

Queering Death  
SAA 2022 Seminar Abstracts  
Seminar Leaders: Lauren Shohet and Christine Varnado

Final list of participants:

**28-1**

Benjamin Bertram  
Alice Dailey  
Derek Higginbotham  
Ja Yeong Jeon  
James Mulder  
Robert Ormsby  
Lisa Robinson  
Penelope Meyers Usher

**Seminar 28-1**

**Benjamin Bertram**

**The Queer Death of Henry VI**

Found lacking as the head of his family, as the head of the state, and as a man in general, Shakespeare's Henry VI is not usually regarded as a good model for sovereignty, at least not by the standards of Jean Bodin and other early modern political theorists. But Henry becomes the tragic queer hero of the trilogy when he challenges reproductive futurism and responds to creaturely vulnerability by grieving over the suffering of humans and nonhumans alike. Drawing from the work of Sarah Ahmed, Lee Edelman, and Nicole Seymour, this essay traces Henry's movement from sovereignty to queer sovereignty and contrasts his queer death to the one he suffers in the tower at the hands of Richard of Gloucester. Henry's queer death, a negation and divestiture of what he had formerly regarded as "life," results from his experience of nonsovereignty in the ontological sense examined by Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, who define it as an experience of "radical incoherence" and "the practice of undoing."

**Alice Dailey**

My paper will examine the temporal effects of a set of artifacts belonging to the National Portrait Gallery, London: a cigarette box of Richard II's relics and drawings of his skull and desiccated brain that date from the 1870s. Discovered in the course of a 2010 cataloging project, the box and drawings become sites of complex transtemporal contact when reopened, photographed, and cataloged for future viewing. Thinking about the cigarette box as a theatre, a history play, a corpse, and a technology, my paper will consider these artifacts in relation to the afterdeaths of Richard II represented by Shakespeare's play and those of Richard III generated by the 2011 discovery of his skeleton.

**Derrick E. Higginbotham.**

**Economic Turmoil and the Queerness of Time's End: The Case of Wimbledon's Sermon**

Apparently, around 1387, the preacher Thomas Wimbledon delivered a sermon at Paul's Cross in London. Middle English versions of this sermon survive in at least seventeen manuscripts, while Latin versions appear in four different manuscripts, all of which indicates its

popularity. Fascinatingly, this sermon becomes a popular printed book, starting around 1572 and onwards; there are at least twenty-one standalone editions of this sermon printed in early modern London. As well, in 1563, John Foxe includes the sermon in his ever-growing compendium, *Acts and Monuments* as well as all subsequent editions well into the eighteenth century. The first part of this sermon meditates on people's economic responsibility to one another, examining the dehumanizing and deathly impact, both individual and collectively, of an eroticized greed. The second part attends to apocalyptic thinking itself, reflecting on the ways that death arrives, stressing that a culture of greed is one of the signs of the end of time.

Recognizing the proximity of pleasure and death in this sermon's representation of avarice, my paper will analyze its representation of economic turmoil as a queer force, one that not only breaks up the social order but also heralds time's end, a certain kind of death. Further, I want to investigate the way that this turmoil encourages this apocalyptic thinking that ultimately fails to be realized. After all, the text calculates that the end of time should have occurred at the start of the fifteenth century, yet the text retains a readership well after this time. What does it mean that some early modern readers were waiting for the end, experiencing the queer slowness of this prophesy's realization, a 'failed' apocalypse, one without velocity?

