

SAA 2022 Participant List – Leader, Devori Kimbro

VS 2: Explorations of Cultural Trauma from the Early Modern Stage to Today

Confirmed:

Richard Ronald John Ashby

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Ashby Abstract:

In this seminar paper, I explore how the spectacle of violence evokes the modes by which people were expected to experience, mitigate, and evaluate trauma. John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (1613) exemplifies how violence, acting as a "sad spectacle," evoked competing heuristics. How must one act in the face of impending violence, the "ten thousand" doors waiting to be opened? I explore how strangulation affects a 'fashion' in death, emblematic of the framework(s) necessary to process this infamously violent production that stages, dissects, and immortalizes trauma. Unlike its source material—*Painter's Palace of Pleasure* (1567)—Webster's drama accentuates the Duchess' stoic agency in the face of death, symbolized when a defiant Duchess kneels before her murderer and effectively fulfills her earlier inquiry: "Do we affect fashion in the grave?"⁵ Revolving around a diametric opposition of murder and sacrifice, Webster explores the semiotics of violent acts, introducing and omitting key elements—including the Duchess' children—to bring into relief how traumatic acts—violence, murder, death—were meant to be experienced or processed.

Barth Abstract:

'The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death': *King Lear*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Station Eleven*

Abstract

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* presents a dystopian world in the aftermath of global pandemic. Hers is an aftermath that frequently asks "is there an after?" as the novel tracks back and forth in time, pre- and post-virus. Central to Mandel's plot are two of Shakespeare's plays: *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605) and *King Lear* (1606). While *Lear* largely occupies the pre-pandemic world, ushering in plague time, *Midsummer* is the play of choice for a traveling orchestra and theatre troupe circumnavigating a dangerous landscape. It seems no accident that these are the two dramas paired for this apocalyptic story. Different as they are, *Lear* and *Midsummer* both take us to liminal spaces rife with the possibility of change and revelation; both

are emotionally challenging; and both operate in dreamlike worlds, one seemingly destructive, the other reaching for union.

It seems also no accident that these two dramas, whose initial performances occurred within a year of one another, have experienced something of a revival during our own time of plague. During 2021, outdoor performance spaces across America exploded with productions of King Lear and Midsummer Night's Dream. Many of these productions - thanks in part to their venues, in part to the moment of collective trauma in which the performances occurred - offer an opportunity to assess the plays as Mandel has: as two dramas significantly closer in impact than they initially seem, two dramas which both comment on our search for answers in the face of ambiguous and continual grief.

Gottlieb Abstract:

Cultural Trauma, Alienated Traumatic Stress in Hamlet and Stephan Wolfert's Cry Havoc!

Abstract

In Shakespeare's *Returning Warriors – and Ours*, Alan Warren Friedman analyzes Hamlet's paradoxical status as a play that both is and is not about a "returning warrior." I argue this paradox is related to the play's dramatization of the alienation of traumatic stress in a context of suppressed cultural trauma. The cultural trauma of "rotten" Denmark is suppressed, yet persistently embodied by Hamlet, then Ophelia. Bennet Simon has highlighted Hamlet's relationship to trauma studies, analyzing Hamlet's trauma, Ophelia's trauma, and the pervasiveness of the play's "traumatized environment" (Simon 717). In both Hamlet and contemporary America, trauma is both pervasive yet individualized; it is largely unrecognized at the cultural level, yet medicalized at the level of the subject. This dynamic is particularly relevant to America's treatment of veterans with posttraumatic stress. Stephan Wolfert's *Cry Havoc!* excavates these paradoxes, bringing them to the surface to create cathartic theater that is both a one-man play and a communal experience. Wolfert shares his experience as a veteran and the work itself creates a community of Shakespeare's isolated veterans: Richard III shares the stage with Henry V, and Hamlet is incorporated at a pivotal moment. Wolfert goes beyond dramatizing trauma and explicitly aims to heal veterans' trauma through therapeutic theater.

Isaacman Abstract:

The Representation of the Jew on the Early Modern Stage
Introduction

Performance History of Merchant of Venice

- "Renaissance- There are debates about the performance history of the character of Shylock. It was at one time believed that the character was played with a red wig and a big nose but now the supporting evidence is questioned.

