

SAA 2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE, JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA  
SEMINAR 32: SHAKESPEARE AND EMPATHY  
FRIDAY, 8 APRIL, 11:00AM TO 1:00PM  
ABSTRACTS

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**GROUP 1 (Gulledge, Dasgupta, Edwards)**

**“Why Dost Thou Laugh”:**

**Unseasonable Laughter and Empathy in *Titus Andronicus***

**John Gulledge**

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Taken from a chapter in my dissertation project, this paper considers *Titus Andronicus* as a dramatic meditation on empathy and disability. The play opens with an aesthetic call for justice: to make “even” or symmetrical—and therefore, shared—the loss of war. Titus’s failure to empathize with Tamora in this opening scene, however, ends up proving the principle of harmony in aesthetic symmetry unjust and ultimately in the wrong, highlighting its shortcomings as a mode of being-with-others. What this display suggests is a counter logic to prevailing aesthetic values, gesturing toward a disability imaginary — “uneven,” unfinished, and normatively considered “disordered.” Later into the action, we are given another episode of discordant empathy: as a brutally mutilated Lavinia wanders back on stage in Act 3, the reactions of her uncle and father are contrasted in both their emotional valence and aesthetic qualities. Titus’s response of laughter is particularly striking. On the one hand, Marcus’s query, “Why dost thou laugh?” recalls ancient and prevailing EM ideas that laughter was often “unseasonable” and unruly.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Titus’s performance of disfluency matches his daughter’s lack of speech, poignantly marking Marcus’s question as much a matter of aesthetics as emotional appropriateness. In other words, Marcus’s *blazon* of his niece in the scene before becomes the assumed (for him) “appropriate” or “seasonable” response, full of emotion conjured forth by the aesthetics. However, it is Titus’s response which becomes a more accurate—and perhaps “appropriate”—reflection of Lavinia’s trauma and mutilation. This mirroring is a reminder that empathy built on difference and unexpected incongruity is born from a rich disability imaginary that I argue flourished in the Renaissance, even as it was derisively oppressed.

**“O, what a sympathy of woe is this”:**

**The Dangers of Empathy in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus***

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*“Come and learn of us  
To melt in showers” (5.3.162-3)*

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<sup>1</sup> John Chrysostom referred to it as “unseasonable laughter,” or *aikairon*, in a homily around 348 AD, for instance.

In the final scene of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Lucius invites his son—and by extension, his English audience—to weep for his recently deceased father. This moment of emotionality in the play speaks to its larger interest in emotional capacity, where one must “learn” to *feel*, to regulate, and thereby, to avoid the potentially corrupting effects of the passions. This is particularly important in a revenge tragedy like *Titus*, given that the genre itself insists on the spectacle of excessive pain, cruelty, and “acts of black night, abominable deeds” (5.1.65). Though the play reveals both Romans and their racialized “others” as being capable of such “acts”, its insistence on bodily hierarchies allows it to depict some forms of violence as laudable—and thereby deserving of empathy—and others as punishable. This is evident when Lucius warns the audience, “If anyone relieves or pities [Aaron], / For the offense he dies” (5.3.183-4). Indeed, this warning serves as a reminder of the dangers of empathy, of “fellow-feeling” and pity, in a play whose excessive violence frequently threatens to disrupt the binaries of black/white, able/disabled. More than any other form of passion, empathy presents an immediate threat of corruption in the play: by allowing its audience to experience the motivations behind some of the more “abominable deeds,” the play potentially allows for kinship and identification with its black, disabled, or otherwise “othered” characters. But, as this paper will demonstrate, this identification is also dangerous, given the threat of corruption from the proximity of black bodies both within and without the play. In this paper, therefore, I will argue that *Titus Andronicus* demonstrates the dangers of empathy and its relationship to race even as it “teaches” its audience to cultivate their own emotional capacities by revealing *whose* revenge is justified and *whose* pain is real.

### **“Shared feeling at Shakespeare’s Globe”**

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Part of a broader study of distraction, attention, and affect at Shakespeare’s Globe, this exploratory paper considers the extent to which feelings are shared, matched, and caught in this performance space. In particular, it examines how far the phenomenon of fainting can be considered a kind of affective empathy, taking the theatre’s 2014 season (which included a revival of Lucy Bailey’s *Titus Andronicus*) as a test case, as well as drawing on show reports, actor response, and affect theory to explore the intersections between emotion, contagion, weather, space, text, and performance.

