

Experiential/Experimental Knowledge in Shakespeare

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Experiments of Performance “Curiously Bound Up”

The theater is a space of experimentation. Through experimenting, our experience of the plays grows, and we come into new knowledge—and this desire to find answers through performance is found in early modern plays as well. Hamlet’s *Mousetrap* is a famous example, but in Philip Massinger’s play *The Roman Actor*, we see a similar setup with very different results. The instances of performance within Massinger’s play contradict Paris’ hypothesis that theater improves the moral character of those who attend. In one example of the failures of theater, Philargus, a miser, is forced to watch a play called “The Cure of Avarice” about the evils of greed, which Paris is sure will improve him. Instead of instilling him with generosity, Philargus heckles the actors, and asks the Emperor to “defend this honest thrifty man” (II.i.102, II.i.337). This experiment failed, the characters in the play continue turning to theater as a solution. When the emperor’s courtesan, Domitia, expresses her desire for the actor Paris to play a lover in his next production, and subsequently seduces him, her reasons for doing so are ones of experience and experiment. She perceives him to have had the experience of having lived many lifetimes because of his playing so many characters onstage, and desires him in part because she imagines his body as a vessel for the roles he performs. Rather than seeing his characters as something external, put on like a costume, his body is the volume inside of which all of the roles he has played are “curiously bound up” (IV.i.43). Domitia’s desire for knowledge drives much of the play-- both an experiential knowledge of theater (casting herself as Helen of Troy) and the sexual knowledge of Paris as a lover. But in all these places the desire for knowledge is one left unsatisfied. The knowledge expected through theatrical experimentation in this play does not resolve the questions at hand.

Sources:

Traub, Valerie. *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

Robert Darcy, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Algorithms of the Mind: Taming Sly and the Family Shrew in Shakespeare’s Cruellest Play

The Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* involves a rich prank played on a poor man, kidnapped into the illusion of wealth and a life he does not remember. The ostensible reason is sport and entertainment, but it is also an experiment on the human mind—to see the moving mechanism of Christopher Sly’s thought when stretched beyond cognitive familiarity of memory and habit. How far, the hunting Lord tests, can the unthinking algorithms of the mind with its heuristic patterns of choice and movement be thrown off their usual path without succumbing to cognitive crisis? How tolerable can it be to the human mind to wake up somewhere entirely unfamiliar, with no memory of arriving or belonging there? How easily might the mind adapt without degenerating into a muddle of confusion and protest? Or will there be some traumatic feedback instead?

The prank played on Sly is a form of unstructured science, undisciplined in its test conditions, but driven by a curiosity about a specimen of human being. And the entertainment performed for Sly—of the cognitive retraining and reshaping of a shrewish daughter and wife—is a mirror to the experiment being simultaneously performed on him. But the play-within-the-play telescopes reflexively back out into the real-world audience similarly cast into mimetic analogy with the events onstage. And so audience reception becomes part of the experimental test conditions relating to cognition and familiarity. Who, therefore, in the many theater spaces created for staging *The Taming of the Shrew* is serving as the subject of experiments of cognition? In perceiving themselves even only glancingly in Kate or in Sly, audience members are poised, without respect to gender, to become aware of themselves as creatures with formidable but also gravely vulnerable cognitive power.

Katherine Eggert, University of Colorado Boulder
Living by Thinking: Experimental vs. Experiential Happiness in *As You Like It*

Of late, I have been puzzling through the peculiar argumentative structure of Book I of *Leviathan*. Cognition, the topic of Book I's opening sections, arrives at the social structure of the commonwealth, which ends Book I, only by way of a curious detour through the topic of happiness. Happiness is the logical linchpin between cognition—the fearful but also intriguing possibility that we may only be imaginatively inventing what we believe to be the case—and the social parlay that rescues the human community from the degradations of the state of nature. Intrinsic, as well, to happiness as a cognitive-emotional state and as a societal foundation is Hobbes's extreme version of mechanism: unlike Descartes and Gassendi, for example, Hobbes insisted that there were no exemptions—not human thought, not human will—from the universe as an assemblage in continuing motion. As Hobbes put it in *The Elements of Law*, “There can be no contentment but in proceeding.” Thus happiness is a (potential) state of imaginative minds in physical motion, encountering other, similar minds.