(p. 99, Thompson and Turchi)"

It was just in the past few weeks in my Shakespeare studies and writing of a lesson plan for middle school students that I read the performance history of the play Merchant of Venice. In reading about the comic interpretation of having Shylock have a red nose and wig and the lack of clarity of the character even having such costume features make me want to gain more clarity about the performance history of Shylock and the representation of the Jew on the Early Modern Stage. I will explore research about the play with a few questions including, "How is the play a comedy when there are so many critical essays about the play being anti-semitic?" As stated from Harold Bloom, "One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy 'The Merchant of Venice' is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work.(p. 171, Bloom)"

To me, anti-semitic does not include a clown which is a device of making a group laugh. In this case, the clown is in the play, which is a way to make a group laugh as well as question ethics. I have always seen the play through the lens of feeling badly for Shylock, and I would feel empathy for him. But now my understanding is that the intention is for Shylock to be represented as a clown, who is in a position of a bank institution and is on trial for mishandling money. Is Shylock a villain? Is he a clown?

In my paper, I will explore how Jews were represented in Shakespeare's day and how it was that he served as a clown and what it means to be a clown as well as how a clown serves this play. The paper serves in exploring how it was this type of perspective of the Jew that creates cultural trauma for how the Jew is perceived in society.

Bibliography

Bloom, H. (1999). *Shakespeare: The invention of the human*. Riverhead Books.

Garber, M. B. (2005). *Shakespeare after all*. Anchor Books.

Thompson, A., & Turchi, L. (2016). *Teaching Shakespeare with purpose: A student-centred approach*. Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.

Kelley Abstract:

In his 1993 *Epic and Empire*, David Quint planted a seed that waited forty years to germinate. As Quint writes in a footnote, "Freud's evocation...of Tancredi's wounding (again) the simulacrum Clorinda...is perhaps not based on a reading of the *Liberata*; it is borrowed secondhand from Goethe's *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister*, 1.7." It was an unusual detail for readers to know in a chapter that explores Tasso's epic as an apology for militant papal supremacy. Yet as Quint was writing *Epic and Empire*, some Yale faculty decided to use Freud's reading of a celebrated episode in the *Liberata* to ground a new field: literary trauma studies. Cathy Caruth's 1996 *Unclaimed Experience* established Tancredi's second murder of Clorinda as a tree as "an iconic example not only for the psychological functioning of trauma but also for the connection between literature and trauma theory." As J. Roger Kurtz explains, a debate emerged over why Freud would deploy Tasso to illustrate "traumatic neuroses" in his 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Quint's footnote redirects the conversation toward a different idea: if Freud had read

the *Liberata*'s full description of Clorinda and Trancredi rather than the one mediated by Goethe, his understanding of the repetition compulsion may have been completely different, and by extension Caruth's foundational work in trauma studies may have been completely different too. To my knowledge, no one fleshed out this line of thought, although critics began to use Quint's footnote as evidence that something was wrong with work by Ferguson, Caruth, and the entire field of trauma studies. Ruth Ley, Caruth's most vocal critic, points out that Tasso's tree story as read by both Freud and Caruth (Quint's former student), implies that Tancredi, a violent crusader, deserves to be treated alongside the woman he accidentally kills as equal victims. Meanwhile, early modern studies, Shakespeare Studies, and critical trauma studies long remained separate fields, as most maintained that trauma as traditionally defined by the DSM-IV was unique to 19th-21st century Europe, North America, and some colonial zones impacted by railroads (where insurance agents and litigators assessed the harm done to passengers in accidents as early as 1866) and military weapons (machine guns, trench warfare) used in and around World War I. For many years, a narrow definition of trauma prevented scholars from applying trauma theories to premodernity. I contend that the *Liberata* itself is a rich site within which to engage with the more recent developments within the field – what some refer to as postcolonial or collective race trauma – as a crusade epic which culminates in the 1099 sack of Jerusalem and massacre of its inhabitants. For different reasons than those once articulated by Caruth, the *Liberata* offers a window into premodern understandings of witnessing and experiencing transformative pain through the literary trope of an Ethiopian woman's double murder and cypress tree-becoming.

