

SAA 2021 – Seminar 19 Inessential Shakespeare

Seminar Leader: Sarah Neville, *Ohio State University*

2 Henry IV, or Falstaff, or Rebellion? Again?: Teaching the Sequel by Itself

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How important is the context of its tetralogy for understanding, for enjoying, *2 Henry IV*? How well does the play teach on its own? For a 2019 British Drama survey/London study abroad, I allowed the Shakespeare play selection for the course to be made by a combination of that summer's Globe offerings and my co-leader's preference. The result, *2 Henry IV*, put me in the position of teaching the play for the first time, and out of its context. I experimented again by choosing it for the early modern play in a general education literature course in Fall 2020. In both cases, I taught the play entirely on its own, providing no backstory, although students were free to look up or read anything they liked (and a few had taken a Shakespeare course with me previously in which they had read *1 Henry IV* and *Henry V*). The very title of *2 Henry IV* or *Henry IV, part 2* marks it as a sequel (The Globe gave the 2019 production the alternate title of *Falstaff* to help give it an identity of its own), and its events may seem echoes of its predecessor (as one student put it: "Rebellion? Again?") or a lead-up to its sequel. But *2 Henry IV* has unique characters, like Doll and Shallow, who help give the play a shape of its own. Rumor provides context, not only of events that have just transpired but the frame of mind in which to interpret the uncertain world unfolding through the play. Using materials (including students responses) from both courses, this paper will explore how *2 Henry IV* works in isolation, not merely as a story outside of its series, but as "The Shakespeare Play" in a literature course.

Constructing Inessential Shakespeare

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Many of the Shakespeare plays that are recognized as less vital than others are the same ones that were considered inessential over a century ago, suggesting that what we're calling 'inessential Shakespeare' was subject to the same historical and academic forces of canon formation that have, by now, been well documented. In this paper, I will argue that many of the plays that are currently seen to be marginal to the canon were in fact a product of making Shakespeare an essential part of the emerging English curriculum during the nineteenth century. As a number of influential nineteenth century editors and commentators constructed the parameters of institutional Shakespeare studies in the United States, they inadvertently relegated certain plays to a lesser status than that their better-known counterparts. They did so not by suggesting that some plays were dispensable, of lesser aesthetic or educative value than others, but by imposing an order in which the plays should be read. Important nineteenth century commentators like Henry Norman Hudson, William James Rolfe, and Richard Grant White provided the necessary textual infrastructure that made American Shakespeare studies plausible; the extensive apparatus that accompanied these

editions offered a cogent argument that studying Shakespeare was socially necessary, and often dictated the optimum order in which students and other lay readers should approach them. The constraints of making Shakespeare the cornerstone of an emerging and extensive program of humanist education, however, meant that some plays inevitably fell by the wayside.

Reading *Cymbeline* for the Plot: No Spoilers!

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While *The Winter's Tale* or *Coriolanus* are described in syllabi or festival notes as “rarely performed,” both of those supposedly obscure late plays can be easily discovered in theatre festivals, film archives, and especially syllabi. But another one of Shakespeare’s later works is seldom performed and even less often taught: *Cymbeline*, written around the end of Shakespeare’s career, sometime between 1608 and 1610. When it is performed, the play is normally relegated to a smaller stage in a larger theatre festival; when placed on syllabi, it tends to occupy corners of course outlines meant for graduate students. The criticism on *Cymbeline* reinforces its marginal status, as the play’s action is characterized as “confusing.” What little scholarship there is on teaching *Cymbeline* apologetically remarks that it is “laughably disorganized and disunified” (Lewis 73), hardly a ringing endorsement. And yet, in both stage and classroom, *Cymbeline* can be remarkably successful.

In the past two years I have twice taught *Cymbeline* to first-year undergraduates in a required literature/academic writing class. In both cases, the students reacted to the unknown qualities of the play with pleasure: they were delighted to read a play in which, in their words, they “didn’t know how it ends.” This suggests that in the very unknown qualities of *Cymbeline* there is an opportunity for a kind of encounter with Shakespeare lost in the well-known endings of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*: because neither its genre nor its subject matter is known to audiences, *Cymbeline* offers the chance for readers and audiences to experience a Shakespeare play as an unknown story, one that offers similar anticipatory thrills as the latest streaming series. This paper will explore *Cymbeline* as an “inessential” or unknown Shakespeare, asking if *Cymbeline* can offer us—readers, students—a rare opportunity to enjoy reading a Shakespeare play for its plot.

