SAA 2020 Virtual Seminar Public Shakespeare and New Media: Critical Approaches

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ABSTRACTS

Jeffrey Butcher, College of Coastal Georgia

Make America "Rotten" Again: Hamlet and the Alt-Right Tribe

In academic and public spheres, we see Hamlet used as a cultural label for the "weak-kneed" and "hesitant." This cultural label has been integrated into American politics for several decades--especially in times of international conflicts (such as Vietnam, the Gulf War, and Syrian support). American leaders, and America as a country, has been criticized for being indecisive and weak like Hamlet. The justification for Hamlet's signification as a "weak-kneed" and "hesitant" character is undoubtedly based on the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. In popular spheres, I would argue that it is almost solely, if not entirely, based on Hamlet's famous speech. However, I argue that perhaps too much value is placed on this one soliloquy. In the play, there are (at least) three crucial moments when Hamlet does not hesitate at all, but rather blindly aligns himself with a conservative power in a tribalist manner. Hamlet throws out all of his values and humanist learning to believe in a ghost; Hamlet decides all his actions will be "bloody" or "worth nothing" after hearing that Fortinbras is entering a meaningless battle in which tens of thousands of people will be slaughtered; and Hamlet, as he lies dying, endorses a foreigner as the new King of Denmark. I argue that we can look at these moments to examine "blind tribalism" among the alt-right. In moments of self-pity, Hamlet tosses out rational thinking, without considering his choices or the implications. In Renaissance England, ghosts are *not* signs of "good" and should not be trusted, yet one conversation completely buys out Hamlet's allegiance. Furthermore, Hamlet senses shared power, or at least feels like he is connected with a proximity of power, when praising and endorsing Fortinbras (a foreigner who is more characteristic of King Hamlet than Hamlet himself). I suggest that we can change the narrative and examine how Hamlet's self-pity, not his introspection, rashly leads him to toe an "old school," traditional and imperialist, conservative party line. Doing this, we can see blind alt-right followers as Hamlets themselves, not because of their hesitancy, but rather because of their longing to think of themselves as being a part of a conservative power structure--a power structure that, in reality, conserves a rotten ideology while it slowly destroys them.

Brooke A. Carlson, Ph.D., Chaminade University

Higher Education and Twenty-First Century Humanism: Orchestrating the Public Shakes Across the Private Pedagogical Expanse

Where in higher education today is Shakespeare? As English Departments in the Humanities struggle with numbers, where does Shakespeare get read, staged, seen, or heard? Academia is certainly not the only place the Shakes shows up. As the world digitizes, on what new media might we see the Bard? These questions about a literary figure and body central to the canon raise questions about quality and colonialization, while the new media involved as a way to both access and engage the Shakes ask questions concerning pedagogy. The response, as I hope to get at here, involves a complicated blending of both the academic and public.

Teaching at a small university in the midst of the Pacific, in an English Department and Humanities Division "cabined, cribbed, [and] confined" on all sides, Shakespeare shows up as a class erratically, contrarily, and intermittently. As a text, however, Shakespeare shows up frequently in individual classes, particularly at the 200 level, in literature surveys. In the fall of 2018, I taught the single Departmental Shakespeare class, English 319 "Studies in Shakespeare Studies," online. I last taught this class face to face in the fall of 2016. In the spring of 2018, Jonathan Burton invited me into The Qualities of Mercy Project, a collaborative effort aimed at bringing together faculty and classrooms across the nation to interrogate the Shakes, The Merchant of Venice, and the matter of mercy. Each class would be asked to appropriate a scene from the play, which would, in turn, assemble a complete Merchant, to be shared publicly, via YouTube. The new media involved in education today would mean new student production not confined to a classroom, or even an LMS, but to the very public and widely accessible social media platform, YouTube. The divide between the classroom as private and the video as public is the 21st century call to arms for higher ed.

A group video project like this is not an analytical paper, although it will certainly make an argument, and allow others to do the same. But its very production, requiring multiple people and synchronous engagement, is contrary to the writing process of many classrooms, and troubling for the asynchronous space of online teaching (and to my class). Producing a video appropriation, moreover, asks students to wield information literacy, critical thinking, written communication, and oral communication in ways that may be new for them in the classroom. Many students are already using these skills outside the classroom on social media, but the ways I am asking them to use them, to do what the Qualities of Mercy Project is asking, is something new. To appropriate the Shakes on new media well, I craft a learning community wherein we can practice appropriating and wielding the tools across time and space. To do this effectively, we need to engage both the academic and public spaces in which we all co-exist. I must, moreover, create a dynamic, student-centered environment that includes a variety of ways for them to appropriate. Producing the Shakes in the classroom (media) and offering it to the public (media) brings both the academic and public into much-needed conversation.   At stake is how we teach, the Shakes, and our very humanity.

