Advice for Seminar Leaders
Andrew Sofer and Jonathan Walker
"Invisible Presences: Detecting the Unseen in Renaissance Drama"
Shakespeare Association of America 2019

Our seminar was particularly energetic and productive, which was in no small part due to our three respondents—Profs. Heidi Brayman, Erika Lin, and Bill Worthen—and the uniformly smart and interesting papers of our seminarians. But two components of the seminar that seemed to contribute to the positive experience and lively conversation were the break-out groups and the single sentences that we extracted from each paper.

In October we sent our seminarians and (three invited) respondents the attached instructions. Once we received abstracts, we placed papers according to shared themes in three sub-groups and assigned each group a respondent. Respondents asked two focusing questions of their group based on the abstracts and assigned them two critical readings toward the seminar. Participants (but not respondents) responded to their group's abstracts on Dropbox; respondents saved their responses for the actual seminar. Meanwhile, Andrew and Jonathan constructed a seminar bibliography.

Once we got the seminar underway, we asked each of the respondents to break out and have a conversation with their groups for roughly 20 minutes. We felt that this would be a useful way for each group to refresh the questions and ideas that they had only yet discussed electronically and to be able both to give and receive some individualized attention to one another's papers. The smaller break-out groups also had the effect of lowering the pressure of participating in the full group, which seemed to ease everyone into the larger seminar while also addressing substantive issues about which each group had written. We then reconvened the entire seminar and asked the three respondents to summarize the discussions that they had just led.

We also pulled a single sentence from each of the seminar papers that we thought crystallized a central question, problem, or point, and then asked each seminarian to read that sentence aloud without any commentary or contextualization. (The handout was shared with auditors.) Our aim was both to ensure that each participant's paper received attention during the full-group conversation and to drive the seminar's discussion and guiding questions forward. We found that asking each participant to read aloud got everyone to participate and encouraged them to find connections between their papers, which simply led to more participation.

Each of these activities during the seminar had the twofold effect of highlighting the individual work of the participants without sacrificing the larger interests and questions of the seminar itself. To be sure, a lot of work had been done in this regard prior to meeting in DC, but the break-out groups and single-sentence extractions allowed us to maintain both macro and micro perspectives on the questions that the seminar proposed to explore.

Since one of the seminar's major aims was to foster contact between junior and senior scholars, we encouraged participants and respondents to follow up with each other as appropriate to develop the essays toward publication post-SAA.

to clarakbiesel, Heidi, wccaldwell, darryl.chalk, leriks, jennifer.hardy, Wendy, Peter, Erika, bernice.mittertreiner.neal, robert.pierce, sarahsandsrice, walkerkn, Travis, wworthen, zoch.a manda, Andrew

Dear Seminarians,

Welcome to the seminar "Invisible Presences: Detecting the Unseen in Renaissance Drama." We are delighted that you have chosen this seminar and look forward to the opportunity to read, share, and discuss your work in the months ahead. We extend a special thank you to our three distinguished respondents—Heidi Brayman, Erika Lin, and Bill Worthen—each of whom will be working with a subgroup for purposes of comments and organization of the seminar discussion.

To facilitate paper writing, you will find below a more extensive description of the seminar and a schedule of important dates. Also attached is a pdf of this welcome letter along with a list of the seminar's participants.

