# SAA Seminar 23 Mind(ing) the Stage

# Abstracts

**James E. Berg (Middlebury College), Burying Oneself in the Part, or, the Truth About Character in Romeo and Juliet**

In this essay, I propose that, contrary to some interpretations, Romeo and Julietaspires not to the staging of self-conscious characters but to the staging of character as unselfconsciousness. In this play, desire enables progress towards and anticipation of a perfectly unselfconscious state. Such is the mind—or, rather, no-mind—developed when actor achieves the status of character in the literal sense of reading material --where “reading” is broadly understood as interpretation, recitation, or performance not only of words but also of things and persons. This aspiration is consistent with contemporary praise for an actor’s performance on stage as “print,” as something that makes the audience feel as if they themselves are readers. It would have constituted oneness with what one was reading, achieved by becoming so well—so deeply--read as to be buried in one’s part, to be an extension of the text. I see the erotic desire between Shakespeare’s star-crossed lovers as an anticipation of the end of reading, as an opportunity for the experience of self as a syntactically linked element ready to be parsed or realized as a contributor to a larger intention. It is a feeling of partialness apprehending wholeness in its very anticipation of combination. Of course, with respect to Creation as a whole, the Romeo-and-Juliet combination, and the play it forms, are only microcosm—only part. Indeed, as an obsessively synecdochic play, Romeo and Juliet represents erotic love, and preparation for a play, as the taking of part for whole. Yet the play also offers a valuable perspective on what it is to know oneself as character—to embrace one’s part and of oneself as part, as mere, fragmentary instrument of meaning, rather than as reader.

**Caroline Bicks (University of Maine), “Now to Marina bend your mind”: Lost Children and Cognitive Retrieval**

How did early moderns mind lost children to make and keep them present? And how did these cognitive processes show themselves on the early modern stage? The turn in recent decades to studies of embodied cognition —and to the reciprocal dynamics between brain, body, emotions, and environment — has opened up new ways to approach such questions, and to expand our understanding of how theatrical players and spaces could bring people back to life. Some of these reincarnations are more visible than others: *King John*’s Constance describes how her grief “fills the room up” in her son’s absence, stuffs itself into his bed and clothes, and never leaves her side; while Hermione, “knowing” that the Oracle gave hope of her daughter Perdita’s survival, preserves herself for sixteen years to ensure their reunion—a kind of magical thinking that materializes on stage in the spectacular final scene of *The Winter’s Tale*.

But not all parents think alike. When they fail to keep their children in mind, who picks up the cognitive slack? Leontes does not recall Perdita— even after the same Oracle that kept her in Hermione’s mind declares that his kingdom will be heirless until that which is lost be found. Time turns to the audience to “imagine” the shift to Bohemia, asking *them* to recognize Perdita and to “allow” the argument that follows: “A shepherd's daughter, / And what to her adheres.” In a similar rhetorical move, Gower directs *Pericles*’ audience to “bend your mind” to Marina, the daughter whom Pericles (a character whose memory consistently fails or incapacitates him) has left to be raised — and endangered — by foster-parents for fourteen years. Focusing primarily on these two plays, this essay considers the powers and limits of these cognitive energies when it comes to minding and materializing lost children.

**Silvia Bigliazzi (University of Verona), ‘Smell[ing] the air’: Time and No-Time in *King Lear***

For Antonin Artaud, “the stage is a tangible, physical place” and it requires a “physical language, aimed at the senses and independent of speech” that should satisfy physical perceptions (*The Theatre and its Double*). When we first enter “this great stage of fools” and we “smell the air,” Lear says, “[w]e wawl and cry.” Through smelling we begin our sensorial journey through life. Memories anchor our sense of self. Entering time involves both an experience of disruption and loss and gives us a sense of substance and reality. Lear’s tragedy is one of gradual regression to the beginning of embodied temporality through smelling on his way back to nothingness. Time and nothingness are fundamental to all interpretations of tragedy, which is shaped by a linear conception of time, wherein nothing can be reversed, and “all experience vanishes, not simply into the past, but into nothingness, annihilation” (Frye 1996, 3). Tragedy compels us to confront, in the present, the anxieties associated with a “directional, irreversible, and finite” time that ultimately leads to death (Kastan 1982, 80). As noted by Wagner and Bushnell, the present is not merely a straightforward ‘now’; rather, it is multidimensional and “thick,” layered with past experiences and future anticipations. On stage, the complexity of the present can be manifested in various ways, approaching a subjective experience of time that is intricately and tragically linked to the individual’s perception of an ending. Within this interplay of our temporal experience and that of the drama, we encounter conflicting frameworks, which become apparent when the ‘thickness’ of the ‘now’ is vividly represented on stage. This paper will suggest ways to explore this theatrical experience in *King Lear* by foregrounding the role of the senses on stage and the cognitive implications of the performance of physical and mental blindness for the audience.

