

SAA Critical Methodologies Abstracts

Kate Bolton Bonnici, ““Six Entrances into George Peele’s *The Old Wives Tale*”

George Peele’s play *The Old Wives Tale* (1595), a merry winter’s tale come to life, interweaves myriad genres, temporalities, and narrative threads. The result is pleasurable and complex. By way of response to these interwoven strands, I offer “Six Entrances into George Peele’s *The Old Wives Tale*,” which performs, through six brief formal experiments, different methods of entering into and so engaging with the play. These include ballad, reader response, structural poetics, death studies, erasure, and the lyric essay. The aim of “Six Entrances” is to explore syncretic critical-creative methods of thinking with and writing about literature. Each methodological approach, or entrance, emerges from a particular interpretive practice. Each constitutes and is constituted by the other entrances—encouraging interdisciplinary conversation, complicating formal boundaries, and challenging claims to critical fixity. To borrow from the sowing and reaping harvesters so important in Peele’s play, adherence to a dominant, monocultural mode of literary analysis yields one kind of fruit and forecloses others; considering multiple forms cultivates complementary growth. Entering a literary work through these mutually-illuminating modes, which is this project’s desire, allows us to perceive new correspondences and to reap richer, more varied, and deliciously fruitful understandings.

Evan Choate. “Who’s History?: Historicism in the Apocalypse”

In January 2018, Hawaiians received an alert: “BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.” It was a false alarm, but for about 38 minutes many people believed it was real. I would have. This paper tries to imagine what that belief would mean for my work. We sometimes use the word “history” predicatively, to describe “a person or thing that is without a future, finished, or defunct.” But it seems, intuitively, that not everything can be history. Becoming history requires that there be something, or someone, left. Believing that you are witnessing a global thermonuclear war is different than believing that you are going to die. Would I be writing this paper if I believed the world would end tomorrow? Next week? Next year? Even in ten years? But belief in the imminence of the Apocalypse was central to the historiographic tradition of the English Reformation. John Foxe’s massively influential *Acts and Monuments* offered historical knowledge as a path to the Apocalypse. Like his mentor, John Bale, who considered the Apocalypse the special “mark and method” of his historical work, Foxe believed that the reality of the Apocalypse gave form to his investigations of the past. Foxe pioneered many of the practices that continue to define modern historiography, but the framework feels alien; only by understanding our relation to the past—scrupulously, rigorously, and faithfully—can we play our role in bringing about the end of the world (in this context a good thing). Paradoxically, Foxe’s heavy-handed apocalyptic teleology theorizes a kind of history that is not defined by its value for or in the future. The ideal history, for Foxe, will not be history. By attending to it here, we might productively reimagine what historicism does today.

Rana Choi. “Erich Auerbach's Formalist Approach to Historicism: The Case of *The Winter's Tale*”

As Auerbach's most famous book-chapters, “Figura” or “Odysseus' Scar” demonstrate, his historicizing approach first queries how elements of a text are related to each other, and his investigation frequently includes non-semantic dimensions of literariness or what he calls “style” as his primary point of departure. He of course also included attention to semantic dimensions of literariness, like intertextual usage, diction, philological or etymological connections, colloquialisms, and the like, all familiar to us as dominant tools of historicist reading practice. A striking feature of the way his formalism considers such relationships internal to the text is that it develops a question and even sense of mystery about why certain things are presented as they are, which prompts one to trace these features back to the organizing presence that motivates that peculiar manner of expression, something that is unfamiliar to us and unique to the period, and thus not something we would know to search for thematically—that is, through intertextual keyword searches with contemporaneous archival documents.

But what features—semantic or non-semantic—does Auerbach look for? In order to eschew *a priori* theories about what features ought to be salient in literariness, Auerbach chooses comparative texts from roughly similar or adjacent historical contexts, and focuses assiduously on the similarities and differences that emerge unexpectedly from the comparison. So instead of comparing texts by a formal feature privileged by the critic, the comparison makes salient formal features that make the two texts unique

One perceivable disadvantage of Auerbach's method is that one cannot choose one's theme or subject beforehand; one follows where the literary language points.

