

Abstracts for SAA 2024 Seminar “Poetics of the Obvious”

Arranged alphabetically by writer’s surname.

Katherine Attié, “Playing Fool to Sorrow: Rhyme’s Reason in *King Lear*”

As a poetic device, rhyme is obvious to the ear. This is not to say, of course, that any given rhyme is necessarily obvious to the sense. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare plays up the ironic tension between concordant sound and discordant sense most notably through the puzzling, prophetic rhymes of the Fool. Focusing on the play’s two main rhymers, the Fool and Edgar, this paper explores rhyme’s double role as concealer and revealer of truth – a doubleness that formally complements the play’s thematic doublings of cruelty and kindness, egotism and empathy, madness and reason, foolishness and wisdom. I argue that the Fool’s disappearance (along with the discarded disguise of “Poor Tom” and his bizarre rhymes) makes possible the reclamation of rhyme in the name of reason. The iambic pentameter couplets that end the play (spoken by Albany in the First Quarto and more fittingly by Edgar in the Folio) deliver rhyme from the “great confusion” of the Fool’s riddles and Tom’s rants; the tragedy’s closing rhymes, marked by clarity, simplicity, and sincerity, come as a relief – not only of the thank-God-it’s-over variety, but also of the poetic variety, as a welcome reconciliation of sonic and semantic obviousness.

Andie Barrow, “Penumbra Love: Poetry and Prose in Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller*”

My paper examines the interplay of prose and verse in the second half of Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), in which Jack Wilton, a fictional page, interacts with the historical character of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, the master in relation to whom he is a “shadow.” The two become interchangeable with one another, swapping by turns names, clothing, and lovers, but throughout their adventures Wilton resolutely and perhaps willfully fails to understand the Petrarchan values that motivate his master’s actions. Despite his and Howard’s mutual occupation of *The Unfortunate Traveller*’s early sixteenth-century chronotope Wilton is thoroughly a creature of the late Elizabethan period, and from his vantage Howard’s poetics seem not only outmoded but alien and irreconcilably queer.

Interwoven into Nashe’s prose narrative are three poems written in imitation of the real Henry Howard’s verse. Although they might be easily written off as shallow parodies of various Petrarchan clichés, reading these poems alongside Wilton’s prose narration demonstrates that he and Howard possess non-overlapping historical perspectives defined by their mutual occlusion of those details which are most important to each other. As bodies the two can never quite occupy the same space, but Wilton never stops trying; his pursuit of proximity to the renowned “poet Earl” in turn reflects Nashe’s own labors as an imitator of Howard’s verse. The constant contrast between Wilton and Howard’s voices and characters highlights the intractability of the differences between their respective times, but also offers opportunities for Nashe to explore the penumbral spaces that exist between Wilton-as-shadow and his historical surroundings. In surveying these attempts, I argue Nashe’s imitations of Howard’s poetry

disclose not only a desire to surpass a worthy master, but also an intertwined erotic and elegiac desire for proximity to a history which is unreachably distant.

Claire Eager, “‘most goodly riuers there appeare’: Riparian Landscape Conventions in Spenser’s Ireland”

This paper considers the obviousness both of literary convention and of poetic deixis, taking to heart Spenser’s dedication “From my house / of Kilcolman” at the beginning of *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*. What if we read the riparian landscapes of *The Faerie Queene* as it were over Spenser’s shoulder, looking alternately out the window of his crenellated tower, towards the mountain Galtymore, then inside at the books in Spenser’s library, and then at the manuscript page in front of him? I begin with scenes clearly associated with Spenser’s Irish experience—especially the descriptions of Galtymore/“Arlo Hill” and its surrounding rivers from *Two Cantos of Mutabilitie*. I attend to the physical details of Arlo’s multiple presentations, first as a place of natural beauty that is subsequently ruined; second as a site divinely transformed by the presence of the goddess Nature. I observe the narrative links or sutures that bind these watery landscapes to the wider poem. At times abrupt; often unobtrusive; in some cases—“(Who knowes not Arlo-hill?)”—they serve to highlight Spenser’s poetic architecture by ostentatiously summoning readers from one narrative level to another. Finally, I consider the further transformations of these riverine landscapes as Spenser overlays them with features derived from literary traditions of the *locus amoenus* and from horticultural practices Spenser was familiar with, landscape architectures and water features he might have seen. Although such conventional elements are easy to dismiss, I consider what the consequences may be of grafting classical or English scenes onto Irish ones—both for Spenser’s Ireland and for the conventions themselves. Drawing attention from Faerie lond to classical literature to the scene of writing itself, Spenser’s rivers and their surroundings both build upon and situate themselves within the poet’s lived landscape experience.

