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**Shakespeare After Queer Theory  
Project Abstracts**

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“You kiss by th’ book”: Queering Editorial Practice in *Romeo & Juliet*

With the knowledge that historical distance makes our understanding of early modern cultural practices rather opaque, this paper will complicate the current notions of the historical representation of kissing on the early modern stage in order to contest established editorial practice. Despite the assertions of scholars such as Ann Pasternak Slater, who asserts in *Shakespeare the Director* that kisses in Shakespeare’s plays “need little historic or symbolic gloss... their essential meaning does not change,” recent work in the field of early modern sexuality studies has demonstrated that we cannot simply map our understanding of sexuality onto the people of this period, nor can we assume proscriptions that appeared in print reflect the actual historical reality of their sexual lives. The meaning of kissing is contextual and across time and space its performance has varied widely: socially or sexually it might be performed mouth-to-mouth, mouth-to-cheek, mouth-to-hand, or mouth-to-fingers-to-lips, while standing or kneeling, and can vary in number, duration, and the presence of an auditory component. Each of these divergent practices potentially signals something different, and these cultural differences would have been represented on English early modern stages. For example, editorial emendations that insist that the original texts of *Romeo and Juliet* imply that Romeo and Juliet must perform a heteronormative mouth-to-mouth sexual kiss during their shared sonnet are anachronistically misreading a staged public, social moment performed by an adult male and boy actor as one in which a private, sexualized gesture between heteronormative actors occurs. In fact, despite the assertion by generations of editors that readers need the stage direction “he kisses her” to understand the text, on English stages the actors did not kiss for almost 150 years. This lack of an onstage heteronormative kiss is significant, because by removing anachronistic interpretations of this gesture and recontextualizing kissing historically, we can potentially avoid heteronormative biases and make visible the possibility of queer or feminist interpretations of early modern plays on both the page and stage.

**Anthony Burton**

SAA 2020

Shakespeare After Queer Theory

## ABSTRACT

“We be of one blood, ye and I.”

However queer theory is defined, it offers an inviting platform from which to consider Shakespeare’s works because -- like other recent critical approaches such as Freudian/psychological, Marxist, post-colonial, feminist -- it can generate new and fascinating avenues into the dramatic and thought content of the plays. But its success in doing so only confirms to me Robertson Davies’ observation that “in terms of Shakespeare and Goethe and the mighty Greeks . . . supreme works of art are themselves convincing arguments in favor of any theory to which they can be attached, however frail the attachment many be.”

Being large and containing multitudes, Shakespeare expands what queer theory contracts, using the fundamental categories of male and female. Without questioning the physical reality of gender differences, he explodes the idea that they are something essential and shows them to be portrays them as social constructs, relatively tolerable in a healthy society but self-destructives over simplifications in times of crisis. Behind the merely social constructs Shakespeare portrays the complete human as androgyne, an embodiment of the principle we know from the Bible in the story of Adam before the separation of Eve, more mystically as the androgynous Judeo-Christian Immortal Anthropos/Sophia, and now more familiar as the principles of yin and yang. For all these, the gender into which one’s fluid individuality is born is only a partial and situational indicator of personhood, not unlike rank, nationality, or race. I will examine several verbal and dramatic devices Shakespeare uses to point us toward this understanding.

**Dr. Dan Gates**, Saginaw Valley SU

Queering *The Duchess of Malfi*

Critics have long recognized the queerness of *The Duchess of Malfi*; in enumerating its queerer elements, one might include the remarkable disunity of its plot, Ferdinand’s incestuous desires, and his sensational lycanthropy. This essay argues that the Duchess’s marriage to Antonio is one of the play’s queerer features, even though it is a heterosexual union. Its queerness derives in part from its secrecy, which renders its legal validity uncertain; it occupies a conceptual space similar to the closet. Yet this secrecy also requires the complicity of the Duchess’s maid Cariola, whose intimate knowledge of the marriage makes her in a sense a party to it, blurring the marriage’s boundaries. Examining the Duchess’s marriage from this perspective may offer a way of tracing the category of “queer” in early modern drama. The Duchess’s marriage to Antonio is not homosexual, but it is queer by virtue of its formal difference from the patriarchal standard of marriage; viewed one way, the Duchess outranks her socially inferior husband; viewed another way, he is the head of the household as the husband. Even as the demise of queer theory is

repeatedly invoked, this paper suggests that “queerness” as deviance remains a necessary and illuminating conceptual category for early modern literature.

**Jason Gleckman**

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Homosocial Love in Shakespeare’s Procreation Sonnets

In the tenth sonnet of *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, the speaker suddenly moves from criticizing the mysterious young man for his selfishness in not having children – a criticism that has characterized the first nine sonnets and reached its apex in the brutal first half of sonnet ten – to expressing the relationship between the two men in terms of love. If one reads the sonnet sequence (as other sonnet sequences were read) as presenting a narrative progression, by the thirteenth sonnet the speaker is very deeply in love indeed, referring to his friend as “dear my love” and, as Andrew Gurr points out, moving pointedly from the use of ‘thou’ to ‘you’ and creating “a real intimacy” between the poet and his subject.

