

Breathing in/with Shakespeare, SAA 2020, Denver

Seminar Leaders:

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Participants and Abstracts

To Trade and Traffic in Affairs of Breath: Shared Air in *Macbeth*

Theo Black, Cornell University

In holding a mirror up to nature, Montana Shakespeare in the Park's 2017 eco-oriented production of *Macbeth* presciently reflected that summer's immediate impacts of area forest fires in its ostensibly futuristic conceit of a world aflame, ravaged by climate change. In creating a shared community in conversation with salient ecological themes illuminated in the play, a pneumatics both ironic and incisive allowed the shared air/breath of characters & actors, performers & audience, and book-ended perspectives of the Anthropocene, to emerge in complicated dialectics. In this paper, I'll investigate this nexus of interconnectedness within the empirical framework of that particularized *Macbeth* – lensing it through the perspectives of actor breathwork, eco-Shakespeare criticism, and community integration. My primary interest is in how the galvanizing impulses of actualized immediacy of what was an initially-futuristic framing of the show suited itself with forms to that conceit, in ways both providential to its illumination and complicated/unexpected in its grappling with myriad ramifications. Second, the thematic elements of environment emblemized in air/breath within the text of *Macbeth* lifted opportunities for those creating the show (actors/director/dramaturg/designers) as well as auditors absorbing its thematics via actors' embodiment of breath, as text shared and actionalized. Evaluating these within the larger context of actor-audience sharedbreath relations will allow, I hope, the microcosm of MSIP's *Macbeth* to voice wider aspects of breathing in/with Shakespeare.

Practising Yoga, Performing Shakespeare

Joyce Boro, Université de Montréal

Breath, movement, and emotion are intrinsically interconnected. Yoga philosophy and performance theory employ distinct paradigms to explain the interplay of these dynamic relationships. But what happens if we place the two traditions in dialogue? Can yoga's foundational conceptualisation of bodymind and of movement as breath in motion fruitfully inform and enhance dramatic performance? My preliminary answer is a resounding yes. Since this is a new project, this paper does not aim to arrive at any firm conclusions. After providing a brief overview of the yogic principles that underlie some modern performance

theories, I will turn to survey the work of performance theorists and practitioners who have offered valuable insight into the relationship of practicing yoga and performing dramatic texts. This includes the early and pre-censored work of Konstantin Stanislavski as well as approaches to theatrical performance such as “enactive” acting, which are, like yoga, holistic somatic practices englobing mindfulness of mind and body. I will conclude by outlining some practical modes of performing Shakespearean texts that stem from this research, which I have workshopped with groups of students. The research that I have undertaken thus far coupled with my analysis of its practical applications in a classroom setting leads me to believe that the combined practices of yoga and performance results in profound, embodied theatrical experiences and interpretations.

Strangling with Kisses: Disrupted Breath in Early Modern Drama

Jennifer Forsyth, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

The circulation of breath, with its regular and conspicuous cycles, represents one of the most easily recognizable systems within the “ecology of the passions,” as articulated by Gail Kern Paster. It also constitutes one of the ways in which the body is the most vulnerable to interruptions of that interchange between body and environment: discontinuities range from the partial or temporary disruptions produced by symptoms of illness (sniffing, coughing, or sneezing) or activity (panting, laughing, sighing, crying, or kissing) to the complete and often permanent cessation caused by full blockage, whether by manually preventing breath via means such as smothering with an object or strangling with a cord or rope, or by forcing the body to take in a different substance, such as water, smoke, or poison.

In early modern drama, women often appear particularly susceptible to such disordered breathing, whether due to an internal or an external force. Not incidentally, these moments often intersect with male sexual desire, whether manifested by references to kisses—given or stolen—or by allusions to or implications of female sexuality, though women’s breath, like the women themselves, frequently evades male control. Ultimately, informed by the work of such scholars as Paster, Mary Floyd-Wilson, Katherine Rowe, and Garrett Sullivan, I consider the ways in which the disruptions of women’s respiratory cycles in plays such as *Othello*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Changeling* challenge early modern narratives about women’s capacity for self-mastery.

