

## Early Modern Horror Part I: Seminar Abstracts SAA 2024

### Melanie Rio, “Rise up and walk like sprites / To countenance this horror’: Fear and the Imagination in *Macbeth*”

In her analysis of “fear-sickness” in *Macbeth*, Alison P. Hobgood asserts that “Fear is everywhere, and ubiquitously nowhere, in a play about being perpetually afraid but not knowing just what is so terrifying.” Fear becomes more frightening when its point of origin remains occluded. This paper will argue that this lack of clear causality in the Scottish play is inseparable from its interest in the psychophysiological impact of horror. As the recent explosion of work on humoralism, affect, embodiment, and cognition has shown, early modernity was perpetually preoccupied with porous borders, and especially the thin dividing line between body and mind. Fear acted on the premodern body-mind through a complicated interplay of the sensitive and intellectual faculties, wherein comprehension relied on the imaginative interpretation of sensory perceptions of external stimuli. In other words, the site of horrors is undifferentiated from the sight of horrors.

Witnessing the horrific could, and usually did, disrupt the normal function of this delicate perceptual system, causing “distraction” and other mental disorders. The polysemantic term “distraction” carried mutually constitutive connotations: “distraction” could describe this kind of psychic fragmentation, the fragmentation of the physical body, or both. The distracting potentialities of combat in an age of nearly constant warfare were of great interest to early modern physicians and, as this paper will demonstrate, Shakespeare. Inseparable from the martial culture of Scotland and the title character’s past military experience, *Macbeth* constitutes a dramatization of early modern traumatic response, wherein the persistent, willful disjunction of eyes and hands reflects the Macbeths’ deliberate, defensive interruption of the observation- apprehension mechanism in an attempt to mitigate the impact of traumatic memory. Shakespeare analogizes this discontinuity through literal and metaphorical representations of the “distracted” body; the Macbeths leave the stage littered with disembodied parts, in a striking somatic expression of their psychological turmoil. By externalizing the effects of fear in this way, Shakespeare reproduces the same experience of horror on the spectators who “witness” their psychosomatic disintegration. This paper will explore the interplay of horror, observation, and apprehension in *Macbeth*, with a special emphasis on the semiotic object of Macbeth’s “cursed” head that Macduff invites the audience, onstage and off-, to “behold.”

### Paul Budra, “Death is amorous”: Romancing the Corpse in Middleton and Shakespeare

As the leaders of this seminar have pointed out, “scholarly histories of horror continually locate its origins as a conscious genre and aesthetic in the rise of gothic literature in the mid-to-late eighteenth century.” I would like to suggest that one of the reasons for this is that the history of early modern tragedy—the dramatic genre in which we are most likely to find horrific representations of death and violence—has been skewed by the critical and performance history of Shakespeare’s tragedies, plays that have long been thought to generate a solemn transcendent emotional exaltation. Those plays (*Titus Andronicus* aside) have impacted our understanding of the emotional possibilities of tragedy in general, creating a sort of emotional standard to which other tragedies must rise to be considered canonical or deserving of contemporary theatrical production. That affective hegemony has imposed the expectation of an emotional solemnity that does not include the overtly horrific or disgusting, and so scenes of the harrowing and gruesome (say the blinding of Gloucester) have been justified by ingenious thematic interpretations or (as was the case of *Titus Andronicus* for centuries) simply dismissed. As a result, early modern tragedies that are clearly designed to elicit horror, such as Thomas Middleton’s *The Maiden’s Tragedy*, a play that includes grave robbing, necrophilia, and jump scares, are rarely addressed in the history of tragedy and are missing from the scholarly history of horror. But perhaps more importantly, long-established assumptions about what we are supposed to feel when watching a

Shakespeare play may have denuded certain scenes in his plays of their original emotional impact of fear and disgust. I would like to test this idea by comparing *The Maiden's Tragedy* with *Romeo and Juliet*, the first a play full of horror tropes, the second a play that has become so sentimentalized that we have lost its potential for the nightmarish.

