

“Shakespeare’s Divination” Abstracts **SAA 2020**

Rachel Lacy Boersma, “Sacramental Tokens in *All’s Well That Ends Well*”

This paper examines two stage properties in light of sixteenth-century debates on material ontology and Protestant theology. The point of connection is the word “token,” which is used by early English Reformers to describe sacramental signs. Shakespeare also uses it to refer to two rings in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. These rings signify two pledges—the King’s “token” (5.3.92) represents his promise to help Helena, and Bertram’s “token” (4.2.65, 5.3.64) stands for conjugal validity and future progeny. The props manifest historical anxieties, which are latent in the play, about matter’s spiritual dimension according to Anglican sacramental theology after nominalism.

On the one hand, the King’s ring is a slippery signifier. It refers to many meanings in the final scene, and it is bound up in circles of exchange, substitution, and deception. As such, it evokes the nominalist postulate that a sign is ontologically distinct from that which it signifies, and that the relationship between things and their referents is ascribed rather than inherent. On the other hand, Bertram’s token seems to effect real spiritual change. It converts his rebelliousness to devotion and brings about communion and comic resolution. In this sense, Bertram’s token recalls older ontological paradigms of the sign, indicating a certain sacramental theology in which tokens participate in that which they signify. It also evokes an “ontology of universalist materialism,” which Peter Struck identifies in Stoic and Neoplatonist philosophies, and which inflected Reformed considerations of the sacraments as signs. Departing from Struck’s association of language and the material, I will examine the ways in which *All’s Well’s* tokens engage the play’s contemporary concerns with sacramental ontology through the problem of the King’s illness, the notions of promises and deferral, as well as Lafew’s suspicion that “the age of miracles is past” (2.3.1).

Charlotte Artese, “Macduff and the Dragon-Slayers: Cesarean Birth and Prophecy in *Macbeth* and Traditional Narratives”

Macduff is a member of a tribe of unborn champions who vanquish evil in medieval and early modern narratives. In legends, epics, sagas, romances, and folktales, heroes born by cesarean section are the subjects of prophecy and go on to defeat dragons. Witches—in one case a “weird lady of the woods”—and other supernatural beings prophesy about these babies and their future victories. A wild, uninhabited place is often the setting for this fortunetelling, as in *Macbeth*: the Weird Sisters first meet Macbeth and Banquo on the heath, when the men have not quite reached Forres (1.1.6, 1.3.39). This narrative nexus of an unborn hero, a prophecy, a witch, and a dragon suggests an analogue to the struggle between Macbeth and Macduff, with Macbeth paralleling the dragon. These stories can provide us with insight as to how Shakespeare’s original audiences might have responded to the Weird Sisters’ prophecy that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.79-80). If members of the audience knew of this traditional motif-cluster, in which a hero with a violent birth, the subject of a prophecy, kills an evil being, that could affect their engagement with Shakespeare’s play. The audience would be primed to see Macbeth as the fearsome dragon devastating the country who will ultimately be conquered by Macduff, the unborn hero.

John Ellis-Etchison, “Portentum, Prodigium, Monstrum: Divination and the Birth of Tyranny in *Richard III*”

Shakespeare treats childbirth as a signifying act in *Richard III* (1592), a form of divination that unlocks the secrets of an individual’s personal and political future. As one of the contributors from Theophraste Renaudot’s *General Collection of Discourses* (1664), for instance, suggests, “Augures ... divin’d from birds, beasts, prodigies, and accidents, ... when any good was to befall [a] Family, and ... upon some approaching evil.” This interlocutor’s reference to prodigies and accidents situates childbirth as a powerful indicator of divine beneficence or displeasure, and forecasts monstrous births as a divine omen rather than an occasional error in nature. In the play, Shakespeare relies on his audience’s knowledge of such matters to decode and presage the significance of Richard’s monstrous birth. Throughout the play, other characters, particularly Queen Margaret, the Duchess of York, and Lady Anne Neville, use the language of childbirth to comment on Richard’s political devolution and monstrous threat. Various women refer to Richard as an “elvish-marked, abortive hog,” a “deadly eye[d]” basilisk, whose monstrosity “wast sealed in [his] nativity,” fating him to become a “troublers of the poor world’s peace,” and “[a] cockatrice ... hatch’d to the world” that “dost infect [the] eyes” of those around him (1.3.215-28; 4.1.54; 1.2.151). Shakespeare uses the notion of monstrous birth to portend Richard’s destruction of the civil vitality of England, connecting his disastrous birth with his failed sovereignty, through specific animalized and monstrous imagery (boar and cockatrice/basilisk) to signal particular kinds of immorality (greed and lust), but also and more largely with notions of political monstrosity within the period, particularly tyranny. Thus, Richard’s troubled birth marks him as dangerous on personal and political levels, as an individual and as a diseased sovereign head threatening to contaminate both his sovereign superbody and the corporate body politic of his people.

