

SAA New Approaches to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Thursday Session Abstracts

Nicholas Bellinson

“Ill met by moonlight”: Illuminating *A Midsummer Night's Dream*”

From its opening lines, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* calls our attention to the phases and visibility of the moon. First it does so during the day, in anticipation of the marriage-ceremony that will take place at the new (waxing crescent) moon; then, it strains our imagination and perhaps our sense by referring over and over to the moonlight during the dark night of the lunar conjunction; finally, the “sweet comedy” *Pyramus and Thisbe* has us laugh at this tangle in the person of Starveling, who “disfigure[s]” Moonlight. This paper explores the questions raised by moonlight. Why are we meant to concern ourselves with the question of what can be seen? What is the relationship between (not) seeing and imagining? How does our own sight differ from those of the characters on stage? Is seeing the same action by sunlight and by moonlight?

Jessica Chiba

“‘The eye of man hath not heard’: language and reality in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*”

There can be no doubt that, on one level, Bottom’s musing observation that ‘the eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was’ is a corruption of I Corinthians 2: 9-10, a humorous mangling of a well-known passage that shows his aspirations toward learning. And yet, there is something more serious to the way Bottom presents his perceptual faculties. For as light-heartedly and fantastically as it may portray the issue, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* repeatedly raises serious epistemological questions. The play is full of faeries who operate invisibly on the world, directing and influencing what may seem, to the human characters, to be acts of free will, deliberately misleading their senses through eyes and ears. Inadvertently or not, Bottom, the only human to have had direct contact with the faeries, may be right: the play raises the very real possibility that there are experiences beyond human perception, a world we might be able to see if we had sensory organs with different capacities: an eye that can hear, an ear that can see, a hand that can taste, a heart that could speak. What might seem like ‘airy nothing’, to a rationalistic Theseus might indeed have ‘a local habitation and a name’, not just in the poet’s flights of fancy. Importantly, however, such a world is not a different world entirely, it is the same world in which we live, understood or described differently because seen, tasted and heard through different senses which might divide ‘reality’ differently.

The theatre translates such potentials into representations that can be understood by beings of our limited capacity. But in everyday experience, the closest approximation of what it means to interpret the same experience in different ways might be furnished by the hall between languages. This paper attempts to think about perception and language through the concept of untranslatability, focusing on the freedom that arises from moments when cognition and judgement are uncoupled.

Mayra Cortes

“Gamehouse of Sound Sports: Race as Play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*”

In this dissertation chapter & article-in-progress, I examine Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through a premodern critical race and sound studies lens, accompanied by

premodern and contemporary animal and game studies. Gina Bloom, one of the most influential early modern game studies Shakespearean scholars, has inspired this essay. In her remarkable study *Gaming the Stage Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater*, she argues that commercial theater first emerged in England in the sixteenth century and “was fashioned as a gaming apparatus for its consumers, whose spectatorship was participatory” (3-4). I, thus, examine how *Midsummer* is fashioned as a commercial playhouse/gamehouse in which the working-class (who are staged and heard as “New World” animal-human hybrids) artisan “players” (Bottom and his friends) are racialized as “gameplay” by aristocratic fairies in the woods and Athenians at court. I primarily examine act 5 scene 1 to show how the aristocratic Athenian playing audience and the working-class playing actors performing Pyramus and Thisbe are presented as engaged in a gaming arena-- of what I call “sound sports” --in which these opposing racial and socio-economic parties compete with one another via sound. The seemingly improvised sonic content that is generated in 5.1 plays out racist humor that seeks to racialize the working-class, but at the same time allows the working-class to stage and sound resistance. My aim, thus, is to point out how *Midsummer* speaks to the early modern commercialization of racist humor and, paradoxically, its resistance to it as well, as a participatory sonic game/“sport” (a key word in the play) in which audience-players not only played with playing-audiences and actors but paid them before seeing their play and hearing their sonic content, thus contributing monetarily to Shakespeare’s gamehouse: an early racist and resistance gaming apparatus.

Andrew Darr

“Choose Your Own Gender: The Implications of Player Directed Gender in *A Midsummer Night’s Choice*”

Gender inclusivity in game design is often approached through player creation and dialogue choices, embodied by Kreg Segall’s *A Midsummer Night’s Choice*. The player is empowered to craft a narrative that is either as normative or non-normative as they would prefer, and the diegetic world of the game with fairies and cross-dressing heroes supports any and all choices equally. *A Midsummer Night’s Choice* permits the player to choose the gender of their player avatar along with their companions, and then throughout the game the player can choose who the player shows romantic attraction to. In this way, Segall argues that this approach to gender and sexuality maintains the romantic illusion of a “nonheteronormative world” where a player character’s sexual orientation has no consequence on how they are perceived. In this way the player can create a narrative that ascribes to heteronormative expectations or subverts them. But what is the effect of that design decision? In *Gaming at the Edge: Gender and Sexuality at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, Adrienne Shaw states, “[W]hat I find most interesting about the optional representation made possible in digital games is that it places the burden of representation on players themselves. That is to say, rather than include diversity in games with set characters, most representation of marginalized groups and identifiers is placed in the hands of players” (35). While Shaw seems to criticize Segall and many other games’ decision to allow the player to create a world that is either normative or non-normative, Shakespeare’s plays and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in particular inspire a playful “nonheteronormative world” free from the consequences so often ascribed to non-normative genders and sexual orientations that the proliferation of gender-bended casting of the play, including National Theatre’s 2020 production along with Segall’s game, celebrate.

