

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

Final list of participants:

28-2

Andrew Daniel
Joseph Kidney
Naomi Liebler
Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey
Rebecca Olson
Triphthi Pillai
Tanya Pollard
Nicholas Radel
Kayla Shearer

Seminar 28-2

Drew Daniel

How to Laugh at Death, and Why, (or, Pyramus and Thisbe as Suicidal Camp)

Is it funny to watch people kill themselves? Is this a queer sort of pleasure? My paper will maintain that there is something queer about the camp excruciation of badly acted self-harm staged by the rude mechanicals in the production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* that concludes “*Midsummer Night’s Dream*”; I am interested in thinking about audience pleasure and audience resistance as a queer space of antagonism, fracture, and “genre flail” (to use Lauren Berlant’s term) that is specifically contoured by the contradictory valences of admiration, envy and hostility towards self-harm, self-sacrifice and suicide within early modern culture. In order to explore this problem space, my essay will probably divide its time between Golding’s translation of Ovid’s description of *Pyramus and Thisbe* and Shakespeare’s re-working of this as comic fodder for aristocratic onlookers. Space permitting, I might also discuss performance histories, up to and including the present, and the broader question of camp’s current petrification as a formerly critical and now passé queer aesthetic mode. I hope to remain mindful of the ethics of my own premises so that I can even approach an answer to the question: under what circumstances are we (ever) permitted to laugh at death?

Joseph Hirzer Kidney

“*Neque lux, neque crux, neque mourners, neque clinke*”: The Death of Roister Doister

Nicholas Udall’s *Roister Doister* (c.1552), once considered the “first regular English comedy,” features at its centre an elaborate travesty of the Roman Catholic *Officium Defunctorum*, a funeral service for the (still living) spurned braggart soldier. Since the precise date of Udall’s play is uncertain, critics have debated the parodic orientation of the mock funeral: is it an Edwardian piece of hostile satire against the quasi-magical potency claimed for Roman rites, or is it a festive Marian set-piece of apolitical entertainment? I read this funeral beside what seemed to be in Udall’s day the most notable component of his comedy: the ambiguous letter sent by Roister Doister to his beloved Christian Custance, a letter whose punctuation is altered in the play to produce contrasting performances from the same text, so that delivery, or

performance, manages to transform praise into insult. Placed side by side, these two dramatic showpieces show how the period's uncertainty regarding the import of performed rituals operated in tandem with rhetoric's delight in reversibility, and the anxieties attendant upon the soteriological efficacy of rites could find in the theatre a space for recreation. This paper is drawn from the opening stages of a dissertation on metatheatre and representations of distorted funerary rituals in early modern English drama.

Naomi C. Liebler

Sans Everything—Erasing the Binary

Desperate for a sign of life while alternating the conclusion of his observation, Lear peers into his dead daughter's face and insists: "I know when one is dead, and when one lives" (*KL* 5.3.261). This is the compelling yet deceptive binary of *final* "final moments"; more than any other stages of life, those last seconds openly defy the human demand for clarity and distinction, and it's only of small comfort that we can now apply the label "queer" to that indecisive, ambiguous, liminal experience. Shakespeare's work is full of such moments—arguably obsessed with them—and not only in the tragedies where we see so much transitional beats between what we call life and death. Some, like that moment in *KL*, are iconic; others are (almost) buried in other generic structures, e.g., the comedies, where twins (e.g., *Twelfth Night*) and deliberate disguises (e.g., *As You Like It*) challenge normative gender binaries. Rosalind's epilogue sends the audience off on its (presumably) merry way into whatever comic-ending harmony we "like." But long before we arrive at that dubious harbor, the melancholy Jaques reminds us that what is at stake in the "last scene of all" of what he calls "this strange eventful history" is not only ambiguous; it is downright terrifying: "second childishness, and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing" (2.7.165-166). How odd to find this in a generically festive comedy, and to find that its ambiguities are not at all resolved by the end of the play. Death in Shakespeare is indefinite, non-binary, and if we survey enough Shakespeare, not even reliably final. In this paper, rather than "deep-dive" (as my students speak) into a single play, I explore the terror-tory of such undefined queer deaths across a range of several non-generically-bound instances: *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *AYLI*, among others.

Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey

The Queer Death of the Hanged Dog: The Execution of Mary Higgs' Mongrel Dog in 1677

The early modern public execution ritual and the narratives written about the condemned's final moments have long been recognized as contested texts. Shaped not only by the power of the state, but also by the victim, witnesses to the execution, and those writing about these spectacular punishments, the meaning of these events was fraught with contradiction. Yet, as P. J. Klemp notes, the execution itself usually functioned in predictable ways, with the condemned providing a final or "last dying" speech that included Christian repentance, audience members gathering to witness, and government officials ensuring that the sentence was carried out. Sometimes, though, an execution and the texts written in response to the ritual subverted not only the justness of the sentence, but also the possibility of constructing a clear meaning or meanings from the ritual. The 1677 public hanging of a dog, deemed guilty but never legally condemned for buggery, is one such case. While the reasons for destroying animals involved in bestiality found their basis in biblical texts, fears of cross-breeding, and attempts to maintain the boundaries between humans and animals, the dog's execution, I argue, effectively queers the ritual by destabilizing

the values expressly hoped for in public executions, namely repentance, punishment, and the prevention of similar crimes.