### **Amanda Di Ponio, "Bloody Banquets: A Case Study in Body Horror: *Titus Andronicus* and The Vienna Action Group"**

If the success of Lucy Bailey's 2014 revival of her original 2006 Globe production of *Titus Andronicus* reveals anything about our proclivities toward the macabre, it is that audiences today still find delight in bloody revenge amidst the less disarming moments of William Shakespeare's most visceral tragedy. The early modern audience's taste for gore is something Gary Taylor has long since established in his reading of Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Bloody Banquet* and its performance history and popularity alongside an investigation of the accoutrements of the early modern larder. One may deduce that the accompanying cathartic release achieved from watching others face bodily distress is a reason this genre's popularity endures – even though the play fell out of favour – a view held infamously by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*. In her seminal investigation of horror, through a close reading of classic and modern examples, Kristeva articulates the source of abject desire rooted within the human psyche. It is unsurprising that Kristeva includes an examination of the "cruelty" in Antonin Artaud's vision for a Theatre of Cruelty, which carries a much weightier and varied definition. This paper will examine avant-garde performances of stage cruelty and their early modern influences in their staging of blood fe(a)sts. The Vienna Action Group of the 1960s will serve as a case study in tracing the attraction and repulsion of body horror in staged performance. The desire to witness the human body pushed to its limits continues to endure as does the horrific intensity afforded the audience not only exposed to, but participating in such iterations of cruelty, as Lucy Bailey's twice successful *Titus* productions attest.

### **Kasey Evans, "Shakespeare's Necromantics"**

This paper will offer a cultural history of the ancient mythical figure of Asclepius, the demigod offspring of Apollo and the mortal woman Coronis. Delivered as an infant from the corpse of his mother's body and raised by the Centaur Chiron (himself represented as an accomplished herbal healer), Asclepius became the mythical exemplar of the divine healing arts. A religious and oneiric counterpart of Hippocrates, whose cures relied on reason and empirical anatomical knowledge, Asclepius grew into the center of a healing cult that flourished from the 6th century B.C.E. until the end of Greek antiquity. As his cult spread, along with the healing sanctuaries called *asclepieia*, Asclepius came to be credited with the miraculous resurrection of the dead. As Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean world, Asclepius was increasingly understood as the principal antagonist of Christ, who claimed the power of eternal life as his sole prerogative.

The remainder of the paper will use this cultural history of the cult of Asclepius to interrogate the necromancers of Shakespeare's latest plays (thus the "necromantics," to steal a term from Renée Fox). I will touch on Prospero, whose "rough magic" has caused "graves at my command / [To] wake[] their sleepers, ope'd and let 'em forth / By my so potent art" (drawing here on Scott Maisano's provocative argument that Miranda died during the voyage from Milan to the island). I'll then turn to the physician Cerimon from *Pericles*, interrogating the ways in which the play (and, I'll suggest, perhaps Shakespeare's late plays more broadly) adapts the religious and mystical elements of Asclepius's cult to claim the prerogatives of resurrection, restoration, and healing for both the patriarchal nuclear family and the theater itself.

### **Jesse Lander, "Hamlet's Hair: Horripilation and Horror on the Early Modern Stage"**

This paper makes the case for seeing *Hamlet* as a key contribution to the emergence of the genre of horror. The argument examines the centrality of horripilation to the play, noting that *horror* is etymologically linked to bristling. A brief survey of dramatic instances will be supplemented by an account of the attention given to hair raising in Tudor-Stuart sermons. The signifying force of horripilation derives, in large part, from its involuntary nature; impossible to perform as a physical act, staged horripilation succeeds through rhetorical elaboration. Though the notion that hair might serve as a peculiarly sensitive organ for the detection of invisible dangers is rooted in a common physiology, the elaboration of this idea in *Hamlet* and elsewhere in the drama of early modern England makes a strong connection between horripilation and the presence of the supernatural.

### **David Hershinow, "Can't you Take a Joke?: The Taming of the Shrew and the Horror of Domestic Comedy"**

Early modernists interested in finding sixteenth-century prefigurations of the horror genre find fertile ground in the period's theatrical tragedies. Might we also find prefigurations of horror in the period's comedies? In this paper, I read Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* with an eye for the horrific. At present, I have a premise and no argument. More to come!

