exploits this expectation throughout his plays, establishing the report not solely as a method of truth-telling but a method of doubt. In *Hamlet*, he uses reports to establish not Hamlet as a reliable source of information, but the murderer Claudius.

**Kristine Johanson**  
**University of Amsterdam**

**Making Rome Great Again?**  
**Nostalgia as Skeptical Strategy on the Elizabethan Stage**

With this paper I want to think through the relationship between nostalgia and skepticism in Shakespearean drama. Contemporary scholars tend to view nostalgia as an un-critical, earnest, sentimental desire for a perfect past, and much of the scholarship on early modern nostalgia has focused on Stuart nostalgia for Elizabeth. Against these trends, I analyze how Shakespeare's Elizabethan histories foster skepticism of the idealized past by using nostalgia as an accessible political rhetoric.

Across his Elizabethan English and Roman histories, Shakespeare stages a suspicion of narratives of the idealized past. He does this in various ways—for example, by refusing to engage with the possibility of an idealized past (as in *King John*)—but I am interested in Shakespeare's use and critique of multiple ideal pasts in plays like *2 Henry VI*, *Richard II*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Henry V*. These plays deploy nostalgia as a political rhetoric grounded in the promise of a lost, but recoverable, political inheritance. In this paper, I first establish the culture of suspicion attached to discourses of nostalgia in early modern England, as evidenced by biblical (e.g. Ecclesiastes), classical (e.g. Tacitus), and contemporary texts (e.g. Lipsius). I then turn to *Julius Caesar* to argue that the play uses a multiplicity of idealized pasts to undermine the notion of any stable history and consequently to create a skepticism around nostalgic discourse and historical narrative.

**Marc Juberg**  
**University of Minnesota**

**Satire and Self-Knowledge in *As You Like It***

*As You Like It* is a strange play, situated somewhat uncomfortably between two phases of Shakespeare's professional development. As one of his last experiments in "festive comedy," it represents a culmination of the techniques and styles that had earned him a reputation as a "honey-tongued" poet. As a play written around the opening of the Globe, it seems to promote a new commercial venture with a promise to deliver customers exactly what they expect. Complicating both of these frames is Shakespeare's willingness to entertain the sudden fashionableness of satire, a mode that Jaques vigorously defends after meeting Touchstone in the forest. Foils to pastoral idealism, Jaques and Touchstone

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are often recognized as Shakespeare's most striking original touches in what is otherwise a faithful adaptation of Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*. But the satirical function of these characters can also be elucidated, I suggest, in light of another of Lodge's works, *A Fig for Momus* (1595), a significant contribution to late-Elizabethan satire in its own right. In this paper, I will argue that *Momus*' broader concern with anticipating and neutralizing carping critics presents a framework for understanding the disposition of *As You Like It* towards its audience. Casting doubt on the possibility of a "man's good wit" ever being fully "seconded with the forward child, understanding" (3.3.11-12), the play discovers a novel use for the satirical discourses of the day: to prompt auditors to slow down their processes of judgment and perform a critical audit of themselves and what they "like."

**Dennis Kezar**  
**University of Utah**

**Seeing Feelingly**  
**The Alchemy of Skepticism and Sympathy in Three of Shakespeare's Later Tragedies**

When we consider Shakespeare and skepticism, determining the focal length of that skepticism becomes crucial (if only to limit the field of inquiry). I intend analytically to read Character in this essay (as opposed to authorial intention – for the most part; and as opposed to philosophical context – for the most part). I also intend to focus upon the intersection of what we might call characterological skepticism and characterological empathy. My tentative argument is that this intersection provides Shakespeare with a rich and troubling energy in his tragedies – an energy that has shaped the critical responses to these tragedies beyond its measure.

A projection: I want to consider a few tragedies (probably *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear*), working toward an argument that Shakespeare's dramatic career – in tragedy – explored and exploited the intersection of characterological empathy and skepticism. This might seem a simple description of anagnorisis; and at some level it is. I am interested in a rather unabashed character study. But exploring this intersection proves somewhat counter-intuitive and thus surprising. By Shakespeare scholars (and by most philosophers), skepticism and empathy have generally been treated as inimical. Both modes of thought (cornerstones of what we have come to see as western 'liberal democracy'), have been seen as mutually repellant poles: to empathize is to inhabit – on some level – an other's subject position; to skepticize is further to alienate that other position.

However when we consider Shakespeare's 'high tragedies' (tellingly, a Romantic label), we witness in the protagonists an imbrication of – perhaps a vector defined by – empathy and skepticism. At the level of character and plot, Shakespeare's tragedies increasingly explore the point at which empathy and skepticism merge into indistinguishability. I will

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certainly consider Lear as a kind of telos in this respect, and will probably look at a few earlier tragedies (such as *Titus* and *Richard 2*) toward a kind of arc.