In this essay, I investigate *As You Like It* as an experiment in Hobbesian happiness that also tests the extent to which social stability can in fact accommodate imaginative mobility: in short, the extent to which happiness as experience can accommodate happiness as experiment. On the one hand, Rosalind's imaginative stage-managing of emotional ties excels in the “as if” that William N. West perceives as the heart of the play: the assertion that the world could be something other than it is. On the other hand, Rosalind's imaginative futurity, directed as it is toward her own happiness, resists what Mario DiGangi, following Brian Massumi, calls “affective entanglements”—the contributions of others' desires to that futurity. Rosalind's imaginative propulsion of others' bodies and minds into ideal arrangements threatens to falter when those bodies and minds are moved otherwise—even when they are moved *not* to imagine any longer. As Orlando protests, “I can live no longer by thinking.”

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DiGangi, Mario. “Affective Entanglements and Alternative Histories.” *Affect Theory and Early Modern Texts: Politics, Ecologies, and Form*, ed. Amanda Bailey and Mario DiGangi. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 47-66.

Massumi, Brian. *Politics of Affect*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.

West, William N. *As If: Essays in "As You Like It."* Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2016.

Ani Govjian, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Experiment, Improvisation, and Virtue in *The Alchemist*

This paper evaluates the multiple tricks, pranks, cons, disguises, wit-wars, and outright lies at work in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* as elements of a mock experimental, and decidedly improvisational, mode. I am interested in the ostensible pursuit of virtue—as an ideal and guiding principle *in absentia*—via faux-experiments. Like every satisfying (proto)scientific experiment depicted in literature, the climax of this play is accompanied by an explosion. In this play, when the furnace and alchemical glasses are destroyed, the eruption is attributed to Mammon's lack of virtue as evidenced by the sexual escapades of this errant knight with the prostitute Doll Common, disguised as a mad scholar. In a pretended fit during their tryst, she recites lines from *A Concoct of Scripture* (1588), a biblical genealogy from Adam to Christ by the Puritan Hugh Broughton. What follows is a scene in which Mammon hides from Subtle, the conman in alchemist drag, in an echo of Adam hiding his naked shame from God in Eden's overflowing flora:

SUBTLE:

...and flee me

When I come in?

MAMMON:

That was my error.

SUBTLE:

Error?

Guilt, guilt, my son: give it the right name. (4.5.45-47)

The insertion of this biblical depiction of shameful knowledge in the center of a play that obfuscates and redoubles meanings (through misunderstanding, puns, and deception) invites questions on appropriate access to knowledge, the validity of the processes by which we attain it, and the relationship of knowledge-making to virtue. This paper additionally examines the frauds Subtle, Face, and Doll Common who appear as ensemble masters of ceremony and function as our access points to the epistemic gameplay. Their efforts at duping their gulls resonate with the variability of trial and error, and they court risk as they take up a variety of tacks to see which approach will hold. Virtue to them is defined as success in their craft.

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Hutson, Lorna. *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Parker, John. *The Aesthetics of Antichrist*. Cornell University Press, 2018.

Nicole Hagstrom-Schmidt, Texas A&M University
How to Prove Your Love a Whore: Experimental Humanism in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*

Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling* is a play obsessed with discovery. The 1623 tragicomedy is filled with secrets, assignments, and discoveries, but with the majority of the action on full display for the spectating audience to experience. On the day of her wedding, Beatrice Joanna discovers a potion in her husband's private quarters, a potion which can determine whether "a lady be a maid or no." Leaving nothing to chance, the decidedly not-virginal Beatrice Joanna tests the potion on her unknowing serving woman, Diaphanta, who confirms that the potion is legitimate. Armed with this knowledge, Beatrice Joanna fabricates the results of the potion-experiment in front of her husband and supplements the results by performing modesty and substituting her maid for herself in a final act bed trick.

Drawing from Bruno Latour and Katherine Eggert, I investigate the underlying rhetorical nature of experimentation and link the potion-experiment specifically to late humanist practices focusing on deductive reasoning and performance as opposed to inductive observations that the experiment would, in theory, be more aligned with. Specifically, I read Alsemero and Beatrice Joanna's potion as a self-contained experiment takes something unseeable (virginity) in the female bodies of Diaphanta and Beatrice Joanna and render it visible to the observer. Yet this experiment is less Baconian or empiricist than we would expect, and its underlying epistemologies, I argue, are deductive, text-driven, and ultimately humanist.

