

# THE SHAKESPEAREAN DEATH ARTS

SHAKESPEARE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, SEMINAR #46,  
ORIGINALLY SCHEDULED TO CONVENE IN DENVER, COLORADO  
FRIDAY, 17 APRIL 2020

Within days of hearing about the cancelling of the meeting in Denver, we the organizers fast-tracked our conversation about publishing a collection of essays drawn principally from our seminar, and currently are in the process of submitting a formal book proposal to an acquisitions editor (who contacted us when she knew her press was not going to be attending 2020 SAA in Denver). We also continued working in some capacity as a seminar, with a roster of sub-groups of participants responding to and giving feedback on one another's papers. The upshot of this peer-editing we plan to address further in mini-seminars through Zoom. Although our peer-editing will be taking place in the months ahead (once participants start reflecting critically on what their peers are suggesting they might consider), it will in the long run help us to streamline our seminar into a coherent collection of essays concerned with exemplary issues pertaining to "The Shakespearean Death Arts."

## SEMINAR ABSTRACT

This seminar will situate and assess Shakespeare's works within the Renaissance death arts, that is, the plurality of *memento mori* traditions, meditative exercises, funereal rituals and commemorative activities from sermons to elegies and exempla of heroes and martyrs. These arts should not be confused with death as a natural event—a physical and biological terminus impeding the advancement of civilization as such. It is our argument that they possess a vigor, growth and energy that contributed to cultural production, whether by means of documents, objects, spectacles, or everyday material practices. As suggested by our title, the Grim Reaper does not just negate and obliterate life but creates a lively dramatic scene. The death arts thereby foreground the artifice inherent in struggling with mortality, helping us to conceive of the distinctive social features and constructed nature of Renaissance artifacts, including the textual, cognitive, and visual.

Through varied scholarly interventions, participants will work toward accomplishing three interrelated objectives: (1) to delimit the dominant roles that the death arts generally performed in Renaissance culture; (2) to determine which Shakespearean works and/or those of coeval playwrights engage most pointedly and extensively with these arts; and (3) to explicate the theatrical, philosophical, cognitive, and sociological rationale behind staging them. The seminar encourages comparative and detailed analyses of the ways Renaissance playwrights mobilize the death arts so that we can better understand not only their historical evolution, but also their creative plasticity from play to play and from playwright to playwright. Potential issues addressed might include but are not limited to the complex interactions between Catholic and Reformed perspectives, the humanist recovery of Roman (stoic) death, and discourses of monumentalization. We will see whether or not and the extent to which these issues

are framed by larger concerns with memory, remembering, and preservation in the face of abject oblivion. Finally a major question that the seminar will move toward addressing is the degree to which (and to what end) playwrights secularized the preparation and commemoration of the individual's death.

## **ABSTRACTS OF PRESENTERS**

Jonathan Baldo, *Eastman School of Music, The University of Rochester*

### **Turnings in the Grave: Riddles, Death, and Burial in *Hamlet***

One of the many things apparently laid to rest in *Hamlet's* graveyard scene is the interrogative voice itself. For most of the play that voice resembles an "extravagant and erring spirit," wandering the corridors of Elsinore at will and marking nearly every action in the play with a "questionable shape." At two junctures toward the end of the play, the ordinarily disquieting interrogative voice seems controlled and quieted, stamped with a "quietus est," as it were: in the modified Walsingham ballad sung by Ophelia and in the riddles exchanged at her gravesite. In both of these forms, the unprecedented asymmetry of question and answer throughout most of the play seems at last to be redressed.

In this paper I explore connections between riddles, burial practices, and beliefs about the dead. Anthropological evidence reveals a link between burial practices and riddles, a link that is reflected in early modern controversies over prayers for the dead and over the beliefs about the souls of the dead lingering for a period of time after burial. In the process, I will attempt to show that Goodman Delver's riddling language bears underground connections to the contested religious traditions that lie at the heart of the play.

