

Abstracts for First SAA Ambivalence Seminar
Valerie Traub and Fran Dolan
3:30-5:30, Thursday, April 11

Amanda Atkinson

Ambivalence, Science, and the Supernatural in Seventeenth-Century Contact Zones

My paper stages a somewhat unlikely conversation between Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the writings of John Josselyn, an English physician who published two accounts of his extended visits to Massachusetts: *An account of two voyages to New-England* (1674) and *New-England's rarities* (1675). I argue that both Shakespeare's and Josselyn's works document a process of ambivalent ideological negotiation that happens in the New World contact zones. While both authors clearly privilege a European, Christian worldview, their texts reflect an uneasy dialectic between Native and settler epistemologies as well as a scientific and metaphysical common ground. I hypothesize that examining these texts through the critical lens of ambivalence enables us to understand how affective experiences structure cultural and political conditions.

Josselyn's works rely considerably on indigenous knowledge - in particular medicines and remedies - which Josselyn overwhelmingly endorses. Josselyn reports scientific knowledge alongside supernatural accounts that combine the shared attributes of English and native spiritual systems, recording legends and memorates—personal encounters with the supernatural—that reflect the particular confluence of beliefs in the seventeenth-century Massachusetts wilderness. But Josselyn rejects medicinal rituals as witchcraft, even as he notes their seeming effectiveness. His accounts are thus palimpsestic, revealing the way that indigenous epistemologies resist complete assimilation into European ones even as they highlight common ground.

Bernadette Andrea

Historicizing Amphibia in *A geographical historie of Africa, wri2en in Arabicke and Italian by Iohn Leo a More* (1600)

I pick up the philological thread in Coccia et al., “Ambivalence as a Feminist Project” (7-9), to investigate how we might mobilize ambivalence as an analytic for the premodern period through a diachronic and comparative approach to language. They pressure their key term's etymology – “‘ambi’ signifying ‘both’ and ‘around,’ and ‘valence’ signifying the property of an element” (9) – to stress the potential of ambivalence as an analytic for “subjectivities marked by historical oppression” (3). I focus on a passage from *A geographical historie of Africa, written in Arabicke and Italian by Iohn Leo a More, borne in Granada, and brought vp in Barbarie . . . Translated and collected by Iohn Pory* (1600) that has elicited ambivalence from scholars of premodern empire, race, and religion. In Pory's translation, John Leo Africanus (al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wezzan) closes his first book with the tale of “a most wily bird . . . called Amphibia” to adjudicate his position as both European and African, with these sites uneasily correlating to Christianity and Islam (43-44). Addressing the vexed issue of translation, I situate the term “Amphibia,” which had been newly introduced into the English lexicon and which did not appear in the Italian original of this text nor in subsequent Latin or French versions, as a subaltern mode of ambivalence *avant la lettre*.

Ronda Arab
Ambivalent Capitalism and the Seventeenth-Century Gentle-born Younger Son

I will examine seventeenth-century dramatic comedies that appropriate proto-capitalist discourse in order to maintain the patriarchal status quo of primogeniture, an inheritance system that benefited the longevity of gentle and noble families and maintained a top-heavy patriarchal hierarchy of first-borns at the expense of younger brothers. Pamphlet literature about non-inheriting younger sons frequently suggested that they were endowed with extra wit; John Earle writes that the younger son has been “furnished [by Nature] ...with a little more wit upon compassion; for it is like to be his best revenue.” I demonstrate that the motif of the witty younger son was discursively mobilized in order to justify the practice of primogeniture and to bolster the creation of the sort of industrious, entrepreneurial subjects perceived to be necessary for the successful emergence of a capitalist system. The narrative that the younger son’s abundantly endowed wit could be and *needed* to be channelled into a variety of productive enterprises functioned strategically to link the continuance of primogeniture in England with the country’s economic health. A number of seventeenth-century dramatic comedies bolster support for primogeniture by insisting on the younger son’s ability and duty to embody entrepreneurial values of wit and industry, while also suggesting that these later-born sons could achieve the traditional awards of gentility by doing so. But ambivalence is evident. The plays reveal the potential threat of the very figure they construct, and they expose the contradictions within early discourses that espoused and attempted to bring together industrious contribution to the commonwealth, loyalty to family, and self-reliant, self-interested ambition. Even in plays that most idealize the figure of younger son, there are traces of ambivalence that reflect the deleterious potential of such a cultural construct.

