

SAA 2024

Seminar 31: “Sex, Race, and the Premodern in Popular Culture”

Led by Yasmine Hachimi and Rebecca L. Fall

ABSTRACTS

Claire M. Busse

“Rejecting the Bard: YA Fiction and the Limits of Shakespeare”

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Shakespeare moved to the screen in a number of popular film adaptations targeted to teen audiences, including *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *O* (2001), and *She's the Man* (2006). By moving Shakespeare's plots and characters to contemporary settings, such films followed a pedagogical path begun in the 19th century that offered Shakespeare as a means for young readers to recognize and negotiate moral and cultural dilemmas. These films worked, in part, because the intolerance of difference and policing of gender norms depicted in Shakespeare's plays resonated with the social milieu of the American teenager. Yet, by repeating Shakespeare's resolutions of these plots, the films ended up reaffirming many of the problematic assumptions about race and gender they seemed to be challenging.

Over the past decade, a number of Young Adult (YA) novels have created a new genre of teen Shakespeare, one that follows the path of the earlier films in highlighting the parallels between Shakespeare's gender politics and those of the American high school. However, while the female protagonists in novels such as K. Johnston's 2012 *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* (2012), Emily Wibberly and Austin Siegemund-Broka's *If I'm Being Honest* (2019) and Hannah Capin's *Golden Boys Beware* (2020, first published as *Foul is Fair*) find themselves in Shakespearean plots, they actively reject Shakespeare's resolutions. No longer a tool for grappling with the problems of the present, Shakespeare's narratives become constraints that must be destroyed in order to move forward.

Vernon Dickson

“Gender and Race in Contemporary Shakespearean Analog Gaming”

Analog (board and card) gaming continues to increase in popularity. With thousands of new titles released each year and multi-billion-dollar yearly revenues, analog gaming is a quickly growing aspect of popular culture that warrants closer analysis. Contemporary Shakespeare analog games have tended to offer traditional visual representations of gender and race, until recently. Most of these games have focused on white, European, and masculine portrayals, often because these games center on a specific emphasis on historical contextualization for the game world and its play, though even games, such as *Kill Shakespeare!* (2014), that are transgressive in their world-building, reiterate traditional race and gender roles. In the last few years though, some Shakespeare analog games have begun to offer more non-traditional depictions, including more diverse characters, options, and images. *Munchkin Shakespeare* (2017) is perhaps the first popular release to purposefully depict a wide variety of artistic renditions of characters, blurring color and gender, even offering players the opportunity to play as a dark-skinned male hero or a green-skinned female witch. More recently, *Time Stories Revolution: A Midsummer Night* (2020) uses fairy depictions to open up a broad and diverse gaming experience for players. *Zounds* (2022) is perhaps the most diverse Shakespeare game available, offering a wide range of racial depictions, often in unexpected ways. In terms of gender, most roles are traditional, though some images may be intended to be gender fluid. What once appeared like a white male-focused grouping of games, now offers players a much more diverse play experience. (250)

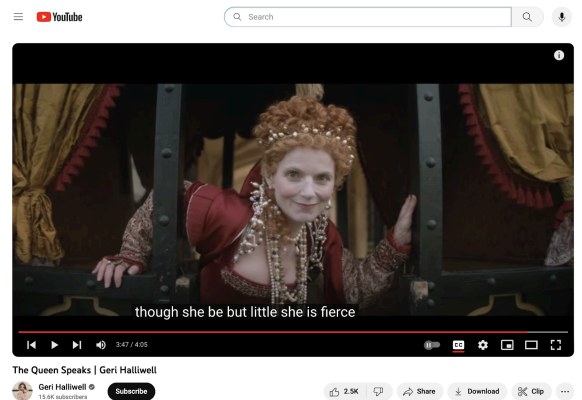
Lee Emrich

“White Light or a Rainbow?: Elizabeth I, Race, and “Girl Power””



In 2015, the thrill of identifying the Bacton Altar Cloth as a piece of clothing directly owned and worn by Queen Elizabeth I herself excited both researchers and the public, and from October of 2019 to February of 2020, Hampton Court Palace proudly displayed “The Lost Dress of Queen Elizabeth I” alongside one of the monarch’s most famous and enigmatic royal portraits: The Rainbow Portrait. Painted quite near the time of the monarch’s death, there is some speculation that the painting details the same fabric found in the Bacton Altar Cloth.

