

## **SAA 2022 Seminar: *Shakespeare and Health* – Abstracts**

### **The Shakespeare Cure: a contemporary case-study, The Untitled Othello Project**

**Emily Bryan (Sacred Heart University)**

In Fall 2021, Keith Hamilton Cobb embarked on a long-planned project, “The Untitled Othello Project (UOP),” to see whether the play could be performed in the wake of America’s racial distress and the toxic structures inherent in the play. This paper looks at the beginning of UOP in the context of a larger book project that examines public and private healing through Shakespeare. Looking at UOP through the lens of the health humanities, the essay studies the idea/the texts/the production of Shakespeare as a “cure” or a way to heal wounds of identity and bodymind. What does it mean to de-toxify Shakespeare’s text? In describing the project, Cobb calls it an act of Creative Justice; however, language of care, health, toxicity, and rehabilitation rippled through the 70+ hours of live streaming. The urge to heal and recuperate Shakespeare’s text was often thwarted by the play and the characters, and this essay will explore the nature of the mechanisms that solicit readers and creators into a psychosocial relationship with the play.

### **Shakes-swole: Posting His Ws in Early Modern England**

**Matthew Carter (Clayton State University)**

In this essay, I discuss early modern attitudes toward the male body through the lens of Renaissance-era health routines. Examining archival evidence of early modern exercise training regimens, including tennis, fencing, and more, I shall discuss the possible – or, perhaps, “aspirational” – health benefits of typical early modern physical activities as they relate to ideals about the male body. In an era that pre-dates modern health crazes, such as Cross Fit and Pilates, and some time before modern medicine began drawing clear connections between certain activities and expected physical outcomes, how did active individuals understand the notion of exercise, and what were their goals?

In particular, I shall discuss the emphasis on skill and ease of movement that was central to most early modern aspirational health outcomes, and which contrasted with Classical

representations of the male body, which were common in the period (I do not discuss the latter in the scope of this essay). Then, I shall discuss a particular examples from early modern drama, *As You Like It*, where we see the effect of an idealized male body in the context of wrestling. In this way, I hope to examine a previously-overlooked aspect of early modern gender performativity. Like strutting “bros” in the modern climbing gym, how did early modern men understand the relationship between their bodies and the individuals who gazed upon them?

### **Living with Silence and Grief: Crip Time in *Hamnet***

**Allison Kellar (Wingate University)**

In Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet*, O’Farrell weaves together different family members’ perspectives as the narrative travels back and forth through time and space to tell the tale of Hamnet’s death and what events happened before and after his life began and ended. Much of the novel describes Agnes and the playwright’s courtship, marriage, and family matters, yet what makes the novel more intriguing than other historical fiction about Shakespeare’s life is that the novel focuses on Agnes’s gift of healing as well as her insight into the past and future. Even though she is quite talented, she cannot protect her son from death. Hamnet and his mother Agnes live life in crip time, experiencing time and space differently than neurotypical or able-bodied characters who are not labeled as disabled or ill. The historical fiction novel’s crip-time narrative, in turn, communes with Hamlet’s sense of disconnection from family, loved ones, and time as Hamlet experiences loneliness and grief over his father’s death.

### **“Wholesome Medicine’: Body, Soul, and Spirit in William Tyndale’s *Obedience of a Christian Man*”**

**Aaron Kitch (Bowdoin College)**

My essay explores Protestant forms of healing in relation to the soul and body. I am especially interested in the overlap between spiritual and somatic health in William Tyndale’s *Obedience of a Christian Man* (1547). Though focused primarily on the political question of the monarch as both a secular and religious reader, Tyndale’s foundational work of English Protestantism also defines religion as a form of “wholesome medicine.” Christianity for Tyndale is a balm to

the soul as well as the body. Against the claims made by some Catholic priests that they could heal both body and soul through the agency of holy water, he outlines a more flexible and far-reaching concept of health that draws on St. Paul's understanding of the body's personal relationship to God. In elevating the ear and the heart over the eye and the mouth as sites of salvation, moreover, he aligns himself with the famous itinerant early modern healer Paracelsus, who argues that "art of medicine is rooted in the heart." I hope to situate my reading of Tyndale within this larger connection between Protestantism and early modern healing practices.