John Gillies, “Raucous objects in *Othello*”

The obvious -- in the sense of the mundane that "is too much with us, late and soon" -- is a stumbling-block to poetry whose endeavour is to "make strange" the things it touches. In the case of epic or tragedy which are governed by the principle of decorum, the antipathy is even greater. If decorum is imagined by Plato (*Statesman*, 283d-85a) as the whole art of weaving -- from carding and twisting threads from a tangled ball prior to their being woven into cloth -- then the mundane would correspond to the tangled ball; the raw mass of wool rather than the decorous garment. Such is the impasse that ancient painters invented a separate genre for mundane objects, the successor to which we find in the still life or *nature morte* tradition of painting. It is a genre in which nothing happens, nothing is celebrated and objects simply are. My essay will contextualise the mundane in *Othello* in terms of early modern Dutch still lifes and consider its stubborn and sometimes raucous poetic intransigence in *Othello*.

Anna Hegland, “Dispatch the Giant’: Stagecraft and Obvious Violence in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*”

In the induction of Francis Beaumont’s 1607 play, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, the Prologue is quick to distance his company of players from the Citizen who has interrupted the play, saying, “Thus much for that we do; but for Rafe’s part / You must answer for yourself.” (*Induction*, 118-119) Obviousness as stagecraft is evident from the beginning of this play as the audience sees behind-the-scenes of *The London Merchant* and witnesses the company of actors try to hold their play (ready “a month since” [*Induction*, 32]) together while obliging the Citizen’s demands. Beaumont’s use of obviousness to drive the plot both informs and destabilizes the comedy and the violence of the piece; while the Citizen and his wife conspire to see Rafe fight giants and lead London’s finest into battle, the audience knows that no real, sustained threat of danger can occur. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, then, is a particularly multi-layered playgoing experience, where what is obvious to the audience is not always obvious to the characters, and the stakes have never been lower. I argue that obviousness in this text is a kind of playfulness, affording great opportunities to an actor in performance. This paper will explore comic and slapstick violence as one part of that playful obviousness and think about the role that language may play in constructing the obvious, violence, and embodied action.

Dianne Mitchell, “Chaste Queerness in Hester Pulter’s Lyrics”

In her afterword to a 2021 special issue of JEMCS on the remarkable poetry of Lady Hester Pulter, queer theorist Julie Crawford admits that “Despite some critical insistence that Pulter pays special attention to the female sexed body, I see little evidence of this” (201). In my short paper, I take up this strange assertion – strange because, I will argue, evidence of Pulter’s attention to the female sexed bodies is everywhere in her poetics. Yet perhaps this literally surface-level interest in women’s bodies has made Pulter’s poetic queerness (paradoxically) hard to see. By close reading some key moments from two particularly women-oriented poems, “Aletheia’s Pearl” and “The Garden,” I argue that queer attention emerges in Pulter’s lyrics via scenes of superficial (but nonetheless highly potent) forms of embodied contact. Confusingly, Pulter refers to her poetic manuscript as “Chaste Fancies.” Without dismissing the ace/aro potentialities of a term like “chaste,” I suggest that this descriptor might also name a formal attachment to surface pleasures, one that permits obvious modes of queer desire that are coded as permissible and viable rather than hidden or repressed.