The opening quatrain of sonnet thirteen suggests to me the tones of a Shakespearean wife cajoling a husband, and in this paper I’ll try to articulate the possibility of a detailed fantasy of a homosexual ‘family romance’ in the procreation sonnets. In this reading of the sonnets, (male) children function not only as a way of generating heirs, but also as a bond between male lovers. So whereas the future wife/mother figure is often presented, in the procreation sonnets, in a generic manner -- simply as a receptacle for the young man’s seed (the ‘usury’ metaphors in these sonnets is one way to express this), the male children resulting from a marriage (or perhaps even a tryst) serve deeper purposes, perpetuating the young man’s beauty and tying the older and younger man together in their love of this beauty – a beauty communicable primarily through procreation (in the young man’s case) and love sonnets (in Shakespeare’s). Moreover, in these procreation sonnets, Shakespeare may even be exploring some alternative metaphors for procreation, more suitable for male figures, such as grafting and distillation which separate notions of sexuality from the female body.

**Emily L. Loney**

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“Shakespeare’s Quartos and the Queer Potentials of Textual Variance”

Seminar: Shakespeare After Queer Theory

In 1623 John Heminge and Henry Condell wrote to a “great variety of readers,” asking the reading public to not judge them harshly for their work editing William Shakespeare’s First

Folio.<sup>1</sup> Heminge and Condell justify and advertise their Folio to readers by contrasting it with the “maimed and deformed” quarto texts of Shakespeare’s plays that had preceded this new edition. With ableist language that contrasts the earlier quartos with the Folio plays which are “cured and perfect of their limbs,” Heminge and Condell use the disability of the earlier texts to justify the existence of the 1623 Folio. The plays, moreover, are “orphans” and the patrons “guardians,” while Heminge and Condell are friends doing “an office to the dead.” Authorship, in the paratexts of the First Folio, is parental, and texts become a means for the author’s memory to outlive his own death. Yet the “maimed and deformed” quartos are marginalized by Heminge and Condell, purportedly out of some anxiety that they will not properly preserve their parent’s legacy. Beginning from this context of the cast-aside quartos and their variant texts, my paper considers how constructions of authorship entwine with constructions of heteronormativity, and it discusses the queer or queer-crip potentials of textual variance in early modern print history.

Specifically, I focus my reading on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and its textual variants. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus suggests that Hermia should be wax into which her father’s seal has been imprinted, advancing a theory of perfect replication that suggests the linearity and self-replication of heteronormativity (Ahmed 2006), as well as recalling the “perfect” textual children of the First Folio. Yet the play allows for more unruly, queer, and, as Puck says, “preposterous” forms of relationship and embodiment than the perfect replication of parents in their children (and union of these children in parentally-approved heteronormative marriages) that Theseus imagines. My paper suggests that these unruly and preposterous forms of relationship can offer a queer framework from which to understand the play’s textual variants. Textual variation was a common feature of the early modern print market: I suggest that the fact of this variation could serve as a sort of anti-normative “form” or “paratext” that itself made meaning. Bringing together queer theory and book history, I look to Shakespeare’s maimed quartos and the textual variants of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for models for doing textual scholarship after queer theory.

**Gillian Knoll**

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Queer Theory after Shakespeare:  
John Lyly’s Pandora, Topping from the Bottom

My essay flips the terms of our seminar title in order to explore the legacy of queer theory in early modern studies beyond Shakespeare. Specifically, I explore the decidedly queer but generally under-analyzed plays of John Lyly. Queer theorists have recognized the similarities between Shakespeare and us, but Lyly’s plays are often set apart, insulated by apparent historical difference. My essay seeks to bridge this historical and disciplinary gap by exploring the queer identity of John Lyly’s Pandora, the central character in *The Woman in the Moon*. Pandora begins the play as she is an unnamed “lifeless Image” that Nature animates at the request of four male shepherds. She is created to fill a heteronormative sexual role—the shepherds long “to propagate the issue of our kind”—but ends up taking a queer and meandering path over the course of Lyly’s play; her ever-changing disposition is reshaped through the influence of different planets, each of whom fills Pandora with a ruling passion, from melancholy to madness

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from John Heminge and Henry Condell, “To the Great Variety of Readers,” in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Red Globe Press, 2007), lxii.

and mutability. Pandora's sexual agency is a product of her capacity to "feel the influence" of each planet and to absorb that influence as they "bend [their] forces 'gainst" her.