Invisible Presences: Detecting the Unseen in Renaissance Drama

Unlike epic, lyric, and other literary forms, the dramatic mode uniquely engages with audiences through the immediacy of its visible and audible action. The presence of actors impersonating characters, the absence of a governing narrative voice, unmediated utterances, and unspoken physical action all define theater as the mostpalpable, though fleeting, of literary artforms. Yet if drama grounds itself and the knowledge it produces for theatergoers through the immediate sights and sounds of the stage, then it also challenges audiences to grapple with dramatic action, events, and conversations that they never directly witness. From Hamlet's encounter with the pirates to the scene at Hero's window to the hanging of Cordelia, invisible and unseen phenomena in Shakespearean and Renaissance drama create perceptual and epistemological tensions with the ocular proofsof the stage. This seminar proposes to examine the relationship between onstage and offstage action and spaces; between dramatic and narrative forms, time, and ways of knowing; and between the materially absent but dramatically essential events that give shape to what playgoers see on the stage. We welcome papers that investigate how the Renaissance theater puts different perceptual and/or epistemological formations into competition with one another, and how such competitions produce dramatic meanings and sway emotions. In a theatrical context that highlights its own spectacle and audibility, what doubts or questions do plays activate by removing crucial action from the audience's eyes and ears? How do offstage sound effects, onstage storytelling, unspoken visual cues that point beyond the stage ("Enter […] booted," *Shrew*), integrate into or fail to mesh with the episodes playing out in front of audiences? How does the anticipation of known but yet-to-be-realized action affect the scene?Others may wish to explore phenomenological distinctions between play-reading and playgoing. How do theatrical performances and play-texts both fluctuate between mediated and unmediated representations, and how are those fluctuations cued to the escalation and release of dramatic tensions and meanings? Participants may consider how unseen events make their way

to the stage and into the consciousness of playgoers from any critical or theoretical direction they choose

SCHEDULE:

Now: Please confirm that you have received this letter by email to either Jonathan Walker, jawalker@pdx.edu, or Andrew Sofer, sofer@bc.edu. Expect an invitation within the next couple of weeks to the seminar's Dropbox folder, which we will use to share abstracts and papers. Please make sure to accept the invitation. Please feel free to contact Jonathan with any questions or concerns about Dropbox.

Monday, 19 November: abstracts due. Please upload your abstracts (250–300 words) to our seminar Dropbox folder titled "Paper Abstracts," plus a brief bio to the folder titled "Participant Bios."

Monday, 26 November: audio/visual needs. Please let Andrew and Jonathan know if you have any audio/visual needs for the seminar in DC.

Monday, 31 December: Respondents will send two focusing questions and two bibliographic suggestions to their subgroups and to Andrew and Jonathan. These are meant to stimulate and advance thinking in terms of the seminar's central questions.

Monday, 11 February: All seminar papers due. Please upload your completed paper (8–12 pp.) to the seminar's Dropbox folder titled "Seminar Papers," and a revised abstract (if necessary). In order to have your name listed in the program, your paper must be uploaded by this date. The deadline has been mandated by SAA.

Monday, 25 February: Responses due. Paper writers only: please upload brief responses (500 words) for each member of your subgroup to the Dropbox folder titled "Comments." Feel free also to respond to any of the papers not in your subgroup.

Monday, 18 March: Andrew and Jonathan will compile a short seminar bibliography based on respondent selections as well as our own and then circulate this along with discussion questions—likely one per subgroup—in order to get us thinking about what directions the seminar discussion may take.

Wednesday, 17 April: See you in DC! We will provide you with a more detailed itinerary of the day and time of the seminar as we get closer to the date.

We're very excited that you will be a part of this seminar and we look forward to meeting and conversing with you in DC. Please let us know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Andrew and Jonathan

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Andrew Sofer, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance* (U of Michigan P, 2013), p. 4:

Materially elusive though phenomenologically inescapable, dark matter is the "not there" yet "not not there" of theater.

Jonathan Walker, *Site Unscene: The Offstage in English Renaissance Drama* (Northwestern University Press, 2017), p. 165:

While the limits of the visible in drama and theater have always predominated as a metaphor for the limits of knowability, those boundaries themselves have a history whose construction has alienated the offstage from onstage events, making its regions seem more unrepresentable and insignificant than they actually are in practice.

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Group 1: The Material Stage and In/Visibility

Respondent: William B. Worthen

Lauren Eriks Cline: "Race and the Non-Visible in Nineteenth-Century Narratives of *Othello*"

[S]pectator narratives about *Othello* in the nineteenth century constructed the meanings of blackness, Orientalism, and miscegenation through recursive or alternative vectors of visibility.

