

Abstracts for “Damaged, Decayed, Destroyed, Disappeared” SAA 2024

Charlotte Artese

The Uriah Letter in *Hamlet*, Legend, and Folktale: A Case Study in Restoring Traditional Narrative Context

In this essay, I try to reconstruct part of the narrative tradition involving a specific motif found in *Hamlet*: someone is sent to deliver a letter that commands his or her death. I connect folktales and legends by the shared narrative elements: (1) a deadly letter altered in transit (2) by thieves, bandits, or pirates (3) so that it orders others to be killed instead of the intended victim (4) who instead makes a prestigious marriage (5) with assistance from a ring fated to be found. None of the narratives I consider contain all of these elements, and the causal links among the elements can vary. The ultimate source for *Hamlet*, Saxo Grammaticus’s account of Amleth in the twelfth-century *History of the Danes*, lacks the thieves and the ring. When Shakespeare adapts this legend, he eliminates the marriage commanded by the altered letter, yet the thieves appear in the form of pirates and the ring as Hamlet’s father’s signet. While the thieves and the ring are not found in *History of the Danes*, they do appear in folktales including deadly letters altered in transit to order a prestigious marriage for the intended victim, sometimes with assistance from a ring fated to be found. These folktales, and indeed the tradition as a whole, leave their impression on this episode in *Hamlet*, and we can infer the shape of the seal that left this impression by collecting similar traditional narratives.

I am interested in traditional narrative itself as a source and context for Shakespeare’s plays that has almost disappeared for us. This essay works toward a larger project I’ve provisionally titled *Legendary Tragedies: The Folktales, Myths, and Legends behind Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth*.

Anya Riehl Bertolet

A Half-Empty Ballad?

I offer a case study of a damaged printed leaf. An anonymous ballad about Malmerophus and Sillera (1582) survives only as a fragment, in one known copy. The upper half of the leaf is missing. The title thus is unknown, and the ballad is cataloged under the names of the protagonists. In order to render this case study useful but not overgeneralize, I offer some thoughts about working with incomplete ballads. I then apply some of these methods to the fragment at hand.

My aim is not only to attend to the phantom half of the leaf, but, more importantly, to consider how this damaged object can be integrated into a study of early modern literary and material culture. What can the preserved half of the leaf intimate of the half that vanished? What paths of study are available to a scholar of this damaged print, and what new methodology for approaching ephemera may it suggest? Finally, exploring a possibility of making a textual argument based on the surviving fragment, I will touch upon the Philomela motif that, in this story, is recalibrated in significant and puzzling ways, overlaid with a heightened materiality of the emotional drama acted out in the ballad.

Loreen L. Giese

Seeing the Unseen, Hearing the Unsaid: Archival Silences and Female Agency

The spate of insightful work on early modern English ecclesiastical court records over the last forty years illustrates how ecclesiastical court records overall are a valuable source of information about the practices of and attitudes toward marriage, particularly for studying female agency in either forming or dissolving a union. Existing historiography often points to the church courts' ability to provide a jurisdiction for female agency, and some studies use female agency as a measure by which to discuss the efficacy of the church courts to meet the expectations of female litigants. Yet what has not been discussed—as far as I have been able to determine—about the ecclesiastical records in general or the London ecclesiastical records in particular is how the archival silences in these cases complicate and influence our own methodological practices in interpreting the conceptual one of agency, particularly the extent of female agency in these kinds of records and whether these courts met the expectations of their female litigants. An examination of one woman's agency in a representative marital cruelty case highlights this thorny issue and explores how the geographical context of the London diocese in which these cases occurred may have influenced their courts' efficacy and contexts of agency and our interpretations of both.