Rebecca L. Fall, The Newberry Library

"Lessons from Shakespeare on How to Use and Defuse Trumpian Nonsense"

In September 2019, Australian journalist Lenore Taylor described the bizarre challenges of covering the current U.S. President's "alarming incoherence." "[W]atching a full...press conference," she wrote, "I realised how much the reporting of Trump necessarily edits and parses his words, to...impose meaning where it is difficult to detect." In working to report his remarks accessibly, she admitted, "I've edited skittering, half-finished sentences to present them in some kind of consequential order," even if that meant amplifying language "that made little sense." As "alarming" as Taylor may find this process, it is not new. Politicians, public figures, and private citizens have long used nonsense as a means of gaining and maintaining power. Indeed, Taylor's experience recalls Shakespeare's representation of a similar phenomenon in Hamlet. In Act 4, Ophelia enters the stage "distracted" and singing nonsensical "snatches of old tunes" that have a powerful effect on her audience. She "speaks things in doubt / That carry but half sense.../ Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / The hearers to collection." As Taylor describes of her own efforts to cover Trump, Ophelia's audiences likewise "botch up [her] words to fit their own thoughts" and order them into coherence, "[t]hough nothing sure" (4.6.6-13).

Comparing premodern and present-day examples of public incoherence, my essay asks what we might learn from Shakespeare and other early modern writers about the high-powered rhetorical contortions of public figures like Trump today—and what solutions they might offer to mitigate the potentially destructive effects of such incoherence.

Philip Gilreath, University of Georgia

"A Thousand Hamlets": Shakespeare and the International Commonplace Book

My article takes a slightly different approach to the concept of a public Shakespeare. I examine a Chinese proverb frequently attributed to Shakespeare and disseminated on various quotation websites used by international students to find meaningful, authorizing statements to use in their university writing classes. Shakespeare is frequently cited for the automatic legitimacy invoked by his name and status. The work attributed to his name, as an open-source repository of literary material, offers an important site in which to discuss evolving notions of intellectual property. In Chinese, the quotation appears as follows:

一千个人眼中有一千个哈姆雷特

In English, it reads "A thousand Hamlets to the eyes of a thousand people," an enabling statement on subjectivity and reader-response: the way a thousand possible interpretations exist in relation to a singular object. Searched on Google in English it appears on Georgia Tech's Techstyle forum for multimodal pedagogy and the British Shakespeare Association's Education Network as a Chinese proverb about Shakespeare. On Chinese websites, including the reference sites my students use for help on their English literary essays as well as quotation/commonplace sites known as "**名人名言**," it is not a statement about Shakespeare but by Shakespeare: that is, a statement by the English literary authority functioning as a kind of apologia that sanctions the student's individual argument. This quotation emerges from an uncertain origin and is now propagated on the web as a source of authority or legitimacy. Though misattributed, the quotation is both strangely resilient and empowering. As such, it offers a compelling formulation of a "public" or communally constructed Shakespeare.

Yasmine Hachimi, University of California Davis

"Bring Up the Bodies: Erotic Tudor Fan Fiction and the Digital Archive

Shakespeare and Fletcher's Henry VIII or All Is True has not only left its mark on theater history, but also upon the historical imagination. The play stages Henry VIII's aggressive pursuit of Anne Boleyn, as well as public reaction to this scandalous affair. One such scene is during Anne's extravagant coronation, where an onlooker says, "Our king has all the Indies in his arms / And more and richer, when he strains that lady: / I cannot blame his conscience." In Henry VIII, Shakespeare began the trend of eroticizing Anne in popular adaptations, centering her as a figure within which the public's erotic fantasies could be realized. Even today, Anne is a hypersexualized figure in historical adaptations, such as Showtime's The Tudors.