A few months later, in November of 2020, the UK’s second-most famous redhead (or first, depending on your point of view), Geri Halliwell aka “Ginger Spice” of the Spice Girls, wearer of another iconic piece of dress history, her famous “Union Jack” dress, created a YouTube series called “Rainbow Woman,” a collection of video vignettes she writes, directs, and stars in. Her debut episode, called “The Queen Speaks,” features Halliwell dressed in Elizabethan dress, hair, and makeup and reciting a speech she has written in the persona of Queen Elizabeth. The video ends with Halliwell quoting Helena from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with a fade to the The Rainbow Portrait and the following quote: “With courage and charisma / Elizabeth the First / a queen of girl power and a rainbow woman.”



Bringing together two of arguably the greatest British sex symbols, my essay will interrogate the entanglements of sexuality, age, race, and gender interwoven into these three artifacts. From the archival desire for Elizabeth’s lost body brought ferociously back to life through the Bacton Altar Cloth to Halliwell mediating her own journey through time by drawing on the staying power of Queen Elizabeth’s symbolism, the “rainbow woman,” I’ll trace how the media of clothing, make-up, portraiture, and video illuminate each woman’s negotiation of time, nationalism, desire, and “girl power.” But, ultimately, I’ll push back on Halliwell’s reading of Queen Elizabeth as a “Rainbow Woman,” instead suggesting how Elizabeth, in her portraiture and cosmetic choices, is deeply a figure of whiteness.

Ryan Hackenbracht

“Japanese Early Modernity and Basho’s Bouncing Frogs”

Modern film recreations of the Edo/Tokugawa period of Japan (1603-1868) vary greatly in the representation of yellow bodies. Some, such as HBO’s *Westworld* (2016-2022), use them as scripts for reinforcing Western superiority, while others, such as Richard Dindo’s *Le Voyage de Bashô* (2019), romanticize them into inhumanity. This paper surveys the diversity of such representations with specific attention to the period’s most famous poet—Matsuo Basho (1644-94), inventor of haiku. Basho, like Shakespeare, has a robust afterlife in popular culture. He makes appearances across a number of genres, including anime, manuals on Zen Buddhism, and fan films on YouTube.

Those YouTube vignettes, in particular, exhibit a range of attentiveness to the actual style and content of Basho’s haiku. Dindo’s *Le Voyage de Bashô*, for instance, remakes Basho after Western stereotypes of a noble Oriental sage, replete with bushy eyebrows and grandfatherly mannerisms. Other films (often those by Japanese creators) are more successful at capturing Basho’s *joie de vivre* and innovativeness—playful, as he was, but also irreverent toward the old *waka* masters who preceded him. His most famous haiku—“Old Pond”—is a favorite among YouTube creators, and its bouncing frogs often encapsulate a creator’s particular approach to Basho—was he an aesthetic traditionalist? provocateur? something else?

Operating within the framework of global Renaissance studies, my paper hopes to further discussion on connections between Europe and early modern Japan—this time, in pop culture. Basho, as inventor of the world’s most popular poetic form, continues to shape notions of what poetry is and what cultural and intellectual work it performs upon the reader.

Jessie Herrada Nance

“Head Over Heels: Canon Fanfiction and Early Modern Romance”

In the Summer of 2015, *Head over Heels* premiered at the Oregon Film Festival in Ashland, Oregon. Billed as an adaptation of Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*, the musical sets the various love triangles (squares, pentacles) against a backdrop of a catchy soundtrack featuring songs from The Go-Gos. I argue that this adaptation of *Arcadia* is what Christine Scholl would call “canon fanfiction,” or “literature that uses and consciously responds to traditional or canonical sources as its foundational material or inspiration for a new production” (22). Fanfiction based on canon literature, Scholl explains, allows “scholars and literature students alike to find renewed value in canon literature while at the same time confronting its gaps and problematic aspects” (22). In *Head over Heels*, playwright Jeff Whitty expands the plots of Sidney’s text to challenge traditional gender and class roles, creating an expansive and expressive musical that celebrates *Arcadia*’s delightful complexity. With its 80s soundtrack, this musical retelling magnifies the instances of diverse expression in the canonical work to interrogate limited views of desire, class, and gender expression in our era, the consequences of which have become more dire in the near decade since the musical’s premiere. Exploring canon fanfiction opens new avenues for understanding the links between early modern and popular cultures. Works such as *Head Over Heels* also provide scholars and students with models of fanfiction that use elements of canonical texts to comment on the “gaps and problematic aspects” of our current, fraught historical moment.

Scholl, Christine. *Canon Fictions: Reading, Writing, and Teaching with Adaptation of Premodern and Early Modern Literature*. Medieval Publication Institute, 2023.