Ben Jeffrey, “Know This Far Forth’: Higher Worlds and the Romances”

Where is the “outside” of *The Tempest*? What I mean by this question is that in each of the other romances there is at least the appearance of a realm above or beyond the main world of the action, inhabited by divine beings who – crucially – intervene into the plot at certain key moments. In *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* there are the climatic dream-visions featuring Diana and Jupiter, respectively, and in *The Winter’s Tale* the judgment on Leontes and Hermione is delivered from Apollo’s oracle. *The Tempest* is different. Despite the copious magic in the play and the otherworldly spirits of the island, we are told that the latter are merely “weak ministers” beneath Prospero’s control. Unlike the other romances, there is no semblance of a higher plane of reality governing the action of the plot or with the power to intrude into it authoritatively. This formal dissimilarity between *The Tempest* and the three plays it is usually grouped with is a starting point for considering the different ontological horizons implicit in each. The supernatural visitations in *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter’s Tale* imply a universe in which human desire can be answered or checked by a non-human beyond (notably a non-Christian beyond). Although clearly *The Tempest* represents an enchanted world in its own way, it cannot be that this enchantment has the same meaning or fantasy-content as the other plays given the apparent absence of any such active beyond. In which case, how different is the framework of the play? I make the case that this much-subdued sense of providence matters because it makes it far more

possible to think (even if this thought is one that the play would ultimately reject) that there is no higher order at work; or that insofar as there is such an order, it cares nothing for the wishes of these agents in particular.

Phebe Jensen, “The Poison of Supposed Prophecies: Astrological Divination in Shakespeare’s First Tetralogy”

By the 1590s astrological divination was at once an accepted part of natural philosophy and an art regularly attacked as a type of transgressive superstition, magic, and necromancy. In this paper, I will be arguing that the plays in Shakespeare’s first tetralogy—especially *1 Henry VI*—explore this tension. I will establish the parameters of the debate over astrological divination as it developed in the 1580s in works concerning the great conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in 1583, including Richard Harvey’s *An Astrologically Prognostication* (1583) and Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton’s *A Defensative Against the Poyson of Supposed Prophetes* (1583). In this context, I hope to show that the astrological divination in the *1 Henry VI* plays are purposely contrasted with transgressive magic. Astrological divination had a dangerous edge, engaged within the plays, that meant it was easily associated with necromancy and demonism. Yet at the same time, for Shakespeare’s original audience in the 1590s, astrological divination was a useful, scientific tool with which to think through God’s will as it operated in the momentous events of history, whereby the fortunes of individual bodies constructed at nativity and influenced by the stars could be analyzed to predict the outcomes of battles, the rise and fall of great ones, and the course of the Hundred Year’s War.

Dan Normandin, “Husbandry and Futurity in Prospero’s Masque”

Divination may demand the resources of the super- and extrahuman, but in Shakespeare’s last plays it also emerges from humans’ own material engagements with the natural environment. In the nuptial masque that Prospero “directs” in Act 4, scene 1 of *The Tempest* to celebrate Miranda’s match with Ferdinand, ecological imagery seems to absorb conventional divinations of future connubial prosperity: hopes for offspring give way to a prophecies of a general “spring” that can arrive “in the very end of harvest” (4.1.114-115). Building on interpretations that link this striking vision of ceaseless natural growth to husbandry tropes in early modern colonization rhetoric, I argue for the masque as a vision of futurity in which the divine is supplanted by the human, the numinous by the material. Ceres’s blessing on “Earth’s increase, foison plenty” (4.1.110) offers a vision of futurity underwritten less by divine knowledge-power than by human labor of the kind that might transform “savage” wildernesses into tamed, tilled landscapes. Such imagery recurs in other figurations of imperial futures through environmental growth in the romances. So Jupiter’s “tablet” in *Cymbeline*—prophesying “lopped branches which, being dead many years, shall after revive, be jointed to the old stock, and freshly grow” (5.5.436-439)—suggests the *translatio imperii* through which a colonized ancient Britain can become a colonizing Jacobean England. These futures are not to be decoded but to be made: forcibly, violently. More broadly, then, I examine the changing status of materiality in Shakespeare’s divination, the points at which supposed human dominion *over* things, rather than a “secret bond *between* things,” begin to structure prophecy.

Bruce Young, "Atonement as Healing in *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale*"

In contrast to the orthodox penal substitution theory, Shakespeare often uses more concrete images—bloody sacrifice, gestation and childbirth, disease and healing—to figure both individual and social atonement. In *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale*, infection, disease, medicine, and healing are linked with psychic and social maladies. The English king in *Macbeth* cures "the evil," a material practice that conveys holy "benediction" and marks the king as "full of grace." For the Macbeths, healing is evoked to note its impossibility: a doctor tells Macbeth his wife's "disease" is "beyond [his] practice" (5.1). Scotland too is "sickly," and Macbeth finds "physic" useless to heal it (5.3). Instead, Scotland is cured by the violent removal of Macbeth, effected by Macduff, "the medicine of the sickly weal" (5.2). Atonement, figured as healing, appears either impossible or to require violent purgation.

In *The Winter's Tale* (2.1) Polixenes views his supposed betrayal of Leontes as an infection ("my best blood turn / To an infected jelly") and as parallel to Judas's betrayal of Christ ("my name / Be yoked with his that did betray the Best"). Hermione, though not explicitly figured as a healer, brings atonement by concrete and corporeal means: her bodily warmth is redemptive when Leontes touches her after her quasi-resurrection, echoing the apostles' encounter with the resurrected Jesus, feeling his body to be assured he is not just a spirit but has "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39).

Imagery of disease and healing thus joins with corporeal encounters—curing "the evil" involves touching as well—to describe and sometimes effect spiritual and social atonement. The use of concrete corporeality as a vehicle for spiritual and psychic phenomena suggests that the spiritual and physical are linked or even merge. Perhaps the cosmos itself is not strictly spiritual or material but rather a living multi-dimensional whole that is both at once.