Bibliography

Mara Amster, "Frances Howard and Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*: Trials, Tests, and the Legibility of the Virgin Body," in *The Single Woman in Medieval and Early Modern England: Her Life and Representation*, eds. Laurel Amtower and Dorothea Kehler (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2003), 211-232.

Katherine Eggert. *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

Bruno Latour, "The Force and Reason of Experiment," in *Experimental Inquiries: Historical, Philosophical, and Social Studies of Experimentation in Science*, ed. H. E. LeGrand (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 49-80.

Jim Kearney, UC Santa Barbara

What Wretches Feel: Shakespearean Experiments in Affective Ethics

Wandering the heath in "storm and tempest," Shakespeare's King Lear exhorts himself to empathetic reflection and moral action:

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just. (3.4.28-36)

That the promised response to this flicker of ethical recognition never arrives suggests that the moment is significant as a *moment*, as a bodily and affective experience creating the conditions for an ethical thought. A platform on which playwrights like Shakespeare experimented with vicarious experience, the early modern stage was, of course, a laboratory of and for such ethical and affective events. In this paper I consider the relation of some of these thinking-feeling events

to some of the practices – and experiments with vicarious experience – that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were exposed to in Tudor educational institutions. Through extensive imitative and imaginative exercises – and with the threat of corporal punishment – Renaissance schools attempted to inculcate certain habits of mind. Understood to be part of the civilizing process, these exercises and the habits they instilled went hand-in-hand, educators claimed, with the development of moral character. In addition to engaging in exercises in which they practiced different rhetorical forms, early modern schoolchildren were trained in *ethopoeia*, which we might translate as “character making.” This paper addresses *ethopoeia* specifically and rhetorical training generally in relation to some of Shakespeare’s experiments in affective ethics. The hope is to attend to “character making” as an experiment in and with ethical experience and knowledge.

Bibliography

Lynn Enterline, *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2012)

Bruce Smith, *Phenomenal Shakespeare* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)

Betsy Labiner

Shakespeare Association of America’s 48th Annual Meeting

In my paper – tentatively titled “‘In my heart the strong and swelling evil’: Problems of Piety and Power” – I will focus on the deep anxieties in early modern England regarding knowledge in matters of religion and belief. The intangible nature of individual belief presents an infuriating provocation to those who demand proof of faith or loyalty, seeking to make an unknowable interior externally evident. Attempts to ascertain the truth of another’s beliefs, or determine with certainty a singular Truth, were issues of tectonic importance, and the quest for such knowledge took many forms. This concern manifests both at the individual and institutional level. The church, while an institution integral to early modern society and commanding of respect, is a site in which interior truths may be a far cry from the holy facade. Playwrights’ interrogation of belief, and of the representatives and structures of the church, questions claims to power and morality, particularly as religio-political tensions mounted. My examination will include both staged conflicts within the playhouse and the historical events of the era. I am particularly interested in the depiction of church representatives in early modern drama, given that at best they are typically well-intentioned but ineffectual, while at worst they are power-hungry, hypocritical, and sinful. I will examine William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, and John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. The playwrights’ depiction of the earthly representatives of god as sinful and unjust indicates a deep ambivalence about ideas of heavenly power and justice, especially when mediated by the institution of the church.

Pertinent readings for the seminar:

Reformation to Revolution: Politics and Religion in Early Modern England. Ed. Margot Todd. London: Routledge, 1995.

Williamson, Elizabeth. *The Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama*.

Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009.

Adam Rzepka, Montclair State University
The Passions of Early Modern Experience

Given longstanding methodological prohibitions against trans-historical identification, it should be surprising that many of the most productive recent movements in our field—towards the study of embodiment, emotion, and cognition, especially—have relied, implicitly or explicitly, on a claim to be recovering historical experience. In this sense, proliferating appeals to experience register the longing of literary and cultural historians for a visceral connection to the subjects we are meant to study dispassionately, while also marking the persistent challenge of articulating this longing within scholarly practices that insist everywhere upon its impossibility.