Brian Chalk, *Manhattan College*

### **Middleton's Monuments**

My paper considers whether the interest Thomas Middleton shows throughout his plays in memorialization reveals a consistent attitude toward the eternizing powers of theatre. Rather than transcending the cultural practices and preoccupations of his own time, Middleton's works demonstrate a unique desire to immerse themselves within them. Middleton, moreover, conveys particular interest in the Jacobean increase of the building of funeral monuments and the popularity of *ars moriendi* texts. Far from signaling a desire to memorialize his works, however, Middleton seems uniquely at ease with the transient nature of theatre. This approach, which contradicts the eternizing aspirations of most great writers, foregrounds ephemerality in a manner consistent with the vision that underlies the *memento mori* narratives Middleton assimilates into his works. I will take *A Game at Chess* as a primary example, a play ostensibly designed to gain contemporaneous fame at the expense of Middleton's career and ultimately his life.

Brian Harries, *Concordia University Wisconsin*

### **“Deciphering the Dead”: Speaking for Corpses in Early Modern Drama**

In many plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries that deal with historical or tragic plotlines, we see conflict resolved at the last minute by the death of one of the warring parties. While we might expect to see the victors exult over their conquered foes, often these plays give us something else entirely. This paper will explore the way that these princes and leaders often use a public moment of eulogy or commemoration to rehabilitate a quondam enemy, usually in the presence of that enemy’s body. At the end of *Lochrine*, Guendolyn leads the other characters in burying the title character next to his father, Brutus, insisting that Lochrine’s ignoble deeds near the end of his life should be forgotten in favor of his lineage and overall nobility of character. In the final moments of *Hamlet*, Fortinbras honors the Danish prince he expected to fight with a royal funeral, even as he assumes the now vacant throne. Having crushed the conspirator’s forces and overpowered Brutus’ army at the end of *Julius Caesar*, Octavius praises the recently-deceased Brutus as a “true Roman” who alone fought for the good of his state. I argue that in these (and similar) speeches focus on dead bodies in these moments as unstable signifiers of the lives they lived, allowing the living to complete and revise the deceased’s narrative for their own purposes.

Gavin Hollis, *Hunter College, CUNY*

### **The End of All: Worldliness, Piety, and Maps as Memento Mori in the Post-Reformation English Household**

What was the work of maps in early modernity? We are familiar with the use of maps in statecraft and in estate management, yet we are less familiar with the ways that maps, and evocations of maps, ruminate on worldly transience. To view a map was not just to imagine new worlds, but also to contemplate an already-dying one. This paper argues that the ways that maps dwelled on mortality are bound up with the global imagining famously voiced in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*. It argues that world-making, often understood as a secular phenomenon, manifested not in a location habitually associated with an emergent private, rather than public, sphere—the post-Reformation household. To explicate these ideas in miniature, its case study is Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, when Elizabeth contemplates “the ruin of my house” and sees, “as in a map, the end of all” (2.4.50–55).

Andrew Loeb, *Trent University*

### **Material Grief in *Hamlet***

Did Hamlet ever see his father’s body? He apparently attended a funeral, since he speaks of the “sepulchre / Wherein we saw thee quietly interred” (1.4.48-9), but there are other details that complicate the question. Horatio has arrived from Wittenberg to attend the funeral, but it has been somewhere between two and four months since Old Hamlet’s death, depending on whether we believe Hamlet’s estimate (1.2.138) or Ophelia’s (3.2.121). Hamlet, presumably also in Wittenberg at the time of death, would surely have received word and made it home faster than Horatio, having royal resources at his disposal, but how much faster? In time to see his father lying “in state”? And given the state of the body itself, “barked about / Most lazar-like with vile

and loathsome crust” (1.5.71-2), would this have been an open-casket funeral, so to speak? If he attended a burial, did he see a body, or only a ritual? These are probably unanswerable questions—they concern matters outside the play’s action—but in this paper I will argue they are worth asking as entry points into a consideration of Hamlet’s grief. In the play that we do see, Hamlet spends considerable time viewing and even handling the material remains of dead bodies (Polonius’s, Ophelia’s, and Yorick’s) and contemplating their significance. Examining these moments in conjunction with early modern attitudes toward, and customs for, the remains of the dead, I will suggest that just as a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar, Hamlet’s grief progresses primarily through his encounters with the *stuff* of death.