“Breathless, pour breath forth”: Breath as a Bridge in *Antony and Cleopatra*

Garth Libhart, University of Maryland

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare uses the heroine’s breath as a channel to express the character’s simultaneous experience of exasperation and power. When Enobarbus tells Agrippa about Cleopatra’s voyage in a barge on the Cydnus River, he describes how, “having

lost her breath, she spoke and panted, / That she did make defect perfection, / And, breathless, pour breath forth" (2.240-2). In this passage—the last part of which some editors alternatively render "*power breathe* forth"—Shakespeare imagines Cleopatra as impossibly exhaling air from empty lungs, or, in the alternate rendering, as exuding power as a figurative breath (emphasis mine). Although this is just one of the many paradoxes Shakespeare associates with Cleopatra, it stands out because of the multivalent connotations of breath in early modern culture, particularly its dual status as both a material marker of vitality and as a signifier of divine inspiration and immaterial substance. This intersection of meaning is hardly a new one in early modern England, but reaches back to antiquity, when writers used the Greek *pneuma* and Latin *spiritus* to mean, in varying contexts, both bodily "breath" and airy "spirit," among other connotations. This ambivalence only intensified in early modern England, a period that witnessed raging debates about the elusive substance of *pneuma*. In this paper, I read Shakespeare's use of breath in *Antony and Cleopatra* in light of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century discussions of *pneuma*, arguing that Shakespeare deploys breath to fuse ruptures between the literal and figurative and between the material and immaterial.

Breathing Ancient History in *Antony and Cleopatra*

Stephanie Shirilan, Syracuse University

My current book project studies the ways in which Shakespeare's theater interpellates its audiences as *pneumatic communities* (literally, if more provocatively, *conspiracies*, or breathing collectives) whose imaginative and affective experience was understood by period psychology and theology to be mediated by the spirit-laden air. In my first five chapters, I examine the murkiness of air and affect in *Macbeth*, respiratory sympathy in *King Lear*, linguistic materialism as acoustic memory in *Hamlet*, listening as moral aesthesis in *The Tempest*, and air and honor in the *Henriad*, wherein I trace a genealogy of class-based stigma against labored breathing (and associated respiratory disease) to the soteriological reading of breathlessness as faithlessness after the Reformation.

For my SAA paper, I'll be drawing on methodologies developed out of my practice-based, interdisciplinary course ("Reading, Breathing Shakespeare") in order to take a first stab at a sixth chapter, on the respiratory animation of ancient character and history in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The pneumatic imagery associated with the imaginative labor diegetically prompted by other plays (i.e., in appeals to fill sails with the audience's thoughts or applause) is more conspicuous and sustained in this play. Wind-making devices such as the bellows and fans that appear in Enobarbus' inspired account of Cleopatra's perfumed barge both anticipate her self-immolating apotheosis as "fire and air" and foreground the vocal *and respiratory* challenge of animating her larger-than-life spirit. Cleopatra's fear of bad impersonation (as bad inspiration by a squeaking boy) glances queerly at the scandal of the actor's capacity to incarnate and animate historical character in and through the breath. I want to suggest that Cleopatra's worry amplifies (even as it seems to diminish) the seductive threat of spiritual materialism that lurks in her "infinite variety," a paradoxically transcendent capacity-in-incapacity exemplified by her ability to make respiratory "defect perfection" and "breathless, power [pour?] breathe forth."

“Sighing like a furnace”: Transforming Devotion in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*

Jillian M. Snyder, Valparaiso University

This essay examines post-Reformation alterations of devotion as manifested in changing views of the sigh. It begins with a brief foray into perhaps the most popular expression of the sigh—amorous longing—by exploring the lovelorn sighs of Francesco Petrarca’s *Rime sparse*. Sighs occur over 120 times in the *Rime sparse*, and, as the essay demonstrates, typify some of the major paradoxes that inform Petrarchan discourse. But the sigh offers only one form of breath in the sequence. Indeed, as the essay shows, the entire *Rime sparse* functions as a meditation linking the breath with devotion, one in which Petrarca’s ardent desire for Laura is redirected toward Christ following his conversion.