Glenn Clark, “Reciprocal Exploitations: *Volpone*, the City, and Practical Psychology”

That Galenic humouralism is the only psychology of interest to Ben Jonson is a critical commonplace. Yet *Volpone* is packed with social interactions which can be categorized in terms of the principles of modern influence psychology. Mosca, Volpone, and the legacy hunters all exploit techniques that look remarkably like what Robert Cialdini has analyzed and described as the “weapons of influence” which trigger automatic compliance responses. Indeed, the central plot of the play, in which Mosca and Volpone trick the legacy hunters into giving Volpone gifts in hope that he will make them his beneficiaries, is an elaborate and multifaceted perversion of the reciprocity principle, whose imbrication in sustained social life is so profound that its constant misuse helps explain the play's final tack toward tragedy. Volpone's famous mountebank scene seems to epitomize the kinds of commercial sales techniques studied by Cialdini. In this scene, Volpone almost simultaneously deploys compliance techniques utilizing claims to authority, scarcity, social proof, and reciprocity. The scene is also the most obviously urban scene in the play. In its metatheatricity it likens influence techniques to scripts, and in its dialogue it reveals those techniques and their effects to be testable through observation. In sum, the scene comes very close to dramatizing a social psychological practice as such in which observation enables testing which in turn reveals predictable, even scriptable, principles. Like modern social psychologists themselves, the play suggests that the densely-populated city is a

place of constantly exploitable vulnerability to suggestion and therefore the place in which social psychology becomes visible.

Liam Daley, “‘Antique Form Much Disfigured’: Literary Form and Unreliable Historiography in Shakespeare's *King John*”

King John, more than perhaps any other of Shakespeare's history plays, calls attention to the unreliability of historical reporting. Much of New Historicist criticism has notably called attention to the fact that all written texts, even those purporting to relate historical fact, nevertheless embody highly subjective points of view. While keeping this important lesson in mind, this paper seeks to build upon traditional New Historicist methods by drawing on recent studies in literary formalism to show how literary form shapes historical content. Specifically, I argue that Shakespeare's highly skeptical use of medieval history in *King John*, illustrates drama's ability to embody multiple, contradictory historical narratives in ways that the printed chronicle cannot. In contrast to what might be called the “official” historical narrative established by the play's political leaders, the soliloquies and frequent asides of John's illegitimate nephew, Philip the Bastard, create a counter-narrative which undermines and contradicts the primary narrative. These competing narratives ultimately offer a vision of history which is polyvocal, contingent, and unstable – suggesting, in ironically self-defeating way, that we cannot believe what we see in a history play.

Adhaar Noor Desai, “Discomposing the Literature Curriculum, or, Poesy and Pedagogy in Early Modern Literary Studies”

What are we teaching when we teach Shakespeare? What assumptions and attitudes are we tacitly affirming through classes organized around authors or historical periods? Scholars of early modern literature have increasingly turned to examine different environments in which people engage with texts from this period—theaters all over the world, film adaptations, allusions in other works, postcolonial appropriations, video games. This essay presses us to reexamine the crucial point of contact that sustains, however weakly, public engagement with early modern literature: English class. Recognizing the ways the “literary” is defined by the cultural institutions that prop it up, how might we work to undermine cultural gatekeeping without sacrificing what we think an educational program that includes literature has to offer? How, moreover, might we reorient our scholarly interests—and our conferences—so that our research and teaching inform one another in form as well as content? How might we better connect *writing* about early modern literature to experiences of *reading* it? I propose that we work more concertedly to help students (and the public) see what many of us now see when we look at early modern literary texts: collaboration and coteries, censorship and deception, innovation and derivativeness, contingency and fragmentation. We might as a result reinvigorate an attention to the progress of a written work from inception to transmission, and foreground contradictions, hesitations, and uncertainties—the “discomposition” that arises along the way. Literary Studies might thus draw on insights from Rhetoric, Composition Studies, Creative Writing, as well as from other process-oriented pedagogies and theories of skill, in order to recast early modern authors as working upon a set of problems that remain urgently familiar:

how writing claims authority, and the means by which a piece of writing captures public attention.