### **Savannah Jensen, "Puppet Personae: The Horror of Being Fictionalized"**

In the spring of 1641 William Laud and Thomas Wentworth, the 1st earl of Strafford, were held in the Tower of London. Both men had been close advisors to Charles I and now were accused of high treason by members of Parliament. Strafford was accused of trying to drive a wedge between the King and his people primarily based on his suggestion that Charles use his Irish Army against the British people. Laud was accused of bringing in elements of Arminianism and Catholicism into the Church of England practices, a move that many felt put their souls at risk. Ultimately, Strafford would be executed on May 12th, 1641, and Laud would be executed later in 1645.

This paper examines pamphlets printed in the spring of 1641. While detained in the Tower, Strafford and Laud lost many personal freedoms, but they also lost control over their public personae. Because Strafford and Laud were unable to take action against publishers or pamphleteers from the Tower, pamphleteers were able to take these two real, complex men and flatten them into generic villains who are forced to confront their own misdeeds in print. The personae of Strafford and Laud were contradictory to the politics of the real lived men. Their public personae were in effect stolen and forced to work against the men from which they derived. This paper unpacks how Strafford and Laud's personae were used against them in the world of public print, and examines how their loss of control over their printed personae becomes an ominous precursor to their executions.

### **Kate Myers, "Unspeakable Fear: The Secret Horrors in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*."**

Horror thrives on the ambiguity — the simultaneous fascination and repulsion — of fear. Fear, in the hands of early modern writers, emerges in the literally frightening figures of ghosts, witches, and werewolves — human-like but inhuman, hybrid, liminal. In a word, ambiguous. But audiences also encounter in these texts another ambiguous kind of fear, a kind of fear that is intuited, primal, and perhaps unnamable. In short, fear that is both known and unknown. The unknown provokes a fear response that psychologists like R. Nicholas Carlton posit to be "a, or possibly the, fundamental fear" responsible for both anxiety and neuroticism

(Carleton 39). Though others have pursued representations of anxiety and neuroticism in early modern literary characters, I seek to investigate how writers like Shakespeare and Webster produce this kind of fundamental fear affectively and structurally in the textual moods and forms of their writings. Though I would also like to investigate whether these rhetorical, thematic, and affective feats may have supplied an unacknowledged link between early modern horror and its gothic literary descendants, such a project cannot be contained in a short essay. As this serves as my inaugural exploration, I plan to establish a Shakespearean base camp by focusing on *Titus Andronicus* and *The Tempest*. I eventually intend to pursue this line of inquiry through texts by Shakespeare, John Webster, Ann Radcliffe, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and others.

### Ani Govjian, “Hecate, Heredity, & the Horror of Masculine Legacy in Shakespeare’s Macbeth”

“...all we that are Christians, ought assuredly to know that since the coming of Christ in the flesh, and establishing of his Church by the Apostles, all miracles, visions, prophecies, & appearances of Angels or good spirits are ceased. Which served onely for the first sowing of faith, & planting of the Church.” —  
*Daemonologie*, 65-66

Why is Hecate invoked in a play so preoccupied with masculine lines of succession? If, as King James avers, all contemporary prophecies are demonic, what does it mean that the Devil has interfered to “correct” or secure the Stuart throne in England?

How is Hecate’s presence in this play about England’s Scottish past reconciled to her complicated associations with the safety of home and anxiety of thresholds, feminine-coded witchcraft and masculine soldiers, and as a harbinger of both death and renewal? What does invoking the psychopomp to Persephone, goddess of magic and crossroads, do for our understanding of this play and of horror in the period even if her presence is “just” witchy window-dressing?

My paper reads the witches’ prophecy as a dark punishment for Macbeth personally and as an opening gambit of horror for an audience that is told that Christ’s miracles have served their purpose and all contemporary wonder comes from a powerfully active source of evil. The specter of tripartite Hecate, then, becomes a testing scourge for Macbeth while the figure of Hecate in the early modern imagination is central to *Macbeth’s* preoccupation with time, gender, and the preternatural impulse to violence.