Beatrice Bradley
Ambivalent Objects

In *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Lauren Berlant observes that the proximity of sex and trauma produces ambivalence and, correspondingly, queasiness; they explain, “strongly ambivalent resonances are queasily related to jokes and play: queasily because genuine experiment unbalances our confidence in frames of expectation, time, and causality.” Thinking with Berlant, this paper considers the queasy as a felt marker of ambivalence, with the suggestion that queasiness—something like minor abjection or weak disgust—negotiates between the strength of revulsion and a more muted uncertainty. I attend in particular to John Donne’s representation of languishing in “The Calm”—where the speaker attempts to escape “the queasy pain / Of being beloved and loving”—and I explore the microaffective resonances of disgust that do not necessarily demand a strong no. The term “queasy” can be useful, I suggest, when encountering that which unsettles for reasons that are not entirely established, wholly known, or fully articulated.

James M. Bromley

“The sydes equall, the corners crooked”: Rombus’s Ambivalence in Sidney’s *Lady of May*

Philip Sidney’s *Lady of May*, an entertainment written for Queen Elizabeth’s visit to the Earl of Leicester at Wanstead in 1578 or 1579, is shot through with ambivalence and the desire for its resolution. The title character asks the queen to choose one of two suitors for her, and the suitors, a forester and a shepherd, are taken to represent the active and the contemplative life respectively. These options appear to be the totality when it comes to the good life, and critics have taken to reading the text as Sidney’s complaint about the impasses of courtiership under Elizabeth. Yet the figure of the pedant Rombus, there to moderate the debate, is positioned somewhat obliquely to these concerns, as indexed by his geometrical name. Most critics have understood him as the only non-ambiguous part of the text, taking the other characters’ derision of him at face value. Even as they are mocked, Rombus’s inkhorn terms, alliterative dilations, and other linguistic infelicities are embedded in what critics have taken to be the text’s fixations, but to the extent that they impede the resolution of the text’s ambivalence, they also point to ways of loosening attachments to place, Englishness, and marriage.

Gina Filo

Imperfect Enjoyments: Ambivalent Consent in Aphra Behn’s “The Disappointment”

Aphra Behn’s complex engagement with women’s sexual desire in her poetry has been long recognized, yet the tenor of this engagement is rather more debated. Many critics proclaim her triumphant embrace of female pleasure against a scrim of social disapprobation, while others argue that female eroticism is brutally instrumentalized to give Behn authorial bona fides in the misogynistic world of the Restoration literary world. Behn’s lyric ladies indeed embrace sexual pleasures, yet often, these pleasures are accessible only after an experience of violated consent and before a disappointing conclusion. In this paper, I examine the complex imbrication of dubious consent and erotic pleasure in Behn’s “The Disappointment.” By using a lens of feminist ambivalence, we can reconcile—or allow to remain unreconciled—the disjuncture between sexual pleasure and sexual violation in these poems, between “good” and “bad” experiences of sex. This in turn gestures toward the value of ambivalence as a framework for understanding tropes of unwanted wooing ubiquitous in Renaissance poetry—and, perhaps, for broader questions of pleasure and violated consent with which we continue to grapple today.

Emily Glider

Ambivalent Tongues: Travel, Translation, and Alienation in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

How might the experience of travel produce ambivalence? If ambivalence often emerges from "multiple affective commitments to various communities," how might the act of moving across cultural and language barriers generate complex and overdetermined expressions of affect? Borrowing from Sara Ahmed's discussion of "alienation," which she defines as a "gap" between

"the affective value of an object" in a social context and "how we experience that object," creating "disappointment" in a subject "out of line with an affective community," my paper examines how the traveler's encounter with multiple, culturally situated "affective communities" prompts formal and rhetorical experimentation in conveying feeling, desire, and self-experience. In a reading of three figures in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*-- the "melancholy traveler" Jacques, the exile Rosalind, and the "wandering fool" Touchstone-- I argue that their various forms of "alienation" lead to inventive rhetorical performances reflecting cultural displacements as well as creative "interweavings."