**James Kuzner**  
**Brown University**

***A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Art of Love**

From its first scene, characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* conceive of love in terms of violence and war. Theseus woos Hippolyta by doing her injuries, Demetrius wants to slay Lysander and feels like Hermia has slain him, and Helena for her part seems happy to be beaten. Indeed, one of the play's principal solutions to the violence that structures love itself involves violence: Puck forcing characters into sleep and drugging them. We can, of course, find a more peaceful love in Helena's portrayal of what her relationship with Hermia once was. But do peace and love ever go together in the play's present? This paper argues that they do, particularly when love involves what we often think that love ought to overcome: serious doubt. We see this when the play's central quartet of lovers awake in the play's fourth act. Until then, they are always utterly, belligerently certain, about their own hearts, about their beloveds, about who does and should belong to whom. But when they awaken into peace, Demetrius, Helena, and Hermia all speak in ways that undo the certainties which have defined their love hitherto. The scene suggests that we do well to assume that we do not understand why our own hearts are the way they are; that the beloved is at best ours and not ours, and only so for a time; and that if love is to be peaceful, precious little in it can or should be taken for granted. The art of love, in this play, is an art of doubt.

**Kelly Lehtonen**  
**The King's College**

**The Charisma of the King: Skeptical Optimism in *Henry V***

Skepticism, as scholars such as David Sedley have noted, has a fundamental connection with the sublime. A condition of awe and wonder, the sublime arises in response to feelings of doubt and uncertainty—to the perception that an event or idea is beyond the scope of human comprehension. That the sublime may be a phenomenon of “ungraspability” is particularly true in the area of personhood, stemming from an ill-defined but powerful attraction of character. When a person evokes sublimity in someone else, he/she possesses *charisma*, defined by Max Weber as an extraordinary persona that enchants onlookers into a state of spellbound admiration. Among many other Shakespearean characters who possess this sort of personal ambiguity and charisma, King Henry V, in particular, demonstrates what Raphael Falco terms charismatic authority, a form of leadership in which observers follow not out of obligation to formal power structures, nor out of a process of formal reason, but out of inspiration and compulsion.

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In *Henry V*, Shakespeare uses King Henry's extraordinary charisma as the backdrop for an in-depth exploration of skepticism in society. The King famously interacts with his subjects directly, outside the normal bounds of a ruler-subject relationship; in doing so, he urges them to accept his authority based on their overwhelming perception of his individual worthiness, despite gaps in position and knowledge. Through Henry's charisma, the play questions two forms of skepticism prevalent in the play and the historical moment: skeptical fideism, or positive dogmatism maintaining that the only source of knowledge was direct revelation from God, and negative dogmatism, or the determined rejection of the possibility of any reliable knowledge. Yet, while discouraging both positive and negative dogmatism, the play appeals to the human drive for relationship—and the human drive for wonder—to invite careful meditation on whether and how the practice of *epoche*, or the suspension of judgment, can enable the beneficial cultivation of faith in others, personally and politically.

**Shiladitya Sen**  
**Montclair State University**

**Mediating Audience Uncertainty via Metatheatre on the Early Modern Stage**

Early modern playwrights and performers habitually used metatheatrical techniques, partly due to convention, partly due to the fraught sociopolitical position of the theater, and partly due to the resources (or lack thereof) of the stages where they performed. Such techniques could communicate various types of information, ranging from plot details to staging contexts to topical in-jokes and references. However, metatheatrical moments in the plays were just as regularly used not to communicate but to surprise, obfuscate, and befuddle audiences. Shakespeare's plays regularly feature scenes (the unveiling of Hermione's 'statue' in *The Winter's Tale*, the scaling of the non-existent cliff at Dover in *King Lear*, the disjunctions between the Chorus' speeches and the on-stage performance in *Henry V*, and the various interactions with the Ghost in *Hamlet*, to name only a few) where characters and performers emphasize the fictive and performative nature of the theatrical performance to remind spectators of their presence at a play—and, in doing so, to engender significant uncertainty about the nature and meaning of what they are seeing performed. Other early modern playwrights too regularly use such techniques, such as Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* during the performance of "Soliman and Perseda."

My paper examines the nature of such scenes, focusing specifically on *Hamlet* and *Henry V*, and the potential effects that they had upon their audiences. Such moments, I argue, engender uncertainty among the spectators in order to implicitly remind them of the need for keen critical judgment and skepticism of what one sees and hears, both within the theatrical space and in the theatrum mundi that exists around it. Paradoxically, these moments also underline the difficulty and potential impossibility of exercising accurate critical judgment in a world of unreliable words and appearances.

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**Michelle Zerba**  
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**“Montaigne’s Back Room, Pyrrhonist Skepticism, and the Puzzles of *Hamlet*”**

Antiquity bequeathed to the Renaissance two forms of skepticism, one deriving from Academic philosophy, the other from Pyrrhonism as it was handed down through the writings of the late second-century Sextus Empiricus. The Academic form, mediated by the influential work of Cicero, focused on the concept of the probable and its adaptability to the persuasive ends of republican oratory. The Pyrrhonist form, on the other hand, led in the direction of a private life lived in reflection and relative solitude, away from the pressures of politics and its dirty work. Its chief characteristics are that the inquirer learns to withhold assent from appearances, since assent gives way to belief, and belief has no stable ground. This paper examines a particular strategy Montaigne develops in “On Solitude” and “On Experience” to cope with the strains of the Pyrrhonist’s competing milieux, and it takes the form of what he calls “the back room,” *l’arrière boutique*. Shaped by considerations of Machiavellian politics, Montaigne’s back room provides a framework for understanding how the delays of *Hamlet* may be conceptualized in terms of early modern reinventions of ancient skepticism that were particularly responsive to the debate about the relative merits of the private and public life.