Queer and feminist readings provide critiques of the play that appropriately explore the relationship between the preternatural, the embodied experience of sex and gender, and the chaos that disrupts affairs of state amid queer temporalities. These evaluations are often pinned on: 1) the site of Lady Macbeth’s body (especially her beckoning to greater/demonic forces to “unsex” her) and her experience of madness, 2) Macbeth’s contention with a masc-forward reading of too-swift action (as the oft-cited foil to readings of Hamlet’s “inaction” as a lapse in masculinity), and 3) the words of Macduff who must feel his grief “as a man” in the face of Malcolm’s hasty call for him to pursue a stony return of force.

In much of the darker elements of Shakespeare’s *oeuvre* the past is a curse. Hamlet’s ghost is a haunting burden that goads murderous and confused action. In *Macbeth*, prophecy and the confounding of time have been read for their preternatural signifiers of demonic influence, degeneration, and evidence of Macbeth’s moral decomposition for upsetting the line of succession.

In asking what Hecate has to do with *Macbeth*, I explore how the play leverages different facets of this figure in early modern thinking to situate the central question of who is fit to rule. The invocation of Hecate encourages a complex reformulation of gender that situates birthing bodies as sites of death while men attempt to install themselves as keepers of futurity.

### **Kenneth Connally, “Pity and Fear”: Early Modern Tragedy as Horror Fiction**

Surveys of horror fiction routinely begin with the 1764 publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and the subsequent rise of the Gothic novel in the late eighteenth century, implicitly or explicitly situating the genre as a distinctively modern phenomenon. Noël Carroll’s landmark study *The Philosophy of Horror* provides one theoretical rationale for this move, defining “art-horror” in terms of its characteristic object: a monster whose existence defies the categorical schemata of modern science. In this essay, I encourage studies of horror fiction to instead consider classical and early modern tragedy as crucial stages in the development of the genre that would come to be known as horror. In support of this contention, I consider plot elements and narrative structures in early modern English tragedy (and the ancient Greek and Latin tragedies that inspired it) analogous to those ubiquitous in modern horror fiction and film, arguing that they serve the same affective function. After responding to some potential objections to a definition of art-horror that would include tragedy, I argue that such a definition is useful, in part because it allows us to see more clearly continuities and developments within the theoretical and critical discourse around tragedy and horror, from Aristotle, Augustine, Avicenna, and Sidney to Burke, Radcliffe, Lovecraft, and Carroll himself.

### **Chelsea Lee, “Re-fleshing: The Denial of Decomposition in *Hamlet* and *The Winter’s Tale*”**

This paper seeks to reevaluate the horror of the corpse by assessing two of Shakespeare’s plays that seem to insist upon the circumvention of natural decay. While often done in the service of preserving the vitality of the presumed dead—there is a simmering horror involved with a body that is arrested from decay. When creating figures of living death, and for this we can consider contemporary conceptions of the zombie and other undead, part of the fear comes from the idea that we might still be alive and aware of the sensations of death—a tortuous suspension. Proper decomposition is the process through which we might fully disengage from the embodied experience of death. That is why there can be both a hidden and overt horror invoked in imagery that seeks to deny or reverse the process of decomposition.

In *Hamlet*, while being told that there is something “rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.90), the iconography of rot and decay are noticeably absent from our visual encounters with the dead. Both the encounters with the ghost and the engagements with Yorick’s skull involve contemplations of the dead that are determined to reinstate non-rotting flesh to a deceased body. I argue that these attempts to circumvent decomposition are indicative of a discomfort potentially more insidious than the image of the rotting corpse itself. By reaching back towards medieval memento mori traditions, especially the iconographic tradition of The Three Living and the Three Dead, we begin to see the didactic power of the grotesque corpse and the ways Shakespeare’s characters manage to avoid such a direct confrontation. Utilizing and pushing back against theories considering the abjection and monstrosity of the corpse, I seek to look at how the most threatening figures of death are those that deny its natural decomposition. This understanding builds towards an assessment of the anxiety and potential looming horror at stake in the negated corpse of Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*.