*

Peter Kirwan: "'Never See Her More': The Dead On/Off Stage"

By disrupting linear time, the re-animation and intrusion of the dead engages a complex set of memory theatrics and spatio-temporal reconfigurations of the playing space that fundamentally transforms both the playable stakes and the interpretive possibilities.

*

Bernice Mittertreiner Neal: "'Foul objects that offend mine eyes': Relations between Offstage Objects and a Prayerbook Onstage in *Arden of Faversham*"

The relations between *Arden*'s stage properties and unseen objects, between its offstage and onstage, prompt an empathetic rapport with a vice-like figure whom the play's own title page condemns, undermining the Protestant aesthetics that structures the play.

*

Travis D. Williams: "Invisible Writing: The Ethics of Stage Letters in *King Lear*"

What is perverse about the stage letter, at least in *King Lear*, is that its material status controls interpretation to the ethical detriment of the interpreter.

Group 2: Historicizing the (Meta)Physical

Respondent: Heidi Brayman

Casey Caldwell: "The Utterance of Flesh in *The Merchant of Venice*"

By contrast with *Macbeth,* part of the dramatic force of the pound of flesh is grounded instead in its being *on the way there. . . .* the bond between Shylock and Antonio invokes . . . a movement from the audience's everyday monetary imaginary to carnal presence on stage.

*

Darryl Chalk: "'If all the world could have seen't': Imagination and the Unseen in *The Winter's Tale*"

In The *Winter's Tale*, the already fraught relationship between things seen and unseen is further ruptured by the diseased imagination. 'Fancy' has fatal consequences in this play.

*

Wendy Beth Hyman: "The Ontology of Elsewhere"

Cymbeline, in all its ambitious multiplicity, maps its concerns both temporally and spatially, as if trying to orbit into another world.

*

Robert B. Pierce: "Consenting as an Ethical Act"

We know that Romeo and Juliet have freely consented to love each other, to marry, and to consummate their marriage even though we do not see an on-off switch turned on and we cannot define the constituent parts of the consent.

*

Katherine Walker: "'Palpable to Thinking': *Othello* and Unseen Conceits"

In the troubled confluence of ocular proof, misreadings of gestures and expressions, and misapplication of a material object, the handkerchief, as an indicator of uncertainty, *Othello* also paradoxically implies that the unseen, the inability of language to be gross, contributes to its subjective efficacy.

Group 3: Inwardness and Innards: Reading the Female Body

Respondent: Erika T. Lin

Clara Biesel: "Reading the Exterior: Imagining Impropriety and Performing Conformity in Early Modern Drama"

[In both *Much Ado* and *The Changeling*] we find both a cultural expectation of women's bodies as being houses of secrets, but also male characters certain they have understood those secrets . . . but their methods are broken. The skepticism which should accompany any reading of the exterior [body] is baked into the text by its form.

*

Jennifer Hardy: "Visualising Unseen Temporal Pressure: The Significance of Quickening in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*"

[T]hough Giovanni's misogynistic and filicidic violence at the close of the play ultimately reinforces patriarchal anxieties regarding female reproductive power, the play's essential utilization of quickening acknowledges women's remarkable ability to generate and direct narrative and biological creations without male authorization or oversight.

*

Sarah Sands Rice: "Perverse Sights: Dissecting the Incestuous Body in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*"

While [public] anatomy demonstrations diffused and recuperated the potentially transgressive intimacy of dissection as public sight and sanctioned knowledge, *'Tis Pity* intensifies the intimacy of dissective sight to the point of perversion.

*

Amanda Zoch: "Invisible Pregnancies in *A Woman Killed With Kindness* and *Titus Andronicus*"

By preventing audiences from witnessing Anne and Tamora's pregnancies . . . Heywood and Shakespeare preemptively punish the women and deny them the redemption offered by motherhood.

Recommended Bibliography

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