Megan Heffernan

Infrastructure and Adjustment: John Taylor's Moving Forms

The institutions that make our literary and textual histories possible are fluid, open, and porous to the conditions of the world we all live in today, and this has been true for the successive centuries premodern books have endured. We are always reading early modern writing that has been funneled through the material and ideological priorities of the modern library, the institutional systems that provide organization, conservation, and access to the cultural past. This paper uses the poems of John Taylor the Water Poet as a model for theorizing the movement of print fragments within Oxford's Bodleian Library. Methods of formal reading—for style, genre, rhythm, rhyme, imagery, influence—for all the traditions that Taylor is absorbing and redeploying in his highly laborious poetry—offer tools for understanding textual movement, material endurance, and the process of wear over time. Taylor's poems are obsessed with the fate of objects in a moving and changing world, and I use his belabored forms to scaffold a literary history that accounts for the refraction of time within the physical, social, and epistemological space of the library. His writing creates formal traces of the desire for infrastructure that typically vanishes from the literary record. At stake in my work is an adjustment to traditional bibliography, which has tended to privilege the narrowly defined instant of production over the expansive and ongoing temporality of maintenance and care.

Miriam Jacobson

The Ruinousness of Rome: Antiquarian Reenactment on the Early Modern Page and Stage

Ruins—architectural, cultural, and textual, to name a few examples—are at the center of early modern antiquarian practice, a genre of historical analysis more preoccupied with sensory, material history than with documents. Eventually it would spin off into its own disciplines of archeology and anthropology, but in the early modern period it was still a (much maligned) practice of history often associated with objects and edifices that had been or were in the process of destruction, or having undergone various processes of decay, vermiculation, and, in Thomas Browne's words,

“incrassulation.” Antiquarians’ hands were dusty and muddy. At the same moment, early modern printed texts and performed plays were actively engaged in another antiquarian enterprise, that of reenactment, or imagined reconstruction. Giacomo Lauro’s collection of engravings *Antiquae Urbis Splendor* presented images of Roman architecture imaginatively reconstructed as if in its heyday, alongside images of it in ruin for viewers to page forwards and backwards, rewinding ruin or accelerating it with the flip of a page. Drayton, Selden, and Hole’s *Polyolbion*’s songs, glosses, and maps reenacted ancient British history in a similar manner. This essay will argue that just as these texts demonstrate an antiquarian fascination with reenactment and destruction centered around ruin, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* stages a performative antiquarian fantasy in which both Rome and Egypt are repeatedly reenacted with an eye to their future destruction, with Rome in particular characterized figuratively as predetermined ruin.

Jonathan Koch

“In the Piazza of one Title page”: Locating and Relocating Printed Imprimaturs in Early Modern English Books

For four months, between November 1644 and March 1645, John Milton was obsessed with printed imprimaturs. In *Areopagitica* and then *Colasterion*, Milton blasted not just a system of licensing that harassed readers with physical markers of its work, but the aesthetics of these markers – their “peasantly rudeness,” how they “garnisht and trimly fac’t” a book, or rose up from it like the “castle St. Angelo,” or appeared “together dialogue-wise in the Piazza of one Title page.” Moreover, when a licenser “brings his chair into the Title leaf,” then every “worthles Author” and “cunning Printer” will use these imprimaturs as a decoy – “a Stale to put off the heaviest gear.” In this paper, I take up Milton’s interest in the aesthetics of imprimaturs and his concerns about their mobility through two lines of inquiry. First, using data from EEBO-TCP, I catalogue the forms that imprimaturs took, including their length, named entities, typeface, ornaments, and position. Second, using materials at the Huntington Library, I explore how imprimaturs were subsequently removed, relocated, and altered. By attending to the material lives of printed imprimaturs, I aim to move beyond institutional histories of press censorship to consider how licensing impinges on experiences of reading.

Victor Lenthe

Philip Sidney the Forgotten Huguenot Theologian

My lost object is Philip Sidney’s involvement in *The Trewnesse of the Christian Religion*, a work of theology whose 1587 publication names Sidney and Arthur Golding as co-translators of a French original. Some scholars recognize *The Trewnesse* as Sidney’s first publication in print, whereas others believe Golding was using Sidney’s name to sell a book he had translated alone. Whereas the text of *The Trewnesse* is relatively stable, I take Sidney’s involvement in the translation as the kind of lost object whose reality is disputed but whose possibility stands to teach us much about the English Renaissance. I first seek to establish the reality of this lost object, providing new evidence that Sidney and Golding were genuine co-translators. By collating translation errors in *The Trewnesse*, I seek to demonstrate that it contains Sidney’s unrevised prose. I then ask what my lost object (Sidney’s involvement in translating *The Trewnesse*) stands to teach us about the English Renaissance. Ultimately, I think I will be able to show, Sidney’s poetics changed Protestant religiosity as much as Protestant religiosity changed his poetics.