David B. Goldstein, “Missing Ingredients: Yearning for Material Culture in Shakespeare Studies”

This paper connects two modes of thought currently in vogue: the ingredient-focused turn in food studies (such as the popular and critical works devoted to beans, tomatoes, milk, cod, or any number of single-foodstuff accounts of food), and the material turn in Shakespeare studies. They may not at first seem particularly related. The first turn provides writers with a ready way of organizing an argument, a kind breadcrumb trail that links disparate cultural features into a single compelling narrative. The second turn provides Shakespeareans with a way of using thought to approach objects, revivifying *things* through techniques of language and imagination. This paper argues that both turns stem from the same source and that placed in dialogue they reveal certain pleasures, advantages, and limitations of searching for material culture.

I take as my case study the medlar—once synonymous with sexiness, now all but forgotten. These little fruits that, as Thomas Dekker puts it, are “no sooner ripe but rotten,” appear five times in Shakespeare’s plays—more than oranges or strawberries—and hundreds of times in printed works of the English Renaissance. Yet one finds little overlap between the ways they are discussed in literature and how they are treated in other kinds of writing, such as recipe books, herbals, agricultural manuals, and dietaries. The early modern medlar leads several separate, mysterious lives, all attached to the same word, each travelling through a different and tangential arc of experience. Reading the medlar’s striking appearance in *Romeo and Juliet*, I argue that Shakespeare uses the fruit to propose a phenomenology in which material fruits become linguistic tropes, and tropes in turn become material, even edible objects.

The medlar challenges us to reckon with the stability of distinctions between linguistic and material culture in early modern England. When we seek materiality in the early modern period, what sort of material do we mean? How do we find it? With what voice does it speak? How does desire produce narrative, and how does the pressure of that desire shape the narratives we uncover? With these questions, we return to a formative moment in the development of New Historicism—the desire to speak with the dead, to rediscover the power of narrative—but with divergent methodologies and conclusions. We sit, not in a graveyard, but at a table. Ingredients and foodstuffs interact with each other through human consciousness to create, not a set of proper objects, but an ecological web of relationships. Whether the focus on ingredients and things obscures the relationships in question, or discovers them, or both, will be the subject of my analysis.

Natasha Korda, “Gyno Ludens: A Doll House Redux”

Although doll houses have loomed large as metaphors within theatre and performance historiography since Nora exited Ibsen’s *A Doll House* [*Et Dukkehjem*] in 1879, as material artifacts they have garnered scant attention. This paper reexamines the *cosmopoietic* or world-making capacity of early modern women’s doll houses as playable media technologies whose material and design affordances enabled imaginative and interactive play in the everyday lives of women for whom a grand exit such as Nora’s may not have been an available option. By taking

into account the ways in which scale shapes the social (re)production of gendered space, and the ideological division of labor and leisure in everyday life, it aims to make room in our historical and theoretical archives for *gyno ludens*. Continually reimagined, remade, reassembled and restaged, early modern women's doll houses help to model a reconceptualization of what counts as an "archive," or for that matter a "stage," and how the forms of intellectual work and performative play they enable might transform the disciplinary parameters of theatre and performance historiography.

Zoltán Márkus, "Unsuspecting Shakespeare: The Bard Beyond Any "Hermeneutics of Suspicion"

Paul Ricoeur's phrase of "hermeneutics of suspicion" has been in circulation for more than half a century now to describe the critical methodologies of Freud (as well as Marx and Nietzsche), in particular, and the dominant discourse of modern humanities and social sciences, in general. In the last few years, however, this largely descriptive term has been deployed with increasing frustration and critical edge. Both sides of the genitive phrase have been decried: our endeavors in literary and cultural studies have become increasingly problematic both as interpretational practices of "hermeneutics" and as hypercritical attitudes of "suspicion." In her famous essay, Eve Sedgwick urged us to swap our "paranoid reading" for a more "reparative" approach (2003); while Michael Roth (president of Wesleyan) recommended "a transition from critical thinking to practical exploration" (2010). More recently, Rita Felski has devoted an entire monograph to the study of *The Limits of Critique* (2015), in which she presents a thorough critique of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and offers more felicitous alternatives inspired by Bruno Latour's *Actor-Network-Theory*. In a chapter that most directly addresses our field (and bears the telling title "Context Stinks!"), Felski relies on insights from Latour's theory to advocate these three propositions:

1. *History is not a box*—that is to say, standard ways of thinking about historical context are unable to explain how works of art move across time. [...]
 2. Literary texts can be usefully thought of as *nonhuman actors*... [...]
 3. These ideas lead, finally, to a notion of *postcritical reading* that can better do justice to the transtemporal liveliness of texts and the coconstitution of texts and readers... [...]" (154).
- My seminar paper offers a, hopefully more reparative than paranoid, reading of these propositions and ponders how the study of Shakespeare may benefit from the waning of the "hermeneutics of suspicion."

