

2020 SAA Seminar: Dramatic Verse
Seminar Leader: Andrew Mattison, University of Toledo

Katherine B. Attié

“Couplets, Couples, and Community: Rhyme’s Social Reasons”

Focused on the connection between dance form and poetic form in a dramatic context, this paper discusses rhyme’s role as an agent of social bonding and social concord in Shakespearean comedy. In the verse satire *The Scourge of Villainie* (1598), John Marston likens rhyming words to dancing bodies, a correspondence that I find highly suggestive. While a dangerous relationship between rhyme and the body is implicit in early modern criticism of rhyme as sensual pleasure (for instance, in Thomas Puttenham’s moral indignation over “bad” rhyme in *The Art of English Poesy* [1589]), the paper argues that Shakespeare gave embodied rhyme more positive connotations within the social milieu of theatrical performance. Through close reading of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I build on the rhyme-dance analogy to show how rhyme, especially the couplet, matches proximate bodies in a balanced, harmonizing fashion whose viability depends on equality, reciprocity, and mutual willingness. When actors on stage rhyme together, the sonic bond often signifies a social bond of love or friendship. When rhyme signifies marriage, the making of a couple is not represented as an act of separation from society but as its very foundation, the making of community. The paper shows how dance and rhyme work together in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to counteract love’s (temporary) lunacy and to move evenly matched couples toward companionate marriage, thereby affirming rhyme’s ultimate status as a socially constructive, civilizing force. Adding readings of *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*, I plan to develop the paper into the fourth chapter of my book, *Shakespeare’s Everyday Aesthetic*.

Aleida Auld

Shakespeare, Milton, and the Rise of Dramatic Poetry

With Oxford’s *The Complete Works of John Milton* (2008) and the *Complete Shorter Poems* (2009), Laura Lunger Knoppers and Stella P. Revard restored the original bibliographic connection between *Paradise Regain’d* and *Samson Agonistes* (published together in 1671), by including them in a single volume (Knoppers), and by offering an ‘Introduction to the Poems Published in 1671’ (Revard). This configuration of ‘paired poems’ had been weak or absent from major editions for decades, and largely unexplored in critical interpretations prior to the 1970s. This paper seeks a partial explanation for this seeming lapse by returning to the original publication in its context. It examines two different literary currents that manifest themselves in Milton’s *oeuvre*: on the one hand, the Virgilian *cursus*, evoked by Milton at the start of *Paradise Regain’d*, encouraged differentiating between drama and poetry and promoted the epic over tragedy; on the other, the rise of ‘dramatic poetry’ in the wake of Shakespeare’s plays and in the midst of John Dryden’s work, tended to collapse differences and merge these genres. As they were published in 1671, *Paradise Regain’d* and *Samson Agonistes* participate in both these trends, reinforcing the generic division and rivalry between these two poems, as well as dismantling them, and finally culminating

with the invitation to compare versions of heroism that rely on different terms. The 1671 publication thus configures these poems as a pair even as it undermines and dislocates that pairing, affecting and informing their treatment in the editorial tradition even up to our own day.

This paper comes from a chapter entitled ‘Pairing Poetry: *Paradise Regain’d*, *Samson Agonistes*, and the 1671 Publication’, part of my doctoral thesis, ‘Reconfigurations of the Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Milton in the Editorial Tradition’ (to be completed May 2021).

Richard O’Brien

Forms for Many Voices: Shange and Shakespeare

Completed in 2017, my doctoral thesis examined the development of dramatic verse in England in response to Shakespeare. The limitations of this project, however, excluded alternative traditions of poetic playwriting, both formal and national. The African-American playwright Ntozake Shange struck me as a particularly significant omission. In this paper, I want to explore Shange’s ‘inventive forms’¹ of verse drama in her best-known ‘choreopoem’ *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, in dialogue with my observations on what Caroline Levine, in *Forms*, calls the ‘affordances’ of Shakespearean verse drama and its formal successors. In so doing I do not aim to reclaim Shange for any kind of Shakespearean tradition: the texts exist, like her chosen first name, as ‘her own things,’ and ‘stealin my shit from me/dont make it yrs’ (*for colored girls*, 53) offers a powerful rebuke to such readings. I am, however, interested in discovering to what extent Shange’s verse drama supports or challenges models of reading I have developed in response to Shakespeare’s.

For instance, Soyica Diggs Colbert argues that the ‘choreopoem creates collectivity based on the intertwining of bodies in space and words in rhythm in order to counter the displacement and dehumanization of black women’s voice, bodies, and experiences,’ while as *for colored girls* developed ‘from a set of poems to a choreopoem,’ Shange herself describes how ‘my solo voice began its journey to many voices.’ To what extent is this ‘racialized communal formation’ (Colbert) different in operation and effect to George T. Wright’s description of the shared Shakespearean pentameter as a ‘condition of being bound together in a common action [which] affirms [...] an aesthetic and an ethic of mutual dependence and obligation’ (138, 258)? This paper thus aims to offer a formalist reading of Shange’s dramatic verse as it negotiates the relationships between individual and choral speech in ways which may both affirm and disrupt our expectations as Shakespearean scholars.

1 Hilton Als, ‘Color Vision.’ *The New Yorker*, Nov 1. 2010.

Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld

Just One Word

In Act 2, scene 4 of William Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV*, Hal proposes to Poins that they "drive away the time" by playing a prank on the drawer Francis (2.4.22). Each will call to him from a separate room with the aim of reducing the drawer's speech to a single word, "that his tale to me may be nothing but 'Anon'" (2.4.25). Poins plays out his half of the prank but does not really know why: "Come, what's the issue?" he asks. Among the answers Hal provides is the following: "That ever this fellow should have fewer words than a parrot, and yet the son of a woman!" By this account, Hal's prank is designed to drag the drawer into a paradox: to have the lexical range inadequate to the parrot but still remain human.

In this paper, I am interested in approaching the topic of dramatic verse through the perverse fantasy of a poetics that could be encompassed by a single word. My primary archive for the paper will be *As You Like It* and the *Sonnets*. In *AYLI*, I am interested in Orlando's rhyming on "Rosalind," Touchstone's improvisational imitation of his verse, and the peculiar way in which the name that Orlando proposes to write "upon the fairest boughs,/ Or at every sentence end" becomes "bad fruit" (3.2.123-124; 105). In the "will sonnets," I am interested in how the poetry fluctuates between the promise that one word could say everything, that all you might need is one word (135 and 136), and the entire evacuation of meaning from that same word in the stifled infant's cry of Sonnet 143. In the broadest possible terms, my questions are: What happens to a name when it becomes a rhyme? And what happens to the personhood attached to that name?