My paper will argue that this dialectic between the felt immediacy of experience in the moment and the melancholic cast of experience as aggregate knowledge is a driving engine not only of contemporary early modern studies but also of two of its primary objects: Protestant theology and Shakespearean theater. For Protestants, the immediate “experience” (*experientia*, *Erfahrung*) of grace was a crucial test of salvation, and precisely because such experience was in itself exterior to discourse, it was the source of extensive theological dispute. A nearly equal concern was the protracted sense of abandonment in between, or after, these momentary experiences of grace—a sense of abandonment that resisted despair only through the wisdom gained in the “long experience” or “sad experience” of a devoted life.

In Shakespeare, these two poles of experience are employed as tests of the theatrical medium, in intricately constructed moments of powerful revelation (particularly in the romances) and in melancholic reflections on what such revelations add up to when one looks back at them as a spectator before one’s own life. My focus here will be on Shakespeare’s rendering of anti-discursive, revelatory “experience” in *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*, but I hope also to spend a little time attending to the ways in which these are lost, almost immediately, as they are gathered up in the “long experience” that informs settled knowledge.

Suggested addition to working bibliography

Frank Ankersmit. “Introduction: Experience in History and in Philosophy.” In *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005)

Bruce R. Smith, University of Southern California
Experience, Experiment, Exercise

My goals will be modest:

1. to examine closely the 32 instances of the words “experience” and “experiment” in Shakespeare’s plays and poems,
2. to pay special attention to the now-obsolete meanings of many of these 32 instances, and
3. to explore the connections and differences between “experience” and “experiment” on the one hand and “exercise” on the other.

My departure point will be a passage in Heywood’s *An Apology for Actors*:

M. Kid in the Spanish Tragedy, vpon occasion presenting it selfe, thus writes.

Why Nero thought it no disparagement,
And Kings and Emperours haue tane delight,
To make experience of their wits in playes.

These exercises, as traditions have been since (though in better manner) continued through all ages, amongst all the noblest Nations of the earth.

My conclusion will be that, lexically speaking, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust should reconsider its new brand name for the five properties it owns in Stratford-upon-Avon: “The Shakespeare Experience.”

Matthew J. Smith

Anagnoritic Knowledge: Hobbes and Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*

As an experience, how does recognition produce knowledge, and what kind of knowledge does it produce? If recognition occurs through interpersonal encounters, then how does the appearance of and struggle with the other materialize in knowledge of and for the self? Indeed, what is the “matter” of knowledge in recognition? Is it rational or historical, recovered or found, won or gifted?

When studying recognition as a site of moral discovery and/or achievement in Shakespeare’s plays, we have to account for two discourses. One is poetic, representing *anagnorisis*, the reunion of characters and the gaining of knowledge through signs, tokens, memories, paralogism, and spectacular occasions. The other is moral, as modern philosophers such as Fichte, Hegel, Buber, Levinas, Cavell, Arendt, Ricoeur, and others have described the founding of moral obligation as a product of reciprocal recognition. These two trajectories may seem discreet but, in fact, overlap in significant ways, especially in Shakespeare’s plays.

In this paper, I turn to the primal scene of recognition as depicted by the seventeenth-century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes’s account of mutual recognition is naturalistic and inevitable and so stands in contrast to Shakespeare’s capricious approach to recognition in plays like *Measure for Measure*. I argue that the naturalistic account of mutual recognition betrays its reliance on an unidentified prior meeting of wills, and, further, I suggest that Shakespeare’s focus on the anagnoritic can be read as a caveat to the recognition discourse as defined by Hobbes and Hegel. Through the problematic figure of the Duke, Shakespeare illustrates a form of sovereignty that does not derive from mutual recognition but that reconfigures moral reconciliation under the anagnoritic sign of the gift.