Ed Pechter, "Does Digital Technology Advance Our Understanding of Literary History?"

According to Hugh Craig and Brett Greatley-Hirsch in *Style, Computers, and Early Modern Drama* (2017), "The "arrival of machine-readable texts" and "of computational tools offers new ways to write a systematic" account of Renaissance drama by providing the "scale, which is needed for a broad literary history." That digital technology provides the basis for a new and improved literary history is a bold assertion, but Craig and Greatley-Hirsch are not voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone. The same claim has been developed in several other

influential studies recently, including Matthew Jockers's *Macroanalysis* (2013), Ted Underwood's *Why Literary Periods Mattered* (2013) and *Distant Horizons* (2019), and Andrew Piper's *Enumerations* (2018). Underwood and Piper figure prominently along with Craig and Greatley-Hirsch in the first three sections of this essay, where I argue that the quantitative analysis of large textual corpora cannot, as they claim, put literary history on a more secure foundation. The gist of my argument is that the processing of data and the interpretation of texts are distinct activities, and that "the "metaproblem of the digital humanities," how to "get from numbers to *meaning*," is insoluble. But it's not just that the models of literary history offered by quantitative practitioners fail to deliver the benefits they promise; these benefits—reducing if not eliminating the "dilemmas of bias and selectivity" and the "extreme subjectivity of interpretation"—are not really beneficial. In the final section, I sketch out what I take to be a better model for understanding literary history, one based on controversy and persuasion rather than "congruence" and demonstration, designed more to generate than to regulate the interpretation of literary texts.

Nicholas F. Radel, "Post or Hybrid History? Two Decades of *Richard II* Criticism (2000-2020)"

As a history play, *Richard II* may not be the best test case for an essay on the critical fortunes of historicism, new or old. Historical awareness attaches itself to the play by its very nature. But my recent survey of criticism of *Richard II* for the revision of the Critical Tradition series makes clear that although there has developed a decided impatience with historical methodologies much recent criticism relies upon conceptions of historical knowledge to ground new critical insights. So, it is not entirely clear, in terms of criticism of the history plays, that we are in a Post Historical phase at all. We may, instead, need to think in terms of emerging new hybrid histories. My essay looks at a number of recent examples of criticism of *Richard II* that conceive themselves in terms of methodologies that are not explicitly or necessarily historical—queer, feminists, cognitive, and memory studies, for instance—but that nevertheless may be usefully read as new forms for conceptualizing history itself. What is most striking about recent studies of *Richard II* is the dearth of new theoretical studies that do not, finally, address themselves to history either explicitly or implicitly. Reports of the death of history may yet be premature.

David Ruiter, "Shakespeare and Social Justice: A Field of Play"

Fundamentally, any discussion of Shakespeare and social justice must attempt to find the convergence of the play-full life of theatrical, literary, and critical performance with real, lived experience—and not just any experience, but experience that falls outside of the bounds of what we might see as a just society. Although many have shown that we can come to view the past more justly and that history informs and influences our thinking about both just and unjust societies of the past and present, the actual *work* of social justice remains in the present and future. My writing for the seminar, then, will try to focus on that situation and propose a field of play, a space on which to perform and otherwise enact social justice via Shakespeare. Ultimately, this piece will be only a beginning, an effort to cover a broad spectrum broadly, from finding creative pathways to approach situations in which social justice is lacking, to reflecting on those situations and shining a light on them, and, ultimately, to picturing ways to potentially

ameliorate those situations. Such pathways are not merely ephemeral, the life of the mind, but real, as they are indeed mapped to actual locations and contexts around the globe.

At least two basic questions come to mind in this effort:

- What can the theatre and Shakespeare have to say about or otherwise bring to situations that could truly impact social justice in its contextual specificity, either in his time or ours, or in the time in between?
- How could the plays be used—by teachers, scholars, actors, directors, etc.-- in support of social justice?

