

SAA 2020: Shakespeare and the Mind: Cognition, Emotion, Affect

Seminar Abstracts

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Collective Affect of the 1970s: Vladimir Vysotsky's Hamlet

Vladimir Vysotsky was a cult singer in the former Soviet Union, who played the role of Shakespeare's Hamlet in Theater on Taganka, a major Moscow theater, between 1971 and 1980. Vysotsky's distinctive voice and his image as a lyrical, free-thinking dissident captivated millions of Soviet people and fused the figure of Hamlet, whom Vysotsky played for a decade, with the image of the popular singer. Vysotsky became Hamlet, and Hamlet became Vysotsky. In the published memoirs of Vysotsky's contemporaries, his colleagues describe how Hamlet helped Vysotsky find himself and gave a concrete form to the idea of freedom he stood for. So Alla Demidova, the actress who played Gertrude, asserts, "He – Hamlet – tells us what is happening in Vysotsky's soul."¹ Similarly, Yurii Ljubimov, a renowned theater director, felt compelled to stage a new play, *Hamlet without Hamlet*, after Vysotsky's death: it is Hamlet who died, and not just Vysotsky. These critics link Hamlet and Vysotsky as oppositional figures that gave voice to the millions of Soviet people.

In this essay, I would like to look at Vysotsky's Hamlet through an affective lens -- as a kind of "mood" or "personality" that Vysotsky projected and brought to his interpretation of the role. The essay attempts to present "celebrity" as a concentration of affective moods and longings of a particular time. Queer affect scholars like Lauren Berlant and Sarah Ahmed taught us to look at affect politically as a kind of orientation towards certain things and a turning away from others. On the other hand, scholars of the former U.S.S.R. have discussed such affective phenomena as "emotional socialism" (for example, the U.S.S.R. has collapsed, but some people remained emotionally "there," now outcasts in the country they do not recognize).² Others similarly described how in the Soviet Union, romantic love was perceived as a "bourgeois emotion" because it looks only at the individual's desires, not big, global factors like the fate of a nation or the constraints of one's social class. Combining Soviet history ("stagnation" period of the 1970s) and the attention to affect, we can

¹ Alla Demidova, "Kakim pomnju i ljublju" [The way I remember and love him]. *Vse ne tak, rebyata: Vladimir Vysotsky v vospominaniyah druzei i kolleg, sobrannyh Igorem Kohanovskim pri uchastii Dmitriya Bykova*. ["Everything is messed up, guys": Vladimir Vysotsky in the memories of his friends and colleagues]. AST Publishing: Moscow, 2017, p. 167. My translation.

² "Emotional socialism" is discussed in Svetlana Aleksievich, *Vremya Second-Hand* [The Time of Second-Hand]. Publisher: Vremya, 2013.

describe Vysotsky's performance of Hamlet as emblematic of the collective affective state of the time.

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Transformations in Hamlet from Fear to Love's Perfection Through Labors of Gratitude and Regret

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* contains characters who display significant fear, gratitude, and regret. At the time of the play's writing or revision by Shakespeare, *The Book of Common Prayer* required a certain scripture reading numerous times every year which claimed, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear..." (1 Jn 4:18, Geneva). Patrick Colm Hogan's work on emotion explains how regret can be potentially transformative, and Lewis Hyde's work on gifts, how gratitude can also be life-changing. Both result in feelings of indebtedness: in the case of gratitude, for the imbalance caused by the reception of a potentially life-changing gift; in the case of regret, for imbalances or injustices caused by the harm we do. Both regret and gratitude can play a part in love's perfection. As key characters in the play process gratitude and regret, a number of them are slowly changed, becoming less fearful of danger or death. In spite of the play's many ambiguities, Hamlet, Ophelia, and Gertrude can be seen in this light. Hogan, Hyde, and key biblical allusions in the play can help us understand how Shakespeare, his players, and early audiences may have understood fear, gratitude, and regret.