Dan Moss, “Partly Knowing the King’s Men: Character Doubling, Conjecture, and Contingent Casting in *The Winter’s Tale*”

That the boy actor who played Mamillius in the first half of *The Winter’s Tale* might have doubled the part of Perdita in the second half has long struck scholars as an especially inviting speculation: a

metatheatrical corollary to Hermione's resurrection via Ovidian stage-magic, which helps to transform tragedy into comedy. Indeed, "the advantages... of seeming to resurrect the dead son in the body of the lost daughter" have proven so attractive to critics like Stephen Booth and Brett Gamboa that the further doubling of the dead Antigonus with the living Camillo is soon proposed as a "logical" follow-up, rectifying the remaining tragedy of Paulina losing her husband by marrying her to the actor who played her husband. That such conjecture-upon-conjecture severely strains what little we actually know about the early modern theatrical practice of character doubling cannot, it seems, prevent so tantalizing a scheme from having become in its own way canonical; even alternatives, such as Northrup Frye's suggestion that the Antigonus actor doubled as Autolycus, are generally relegated to footnotes in favor of Mamillius/Perdita and Antigonus/Camillo.

Focusing on the strangely incoherent levels of thespian skill necessitated by Mamillius' role in Act 1, scene 2 of *The Winter's Tale*, where in Evelyn Tribble's terms the boy is heavily "shepherded," and in the following scene, where he briefly but dazzlingly out-performs his fellow apprentices, this paper argues that Shakespeare prioritized contingencies of casting and audience preference over generic coherence. In other words, Mamillius' part is designed to suit, in any future production, either a young apprentice actor incapable of doubling or an advanced apprentice experienced enough to play Perdita as well as Mamillius. If so, Shakespeareans would do well to re-examine other frequently proposed doubling schemes—beginning with Antigonus/Camillo, but extending to such perennial favorites as Hippolyta/Titania, Hamlet Sr./Claudius, and Posthumus/Cloten—for signs of contingent casting, rather than the all-or-nothing prescriptive doublings more common in the criticism.

Jimmy Newlin, "Just Read the Play Again': *King Lear* and the Obvious"

This paper begins by considering an obvious quality of Shakespeare's greatest tragedy, *King Lear*. Whereas every previous version of the Leir myth depicts the French army triumphing and the King returning to the throne, Shakespeare's *Lear* ends in a catastrophe and despair. Following Catherine Belsey's 2015 call for a return to the study of Shakespeare's engagement with his sources, I suggest that we can infer something of Shakespeare's authorial intentions by considering his decision to revise a familiar, "historical" narrative so radically. Shakespeare's shocking revisions clarify the play's blunt assertion that human experience is a result of chance and the laws of nature, rather than the interests of the divine or another moral or supernatural order. This paper serves as a prospectus for a larger project on *Lear* and its critical history. By considering *Lear*'s depiction of its "tough world" (5.3.290) alongside the play's sources and its awestruck reception, we can better understand *Lear*'s unique effect on its reader and its anticipation of our response.

Jennifer Rust, "Amen as Acclamation: the Political Force of Obviousness"

In this essay, I want to revisit Shakespeare's absorption of liturgical speech acts into dramatic discourse by tracing the play of the simple term "Amen." I want to examine such speech acts as acclamations: liturgical rituals that express the public and political unity of a people. Acclamations claim a political

force by their very obviousness, but Shakespeare's staging of them tends to reveal instability and division in the commonwealth.

Ernst Kantorowicz's *Laudes Regiae* (1946), a precursor study to *The King's Two Bodies*, is perhaps the most well-known study of acclamations as political-theological phenomena. Kantorowicz's study in part responds to Carl Schmitt's evocation of acclamations in polemical attacks on the voting procedures of liberal democracy in *Constitutional Theory* (1928). In Schmitt's account, premodern customs of public acclamation are cast as authentic "democracy" and opposed to the secret ballots and private voting procedures demanded by the liberal individualism of parliamentary and American political systems. For Schmitt, the acclamation commands the political force of obviousness: its power stems from its publicity, and its corresponding lack of "secret" procedures and erasure of spaces for private scruples. The acclamation, like the fascist rally, embodies a fantasy of collective will.