Barbara Sebek, “Of elephants, strange fish, and sammelbands: Interrogating “Context” and

Rethinking Temporality with Jasper Mayne’s *The Citye Match*”

I will deploy multiple notions of “context” (temporal, geographical, spatial, conceptual) for reading Jasper Mayne’s little-known play *The Citye Match*. The play provides distinctive materials for interrogating multiple, overlapping, or clashing temporal frameworks (macro/micro, global/local, generic/formal). First published in quarto in 1639 and subsequently reprinted or rebound in sammelband with a range of other materials, early print versions help invoke alternative temporal and cultural contexts. In addition to thus situating the play in material textual studies/print history, I will tap into other flourishing critical sub-fields in early modern studies that are already enacting new ways to conceptualize “context” and temporality—animal studies and postcolonially-inflected global trade history. Covering all this ground is likely unrealistic for a 3000-word essay, but I will attend to each of the terms in my title. The strangeness of the “strange fish” that crops up in *The Citye Matche* is at least partially a function of its particular historical “moments” and expanding networks and geographies of trade, travel, and encounter. Like the play’s other animal spectacle, the elephant, the strangeness of the strange fish requires us to attend to the play’s more immediate “moment” of the 1630s, when creatures, foods, and objects from the wider world are more thoroughly integrated into London material culture than when Shakespeare was active. Yet, these particular creatures have their own trajectories, histories, iconographic traditions, and cultural receptions that are both longer standing and more of-the-instant. The “strange fish” scenes and the passing references to the elephant help us to both anchor this play in its various “moments” and insert it into a transhistorical or diachronic framework, situating the play outside of historical or chronological time.

If space permits: Does studying a less familiar play/playwright offer a special point of entry for rethinking context and temporality? Or would my methodological efforts bear more fruit with a more canonical or widely known play (e.g., that “strange fish” Caliban)? How do teaching and specific pedagogical urgencies mobilize or demand multiple senses of context and temporality?

Emily Vasiliauskas, “Caliban’s Theater”

Julia Reinhard Lupton’s reading of *The Tempest* offers an alternative to historicist approaches to the figure of Caliban. Instead of tethering him to what was happening in European culture in relation to its non-European others in the early seventeenth century, she places him prior to both culture and cultural difference: “Shakespeare manages to isolate within the idea of the human,

forever divided between universalist and particularist strains, an elemental category of bare sentience which refuses to resolve into the homogenizing ideal of the one pole or the identitarian pole of the other.” Caliban reminds us that we are all, at bottom, creatures and, therefore, “exceptions to [our] own humanity.” Lupton uses a theological frame of reference to expose an ontological category in the service of an ethical project. One term that is just as challenging to the kinds of historicism generally practiced by early modernists as theology, ontology, and ethics are and that is missing from her analysis is aesthetics; I want to see what happens when we think about Caliban’s creaturely condition in terms of an aesthetic mode of being.

At the end of *The Tempest*, known for its precise reckoning of debt and payment, punishment and reward, Caliban is unaccounted for: will he remain enslaved with Prospero as the group travels to Italy, or will he be liberated and left behind on the island? Most of the scholars who address this crux are concerned with its political implications: what does the play’s silence here have to do with forced labor, settler colonialism, and related matters? But I wonder whether there might be at least as much to say about the aesthetic implications. Prospero ends the play by soliciting applause from the audience—only with its help will he be released from the island and permitted to re-enter the society he left behind so many years earlier: “I must be here confined by you, | Or sent to Naples.” In so doing, he involves the theater structurally in the work of romance. The stage as a world apart—what happens on it is far away, no matter how close the action might seem—is reconciled with the world as it is. Prospero leaves the island, and the theater shifts, almost imperceptibly, from mimesis to presence. Caliban, however, as an unaccounted for remnant, disrupts the work of romance. The possibility that he remains on the island prevents the world of the stage from fully entering the world of the theater: there is something that will never cross over, that can never be reconciled. If Prospero grants the audience the sense that the performance exists for it—indeed, it is hard to think of a better example of Michael Fried’s claim that the theater extorts special complicity from its beholders—Caliban shows us that the theater also has a life of its own, that negativity is as constitutive of performance as phenomenological fullness is. When the play ends, we leave, but Caliban doesn’t, and the existence he has in the theater is something that we will never know.