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A Raging Mother, a Dead Child and a Suicidal Prince: the Theatre of Sympathy in *King John* and *Hamlet*

In the summer of 1596, Shakespeare lost his only son, Hamnet who was 11 years old. Though no explicit record of his paternal grief exists, it is surely not coincidence that soon after the child's death, Shakespeare depicted a mother in *King John* who is so overwrought with the loss of her young son that she is driven to thoughts of suicide. In little Arthur, Shakespeare for the first time places a physically fragile, and yet rhetorically powerful child at the heart of his dramatic action. Arthur first saves himself from assassination through the sheer affective magnetism of his "innocent prate", only to die anyway from a fall as he tries to flee the walls of his prison. The tragedy of Arthur's death creates a theatre of sympathy which speaks to Martha Nussbaum's insight that in emotion "we recognise our

own passivity before the ungoverned events of life” (*Upheavals of Thought*, 78). Shakespeare will go on to write one of the supreme examples of a character caught in the strange passivity of an interim between the forming of a fatal resolution and carrying it out. In grieving for her child, Arthur’s mother, Constance insists: “I am not mad; I would to God I were!”; in mourning his father and plotting revenge, Hamlet determines “to put an antic disposition on”. And yet, Hamlet’s “madness” proffers a radically modern sense of self-consciousness and interiority that reveals a profound disconnection between the self and the order of things. This paper will think through how the death of Shakespeare’s child contributed to the creation of characters who are profoundly out of love with life and thus to a drama that registers the non-resolution in human experience.

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Feeling, Consciousness and *the Melting Mood*: Emotional Tears in Shakespeare

In the proposed paper, I will situate the topic of emotional tears in the context of ongoing discussions in cognitive neuro-science about the evolution of emotional tears as something characteristically human, that would have been possible only when communities were formed and the socio-moral emotion of sympathy had evolved. As we know, in 16th-17th century literature, *emotional tears* play a significant part in storytelling, poetry and performance. The purpose of this discussion is to link the figurative trope of emotional tears to a specific neuro-cognitive question, that, while for animals and humans the function of tears is primarily biological (lubrication and cleansing of the eye) why would emotional tears have evolved? Was it to seek sympathy of others in distress. Seeking, withholding, and apportionment of sympathy is a perennial public and private issue, though culturally defined emotion rules differ. I see emotional tears as a significant figure, for instance the early avoidance of tears in *King Lear*, profusion of Titus Andronicus’s tears in the middle of the play and of Othello’s copious tears at the end of the play. In this brief discussion, I will draw examples from these three plays, and *As You Like It* (animal tears). From a historicist perspective, emotional tears fall into three categories, *contra natural* tears, brought on by anger, shame, humiliation; *natural tears* associated with grief, compassion, separation, suffering and physical pain; and, *supra natural* tears related to religious devotion. The perspective drawn from cognitive neuroscience will also divide into three foundational assumptions –a) emotional tears are uniquely human; b) are generally regarded as reliable signals of distress; c) relate to social bonding and group interaction, facilitating body transparency and trust, or not? From a dramaturgical perspective I will divide emotional tears into a) *expressive* (of states of consciousness); b) *communicative* (soliciting sympathy and trust, succeeding or failing at it, the why and wherefore of it); c) *communitive and expressive*, such as Cordelia’s tears described in exalted language. I don’t yet know what my final conclusions will be. It will be something about transparency and trust when it comes to formation of emotion-communities; and, articulation of feeling states where the dramaturgy is driven by concretization of consciousness states.

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Empathy is Complicated: Simulation, Inference, and A Midsummer Night's Dream

The processes of empathic understanding and response are highly complex. They include repeated cycles of perception, recollection, inference, and simulation that are inseparable from one another since they actually provide the conditions for one another's operation. For example, even when we set ourselves the narrowly defined task of figuring out how someone might react to a particular event, we need to set the parameters for our simulation of the other person, specifying immediate social and material circumstances, more enduring interests, long-term dispositions, and a range of other factors. Moreover, this is all colored by our interpersonal stance toward the person (thus, whether our emotional responses to his or her feelings are parallel, reversed—as in Schadenfreude—or merely indifferent). Finally, we may always modulate our response through further inference and simulation, including comparative judgment about the relative fortitude or merit of the person, judgement that affects our feelings of compassion or lack thereof.