Jeanne McCarthy

The Lost Mock-Saint Play ‘Placy Dacy als St Ewe Stacy’: Iconoclastic Repurposing of “Placidus of the Legend of St. Eustace” (1534) and the Case for Nicholas Udall

In token of historical decay enhanced by the Reformation’s active destruction of churches, a play’s title, evidently a mockery of a saint play, appeared in the register for 1534 at Braintree’s St. Michael’s Church. That this church was a one-time pilgrim stop or way-station invites further scrutiny of the overlap between partial survivals of iconoclastic early performance practices and lost rituals. The play ‘Placy Dacy als St Ewe Stacy’ has been, so far, unconvincingly associated with the so-called “father of English comedy” Nicholas Udall who appeared in the records as Rector some two years later. Intriguingly, this martyr’s legend, retold in the *Golden Legends*, contains elements of romance, including a family’s separation and long-delayed reunion, and the miraculous conversion of the Roman soldier Placidus to Christianity is the subject of a prominent mural (ca. 1480) in the pilgrim stop of Canterbury Cathedral. The garbled, rusticated mock-Latin rendering of the title hints at an irreverent retelling of St. Eustace’s conversion; as such, it recalls Udall’s history of comically repurposing and recycling Latin, Terentian comedy, and Catholic relics, saints, and ritual. The title offers further evidence of the evangelical Udall’s unusual form of iconoclasm elsewhere, which was not so much to break treasures but to repurpose them in an ironic irreverent way, a reminder that what remains is not simply ruins but a sort of jocular, irreverent deconstruction of cultural forms.

Anne M. Myers

Authenticity, Loss and Desire: Disappearing Monuments in Post-Reformation England

I am interested in the way that controversies surrounding the destruction or removal of monuments in present-day America (of colonizers, enslavers and Confederate leaders, for instance), echo texts by the iconoclasts and antiquarians of post-Reformation England. On the one hand, monuments are spoken of as authentic records of historical fact, and therefore objects to be preserved, however antiquated or distasteful their subjects may be. On the other hand, opponents note, the flip side of inscription is erasure, and monuments can equally be viewed as polemical expressions of flawed and oppressive ideologies that obscure truth, rather than recording it.

I illuminate the interplay of these conflicting impulses by examining the concept of the monument in early modern texts—among them John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* (1583), William Camden’s *Britannia* (Latin, 1586; English 1610); and John Weever’s *The Ancient Funeral Monuments* (1631)—through the incongruous lenses of etymology and desire. As scholars of the early modern period will know, the word “monument” in the period could mean a historical document (a possible conflation with “muniment”). It could also mean a sepulcher or similar commemorative structure. In the first case, the word suggests a kind of authenticity stemming from proximity to the past, in the second, it suggests less objective ways of thinking—nostalgia, mourning, self-fashioning, and a longing for immortality. At times, early modern writers use clearly use the word in one sense distinctly; at others, the two meanings bleed together. I am interested in how these intertwined inheritances allow monuments, in the early modern period and now, to sit uneasily on the cusp of “history” and “heritage,” a set of terms with related meanings but very different cultural connotations.

Rebecca Olson

The Vexatious Moth: *Love's Labour's Lost* and the Performance of Imperceptible Decay

Early modern painted cloths, once ubiquitous, no longer exist. I have argued elsewhere that the perceived ephemerality of these objects—they were associated with demise even during the early modern period—was likely part of their appeal, and could help explain why they were chosen over higher-quality woven hangings as stage properties at court. Like theatrical performance itself, the painted cloth was nimble, topical, and “insubstantial.”

My paper explores in more detail the most commonly cited contemporary threat to such textiles: the moth. Although exposure to sunlight has probably done the most damage to early modern textiles over the long term, parasitic insects were major culprits of destruction at the time; in Shakespeare's plays, for instance, hangings are referred to as “moth-eaten” and “fly-bitten.” Indeed, moths must have been an ongoing problem in Elizabethan and Jacobean homes: they do not typically attack cotton or synthetic fabrics, but rather plant-based and animal-based fibers, which means that nearly every bit of cloth in Shakespeare's England was susceptible. I attend to the way Shakespeare's plays juxtapose stage textiles with the cause of their destruction, specifically in *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which a character named Moth participates in a performance very much implicated with conventional use of painted cloth.