Joanna Huh

“Lasso, che son? che fui?: Alas, what am/I? What was I?”:

Ambivalent Desire in *Antony and Cleopatra*

This paper examines the unexpectedly ambivalent affordances of Petrarchism, a poetic tradition that supposedly supplies the ideological grounding of heteronormative culture: monogamy, singular identity, self-sovereignty, and self-disclosure. However, through a dialogue between Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, I argue that the titular lovers dissolve the oppositions between agency and passivity, mastery and submission, purity and pollution to imagine intimacies couched in Petrarchan discourse that evince an ambivalent understanding of selfhood, with new rules that reconstitute the definitions of agency and submission, self-boundedness and self-shattering, security and vulnerability. Rather than fixing these two lovers as archetypes of their sexes (Antony as Roman masculine hero and Cleopatra as Ur-Woman), this paper argues that their visual-rhetorical heterogeneous bodies evince the constant Petrarchan transformations of identity to register the temporal shifts and animate trans-material assemblages of subjectivity—and that we, too, must confront our-selves as coopted by foreign forces both within and without. This ambivalent view of desire as a salutary challenge to the dangerous illusion of (in Bersani's famous phrase) “the sacrosanct value of the self” asks us to cultivate viable alternatives to the radical individualism of the liberal, bourgeois subject grounded instead in vulnerability, risk-taking, and violence.

Erin Kelly

The Pleasures of Ambidextrous Ambivalence in Earlier Tudor Drama

This essay explores the similarities and differences between the Humanist practice Joel Altman helpfully labeled “the Tudor play of mind” and recent theorizing of ambivalence as critical project. My case study is Thomas Preston's *Cambyses*, first printed in 1570 and possibly composed as early as 1560, a play that stages ambivalence about monarchy, justice and capital punishment, and religious devotion. I am especially interested in exploring whether ambivalence is part of what made *Cambyses* so appealing to early modern audiences – repeated references to the title character up through the seventeenth century suggest the play wasn't respected as great poetry, but it was clearly part of the popular imagination. At the same time, I put into conversation early modern and contemporary discourses of ambivalence, not only considering whether ambivalence might be understood as a necessary attitude for an individual operating

within hierarchical social structures but also thinking about the aesthetics of ambivalence and pondering ambivalence as a possible source of pleasure.

Agnes Matuska

Ambiguity, Performance, Imagination and the First Vice in Theatre History

I am offering a paper on *The Play of the Weather*, an early Tudor play authored by John Heywood. The drama is significant from a drama history point of view because it features the first extant character labelled with the term "Vice", namely Merry Report. The role was most certainly played by Heywood himself, who embodies a connecting link between the festive occasion of presenting a play and the world conjured by the plot. The setup is intriguing because theatre and politics intertwine directly: Heywood, advisor and entertainer to the king embodies the play's playmaker Vice, who is servant to Jupiter, an allegory of Henry VIII. The play's direct connection to the topic of our seminar on "ambiguity" lies not only in the inherently ambiguous characteristics of the Vice, but also in the plot combining theatrical fiction with court reality in a risky, puzzling, but potentially liberating allegory. I wish to explore the character as the epitome of the ambiguity inherent in imagination, verging on the brink between empty fiction and performative transformation -- that can be attributed to the play, but more generally to theatre/performance as well as the humanities as a contested discipline.