Defamiliarizing *Romeo, or, The Time for Timon*

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Elihu Hubbard Smith, a theater-loving physician from New York, wrote in his diary on November 23, 1796, “It struck me, while in the [theater], that one cause of the pleasure which our people take in the plays of Shakespeare...is that they are *familiar* with all the principal dialogues & characters, from their boyish days. Who has not bore a part in the quarrel of Brutus & Cassius, pronounced the soliloquy of Hamlet, & played the orator over the corpse of Caesar?” (emphasis mine). There is a certain intimacy in the familiar, a type of comfort that we have from early (and repeated) exposure to something. Such sentiments seem to lead us directly to the twenty-first century, where stripped-down anthologies with familiar Shakespeare plays have become the norm, from *The Norton Shakespeare: Essential Plays* to Bevington’s *The Necessary Shakespeare*, which claims in its Preface to “distill the best, the oftenest read, the most produced of Shakespeare’s great plays” (viii). This paper seeks to interrogate such statements and terms, asking what might happen if we lean in to unfamiliar Shakespeare—what Marjorie Garber has called plays relegated to the

“reputational dust heap”—and allow them to speak to our current cultural and political moment instead of relying on Shakespeare’s “greatest hits.” One omission in these anthologies is *Timon of Athens*, and I plan to use this text to imagine a literary and cultural landscape where Timon is as ubiquitous as Romeo, showing how this little read and rarely produced tragedy might offer its younger readers a touchstone for their times.

De-essentializing the Essential Shakespeare: Five Ways of Reckoning with an Icon

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I start with the obvious—who among us *couldn't* rightly guess the names of 20 of the 21 plays rendered essential by Stephen Greenblatt's *Norton 3 Essential Plays* or of the same 20 chosen by David Bevington to represent *The Necessary Shakespeare*? Using this question as my point of departure, I try to redirect attention to what's made/what makes the consensually chosen 20 plays *essential* and the rest *inessential* in the first place and to possible ways of recalibrating the prevailing consensus. To do so, I pursue five tacks, the first focused on interrogating the “essential” characteristic of *complementarity* introduced by Norman Rabkin and the resistance to the same offered by more unaccommodating texts. The second involves privileging the generally neglected social historical content of such currently *inessential* plays as *2 Henry VI* and *Coriolanus*, in part as a way of extending current debates about inclusion vs. exclusion to canon reformation. The third effectively calls for and rationalizes the affirmative *staging* of plays like *All's Well*, *Troilus*, *Merry Wives*, and *King John* in place of the numbing repetition of restaging the greatest hits. The fourth complements this move by calling for and rationalizing the *teaching* of the currently *inessential* in place of essentialized Shakespeare in college and university classrooms. My fifth and last tack more polemically identifies how a good many of the approved canonical repertory serve a moderating, conservatizing, mythifying function that could be mitigated were they to be given a sustained timeout and displaced by other more provocative fare, or taught and performed otherwise, which of course goes double for patently racist provocations like *Merchant* and *Othello*.

Estranged Shakespeare: Editing *Sir Thomas More*

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In this paper I hope to ask why *Sir Thomas More* can be so essential to our understanding of how Shakespeare wrote and yet so *inessential* when it comes to published collected editions. Indeed, the play is rarely published in its entirety in collected editions of Shakespeare's plays, usually only Shakespeare's three Additions are presented. But whilst editors may want to create the illusion that Shakespeare wrote More's speeches separate from the collaborative mechanisms of the playwriting world, the Additions are both fascinating and troubling for our ideas of how Shakespeare's plays were written: they were collaboratively revised by the anonymous scribe Hand C. Most often, Hand C is edited out of the Additions. I will suggest that this is to do with the authorship hierarchy within early modern textual studies and editing. Shakespeare's essence as a writer continues to be understood as a singular-Author, rather than a collaborative playwright. I want to consider why is it that we have a hierarchy of Shakespearean collaborations; and what does it say about our field when the most collaborative play of Shakespeare's career is in/*essential*?