Morgan Souza

“Animal Amphibium”: Experimenting with Mistyping in Ben Jonson’s *Epicæne*

In *Epicæne*, Ben Jonson affronts readers with several difficulties of type that take the forms of monstrous mixtures of gendered stereotypes. One marker of these social monstrosities appears in the surname of Mistress and Thomas Otter, the latter of which is noted as a captain of sea and land. As Izaak Walton notes in Chapter 1 of *The Compleat Angler*, otters are despised because they prey on fish, preventing anglers from reaping their own bounty (4). Additionally, Walton’s speakers discuss the otter’s strange combination of appendages allowing for both aquatic and terrestrial mobility (42). Between the otter’s disruptive behavior and mixed forms, the speakers suggest that this abomination is better off hunted to extinction. This perception of the otter as something destructively and problematically mixed up carries over into Jonson’s characters. Audiences learn that Thomas Otter is subject to Mistress Otter, who beats and scolds him regularly for not adhering to her will. Mistress Otter is referred to as “Captain Otter” by Clerimont in regard to her masculine behavior (1.4.28). Like the “animal amphibium,” as

Dauphine terms Thomas (1.4.24), mistress Otter is a strange comingling of things that disrupts the social order. This essay will explore how Jonson uses the vehicles of satire, aesthetic, and monstrous symbolism to stage an experiment that tests the viability of extreme social mixtures. In the playful and perhaps frightening testing of confused stereotypes that appear in Mistress Otter, Thomas Otter, and other characters, Jonson allows viewers to laugh at the absurdity of such mistakes in typing, reinforcing ideas of decorum and social order by showing their inversions to be ridiculous, debauched, and intensely undesirable, particularly by a patriarchal society. The knowledge gained through this experiment is simultaneously social, moral, and biological, and reveals interconnectivity between all three.

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Tiffany, Grace. *Erotic Beasts & Social Monsters: Shakespeare, Jonson, and Comic Androgyny*. University of Delaware Press, 1995.

Richard van Oort
Shakespearean Experiments in Narrative Perspective

Drawing on the recent work of the philosopher Peter Goldie, I intend to look the close relationship between dramatic irony and narrative perspective. My test case will be *Henry V* and, in particular, the conflict between the play's two external perspectives, the chorus (who plays the role of unreliable narrator) and the implied author (Shakespeare). This conflict between narrator and author is the occasion for much dramatic irony. Failure to grasp this irony has, I believe, at least one significant critical consequence. It privileges interpretation over evaluation. This tendency is evident in, for example, Norman Rabkin's influential argument that the play produces symmetrical and mutually exclusive interpretations of the king. I defend the task of critical evaluation by arguing that the conflict between opposing views of the king is more plausibly conceived as a problem of narrative perspective and dramatic irony. Understanding the problem in this way helps us to get a clearer sense of Shakespeare opinion of his famous protagonist.

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Goldie, Peter. *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Rabkin, Norman. "Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28 (1977): 279-296.

Katherine Walker, Mount Holyoke College (knwalker@mtholyoke.edu)
Instinct, Experiment, and Prickings in *Macbeth*

This essay examines the knowing, experimental body in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and early modern instinct. To begin with one of the most familiar instinctive moments in drama, one of the Weird Sisters announces the arrival of Macbeth with a bodily intimation that both protracts and heightens the drama of the King's entry. "By the pricking of my thumbs," the Second Witch proclaims, "something wicked this way comes" (4.1.44). Despite the troubled conflux of sources of knowledge in the play (not to mention our modern obsession with the "source" or author of this particular scene), the Second Witch's foreknowledge is not explicitly attributed to demonic prompting or deductive reasoning, even though these too are possibilities variously present throughout the play. In this moment, the Second Witch's feeling is located entirely in her body, inviting audiences to read her hands for the instinctive knowledge they possess. For the Second Witch the emphasis on what she knows through a "pricking" is a bodily form of understanding that challenges Macbeth's own disregard for causal knowledge. "I conjure you, by that which you profess," Macbeth demands, "Howe'er you come to know it, answer me" (4.1.49; 50). The imprecise demonstratives and pronouns in Macbeth's lines call for us to realize that the only anchor we have in this exchange are the bodies represented on stage, not the forces compelling those bodies to behave in certain ways. This essay asks us to consider prickings and promptings earnestly, looking to such moments as means through which the stage navigates among different potential sources of knowing, both experiential and experimental. Ultimately *Macbeth* puts forth the body itself as a constitutive agent in the process of creating knowledge about other bodies, the environment, and external influences.

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