Schmitt's argument demands a nostalgia for premodern or early modern rituals of power, but can this nostalgia be sustained when we examine the texts of the era? As is well-known, Shakespeare's history plays obsessively stage the making and unmaking of monarchical sovereignty within the body politic. Thus, it is no surprise that acclamative "Amens" cluster in these plays, notably in *Richard II*, *Henry V*, and *Richard III*. The "Amens" of *Richard III* in particular have been previously discussed in terms of Austin's theories of performative speech by Ramie Targoff, an argument I would like to revisit in light of Schmitt's claims for the obvious political force of acclamations.

However, I think that Shakespeare's most perplexedly "republican" play, *Coriolanus*, offers an even more interesting test case for the integrity of Shakespeare's staged rituals of public acclamation. In *Coriolanus*, in particular, where acclamations of collective consent are meant to affirm, through their public obviousness, a new political order, we find instead that they unfold into uncertain or unstable judgments or enfold hidden agendas or affects that undermine the political order that they ostensibly reinforce. In this way, *Coriolanus* crystallizes a paradox of Shakespearean scenes of acclamation: staging the public acclamation reveals a fractured polity rather than political unity.

Richard Strier, "What's Obvious in *Othello*?"

This paper will explore that question, since *Othello* seems to be a play in which certain things seem obvious (and may or may not be so) and certain things perhaps should be obvious, but are not agreed upon to be such. The play is therefore a good testing ground for the usefulness or power of the concept.

Things that seem obvious: that Iago is a villain; that Desdemona is chaste. The interesting thing about the first matter is that it is possible to see him in a somewhat different light. This is brought out in William Empson's essay on the word "honest" in the play in *The Structure of Complex Words*. I will lay out and meditate on Empson's points.

With regard to Desdemona's chastity, I think that this should be obvious, but the play does, in at least at one moment, seem to raise the issue. Here I think that the assertion of obviousness is something like a moral or critical imperative, though it is one that productions could (if they wish) try to blur.

Something that I think should be obvious is Othello's grandeur of being. Here I will make use of Reuben Brower's chapter on the play in *Hero and Saint*. What is obvious in the criticism is that the "obvious" fact to which Brower and I would point is not at all obvious to many critics of the play, who see Othello as either a fool or portrayed -- through the supposedly racist ideology of the play -- as somehow inherently unstable and prone to violence. This obviously involves the question of whether it is obvious that the play is racist. I would claim that careful attention to the text can make this seem less obvious, and perhaps even obviously false.

Ted Tregear, "Hide and Seek in Herbert's *Temple*"

'Coloss. 3.3' is hiding in plain sight. By embedding the scriptural verse of its title as a diagonal acrostic, George Herbert's short poem is really two poems, or perhaps three. Read one way, it discovers a double motion within human life, which, like the sun, moves at once from east to west -- from life to death -- and from west to east. The idea is difficult, but also univocal: it is a notion that 'My words & thoughts do both expresse'. Read another way, the poem reveals a very different expression: the verse to which its title refers, which, by the end, has produced its own pentameter line: '*My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure*'. And yet, 'reveals' is the wrong word, because this hidden message isn't hidden at all. By marking out its diagonal motion in italics and capitalizing its constituent words, *The Temple* could hardly make it more obvious. These are the poem's two poems; the third consists in the dialectic between the two. Taking off from a reading of 'Coloss. 3.3', this paper will trace the double motion in Herbert's poetry. It seeks to understand why Herbert takes a verse about hiding, and hides it, but with such manifest hermeneutic prompts. And it explores what this might say about the hidden and the manifest, obliquity and obviousness, in Herbert's poetic practice.