### **Ja Young Jeon**

#### **Dead Women Tell No Tales?: Rethinking Hermione's Ghost in *The Winter's Tale***

This essay explores Hermione's liminal return as a ghost in Antigonus' Dream in 3.3 of *The Winter's Tale*. The affectively disorienting mingling of the apparition's grief and charm makes Antigonus feel on edge, but it also fascinates him. Crucially, the emotional disturbance and enchantment become visible as a form of embodiment: the ghost gasps, hisses, and weeps, whilst the courtier "[a]ffrighted much" (3.3.36). The female ghost's potent effect on the male hearer evokes the play's representation of the Greek Pythia, whose delivery of Apollo's divine words engrosses and overwhelms their auditors in similarly physical terms. In Delphic practice, the thunderous voice does not come directly from Apollo himself: it speaks from his female vessels, the Pythia, whose bellies are taken over by the divine spirit to channel the god's words. Linking these two moments, I will nuance the understanding of Hermione's ghost. I suggest that Shakespeare's allusion to Greek-rooted ventriloquism offers a tool for Hermione to challenge the usual binaristic degradation of the female vessel, reflected in women's bodies susceptible to passionate takeover. Hermione's ghost veers between the realm of the living and that of the dead. The presence continues this non-dualist paradigm, reconceiving the passivity of the receptive vessel into the indirect tool to exercise her vocal power. Receptive but procreative, passive but effective, mediated but accessible to revenge, Hermione's ghost brings the reversible death into dialogue with the distinctively 'queer' form of speech.

### **James Mulder**

#### **Surviving Richard III**

This paper will consider the ways in which death is queerly fractured, protracted, and portended in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. I will examine the ghostly voices and partial states of being-alive that reverberate in the play through the lens of crip theory and trans studies. Since, famously, Richard describes himself as "unfinished, sent before [his] time / Into this breathing world scarce half made up" (1.1.20-21), I will also be interested in the question of non-closure, both in a narrative sense and in a material, embodied sense. The play's representation of dead,

dying, and partially-alive bodies, I argue, animates these bodies with a kind of persistent, obstructive, deathly animacy.

### **Robert Ormsby**

#### **Shakespeare's Tomb as Thanotourist Place: Locating the Author in Holy Trinity Church?**

In this paper I will consider Shakespeare's monument and grave marker in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church as a thanotourist attraction. I will explore the extent to which visitors to the church are carrying out the conventional tourist search for "the other" as they search for "the Author" Shakespeare elsewhere in Stratford. I will relate this attraction to established concepts of tourist places, including Dean MacCannell's influential formulation that tourist operators typically claim to make "authentic" "backspace" (hidden/private space, pace Erving Goffman) available to tourists. If the grave-as-resting-place-of-the-dead is the ultimate backspace, I will examine the means used to render this Shakespearean backspace accessible for tourist: images, signage, websites, and the documentary Shakespeare's Tomb. I will also consider the ambivalence of Holy Trinity Church: it is both a religious space and an explicitly tourist place; it encompasses Shakespeare's mortal remains but also features the regular celebration of communion, a rite that anticipates rebirth by memorializing Christ's death.

### **Lisa Robinson**

*Antony and Cleopatra* and death's heterosexual refusal via faked/failed deaths: Thinking about the seminar's description of (the assumption of) death, I'm turning towards *Antony and Cleopatra* to discuss the its disruptions, and how death's non-linearity within the play queers both the concept of death, and the romantic intertwinings of its titular characters. Cleopatra fakes her own death for the sake of heterosexual love, and Antony attempts to die at the 'loss' of this love but fails to do so successfully. Essentially, death refuses to participate when it is invoked to prove the legitimacy of heteronormativity.

### **Penelope Meyers Usher**

#### **(Un-)Dead Again: Dying and Undying in *The Duchess of Malfi***

It makes sense that *The Duchess of Malfi*—a play so deeply invested in queering the body ("what's this flesh?")—is interested in queering the body's "end" in death, as well. My point of departure will be the Duchess's queer return from death in 4.2, in which—at least, as Bosola narrates it—she "return[s]...from darkness" only to die twelve lines later, prompting the impossible remark that "she's gone again" (l. 331 and 343). Indeed, the Duchess's second death undermines a stable notion of what it might mean to die. Examining the play's bodies that die, and then die again; its "dead bodies...but feigned" (4.2.340); its echoes and spirits that live on after death; and its equivocating and enigmatic language around death, I will explore how the play undermines and undefines the end of life. I will also reflect on the implications of the play's queer engagement with death, particularly with respect to metatheatrical and generic concerns.