Katherine Hennessey

“Courses that never did run smooth: Reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in China, Kuwait and Yemen”

Having lived and worked in eight very different countries over the past fifteen years, I sometimes feel that my academic career more closely resembles a journey through the dark woods outside of Athens than a stroll through the grounds of Theseus' palace. I don't intend that as a complaint, at least not entirely: to my mind, the more elegant and ostensibly more desirable of the two settings enforces a certain rigidity of experience in return for its greater prestige and stability. The woods, on the other hand—admittedly lonely and nerve-wracking at times—hold out the constant promise of novelty, surprise, and even, every so often, something akin to magic.

This paper will reflect on three groups of global readers whose novel and surprising responses, questions, and insights have helped to shape my understanding of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The first is Yemeni scholar Subhi Al-Zuraiki, who has been working since 2016 on a Yemeni dialect translation of the play. Second, the students in my Fall 2019 Shakespeare class at the American University of Kuwait, who laughed as I've never seen a class laugh before when reading the Rude Mechanicals' scenes, but whose comments on the oppressive nature of arranged marriages and Egeus' paternal authority were deadly serious. And most recently, the students in my Spring 2022 class at Wenzhou-Kean University, who empathized profoundly with Helena's unrequited love for Demetrius and read Theseus and Oberon as authoritarian figures with dangerously unchecked powers over those around them.

Jason Hogue

“Midsummer “Meristembodyment”: Plant Bodies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*”

In a *PMLA* article from 1958, Peter Demetz wrote about the classical trope of the elm and the vine, stylized as “the history of a marriage topos,” a trope utilized by English Renaissance writers such as Sidney, Spenser, and Milton. Demetz touches briefly on Shakespeare's use of this vegetal image in *The Comedy of Errors*, but the figural use of vegetal union(s) also appears in several other Shakespeare plays, and indeed rather prominently in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Titania describes her intimate encounter with Bottom in such vegetal terms, as “gently entwining” woodbine circling a honeysuckle plant and an ivy vine “enringing” the “fingers” of an elm tree. Furthermore, when Helena remembers her earlier relationship with Hermia, she poetically believes they “grew together / Like to a double cherry.” With this paper, I am interested both in the specificity of plant type or species with which *Midsummer Night's Dream* seems concerned, evident in Titania's and Helena's naming of plants here, as well the vegetative capacity of fusing or joining similar, though not identical, bodies together. To explore these botanical images in the play, I want to introduce a new term: “meristembodyment.” The term is a portmanteau of “meristem,” which refers most simply to the areas of plants that contain cells and thus can divide and grow, and “embodiment,” the condition of having a physical body and experiencing the world through the particularity of it. I draw on Stacy Alaimo's new materialist concept of trans-corporeality to help me theorize the concept of meristembodyment as it applies to the plants of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the implications of thinking about them not only as figures or metaphors but also as particular bodily beings, the materiality of which, I argue, informs the play more than we might initially think.

Rebecca Laroche

“But a Patched Fool”

An illustrated braided essay about what it means to develop a passion divorced from professional ambition when your first passion led to such ambition and your profession. It works to untangle the tangle that results. In it, I express and embrace the value of liminality and seek an audience thus translated.

Geraldo U. Sousa

“Borders of Reality in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”

In his book, *An Immense World* (Random House, 2022), Ed Yong writes of how animals, including humans, though “living in the same space” “experience it in wildly and wondrously different ways” (5). They live in “a sensory bubble—Umwelt,” a German word signifying environment (5). The OED defines it as “The outer world, or reality, as it affects the organisms inhabiting it.” Yong adds, “Earth teems with sights and textures, sounds and vibrations, smells and tastes, electric and magnetic fields. But every animal can only tap into a small fraction of reality’s fullness. Each is enclosed within its own unique sensory bubble, perceiving but a tiny sliver of an immense world” (5). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare explores the hinge between parallel worlds, a form of doubling that inspires terror with sinister overtones. These worlds have thin boundaries and unexpected portals that permit the crossing from one side to the other, but the two sides can never be reconciled, and they pose a threat to self and society: they do not fit together as well as they should. Portals open into the unknown and to parallel realms of darkness and shadow. Shakespeare represents forces that disturb and destabilize the natural, empirical, logical boundaries of reality, and opens unexpected paths to the mysteries in the dark corners of the human mind. Shakespeare suggests that in the dark, magical, dream-like forest of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the encounter between humans and fairies reveals that home borders on something wild and that the recurring violation of borders destabilizes human perception and the very notion of reality.