All these processes are on display in our spontaneous and effortful empathic processing of literature, whether that is aimed at the author, a character, or a particular audience or reader. My first purpose in analyzing Theory of Mind (ToM) in the opening scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is to work through some of this complexity by considering particular instances in detail, thereby making the processes more concrete and comprehensible. More generally, I hope to suggest the value of looking at literary works for this sort of undertaking. In the study of empathy, as in other areas of human psychology, literary works often present us with unusually well-developed, effectively articulated, and nuanced representations of human feeling, as manifest in social interaction and modified by self-reflection. This makes such works well-suited to be part of our attempt to understand affect in the human mind and human society. Finally, I also hope to bring to light a few previously less well recognized aspects of Shakespeare's play.

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'A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass': Shakespeare and the Suffering Imagination

This essay reads how the mental perturbations are frequently portrayed in Shakespeare's sonnets alongside early modern ideas of stoicism and materialism. This essay posits that Shakespeare often derails the immaterial qualities of the mind in favour of a corporeal

conception of consciousness. This is explored in sonnets 85 and 110 wherein Shakespeare enriches our understanding of the workings of the mind under duress, with recourse to language at its most material. In other words, the unpredictable and often self-destructive swirls of the suffering imagination can be better understood with, Shakespeare claims, with its shared commonality with the fraught entanglement of the human body with the natural world.

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Disability, Emotional Contagion, and the Affective Economy of Fear in *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621)

Much has been made of Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's sympathetic portrayal of Elizabeth Sawyer, the witch in *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), a character who deftly showcases how stigma accompanying age, class, and gender facilitate transformation into a witch. However, critical attention has not been paid to Sawyer's non-normative body, described in both the play and its source text as "crooked and deformed." This paper seeks to amend this critical gap by reading *The Witch of Edmonton* through the frameworks of Feminist Disability Studies and theories of emotional contagion. By demonstrating how individual fear of disease, disability, and social decline transforms otherwise godly citizens into agents of violence, I demonstrate how theatrical representations of disability might stage broader cultural anxiety over the meaning of nonnormative bodies and the contemporary belief that bodily health could function as a vector for interpreting the health of not only the soul, but the body politic. The body of the witch, a figure upon whom all sorts of social, cultural, political, and gendered anxieties were mapped, serves as a particularly rich site of exploration. By attending to the embodied position of the witch on the early modern stage, particularly the ways Sawyer as well as other characters describe her physical differences via a shared lexicon of animality and disease, I advance Sara Ahmed's claim that bodies marked as *other* are "stickier," and thus more likely to attract emotions like hate and fear. The "stickiness" of a disabled, impoverished, elderly woman provides an apt avenue to explore the affective economy of fear that drives the social violence in the play. Ultimately, my reading of *The Witch of Edmonton* calls attention to the particularities of the body, and in doing so, reminds us that affect and emotion are not disembodied psychological states, but instead are experienced within and practiced upon bodies subject to social and cultural violence and valuation, some more so than others.

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Human Nature in Shakespeare's Plays, Through the Lens of Social Psychology

As a body of work, Shakespeare's plays might be described as illuminating the kinds of illogical, foolish actions people can perform, with consequences ranging from absurdity to tragedy. The discipline of social psychology can be described in much the same way. Social psychology research often suggests that these apparently irrational actions are rooted in processing guidelines that are adaptive (in the evolutionary sense) and functional most of the time, but can "misfire" in some situations. In this paper I propose that William Shakespeare was an outstanding intuitive social psychologist, and that the lasting appeal of his work stems from his ability to depict these misfires in ways to which humans over centuries and across cultures can deeply relate. To support this proposal, I combine evidence from empirical social psychology and affective science with examples from Shakespeare's plays. While acknowledging the importance of historical and cultural context in these stories, I also note the evidence suggesting universal themes of human nature in Shakespeare's work.