## Emily Schoenbeck, “Rarer Monsters: Witchcraft, Body Horror, and Deception in *Macbeth*”

Destructive and spiteful, witches were a plague on the villages of Early Modern England. While not as prominent in England as they were in the low countries, witches still had a vivid hold on the English imagination. When it came to finding them out, English witch hunters could rely on a well known fact: witches couldn't cry. Lady Macbeth certainly finds such a womanish display at odds with her ambitions and asks dark forces to dry her of such feminine dampness. Lord Macduff on the other hand grieves the loss of his family, and his tears drive him to slay a tyrant. Tears were a sign of humanity, of natural feeling. Ann Bodenham, an English woman accused of witchcraft in the 17th century, was publicly condemned for not crying at her plight. Showing the appropriate amount of grief could be a life or death matter. There is no shortage of dead bodies in *Macbeth*, and the survivors—parents, spouses, children—repeatedly take stock of how they feel and how they'll allow their bodies to respond to the loss. While killing and bloodshed might be expected in the play's Scotland, there is horror at the unnaturalness of those who grieve improperly. Or worse still, not at all. By close reading *Macbeth* in light of early modern ideas about witchcraft and tears, this paper explores horror as a response to human beings' ability to mentally divorce themselves from their actions.

## Jessica Walker, “A *Midsommar* Nightmare”

Unhappy lovers flee the city, hoping that a trip to a remote location far out in nature will solve their relationship troubles. They find themselves in a place where none of the “real” world's rules seem to apply, inhabited by attractive but strangely otherworldly figures who use their powers to manipulate the visitors, drugging them with potions that affect their emotions and transforming men into beasts. At the end of this transformative experience, characters regain what they had lost, and the mysterious figures that inhabit the wilderness give their blessings to the couples that they had brought together through their meddling. But the resolution is an uneasy one that relies on characters' autonomy being robbed by the love-potions they have ingested. Is this an early modern Shakespearean comedy, or 21st-century elevated horror? While the plot of Ari Aster's 2019 folk horror film *Midsommar* bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Midsommar* is not simply *Midsummer* with the addition of horror elements; rather, Aster's film takes the troubling undertones already present in Shakespeare's play and pushes them to monstrous extremes.

Though *Midsommar*'s Christian and Dani are, like Lysander and Hermia, a long-term couple hoping their escape to the wilderness might resolve the stresses plaguing their relationship, they more closely resemble a disdainful Demetrius trying to flee a woman he no longer desires and a codependent Helena following out of desperation. Through their relationship, *Midsommar* demonstrates the same parallel threads of coercion found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: a woman gaslit by a man who once loved her, and that same couple manipulated by the mysterious forces that control the green world in which they find themselves. Being the stuff of comedy rather than horror, the meddling of Shakespeare's fairies stems from sympathy rather than deliberate malice; initially, the members of the Hårga commune appear to be similar figures, using unorthodox, potentially dangerous methods that will nevertheless lead to an emotionally satisfying resolution. But as the film progresses, their sinister intent becomes clear: to coerce the visitors that they deem racially “pure” into contributing to the isolated community's gene pool, leaving the rest to be brutally sacrificed in order to ensure the group's continued prosperity. These horrific events do not stand in contrast to those of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but rather bring to the surface the distressing undertones of one of the play's subplots: Oberon's use of the love-potion in hopes of romantically manipulating Titania into giving up her child. The play's resolution is likewise discomfiting: how “happy” of an ending can this be when peace is bought at the expense of the love-drugged characters' autonomy? *Midsommar* intensifies this effect, leaving the viewer uncertain whether to feel joy at Dani's freedom and acceptance, or horror at the madness and violence with which they were purchased. Ultimately, my goal is that these comparisons with *Midsommar* will serve to uncover and more closely examine the elements of “horror” that lurk in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

**M.G. Aune, “Sweaty is the Head that Wears the [Burning] Crown: Horrific Execution in *The Tragedy of Hoffman*”**

The early modern English stage had no shortage of real life examples of gruesome acts of torture and execution. Playwrights of limited creativity in these regards could look to pamphlets, ballads, travelers’ tales, and of course, Foxe. The drawing and quartering of traitors in England was a public (and presumably memorable) exercise of state power in which the traitor’s body was converted to a collection of warnings.