The second part of the essay takes up Protestant revisions of Petrarchism, specifically as they appear on the stage. Drawing from changes to the sigh occurring in the English sonnet craze of the 1590s, the stage tests the sigh’s efficacy as a means of engaging in questions around its relationship to right devotion. Such tests are especially true in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Even as the comedy displays the windy passions of forlorn lovers, it simultaneously mocks the conventionality of such passions. Indeed, the comedy’s most notable sigh emerges not from its couples, but from Jacques, who includes the Petrarchan lover “sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress’ eyebrow” among the cast of his seven ages of man (2.7.149). Jacques’s description is a fitting metaphor for the play’s approach to the sigh. As I contend, inasmuch as *As You Like It* calls attention to the sigh’s conventionality, it conforms with post-Reformation efforts to recalibrate Petrarchan devotion toward companionate marriage.

‘Whose breath I hate’: Breathing and Political Representation in *Coriolanus*

Robert D. Stefanek, United States Air Force Academy

Breath was often visible in the London theatre. Plague regularly closed the theatres in the summer, leaving most dramatic activity for the damp, cool-weather months when conditions allowed the water vapor in the intermingling breaths of actors and audiences to condense and manifest itself. *Coriolanus* turns at a moment that evokes foggy breath: as *Coriolanus* is banished from Rome, he in turn banishes Rome, and in particular the plebeian citizens and their tribunes, with the words, “You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate / As reek o’ the rotten fens.” “Breath” here means many things: the air exhaled from the lungs and its attendant heat, odor, and condensation; the lives for which it is a synecdoche; the spiritus of which it is a physical manifestation; the smell, fog, and contagion associated with the Fens to which it is compared; and the political voices and emerging class consciousness of the plebeians that has found its fullest expression in the banishment of the patrician general and consul candidate *Coriolanus*. Drawing on historical phenomenology, early modern staging practices, and theories of political representation, this paper will examine breath and breathing in *Coriolanus*: as a phenomenological artifact of the actors and the characters they are playing, of playgoers during the performance of a play that

maps Roman social hierarchies onto the theatre audience, and as a caesura in the soundscape of a play filled with the cacophonies of war and political discord. It will argue that breath itself, its physical presence and intermingling, becomes a site of the class conflict and political contestation occurring in Rome's nascent representative government.

Airy Forgiveness in *The Tempest*

Kathryn Swanton, Loyola University Chicago

For this seminar, I will examine the connection between the wind and breath in *The Tempest*. As part of a larger project in its early stages, I am looking at how early modern English and Spanish fiction and non-fiction conceive of the wind as an agent of providence. In parallel, I am interested in how the respiratory and circulatory systems reveal the movement of otherwise unobservable forces that connect characters to divinity at critical transition points.

Seventeenth-century world maps often depict the directional winds as faces blowing air. Imagining wind as breath creates a sense of invisible intentional forces at play in the natural world and the seafarers' journeys. In accounts of sea voyages, the wind might be associated with the personified classical Winds or God. But the initial storm in *The Tempest* enacts Prospero's intentions. In analyzing how storm winds are figured as breath and rage in *The Tempest*, I will also draw on similar imagining of the wind in *King Lear* and perhaps *Pericles*.

Through music, breath more gently directs characters' movements in *The Tempest*. One definition of "wind" is "Air as used for 'blowing' or sounding a musical instrument (wind-instrument)" (*OED* def. 12a). Songs in *The Tempest* are repeatedly referred to as airs. Where music for plays in the Globe theater would have included loud instruments like drums and trumpets (the playing of which fits with the imagery of the wind cracking its cheeks), music for the indoors Blackfriars theater, where *The Tempest* was produced, would have featured the softer sounds of wind instruments, suited to accompany singing, which of course also involves breath control.

It is likely that in the end, I will argue that *The Tempest's* depiction of wind as alternately coercive and gentle corresponds to Prospero's conflicted delivery of forgiveness.