### **Comedy, Placebo and the Power of Nothing**

**Agnes Matuska (University of Szeged)**

The starting point of my investigation is an article I read several years ago in the *New Yorker* magazine, that has been haunting me ever since, also because in my mind it curiously captures what is at stake in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*. The article entitled "The Power of Nothing" deals, among other things, with the performative aspects of the encounter between healer and patient, the use of placebo as medicine, and the relationship between emotions and healing. A particular study is described in the article, in which participants in the trial who received placebos were told so, and their health improved despite the fact that they were aware of not receiving any "real" medicine. If studying the placebo effect is about the power of nothing, so is Shakespearean comedy. I wish to offer an analysis of *Love's Labour's Lost* as a play that explores, in general terms, the validity of literary fiction, and specifically the meanings and uses of comedy. Critical tradition considers that there are three plays-within-the-play in the drama, each testing the power, effects and limitations of imaginative play as opposed to something that is implicitly created as the opposite of fiction. It seems to me that the main investment of the play goes into overcoming its own boundaries as poetic illusion, ultimately by including death into play. While making death as a potential touchstone of reality as opposed to the play of poetic fiction, the drama evokes the familiar, *vanitas* understanding of the *Theatrum Mundi* metaphor. Still, it also strives to gauge the highest stakes of fiction and play, in other words, similarly to the placebo effect, "the power of nothing".

## **“Med’cine of the Sickly Weal”: Imagining Biopolitical Government in *Macbeth***

**Jennifer Rust (Saint Louis University)**

Early modern witchcraft theory makes visible tensions among several modes of government: political, theological and medical. All three represent variations of pastoral power, a concept that must be distinguished from more absolute forms of sovereignty and divine right ideology. Government, as conceived in such discourses, is a pastoral practice, concerned with the care and salvation of both the individual and the collective; it deploys tactics originally developed in an ecclesiastical context. The theory of government that emerges from witchcraft discourses can be understood as a form of premodern biopolitics. This is evident in frequent references to a public health threat, specifically, witchcraft as a disease, which must be mitigated by governmental agents. *Macbeth* represents a crisis in this framework of pastoral government. This crisis is signaled initially by the pervasive presence of the witches and later by the emergence of the biopolitical figure of the doctor-sovereign. Macbeth’s downfall underscores deep contradictions within early modern efforts to imagine new forms of biopolitical governance.

## **Shakespeare’s Castles of Health: Figure, Form, and Body in Early Modern England**

**Jay Zysk (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth)**

Thomas Elyot’s *The Castel of Helth* (1534, 1541) conveys the idea that health (as well as the attendant topics of diet, wellness, and sickness) was articulated and understood in the early modern period by means of textual forms, tropes, and figures. Indeed, Elyot’s governing conceit of the “castle of health” can be linked to the allegorical edifice of spiritual health famously articulated in the earlier morality play, *The Castle of Perseverance*, as well to Edmund Spenser’s fusion of dietary, moral, and physical health in the Castle of Alma in *The Faerie Queene*.

Looking first to the formal and figurative features of Elyot’s text, particularly the itemized lists and indices included therein, my paper will examine various textual strategies by which the body is represented in both sickness and health—in early modern England. Turning

then to *1 Henry 4* I will describe how Shakespeare uses similar figures and formal features to imagine the body. In doing so, I will argue that the function of textual form and figuration has been too often overlooked (if not discounted outright) in prevailing studies of early modern embodiment. Existing scholarship on humoral theory, anatomy and dissection, and early modern phenomenology insists on a firm separation between the literal and the figurative as it privileges a perceived “material” body over against a textual body—a body made out of tropes and figures, language and textual form. My paper shall claim that it was through the metaphorical imagination that writers such as Elyot and Shakespeare imagined—and, indeed, invented—bodies. The paper will conclude by asking what it means to pursue a literary imagination of the body and how recent movements in the medical humanities and health humanities inflect that critical endeavor.