In Hungary the leader of a peasant uprising in 1514, György Dózsa was “stripped naked and placed upon a red-hot throne, a burning sceptre was placed in his hands, and upon his head was pressed a burning iron crown. His starving followers ... were brought to his “throne” and forced to drink his blood and to eat pieces of his roasted flesh” (Browne 298). His body was then cut into four pieces, each sent to a city for display.

Scholars assume that Henry Chettle, perhaps by word of mouth, had learned about this incident and incorporated it into his play *The Tragedy of Hoffman or A Revenge for a Father* (1602). The revenger’s father is executed offstage for piracy with a burning crown and the revenger, in front of his father’s corpse, uses the burning crown on Prince Charles, the son of the king who ordered the first execution.

The idea of a burning crown had appeared on stage earlier. Christopher Marlowe has Edward proclaim, “But, if proud Mortimer do wear this crown / Heaven turn it in to a blaze of quenchless fire!” (5.1.43). Though Mortimer survives the play, Edward is notoriously executed with a red hot spit, a bed, and a table.

A third instance comes from Shakespeare. In *King John* (1595?), John tells Hubert to kill the boy Arthur. Rather than kill Arthur, Hubert decides to blind him with a red hot poker instead. But he’s no match for Arthur’s rhetoric and the boy escapes.

I am interested in the use of heated implements as a means of on stage execution. There are certainly echoes of continental practices, though it doesn’t seem to have been practiced in England. It is also a spectacular, horrific way to kill a character on stage. I hope to compare these instances (and others) to the changes in on screen representations of murder in horror films of the 70s, 80s, and 90s.

I believe that Robin Wood’s work will help trace a thread of class and gender anxiety and Noel Carroll’s will follow another thread of audience response. And ultimately end with a discussion of horror and genre via David Hume.

**Verena Theile, “Here, by a Madman, this song is sung, to a dismal kind of music”: Performing horror and the disintegration of the human in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.**

Drawing on monster theory, I will argue that *Titus Andronicus* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, two extremely visual and explicit plays, confront us with two sets of monstrous villains who perform horrific spectacles of graphic violence on stage to not only exact revenge but also to inflict intense terror in their opponents along the way. As the reader/viewer, we react viscerally as we share the experience of abject horror with the victims. But when the torture and punishment escalate, driving their victims strategically from despair to madness and, ultimately, death, we also experience the end of their suffering as a release from the horror we had to witness, and they had to bear.

In *Titus*, Aaron and Tamora's reign of terror is geared toward inflicting the greatest possible destruction to the Andronici. We witness the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, the forced self-severing of Titus' hand, followed by the return of his hand and the presentation of his sons' severed heads, but also the mock morality play Tamora and her sons perform to make sure Titus really is mad and suffering to an acceptable or desired

degree—only to have the tables turned on her and, indeed, one upped by Titus's slaughter, cooking, and serving of her sons to her in a pie...

In *The Duchess*, the Aragonian brothers resent and reject their sister's remarriage. Ferdinand especially is hellbent on destroying his sister. His torture methods attack her mind and her senses. Having imprisoned her, he visits the duchess in the dark, asking her to kiss his hand and ask for forgiveness. When she does, he walks off, leaving her with a severed hand in her grasp and leading her to believe that Antonio is dead, as the dead man's hand still bears their wedding band. He then directs Bosola to show her wax figures, made to look like her children and husband, again manipulating her into believing that they are all dead. Still unsatisfied with the state of her mind, he extends his methods of torture to assaulting her via noise and by having madmen howling outside of her cell. Her end finally comes when she is presented with her own coffin and the rope that will be used to strangle her to death.

The progression of violence in these plays, I will argue, moves the characters (and us) along a spectrum of fear that starts with outrage and repulsion, that collapses into despair and the realization its utter absurdity in the middle, and then ends with an abject horror so grotesque that it overwhelms the characters (and us) even as it liberates them (and us). My focus will be on the performance of horror in these two plays and on the insidious use of sensory terror as a means of torture.