Zackariah Long, *Ohio Wesleyan University*

### **Hamlet’s Chiastic Memory Theatre**

This essay considers chiastic structures as an art of memory in *Hamlet*. In its simplest form, chiasmus is “a grammatical figure by which the order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in the other” (OED), usually represented diagrammatically as ABBA. However, critics of Renaissance literature have demonstrated that chiastic patterns can also serve as frameworks for larger units of discourse. In this paper, I pursue a complementary argument by demonstrating how Shakespeare deploys chiasmus in *Hamlet* to map out the arc of its protagonist’s struggle to come to terms with his father’s memory. The arena for this struggle is the symbolic topography of the Globe Theatre—specifically, its tripartite vertical division into heavens, earth, and hell—and the form that this struggle takes is Hamlet’s attempt to mnemonically place his father within this symbolic topography. I argue that Hamlet’s difficulty in assigning his father a determinate place in the theatre of his judgments reflects both the limitations of the Globe as memory theatre as well as the dislocating effects of the Reformation on the early modern cultural imaginary.

Pamela Royston Macfie, *University of the South, Sewanee*

### **“Native and indued / Unto that element”: Memory, Dissolution, and the Death of Ophelia**

Although Ophelia’s death has been variously interrogated, especially in terms of its floral attributes, scholars have paid relatively scant attention to its liquid process. This essay argues that Ophelia’s drowning performs a burial rite that counters her final interment in earth. Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s dying radicalizes the convention of the *locus amoenus*, defines death as dissolution, and privileges water as permitting a terra-aqueous embrace that returns a creature to its origins. Her description mystifies death even in its final image of mud. Where Hamlet insists in the next scene that we end as dust and inchoate scatter, Gertrude suggests that Ophelia’s body layers with history the mud in which it is embedded. With these details, Shakespeare figures an ecology of the female body whose interaction with elemental nature, even in death, is permeable and deliquescent.

Andrew D. McCarthy, *University of Tennessee, Chattanooga*  
**Shakespeare's *Ars Moriendi***

In the later Middle Ages, concern over the moment of death was repeatedly articulated in the *ars moriendi* tracts, texts that emphasized the dying Christian's preparation for judgment in the afterlife. This paper will detail Shakespeare's engagement with these source materials, revealing a shift in his understanding of the art of dying over the course of his career. In *Titus Andronicus*, a play virtually obsessed with the artful death, characters orchestrate and execute a number of intricately plotted murders. This playfully subversive use of his sources ultimately gives way to more thoughtful—though not homogenous—approaches in later plays like *Henry V*, *Measure for Measure*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. In this way, Shakespeare's mid-career plays provide us with an opportunity to consider how the playwright visits and revisits his sources as he develops as both an artist and a man.

Amanda K. Ruud, *University of Southern California*  
**The Art of Losing: Description in Early Modern Rhetoric**

The humanist practice of rhetoric was among the most studied arts in early modern England. From the early modern classroom to the courtroom to the council chamber, English gentlemen studied the skills of vivid description and persuasion with the hope of advancing their reputations and influence. It is well known that many schoolroom exercises designed to teach these skills invited students to describe scenes of traumatic loss, such as the fall of a city, or write speeches for bereaved characters, such as Hecuba. This essay traces the connection between early modern handbooks that taught the skill of vivid visual description and two scenes of description in early modern drama that are used as sites of mourning. In both *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* characters offer vivid visual descriptions in the context of bereavement. This essay identifies an elegiac emphasis in rhetorical handbooks' advice about description. It then attends to two scenes that employ descriptive figures of speech, such as *ekphrasis* and *enargeia*, but also focus on characters' attempts to manage their responses to death. In one scene, a ghost uses description in an attempt to persuade his son to respond to murder with revenge but struggles to succeed because his *enargeic* speech produces mourning instead. In another, a bereaved father describes a painting of his son's murder in which he imagines himself depicted grieving perpetually. In these scenes, the essay argues, the playwrights leverage the elegiac aspect of descriptive rhetoric in order to repurpose rhetorical descriptions as sites for mourning death within drama.