Maria Sequeira Mendes

Praise with Purpose: Flattery in Shakespeare

This paper focuses on the relationship between flattery in early modern drama and 'ambivalence' as a critical concept. As Thomas Preston puts it in *Cambyses* (c.1558–1569): 'My name is Ambidexter, I signifie one,/ That with both hands finely can play'. The idea that flatterers are strong on both sides, that they are able to fine-tune their politics, equivocate their religion and change their social ethics to those of the flattered subject makes them particularly dangerous in a post-Reformation world. Even though Bleuler only coined the word 'ambivalent' in 1910, both the word and its attendant theoretical merits have counterparts in early modern English conceptions of the 'ambidexter' and of 'ambilogy'. Both rooted in Latin 'ambi'—meaning "both" (ambiguous) and "around" (ambient)—these terms abound in representations of flattery. The menace of adulation lies, then, in the fact that the chameleonic—ambidextrous or ambivalent—nature of certain flatterers permits them to move easily across social types: they lack a moral code and adjust their behaviour to the needs of their interlocutors to profit from them.

Courtney Naum Scuro

**Provisional Queer Potential in *The Roaring Girl*:
or, Why Does this Play Make Me Feel So Empty Inside?**

My project offers an episodic reflection on three interconnected themes: my fraught affective relationship with Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's 1615 city-comedy, *The Roaring Girl*; the challenge to locate the source of ambivalence in a research-object, researcher,

field-at-large, world-at-large, and/or anywhere in between; the connection (and contention!) between a politically-oriented concept of ambivalence and an ethics of care.

Along the way, I explore *The Roaring Girl*--a play that I, like many, have loved for the queer vitality enlivened by this comedy's project of political query and reconstitution. Through Moll Cutpurse, the play performs an invigorating and reverberant queering of incumbent social paradigms by defying the privilege of patriarchal authority to define modes of life within this imaginary community. Yet, despite Moll's crucial role in processes of communal reform, the play's final scene ultimately fails (or does it?) to embrace its own provisional lessons on queer potentialities...*if* we read the play's final lines as anticipating a future-state which reimposes the strictures of patriarchal law. That ending eaves me feeling rather empty inside.

Melanie Simoes Santos

Mixed Feelings: Re-Reading Britomart's Retraction in *The Faerie Queene*

In this paper, I return to a (non)event in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, an event whose precipitous collapse leaves behind an affective weight that I continue to sit with—a sexual trauma that Britomart reconstructs only to immediately retract. Recounting this rape, Britomart offers an alternative origin story for her quest to find Artegal—not the story we are offered in the Legend of Chastity's opening, that Artegal is the “louer” she seeks “whose image shee had scene in *Venus* looking glass,” but rather that he is the “worke[r]” of a “haynous tort,” having done her “foule dishonour and reprochfull spight” (3.1.8, 3.2.8). In a previous attempt to grapple with Britomart's retraction, I focused on the problem posed by this “missaying” of rape to the aims and methods of feminist scholarship. The episode has largely gone untreated in this tradition, I suggested, because of the ambivalent response it inspires—the sense that Britomart's unsaying of rape is an unpromising and potentially dangerous moment to single out for notice. In this paper, I focus on Britomart's own ambivalence toward Artegal, taking her admission that this disavowal “feed[s] her humour” as a provocation to return, as Andrea Long Chu writes, “to the scene of a crime that never happened.”

Stephen Spiess

**The Cultural Logic of Ambivalence:
Notes on the “Necessary Evil”**

As a critic interested in the history of words and the conceptual structures that they enable (and foreclose), one of the many benefits of this seminar lies in its invitation to explore the prehistories of “ambivalence,” including terms, categories, and cultural logics that can be seen to anticipate its modern conceptualizations or structural antinomies. In this paper, I propose the “necessary evil” as one such historical analogue and examine how its bivalent figuration of prostitution as a socio-sexual practice that must be condemned yet tolerated can be leveraged to illuminate additional ambivalences—cultural, affective, theological, epistemological—that help to explain both the logic's conceptual appeal and its surprising durability, even in Reformation contexts in which it emerged as a central emblem of Catholic licentious and heresy. Tracing the development of this ambivalent logic from its first conceptualization in Augustine's *De Ordine* (c.386) to Thomas Fuller's *Church-History of Britain* (1655), I focus especially on its temporal

dimensions: how, that is, the necessary evil differentially situates men, women, and prostitutes in sexual time; how these temporalities align with, or diverge from, broader ideologies concerning male and female sexual behavior in the period; and how they support and upend early modern epistemologies of sex.