Rebecca Olson.

Death as Preservation in *The Winter's Tale*

This paper reads Hermione's reintroduction to court in the final scene of *The Winter's Tale* as a particularly Jacobean enactment of queer/crip temporality. On one hand, Hermione's avowal that she has preserved herself for 16 years to "see the issue" (5.3.29)—her daughter Perdita—would seem to reinforce the romance's generic reprofuturity. The play's investment in the figure of the child would appear further emphasized by the fact that its culminating scene evokes the churching ceremonies that marked early modern women's postnatal return to society; as others have noted, Hermione's "death" can be read as an extended lying in period. However, if we take Hermione's death at face value and better contextualize her spectacular return, we can instead understand the play as transforming death into lying-in in a dramatic rejection of "straight time"—a situation that, in line with Alison Kafer's concept of crip time, interprets queer futurity as "part of a critique of compensatory able-bodiedness."

Tripthi Pillai

Queer Uses of Disease and Death: Building Covid Consciousness and Resisting Anti-CRT Politics through a Jugaad Reading of *The Alchemist*

For our seminar I will offer a jugaad * reading of disease and death in *The Alchemist*. My presentist engagement with the appropriative logics of hustle and small-scale survival employed by characters emphasizes the play's unlikely usefulness to us for navigating the twinned pandemics of COVID-19 and institutional racism that continue to shape the early twenty-first century. By mapping how the play queers death, we may not only use it as a survival guide for the present, but also as what Lisa Lowe might call "a history of the present" that "troubles the givenness of the present" (136). Indeed, *The Alchemist* is useful because it is a treatise on queer use.

* Orientalized as cutely "untranslatable" ("Untranslatable Word"), the Hindi-Urdu word jugaad is a critical toolkit that serves as a catchall for the logics of unlikely usefulness. Be it through temporary fixes, shortcuts, or quick tricks to navigate hostile institutions, times, or environments, jugaad requires a willful twisting of and resistance to dominant narratives of use. A streetwise application of what Sara Ahmed identifies as the "queer use" of objects and ideas, jugaad embodies risk and also potential. In manifesting the power of perverting intuitive structures of interpretation and value by displaying how "things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended," I will propose that a jugaad reading of *The Alchemist* provides a "way of making connections between histories that might otherwise be assumed to be apart" (Ahmed 198).

Tanya Pollard

Reversing death onstage

Between 1607 to 1611, the King's Men staged a series of plays – including *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale* – in which family members return from apparent deaths through a combination of medicines, magic, and emotional alchemy. This paper explores these fantasies of impossible recovery in the context of the severe plague bouts of 1603-4, 1606-7, and 1608-10, which claimed a heavy death toll from the families of the King's Men. If we are now

still experiencing the long 2020 pandemic year, during this series of plays the company had been experiencing a very long 1603, with cumulative and escalating consequences. How do stories about catastrophe change when catastrophe lingers inside our own homes?

Nicholas Radel

'No Future': Queer Death and Self-Negating Desire in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

The received wisdom, not entirely inaccurate, is that John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* pays homage to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Such wisdom depends upon a myth of (re)productive begetting, one in which Shakespeare begets Ford and is always master to his minions. Nothing could be less queer—albeit the Shakespeare industry (from which we all benefit) has insured that the small-town boy from Stratford has become England's queerest writer. So it is that Madhavi Menon can write, with little attention to the great dramatic tradition that blossomed in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, that only Shakespeare among the early dramatists “theorizes the nonmateriality of bodies in relation to desire” (60)—and is, hence, the queerest of them all. Ford deserves another look in these terms.

In my paper for the SAA 2022, I explore more closely what Ford manages in his homage to Shakespeare, especially with regard to death and desire. In Ford's play, desire is constituted and preserved in disruptive, self-negating death—not only for his women characters (as has been widely noted) but also his men. In *'Tis Pity* desire wends its way inexorably toward queer negotiations with death, explaining perhaps, how and why Ford's play deals famously with modes of desire—incest and thwarted homoeroticism among them—that point toward the negation of materializing, reproductive gestures.

Kayla Shearer

False Death, True Lovers: Death as Queer Transformation in Shakespeare

Using Imogen from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* as a case study, this paper will approach death as a site of social meaning-making that divests it from both the conventional understanding of it as a strictly bodily phenomenon, as well as from the finite representation of selfhood that characterizes ontological death. Death, in this perspective, is a failure to make sense of the self in relation to a meaningless or unintelligible world, and acts as a site of transformation as it pluralizes and queers the subject's social identity. Imogen, like many of Shakespeare's heroines, faces false accusations of infidelity that shatters her worldview. Unable to reconcile her own actions with the reports, she loses her sense of identity as a good woman and as Posthumus's wife, and ultimately transforms into the boy Fidele. As Fidele lives on, the report of Imogen's death pluralizes her identity as she is memorialized in material objects carried by the husband who mourns her death, and the man who first accuses her of infidelity, resulting in two unique “Imogens” with a postmortem social presence in the play. This multiplied selfhood eventually allows Imogen to restore her reputation as an honest woman at the same time that it allows for a new kind of social experience as the boy Fidele that in many ways contradicts traditional feminine values.