Eileen Sperry, *The College of Saint Rose, Visiting Assistant Professor of English*  
**"As thou art, I once was"—Death and the Bodies in *2 Henry IV***

*Tu fui, ego eris* was a common motif of the early modern English *memento mori* tradition, expressing the inevitability of death for all. In Christopher Sutton's *ars moriendi* treatise, *Disce Mori*, the English translation of the phrase adorned a prominent woodcut: "As thou art, I once was. As I am, thou shalt be." This sentiment constituted a kind of paradox: usually accompanying an image of two bodies, one living and one dead, the statement makes simultaneous claims for identity and difference between the pair. In the first sense, the "I" and "thou" of the *tu fui* are, and must be, the same; the form

insists that all are rendered ultimately identical through death. And yet, the two must also be fundamentally separate. They are represented—grammatically, visually—as separate individuals, one informing the other of a future not yet realized. In this chapter, I explore the history of the *tu fui* motif in the English death arts. In particular, I concentrate on Sutton’s treatise, an under-examined but influential text of the seventeenth century. I then turn to Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV*. There, in Hal’s misrecognition of his father’s death, Shakespeare stages a live *tu fui*. In both cases, I will argue, the form presents a paradox that is ultimately unsustainable; both Sutton’s text and Shakespeare’s play demonstrate the need to choose between the claims of identity and difference. Finally, the chapter will explore the relationship between this particular death art and literary form, suggesting that the *tu fui*’s claims are ultimately sublimated by demands of narrative and dramatic form.

Dorothy Todd, *Texas A&M University*  
**Tombs, Ooze, and Ashes in *Pericles***

This paper takes a two-pronged approach, considering both the role that the dead Gower assumes in the play as he emerges from the grave to provide choric commentary and the function of the supposed deaths of Marina and Thaisa in establishing the play’s ethos of mourning those who are not truly dead. This paper teases out some preliminary thoughts about the ways in which the images of ashes, tombs, and ooze highlight the unique intertwining of the mourning of death and the celebration of new life in *Pericles*. The play demonstrates the efficacy of the death arts in the process of memorial preservation, but it takes one step further by actually connecting these moments of apparent death to the continuance and renewal of life. The death arts in *Pericles* do not simply help us remember; they revive and recreate.

Jessica Tooker, *Indiana University, Bloomington*  
**Empathetic Reflections on Love, Life, and Death in *Othello***

Requesting that Desdemona safeguard his first love gift (the infamous handkerchief), *Othello* highlights the remarkable properties of the object as a narrative device. “There’s magic in the web of it,” he explains to his wife. Demonstrating that he won Desdemona’s love with words, Othello enjoins the audience’s empathy with his devotion to her. A stunning reversal of another linguistic technique in the play—what I would call “wounding words,” or hate speech which affectively, even traumatically impacts the audience—Othello’s narrative displays how the couple’s relationship infuses the present with a potent life force serving as a ballast against inexorable mortality. To be sure, in Shakespeare’s *Othello* the forces of life and death are hypnotically, and frequently rhetorically juxtaposed. Interrogating the “death art” of performative language, or “thana-rhetoric”, deployed as an affective mechanism simultaneously signaling a consciousness of mortality and invoking a form of transcendent humanity, my essay analyzes the play’s artful obsession with words as signifiers of not only love (and its fatal counterpart, hate)—but human life as it would, with downright violence, confront the specter of death.