Melissa Johnson

“Shakespearean Allusion in Justina Ireland’s *Dread Nation* Duology”

Justina Ireland released her book, *Dread Nation*, to wide acclaim in 2018. The YA novel is an alternate history of nineteenth-century America, in which zombies roam the land and prey on its human inhabitants. Ireland’s main character, Jane, is a Black teenage girl, training to become a bodyguard of sorts for wealthy young white women in the midst of this undead scourge. In Ireland’s sequel, *Deathless Divide*, Jane and her fellow and rival trainee, Katherine, find themselves on the run through the American West after political corruption and the worsening plague force them into exile. Throughout both novels, Ireland makes numerous references to the works of Shakespeare, communicating deeper themes, foreshadowing significant moments, and expressing her characters’ emotional developments through these connections. Ireland’s use of Shakespeare illustrates the breadth and depth of his work for young adult readers who may not be well versed in his plays yet, while nuancing the experiences and struggles of her diverse female characters, particularly Jane. Over the course of the two novels, Jane and Katherine become heroines largely influenced by those that Jane reads and references, translating the highbrow culture and poetic genius often associated with Shakespeare into a uniquely African American narrative.

Willnide Lindor

“Moving Black Forward: Sublimating the Legacy of Blackness in *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Black Panther*”

In a riveting scene before his death, Killmonger, from Marvel’s 2018 film *The Black Panther*, utters, “Just burry me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships...Cause they knew death was better than bondage” (*Black Panther* 1:57:40). Killmonger’s chilling resolution to experience premature death for the promise of agency speaks to his acute awareness of his place in relation to a larger colonial history. Killmonger is intimately connected to the confining accounts associated to blackness, but he reveals an unspoken narrative—his ancestors weren’t passive actors in the scripts of the histories, travel narratives, or dramas written about them—instead they were actively engaged in changing their present to forge freeing futures. Both in dramas and films, writers have attempted to reimagine blackness in the margins of precolonial and colonial histories. In the Renaissance, Shakespeare created multi-dimensional Moor characters in *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus*—challenging early modern tropes of blackness. In *Black Panther*, Ryan Coogler casts the audience’s vision towards the future to imagine the African experience beyond historical and contemporary socio-cultural restraints via Afrofuturism. In this paper, I argue that Shakespeare and Ryan Coogler sublimate the historicity of African alienation inherited through pre-colonial and colonial epistemologies to establish worlds via scripts where the legacy of blackness becomes synonymous with power and pride.

Danielle Rosvally

“Good Luck and Don’t Fuck it Up: Shakespearean Queens on the Small Screen”

In this paper, we consider performances of Shakespearean content by drag queens on television and the internet. Specifically we look to popular screen depictions of Shakespearean drag from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and YouTube. The 2015 episode of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* titled “Shakespeare” (a perhaps-unintended appropriation of Madahvi Menon’s 2011 book title) depicts the season 7 queens performing in two Shakespearean adaptations: “Romy and Juliet” and “MacBitch.” We couple the *Drag Race* queens with the YouTube performances of the drag queen Tootight Lautrec whose

exhaustive repertory includes lip sync performances of Shakespeare's Sonnets as performed by various famous actors.

Generally, *RuPaul's Drag Race* hinges on queer iconography and recognizable pieces of popular culture. By devoting an episode to Shakespeare, therefore, *RuPaul's Drag Race* indoctrinates Shakespeare into the hallowed halls of iconic queer performance. Shakespeare becomes part of this queer pop culture canon and, as an extension, an integral piece of queer world-making. Tootight Lautrec extends this Shakespearean queer world-making via YouTube. By devoting a sizeable part of her repertoire to lip-syncing sonnets, Lautrec further canonizes Shakespeare as a critical piece of drag culture. These mediated acts of drag create a digital footprint and subsequent archive. Remixing Shakespeare's cultural capital with these traditional drag acts in mediated spaces incorporates the kind of layered dramaturgy that is traditionally part of queer world-building. As such, these acts of drag incorporate Shakespeare as a key building block for such world building; a touchstone of queer experience in the digital age.

Laryssa Schoeck

“Remixing Romance in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*: Representations of Gender Identity and Sexual Expression in *♫ Juliet*”

Premiering on the West End in 2019, and currently running on Broadway, the jukebox musical *♫ Juliet* reimagines Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* through the song catalogue of pop music maestro Max Martin and a book by David West Read. *♫ Juliet* transforms *Romeo and Juliet*, one of the most famous, if not *the* most famous heterosexual love stories of all time, into a neon pink and glittery world which is “undeniably queer.”^[1] “What if Juliet didn't die at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*?” is the central premise of the musical, but this “what if” extends past Juliet's fate. The musical also questions “what if” Shakespeare's famous love story was no longer solely about a heterosexual couple, but also included a non-binary character, May, and a queer love story to challenge the primacy of Shakespeare's eponymous lovers? *♫ Juliet* attempts to reclaim Shakespeare's cisgender, heterosexual love story, and progresses queer character representation within musical theatre in the process. However, Read undermines the progressive potential of this Shakespearean “remix” to represent a non-binary person and a queer relationship by utilizing non-Shakespearean characters, May and François, to represent these identities, instead of reimagining Shakespearean characters to fulfill these roles. This essay will question Read's adaptive choices to largely exclude Shakespeare's characters from queer identities and examine this oversight within the context of the twenty-first century jukebox musical form.