This paper explores Anne as a figure of erotic investment within Henry VIII, Showtime's The Tudors, and erotic Tudor fan fiction on fanfiction.net. I argue that Anne's beautiful body is a particularly ideal site for fan fiction because the writer's mandate to interact with history allows them to pull Anne out of the heteroerotic dynamic in The Tudors and give her not just alternate endings but alternate partners. She remains eroticized-- and given the genre of erotic fan fiction, she must remain so-- but she is also broken free of the erotic relationship that was her undoing in history and in subsequent adaptations. Fans invested in redemption can reclaim her, writing stories where she survives the executioner's block and gets her happily ever after. Readers on fanfiction.net desire more interaction with the stories on the site so they can get what they want out of the fiction, but that fiction is their way of fulfilling their desires for The Tudors show and its unfulfilling interaction with history.

Examining erotic Tudor fan fiction allows us to think through the potential of the digital archive as an active space where fans reimagine, play with, and participate in the creation of history. Not only does this allow fans the opportunity to interact with historical narratives and history, but it also makes history and the Tudors, in particular, more accessible to a wider and perhaps more diverse audience.

Sawyer Kemp, University of California, Davis

Accessibility as Adaptation in Digital Performance (or, The Work of Art in the Age of the Digital, Ubiquitous, Handheld Reproduction Device)

As critical and performance Shakespeare institutions move away from a mode that values Shakespeare as a single author genius, they increasingly move toward engagement metrics that attempt to describe or measure something audiences gain experientially and phenomenologically through the performance event that "Shakespeare" as an institution facilitates. The valuative term given to this practice is "accessibility," a word borrowed from Disability Studies that comes to describe a range of public-facing support practices like lower-cost ticketing, educational lectures, updated language, socio-politically motivated production design, and a host of other curation and storytelling initiatives. And yet, these modes of access still prioritize "expert-curated encounters" routed through editors, scholars, and directors. The emphasis on centralizing circulation through an elite few, simultaneously declaring Shakespeare's relatability and the specialization required to access that relatability, is a double bind that is foundational to Shakespeare studies and performance.

But what if direct access, rather than unidirectional "outreach," is prioritized in the act of performance? This essay examines Buzzfeed's 2018 Instagram adaptation of Romeo and Juliet to argue that accessibility is fundamentally a praxis of adaptation; that a Shakespeare made "accessible" is necessarily a multilateral exchange in which the text object may (will, in fact) be altered. Titled "Romeo ♥ Juliet," this multi/social media event makes significant interventions in and departures from Shakespeare's text to foreground a queer reading of the text while still being accountable to a legacy of violence against queer bodies and, subsequently, an audience that it sees as potentially precarious.

Emily R Lathrop, George Washington University

"Lend me your ears:" Public Engagement, Shakespeare, and The Podcast

What does it mean to bring Shakespeare to the public? This question has been at the heart of The Public Theater since its beginnings as the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1954, when Joe Papp decided to produce free Shakespeare for the people of New York City. Many of the initiatives Joe Papp started in his tenure, like Shakespeare in the Park and the recently revived Mobile Unit, are still mainstays of The Public's programming. This dedication to accessibility has led The Public to create a number of engagement initiatives, such as Public Shakespeare, Public Works, and Public Forum. This paper will look specifically at The Public's newest branch of engagement: their podcast, Public Square.

Podcasts have proliferated in the last decade, reaching people through multiple platforms and allowing for audiences to listen at their leisure wherever they like. What does it mean for a theatre to have a podcast, particularly one that is so invested in public engagement? This paper takes up this question and looks at the place of podcasts in the world of audience engagement and theatre. Are podcasts a form of a talkback? How do podcasts allow audience members to control and change their experience? What might it mean for a theatre to record in-person engagement and to post it digitally, for public consumption? How might forms of media, like a podcast, help make institutions more accessible to local and global audiences and communities?

Emily Rendek, University of South Carolina

"Among the buzzing pleased multitudes": Shakespeare and Buzzfeed

Is this quote from Shakespeare or Tumblr? Which Shakespeare character is your soulmate? What Shakespeare quote should you live by? Buzzfeed is filled with quizzes, ranging anywhere from testing our knowledge of Shakespeare to providing information in the form of listicles, such as what movies are based on Shakespeare's plays. With well over 100 posts on Shakespeare (dating as far back as 2007), Buzzfeed's network demonstrates how Shakespeare remains a popular source for social sharing. What can we learn from these various representations of Shakespeare? My essay will explore how Buzzfeed has shaped our understanding of Shakespeare and perpetuated the idea that knowledge of his works provides cultural capital. In 2006, both Buzzfeed and Twitter were founded and Facebook opened to the general public; since then Shakespeare has been a viral sensation both influencing and being influenced by our digital age.