Maggie Vinter, *Case Western Reserve*

### **Othello's Speaking Corpses and the Performance of Memento Mori**

*Memento mori* is the spiritual practice or art of imagining one's death in the image of a corpse. The motto *tu fui, ego eris* [As you are, so once was I. As I am so shall you be] treats death as a destabilizing event that disrupts bounded identity by conjoining past and future. In this specular confrontation between the living and the dead, memorial doubles as script for future tragedy. The exercise involves role-playing, and although *memento mori* is now most strongly associated with visual art, the tradition has a longstanding performance strand. This chapter traces a history of performed *memento mori* within the medieval and early modern *danse macabre*, focusing on the speaking corpses who claim living humans as dance partners with ironic imitations of their worldly professions. As the living mournfully echo back the dead's summons and join the dance, the direction of mimicry switches. Original and copy become reversible positions; death mocks life and life anticipates death.

Although *danse macabre* in England was suppressed following the reformation, its influence persists into Shakespeare's theater. In *Othello*, Desdemona and Emilia each take on the role of the speaking corpse. In performances of the Willow Song and their final words, both characters speak simultaneously for the living and the departed in ways that resemble the disruptive couplings of the *danse macabre*. Shifts in mode from speech to song, and reminders of the living presence of the actors highlight the constructed nature of theatrical death. But even as episodes like Desdemona's implausible brief revival threaten to expose the illusory nature of theater, they counteract attempts to circumscribe or evade mortality. Precisely because it is only performance, corpses can talk back to remind living characters and audiences of their ends.

Lina Perkins Wilder, *Connecticut College*

### **Artful Death: Women's Agency and Foreshortened Classical Allusions in *Hamlet***

*Hamlet* has long been a play that turns its audiences into armchair detectives. When is Hamlet actually mad, and when is he only pretending to be mad? What did Gertrude know, and when did she know it? And, as the title of my paper invites us to ask, did Ophelia or Gertrude commit suicide or die accidentally? Suicide, of course, brings other questions with it. Does Gertrude or Ophelia die as Horatio intends to die—classically, stoically, “more an antique Roman than a Dane”? Do they die as despairing Christians, condemned to hell as punishment for their mortal sin? Or do they simply die by misadventure, two of the several passive collateral victims to Hamlet's revenge?

While the evidence that would allow us to answer these questions falls into the same category as evidence about Lady Macbeth's children (or for that matter, Lady Macbeth's suicide), questions about women's suicide are prompted not only by the play but by other plays that treat similar issues. Many Elizabethan and Jacobean plays (and several of Shakespeare's own plays) leave us in no doubt about the intentions of women who commit suicide. This essay will examine Hamlet's silence on this issue by looking through the classical allusions, folded under the edges of Shakespeare's play, to the clamorous Hecuba and politically aggressive Agrippina the Younger.

## ORGANIZERS

**William E. Engel** is the Nick B. Williams Professor of Literature at the University of the South, Sewanee. He is the author of five books on literary history, memory studies and applied emblematics, including *Mapping Mortality* (U of Massachusetts P, 1995), *Death and Drama in Renaissance England* (OUP, 2002), and co-editor of *The Memory Arts in Renaissance England* (CUP, 2016). Recent work includes the chapter on ‘Education and Science’ in *A Cultural History of Memory in the Early Modern Era* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2019) and *The Printer as Author in Early Modern English Book History: John Day and the Fabrication of a Protestant Memory Art* (Routledge, forthcoming 2022). He is on the editorial board of *Renaissance Quarterly* and is the Renaissance Society of America’s Discipline Representative for Emblems.

**Grant Williams** is an Associate Professor of English at Carleton University. He has co-edited four collections: *Forgetting in Early Modern English Literature and Culture: Lethe’s Legacies* (Routledge, 2004), *Ars reminiscendi: Memory and Culture in the Renaissance* (CRRS, 2009), *Taking Exception to the Law: Materializing Injustice in Early Modern English Literature* (U of T Press, 2015), and *The Memory Arts in Renaissance England: A Critical Anthology* (CUP, 2016). He is currently working on a book project about artificial memory, monumentality, and the scholarly imaginary.