### **GROUP 2 (Wilson, Cleland, Spencer)**

#### **“On the Possibility, or is it the Impossibility, of Empathy”**

**Luke Wilson**

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In this paper I propose to approach the question of empathy in Shakespeare epistemologically. How is it possible to “feel with” another? How exactly would that work? On the one hand, that we feel empathy (in our lives, and with Shakespeare’s characters) *feels* incontrovertible; and certainly the plays are themselves among other things meditations on fellow feeling. On the

other, it seems to me that when Shakespeare addresses the idea of empathy *directly*, rather than implicitly, he does so with considerable skepticism. My thought is to look at this in *As You Like It*, and, following Laurie Shannon in arguing for the indistinction (or indistinct distinction?) of animal and human before the Enlightenment, think about the relation in the play between empathy with animals and with human beings. Rosalind says that in probing Silvius's love-wound she becomes sensible of her own. Is this empathy? What is its relation to, say, Jaques's notoriously sentimental identification with the stricken deer? I hope that this initial focus will enable me to move beyond *As You Like It* into less well-traveled literary territory. But we'll see.

### **“*The Rape of Lucrece* and Tarana Burke’s Me Too Movement”**

**Katharine Cleland**

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This essay will put *The Rape of Lucrece* into conversation with Tarana Burke's Me Too movement. Burke founded the Me Too movement in 2006 as a way of helping young women and girls of color heal from the trauma of sexual violence. Scholars have long commented on Shakespeare's portrayal of issues in *The Rape of Lucrece*, such as sexual violence, consent, and shame, that are also at the heart of the contemporary Me Too movement. They have yet to consider, however, how Burke's philosophy of “empowerment through empathy” can impact our understanding of these issues. Indeed, Burke insists that survivors of sexual violence can only heal from their trauma by making empathic connections with other survivors. In this essay, I will explore how Burke's philosophy of empathy can help us better understand Lucrece's shame and suicide. By looking to the epyllion's ekphrasis, I will focus particularly on the possibilities—and limitations—of art's ability to provide a stand-in for the empathic connections that can help a survivor heal from sexual trauma. In this way, my paper will engage with several topics important to our seminar, including the general relationship between empathy and art/literature, Shakespeare's portrayal of empathy (or lack thereof) in his works, the distinction between empathy and sympathy, and how contemporary philosophies of empathy speak to the early modern.

### **“A Wasteful Cock: Empathetic Compunction in *Timon of Athens*”**

**Stephen Spencer**

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Once definitively considered the “economic” tragedy in Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre, *Timon of Athens* (1605–06) has become a profoundly religious play in recent criticism. Implicit in this criticism is the notion that the tears shed by Flavius, Timon's steward, mark his genuine grief for his master's economic misfortunes and forge something akin to a “religious” (if not “Christian”) bond between the two men. Whereas previous criticism tends to view tears as marking grief for the waning of charity—religious, economic, and social—throughout the play, this essay argues that tracking Flavius's tears shows how Shakespeare and Middleton reconstruct charity as the new, usurious credit-debit economy overtakes early modern England.

My reading of the play focuses on Flavius's discourse to Timon in 2.2, in which the steward's descriptions of his past and future weeping for his master's insolvency causes him to weep in the

present. Timon curiously categorizes Flavius's discourse as a "sermon" (2.2.172), which invites comparison to sermons on weeping in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. By reading 2.2 in conversation with a sermon on Luke 23:28 (Weep not for me, but weep for your selves) by Thomas Playfere (~1595), who became chaplain to James I, I show how Timon and Flavius's interaction stages post-Reformation controversies surrounding religious weeping: its proper object, subject, gendering, and place. Through a unique metaphorization of compunction—the sting of remorse—Shakespeare and Middleton render Flavius's tears an emblem for fellow feeling in a post-Reformation climate that tended to encourage weeping for individual sin. Ultimately, 2.2 of *Timon of Athens* suggests that the theater was understood as a space of religious affect, but unlike the pulpit, its semi-public, semi-private nature could nurture empathetic compunction.