Bad Trips in *Cymbeline*

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Somewhere around the middle of *Cymbeline*, our heroine Imogen, after a long, hard day of travel to meet her husband Posthumus at Milford Haven, learns that the trip is a trap: Posthumus, convinced of her infidelity, had ordered his servant Pisanio to accompany Imogen on this false trip and kill her along the way. Devastated, she asks Pisanio, “Why hast thou abused / So many miles with a pretense?” (*Cym* 3.4.103-4). It’s a question that an impatient audience might also ask. *Cymbeline* is famously full of restless and vacillating characters, and almost all of its events are driven by people making ill-advised, enforced, and improbable trips, wandering without purpose, losing their way, or getting stuck in the cul-de-sacs (literal and figurative) that litter the play’s imaginative landscape. This traveling structure is, of course, an inheritance of the play’s indebtedness to the romance genre.

However, while travels and journeys feature in other Shakespeare plays, none stress the pointlessness of their characters’ journeys quite as much as *Cymbeline*. Moreover, when journeys in *Cymbeline* aren’t useless, they are dangerous – motivated by malice, duplicity, conquest, or revenge. In *Cymbeline*, travel is simply not advised. It is not at all evident that the play’s labyrinthine structure of branching paths, roaming plotlines, and failed journeys is a defect of the text; indeed, I hope to suggest otherwise in my seminar paper. But such a structure is, manifestly, mechanically unnecessary, and contributes to the play’s reputation as too complex and difficult for introductory undergraduate courses. My paper will explore the connections between the popular conception of *Cymbeline* as a pleasurable but inessential text for undergraduate study and the play’s own formal obsessions with the dangers and pleasures of the unnecessary, especially unnecessary travel. Drawing on the current critical conversation surrounding space, movement, and geography in this play, I explore how *Cymbeline*’s interrogation of the utility and danger of “abused miles” can contribute to our seminar’s conversations of the consequences and benefits of deeming a text “inessential.”

Marina’s School

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I want to juxtapose two strands in thinking about *Pericles*. One strand emphasizes the play’s interest in human vulnerability: the sea wrenches Pericles, Thaisa, and Marina out of their existing systems of relation, away from all of their property and their power. Teaching the play, I relate it to contemporary migration, the global flow of people fleeing crisis who find that “home is the mouth of a shark.”[Warsan Shire, “Home”] For all the recuperative power of its ending, the play in this reading emphasizes the vicissitudes of fortune and human helplessness[For a dissenting view, see Jane Hwang Degendhardt’s argument that it is not helplessness but patience. For her, Pericles is part of a re-evaluation of fortune that treats it positively.] in its face. But as Joseph Campana points out, not all is stripped away from Pericles and Marina. Rather, their education—in arts, in rhetoric, in music, and (in Pericles’s case) in arms—renders them exceptional, in ways that allow them to continue to reproduce their status. As Greenblatt describes in “What is the History of Literature,” these skills reproduce their class distinction as individual merit. Naked ashore, Pericles’s arms and dancing earn him the attention of the king; enslaved and in a brothel, Marina’s rhetoric and singing allow her to escape sexual threat. As Campana points out, a kind of universal human vulnerability is in fact entangled in a web of preexisting privileges and relations. Shakespeare’s play of helplessness

is run through with a dream of the power of education and art. Romance's conservatism—its belief that aristocratic skill shines through circumstance—resists the leveling of fortune. Pericles is at risk of drowning, but never of being confused with the fishermen.

What interests me about this play, I suppose, is that it captures something of the reaction to COVID. On the one hand, a kind of levelling new attention to the bodily conditions that we share. We are all, I suspect, newly aware of our breath, our sense of smell and taste, and of our distances from other people. At the same time, however, I am constantly reminded of how privilege reinstates itself as reduced risk. Like Marina, whose skills in embroidery and rhetoric enable her to escape the most dangerous and exploitative conditions of the brothel, my ability to teach Shakespeare frees me from risks many of my students face. Like the ability to perform a “matachine dance” or to “compose[]/ Nature's own shape” with a needle, *Pericles* becomes essential for me precisely because it's inessential. The university in fact lives in this gap, as part of the cultural machinery that serves to distinguish essential from inessential. As we confront our nested crises—environmental, economic, political, university—I want to make a case for talking with students about *Pericles*.