Maria Shmygol

Textual Remediation and *The Booke of Sir Thomas More*

My paper focuses on different forms of material damage and textual loss in relation to the collaborative play *Sir Thomas More*, particularly in terms of how these issues are negotiated by textual editors. The play survives in a unique manuscript, *The Booke of Sir Thomas More* (BL MS Harley 7368) which is written in seven different hands, including that of the censor Edmund Tilney. The manuscript contains the ‘original’ text of the play and a range of excisions and additions, including cancelled text and cancelled leaves, interlineal additions, additions of new text on slips and whole leaves. These characteristics make *Sir Thomas More* a challenging text to edit, all the more so given the damage that the manuscript has undergone in the centuries since its composition: bleed-through and corrosion caused by ink makes some parts nearly impossible to read, the crumbling edges of some leaves have led to an irretrievable loss of text, and nineteenth-century conservatorial efforts to preserve the manuscript have led to further damage and loss of text. My paper interrogates how previous editors of the play have conceptualized and represented these characteristics of the play, reflecting on different forms of textual ‘rehabilitation’ and what is at stake in rendering loss and damage legible for readers.

Christine Varnado

Shakespeare's Lost Silent Films

I'm teaching “Shakespeare and Film” for the first time this semester, and my first impulse was to begin the course with Shakespeare adaptations from the very, very early history of cinema (Herbert Beerbohm Tree's 1 minute *King John*, 1899; Sarah Bernhardt's 1900 *Hamlet*). Neil Forsyth (*Shakespeare the Illusionist*) has traced an aesthetic through-line of magic, dreams, and supernatural visions from Shakespeare to the proto-Surrealist experimental films of Georges Méliès (*The Astronomer's Dream*, 1898; *A Trip to the Moon*, 1902). Canonical Shakespeare and film scholars, starting with Robert Hamilton Ball (*Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History*, 1968), write in detail about Méliès's 1907 adaptation of *Hamlet* (in which he plays Hamlet) and his meta-theatrical *La Rêve de Shakespeare*, also known as *La Mort de Jules César* or *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar* – but no one can

watch, or teach them, because they are among the vast archive of early silent films “presumed lost.”

Upon closer examination, what scholars are writing about is an imaginary reconstruction – their own fantasy, though inspired by the imaginary reconstructions of others writing before them – from the shot by shot description (and a few images!) in the Star Film Company’s surviving catalogue. My paper will analyze this small canon of academics’ dreams, ideational reveries (for that’s what they are) imagining these 2 lost Méliès films, comparing this method of generating an aesthetic object for critical discussion to both the print history hypothesis of the “memorial reconstruction” of play texts by actors, and the ekphrastic description of imagined silent films in postmodern fiction (Paul Auster’s *The Book of Illusions*). I want to ask what these flights of critical fantasy can show us about the role of imagination in all reading, the relationship between reading and watching, the status of the textual or filmic object of analysis, and the line between scholarship and fiction.

Eunwoo Yoo

Perishable Food and Ephemeral Performances: Reading the Food Scenes in *Coryat’s Crudities*

This study explores the intersections of food and travel within early modern English travel narratives to uncover how dietary encounters in foreign locales contribute to the construction of an English identity. I examine extant texts with the framework of performance studies to attend to the transient food and performances that have decayed and disappeared. Its first half, which I share at this seminar, analyzes the portrayal of exotic food practices in *Coryat’s Crudities*. These food scenes, reflecting the sentiment of a period marked by significant global exploration and cultural exchange, are moments where cultural otherness is observed and represented. I argue that such differences are noted by Coryat not simply to understand the Other but to rediscover Englishness through the alterity. In short, this work underscores the role of food representations in nationalistic self-fashioning within early modern travel narratives, to emphasize the significance of food situated at the crossroads of bodily experience and cultural identity, albeit its perishability.