[1] Lewis, Christian. ‘*♫ Juliet*’ Review: Shakespearean Jukebox Musical is Like a Shot of Pure Gold, *Variety*, 17 Nov. 2022.

Alexandra K Sengupta

“Shakespeare Who?: Finding Female Agency through New Narratives and Forgotten Women in *Rosaline* and *Ophelia*”

Women directors are staging a coup of the canon; Shakespeare is out, and his stories are up for grabs. In 2018, *Ophelia*, directed by Claire McCarthy, took the well-known and much adapted story of *Hamlet*, and recast the main roles. No longer is the story about Hamlet, but about Ophelia, who narrates the ending of their tragic love story to the world. More recently in 2022, Hulu released a film titled *Rosaline*, directed by Karen Maine, that also rewrites the narrative in favor of a forgotten female side character. Rosaline, Romeo's original love interest (before she is replaced by Juliet and

the powerful effects of love-at-first-sight) never even gets a line in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, just a few measly mentions by other male characters. But in the 2022 film, she is the main character, and she will not be so carelessly tossed aside. These films and their female directors deliberately break from the source text to give voice to female characters and rewrite a literary history and their perceived wrongs against female characters. In this paper, I examine both these films and their source texts to show a clear agency given to female creatives and side characters through a rewriting of one of the most canonized writers of all time. It is this unique canonization that allows for the donning of new identities and the creation of new narrative and adaptive conventions.

David Vaughan

“Temptation and Sin in the Gardens of Milton and Lil Nas X”

In a music video for the song “Montero (Call Me By Your Name),” Lil Nas X employs images and tropes that recall Milton’s garden in *Paradise Lost*. “Montero” begins in Eden where Lil Nas X, whose given name is Montero, is tempted by a serpent whose features resemble his own. After the fall, Lil Nas X suffers persecution, judgement, and death. Thereafter, Lil Nas X nearly ascends to heaven before sliding down into hell to seduce and replace Satan. Ripe with Miltonic overtones, the garden scene suggests that Lil Nas X reimagines early modern conceptions of temptation, seduction, and sin in order to alter or adapt the narrative of the fall for the twenty-first century. Moreover, by alluding to Milton, Lil Nas X establishes a link to premodern notions of sex, race, and gender even as he appears to question them. This paper will address two questions: for what purpose has Lil Nas X reimagined Milton’s garden? And, more generally, what do such reimaginings reveal about modernity’s conceptions of temptation and sin? By addressing these questions, I would like to consider the function of poetic allusion and imitation to suggest that Lil Nas X paradoxically points back to the premodern in order to guide modernity forward. Additionally, I will consider how Lil Nas X alludes in order to intervene in and to upend Milton’s hold on depictions of temptation and sin in the Garden of Eden.

Jennie Votava

“Fairest resemblance of thy maker faire’: Reading Race in *Paradise Lost* through HBO’s Adaptation of *His Dark Materials*”

This essay examines how HBO’s serial TV adaptation of Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* revises Pullman’s own appropriation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* by featuring two interracial couples as Adam and Eve figures. Pullman’s recasting of the primal fall as the redemptive sexual awakening of his child protagonists, Lyra Belaqua and Will Parry, has been of considerable interest to scholars of his trilogy of fantasy novels (1995-2000), which take place across multiple universes, including our own. While remaining quite faithful to the source texts, two key choices by the HBO production (2019-2022) add to the stakes of Pullman’s appropriation. One is the series’ racially diverse casting. The other is its expansion of the roles of two secondary characters: Lyra’s scheming mother Marissa Coulter (Ruth Wilson) and her co-conspirator and fellow traveler to alternate worlds, Carlo Boreal (Ariyon Bakare). Toward the end of the series’ second season, Boreal and Coulter enact their own version of Adam and Eve’s climactic exchange in the Garden of Eden, resulting in Boreal’s murder. This key scene underscores the significance of race in the series’ conclusion, in which Will (Amir Wilson) and Lyra (Dafne Keen) more overtly take on the roles of the mythic first couple. By evoking Milton’s problematic constructions of both race and gender in *Paradise Lost*, the pairing of these scenes not only complicates Pullman’s positive spin on Genesis 2-3, but also offers insight into what scholars are only beginning to unpack as Milton’s contribution to premodern constructions of racial whiteness.