Pitying Desdemona in *Othello*: Self-Defense and the “Willow Song”

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The basic question that this paper answers is this: just how essential are the additional Folio lines of *Othello*? The Folio version (F: 1623) of *Othello* differs significantly from the quarto (Q: 1622), containing not just upward of a thousand variants but also 160 new lines, which significantly expand the role of Desdemona, especially in act 4. Near the end of act 4 in F but not in Q, Desdemona sings the melancholy “Willow Song” that deepens at once her premonition of her death and her commitment to face it. Elsewhere in this scene, F adds substantial dialogue between her and Emilia, who proves by turn cold, unhelpful, and ominously ironic, further developing Desdemona's pitiable state. Just a scene earlier, F uniquely includes Desdemona's longest defense of her chastity, delivered ironically to the villain Iago. Whereas in Q Desdemona may seem unable adequately to defend herself, especially in her merely brief counter-charges to Othello in 4.2, F reveals that she can do so to even her most cunning enemy. In her interview with Othello earlier in the scene, he cross-examines her so relentlessly that she is given comparatively little opportunity to present the kind of defense that an audience (in F) soon learns she is well prepared to give. The “Willow Song” in F's next scene capitalizes on other F-only portions that generate respect and pity for Desdemona, thus involving her more completely as a cause of pitying emotions an audience experiences in the final deaths, which she at once foresees and attempts to evade more fully in F. F-only portions of the play are, at least from Desdemona's perspective, absolutely essential.

Laying Plots in Shakespeare's *King John*

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Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* is a strange history play on the periphery of the canon. In this strange play, we see a contest over the English throne that is never fully resolved, and the machinations of various characters made irrelevant by accidents. The play opens with the titular monarch's pressing need to quell his nephew Arthur's rival claim to the English crown, but, in the end, John's son Henry ascends the throne simply by surviving the accidents of the play. What should

we make, then, of the play's interceding plots that figuratively go nowhere? This essay poses this question about plots and plotting in order to explore the play's curious representation of seemingly futile political action, and press against the sense of futility that critics have found in the play's equilibrious structure. This paper focuses primarily on a scene in the second act that seems especially inconsequential to the play's larger plot: when the English and French armies meet outside the city of Angers to contest the succession of the English crown. The citizens of Angers are *almost* granted political agency to decide the contest, but that agency is immediately undercut by a dynastic marriage, which, in turn, is rendered irrelevant only a few scenes later. This essay, however, suggests this seemingly illogical civic plot bolsters, rather than depreciates, the importance of citizens to national history.

The Value of a Name: P.T. Barnum's American Dream

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Legendary showman Phineas Taylor Barnum made a career out of selling things that weren't necessarily as-advertised. At his American Museum and Lecture Room in New York City, Barnum democratized entertainments which offered the necessary trappings of middle-class sentimental health for a price that those on the class margin (artisans, clerks, etc.) could afford. The story of Barnum's attempt to purchase Shakespeare's birthplace and ship it to the American Museum is at best sensationalized and at worst apocryphal, but his continued telling of this story does indicate the value of Shakespeare as a key part of Barnum's vision for idealized middle-class American life. Despite his inability to acquire the birthplace, Barnum did find ways to include Shakespeare in his museum (though, of course, these holdings represented more fiction than fact as Barnum showcased images and replicas that represented Shakespearean legend more than Shakespearean history). This paper will examine Barnum's use of Shakespeare in constructing bourgeois American-ness via the American Museum and Lecture Room, and will interrogate how Barnum crafted value in this image via his inclusion of Shakespearean myth rather than Shakespearean reality.