Pandora tops from the bottom in several ways. First, ontologically, she is constituted by her receptivity to planetary influence but at various points seduces and overwhelms those planets. Second, dramaturgically, the planets sit on high and gaze down on Pandora until the end when she ascends to the top, taking her place at the moon. And third, sexually, she is defined by her receptivity but often acts out—she aggressively beats one suitor, she beds down three others in quick succession, and she ends the play embracing mutability as her defining feature. *The Woman in the Moon* stages the drama of forming an identity through eroticized receptivity; for Pandora, topping from the bottom is more than a bedroom practice. It is also a way of being, a marker of sexual subjectivity, in the early modern period as today.

**Lisa Robinson**

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The Sea as Queering Power: Othello's Fluid Futurity (title still being worked on!)

As humans, we're often convinced that nature and landscapes are solid things. The ground we walk on is penetrable, but it supports the weight of humanity. But when thinking about a fluid sense of nature, water immediately comes to mind. Its physical fluidity marks a connection to the same fluid freedom of queerness. Water distinctly separates humanistic knowledge making, relying on what is directly in front of our faces, and replaces the fear of the unknown with the fear of what lies on the other side of the water. A separation that lives beyond the view of the horizon, like the sea separating heteronormative life from its queer potential. José Esteban Muñoz's thoughts on queer futurity take sail here. This tangling of ideas forms a cohesive structure that labels the sea as an othering space. The bodies that cross it, the powers that they connect to on the other side of the unknowable distance, they all bring themselves back as different creatures. Muñoz claims that to see the horizon as queer, takes our viewpoints out of normal thoughts of temporality. That "opening oneself up to such a perception of queerness as manifestation in and of ecstatic time offers queers much more than the meager offerings of pragmatic politics."<sup>2</sup> And the return or the movement of bodies along its vast space, is as inherent to queerness as breathing. Therefore the bodies that step on land after a sea crossing exist outside of the stranglehold of heteronormativity. However, that does not stop normative society from trying to restrict those bodies. They are othered from the moment they step on shore. In an attempt to constrict their fluid power, their bodies are marked as different, violent, and harmful to a strict human way of life.

Like *Othello's* titular character, a body marked as other can become the victim of these practices. Words and images of normalcy take root in their watery bodies. The sea, which moves Othello's body before the play even begins, becomes his queer familiar. Othello's water language is emotionally significant, the weight of which impacts the play from the very beginning. Utilizing Othello as a case study for evaluating the sea's queer potential, I will argue that his body's marked

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<sup>2</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009. 32.

otherness can be read as queerness. The “fountain for which [his] current runs”<sup>3</sup> risks drying up, to no longer exist within societal parameters. He brings difference and changeability to the landscape, wielding the potential of the sea with every step. Walking along the paths of queer theorists like Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz, and ecocritical thought from scholars like Vin Nardizzi and Lowell Duckert, I strive to find the generative potential of the sea as a queer future, but one that ultimately does not require the longevity of the human body.

## **Abraham Stoll**

SAA 20

Shakespeare After Queer Theory Research Seminar

### *Transgendered Casting and the Actor*

We may have entered a new moment in Shakespeare production, in which female actors are cast in leading male roles with regularity. In major theatres women have recently played Lear, Hamlet, Brutus, Macduff, Mercutio, Prospero and Timon, and Faustus, and many more roles. It seems that such transgendered casting has become normative, increasingly not a pointed challenge but a normal thing.

This exciting new practice can be seen as a success of queer theory (and of course the related political movements that have fought for trans and gay rights and gender equity.) More particularly, the wide acceptance of transgendered casting is a practical expression of Judith Butler’s formative insight that gender is performative. Given the history of Shakespeare production, and the clear queerness of the plays, it is easy to understand that Shakespeare would be a place in which gender as performance would become normalized – in which mainstream institutions and audiences would accept that Brutus can be performed by a woman, just as ancient Rome can be performed in modern America. But normativity is itself a vexed destination. When queer theory begins to win the argument, it risks losing its queerness, as David Halperin argues: “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.”

This paper explores the idea of normative transgender casting by looking at its application in two specific productions. The Old Globe / USD Shiley Graduate Theatre Program, a classical training program for actors, has recently begun making transgendered casting a regular part of its Shakespeare productions. I will discuss a production of *Julius Caesar*, in which women played Brutus and Cassius, and a production of *Twelfth Night*, in which women played Orsino, Feste, and Fabian. Very different approaches to these plays yielded an array of problems and opportunities. One common challenge for our actors was the task of inhabiting a male character in such a way as to serve the story-telling needs of these productions. We came to think of this as the need to get beyond drag, so as to act without slipping into the familiar energies of parody and camp. I am looking to describe this effort in terms of Butler’s reevaluation of performativity in *Bodies that Matter*, where she complicates the performance of gender by expanding from the mere choice to don a costume, to the more complex process of “citationality and resignification.”

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<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, William. “The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice,” *The Arden Shakespeare*. Ed. Ayanna Thompson. Bloomsbury, 2016. IV.ii.57-60.

I hope to use Butler's notion of citation to better understand the actor's work of developing gesture, voice and movement on stage.