Pentland Abstract:

Unsettling Shakespeare: Cliff Cardinal's "radical retelling" of *As You Like It*

"Sweet are the uses of adversity," as Duke Senior opines in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*--a line that was used to promote Cliff Cardinal's adaptation of the play for the Crow's Theatre in Toronto last Fall. The theatre company advertised it as a "radical retelling" of Shakespeare's famous pastoral comedy--and that it certainly was. Cliff Cardinal, an award-winning Indigenous writer, performer, and "cultural provocateur" known for his shows *Stitch*, *Huff*, and *Cliff Cardinal's CBC Special*, used a production of Shakespeare's play as the occasion to talk to his (mostly-settler) audience about land acknowledgments and, more generally, the cultural trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada. The show is described by one critic as being "unlike any other production of the play, past or future" (*Now Magazine*; quoted by Crow's Theatre), and its opening night in late September coincided with Canada's first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. This paper will explore the use of *As You Like It*, a perennial favourite among Shakespeare's comedies, as a pretext for addressing the legacy of settler colonialism in Canada. Why this play? And how does Cardinal's "retelling" of it mobilize the energies of Renaissance pastoralism, in particular, to confront the unfinished work of reconciliation in this part of the world?

Pullara Abstract:

"She on whose tongue a whirlwind sits to blow A man out of himself, from his soft pillow To lean his head on rocks and fighting waves, Is not that scold a witch?" (4.1.136-39)

So asks Mother Sawyer near the end of Rowley and Dekker's play. First performed in 1621, *The Witch of Edmonton* has found its stride on the modern stage, having been performed more consistently in the twenty-first century than in its entire four-hundred-year history (Wymer 2019). In the last decade especially, the play has been performed by numerous theatre companies, ranging from national organizations like the Royal Shakespeare Company to local university troupes. I would like to suggest that one of the reasons for this lies in the symbiosis which exists between women like Mother Sawyer and the female activists of the #MeToo movement. The witch has become a recurring figure in the movement's discourse, a symbol of women taking back their power, but I believe that more than the mysterious supernatural witch figure, women like Mother Sawyer who were accused of witchcraft draw specifically significant parallels to the voices of the #MeToo movement, particularly around questions of believing women, female abuse, and the dichotomy between female language and silence. Looking at two recent performances of the play, the RSC's 2014 production and a 2020 virtual version from the Western Reserve Playhouse, my paper will explore how the shared female trauma of the early modern accused witch and the modern assault survivor coalesce in twenty-first century performances of *The Witch of Edmonton*, whose titular character finds resurrected importance in an age when women are fervently speaking out against those that would seek to harm them.

Scott Abstract:

“Speak how I fell”: Blood, Tears, and Traumatic Pasts

My paper will explore how the euphemistic language and martyrological narratives often used to describe traumatic pasts can distort the past and survivor memories and produce inaccurate histories. I begin with brief discussions of such language in reference to “Indian Residential Schools” in Canada and the murder of George Floyd in the United States.

My paper then reads this kind of language in Buckingham's final speech before he is executed in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*. Trying to be a good martyr but instead fixating on the “fall” of the executioner's axe and his own blood, the violence and horror of the execution that is yet to come keeps surfacing. As it turns out, the execution does not appear in the play; indeed, in practical terms, a beheading would be difficult to stage effectively. However, its absence means that the playwrights can explore how trauma is put into words, can consider what kind of language best conveys the experience of human suffering after the fact.

Buckingham's farewell, followed by the play's continual return to the idea of the “fall,” makes an ethical call to keep the bodies of the dead in sight and to avoid linguistic buffers that de-articulate physical suffering and the crimes of perpetrators. In positioning those around him as his mourners, Buckingham asks them to share the burden of his suffering and match his blood with their tears. This mixed liquidity symbolizes a mutual “crying” out, a persistent vocality that recognizes traumatic pasts and refuses to be silent about the horror of the unimaginable.