Slapdash Fairies and Ad Hoc Queens: An Essentially Inessential Examination of Performance in *Sir John Falstaff* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

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Audiences tend to love it. Critics tend to hate it. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a polarizing and ultimately inessential Shakespearean play. Grappling with this inessential play, however, means engaging an even more inessential text: the first Quarto from 1602. Printed with the title *Sir John Falstaff and the Merry Wives of Windsor*, the Q text is far shorter than the Folio, presenting the same plot at almost a ludicrous speed. While many have lumped it into the 'Bad Quarto' category, recent scholarship has begun to bring attention to the ways in which the text is not corrupt but effective. Significantly, both Richard Dutton and Elizabeth Kolkovich have examined the fairy masque/performance at the end of the play, with Kolkovich especially arguing that the Q version is a distinct and no less important iteration of this play within the play. While these scholars spend much time on *what* is said to craft arguments about the differing texts, they often overlook *how* it is all being said. That is to say that they overlook several moments within

the performance that align it with a particular type of Shakespearean performance. This analysis then intends to take up the inessential version of an inessential play to argue that attending to it as a piece of performance shows ultimately its essential Shakespearean-ness. Through the slapdash preparations, the uncertain instructions, and suspenseful use of dramatic irony, the Q performance grounds itself both in the play's investment in improvised performances (e.g. the Witch of Brentford) and in Shakespearean conventions of plays within plays. So too, by recognizing the differing approaches to rehearsal and control, which are distinctly gendered between the two texts, we can begin to read the F text as one crafted through masculine control, whereas the Q text plays on feminine ingenuity and improvisation. This gendered examination then has repercussions to the discussion of the text as revision. Examining this scene's performative structures suggests then that the Quarto text possesses the pith of Shakespearean performance.

The Dilemma of “Inessential Shakespeare”

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I adore *Q1 Hamlet*. (I think “ay, there’s the point” lands quite nicely, myself). *Pericles*. *Cymbeline*. *Henry VIII*. But am I ready to say that these plays that are often dismissed as “inessential” are actually “essential”? This was a temptation that I faced with when I signed up for this seminar about “Inessential Shakespeare.” I thought I might write a paper about one of these plays that I love and make the case that “this thing that most people think is inessential is actually essential.” Then I considered another paper I might write: one that would deny any meaningful distinction between “essential” and “inessential,” or, at least, argue that such distinctions are inevitably culturally constructed and therefore do not identify anything “out there” in Shakespeare’s works but only track cultural or political trends. But here’s the problem: if I accept the claim of hypothetical paper #2 (“there is no real distinction between essential/inessential”), then I couldn’t make the kind of argument that I want to make in hypothetical paper #1 (“this seemingly inessential thing is actually essential”). This is the dilemma that I face in the subject “Inessential Shakespeare.” This paper will do three things: I’m going to explain what I think we lose if we blithely toss aside the possibility of an “essential Shakespeare”; how Sonnet 53 helps us understand why conceiving of an “essential Shakespeare” seems so implausible; and two different ways that criticism has addressed the problem of an “essential Shakespeare.”

Can Helen Be Right?: Harming as Healing in *All’s Well That Ends Well*

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In this paper I make a case for featuring *All’s Well That Ends Well* within a one-semester undergraduate Shakespeare curriculum, not only as a substitution for its “essential” downbeat-comedy sibling *Measure for Measure*, but for its own sake as it exemplifies an important recurring thread in Shakespeare’s plays: the natural tendency to self-poisoning and the way it threatens our beliefs about how the world should work. Moreover, *All’s Well* uniquely introduces that threat via the rare figure of a female physician who choreographs her own disappointing ending. In exploring the confounding of harming and healing, I also view the play through the lens of Martin Amis’s 1991 novel *Time’s Arrow*, which follows a doctor’s life backwards, meaning that he hurts his patients before sending them off to be healed by assailants. How, the narrative voice asks, can the logic of such a world be right? Though time runs as expected in *All’s Well*, “Doctor She” prescribes herself

the toxic Bertram, blurring the distinction between medicine and poison. Further, the play's vexed portrayal of repentance ultimately reinforces the choices of its characters, chalking them up to characters' respective natures. *All's Well That Ends Well* is thus a meditation on whether our natures prompt us to pursue our own poisoning under the guise of a remedy, and experience trauma under the forced façade of resolution. It deserves consideration as a valuable alternative to “essential” plays that make us question the wellness of comic endings, and as a perfect set-up for un-recuperative tragedies like *King Lear*.