**Christopher Crosbie (North Carolina State University), Rewriting Intent in Shakespearean Drama: Community, Exculpation, and the Ludic**

Early modern scholarship has tended to understand the unknown intentions of others as a site of cultural anxiety, a kind of provocation toward suspicion, throughout the era. For our seminar, I aim to explore the countervailing concept of “generative intentionality,” a term I use to consider the tendency of individuals and communities to shade interpretation of others’ intentions – across all manner of situations – with a mind toward charitable social ends. My RSA paper will begin this work by examining this concept in early modern culture more broadly, as well as in *Richard II* and *1 Henry IV*. In our SAA seminar, I will turn to Ophelia’s burial in *Hamlet* and the Duke’s judgement of Lucio in *Measure for Measure*, two scenes (drawn from tragedy and comedy, respectively) that fuse the ludic and the serious as characters adjudicate claims about others’ intentional behavior. In the case of Ophelia, Shakespeare places the most consequential question of whether Ophelia meant to kill herself within the deliberative but jesting purview of the play’s clowns. In *Measure*, the comedic Lucio receives promise of the play’s harshest punishment despite his clever, almost endearing, claim he merely spoke “according to the trick.” Shakespeare, I argue, appreciates the capacity of the theater to foster communal habituation into the practice of allowance-making. This predilection never presupposes, however, an easy or unalloyed movement toward social settlements. Rather, Shakespeare draws generative intentionality’s very dramaturgical and ethical force from its inescapable embeddedness within the messiness of real, lived experience. To that end, Shakespeare tellingly acknowledges, so as to subsume, residual worries about the disruptive potential posed by the post-hoc rewriting of one’s actions via appeal to innocuous intent.

**Pascale Drouet (Université de Poitiers, CESCM-UMR 7302), The Cry on the Elizabethan Stage: Strategies of Displacement in *Julius Caesar***

The cry, French philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien observes, is “the sudden intrusion, right in the middle of the course of things, of a violent and pure affect. Every cry we hear, whether of dread, surprise or joy, seizes us and demands our attention” (“Poetics of the Cry”). Taking this definition as a starting point, this paper intends to question the intensity and impact of the tragic cry, especially when facing unjust or unnatural death, both on stage and among the audience. What happens when the mind is short-circuited by irrepressible emotion? When the affect bursts forth, leaving verbal expression and syntactic coherence far behind? How is this convincingly conveyed to the audience, turning them into “wonder-wounded hearers” (*Hamlet*, 5.1.224)? To this end, the paper will focus on Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1599), a play that is of interest to us because, although unlike *King Lear* (Lear’s famous “Howl, howl, howl, howl”, 5.3.255) it does not include any crying on stage, it presents us with three dramatic modalities of the cry that can be understood as a displacement strategy: (1) The reported cry in a character’s narrative speech, as exemplified by Julius Caesar when he says: “Thrice hath Calpurnia in her sleep cried out, ‘Help, ho, they murder Caesar’”(2.2.2), and then by Calpurnia reporting the prodigies seen and heard by the watch, “ghosts [that] did shriek and squeal about the streets” (2.2.24). (2) The ghostly cry no one can hear (either on stage or in the audience) except one character. Such is the case for Brutus, who believes he heard Lucius, Claudio and Varrus cry out in their sleep (*Julius Caesar*, 5.1.295-305). (3) An absent or mute cry, neither performed nor mentioned, meaning a cry repressed and symbolically displaced to self-mutilation or self-slaughter, as epitomized by Portia’s casting burning coals into her mouth (4.3.155-156).

**Claire Guéron (Université de Bourgogne), Romancing the Mind in Chapman, Johnson and Marston’s *Eastward Ho* (1605)**

City comedy’s indebtedness to both Chivalric and Greek romance has long been acknowledged. This is especially true of the sub-genre known as Citizen comedy, whose use of romance tropes – knights errant, giants, fairies, enchanted castles, magic jewels, spells – though sometimes tongue-in-cheek, served to enchant craftmanship, guild membership, and civic participation. More narrowly, the romantic marvelous could be coopted to celebrate the feats of mental ingenuity involved in successful trade and citizenship. This amounted to a “romancing of the mind” - a construction of the mind as a place of magic and wonder, from which powerful ideas could emerge. In this paper, I will argue that *Eastward Ho* “romances” the mind by combining the long-standing allegorical associations of such chivalric staples as enchantments, monsters, and hidden treasure with the hermetic principle of alchemical sublimation, whereby the purification of base metal into gold runs parallel to mental elevation. While drawing on the genre-focused research of Helen Moore and Barbara Fuchs, my main methodological framework for this paper will be Jessica Rosenberg’s work on scale and “devices”, thanks to which I will argue that the play’s trail of bits and pieces, such as Touchstone’s aphorisms and Gertrude’s snowballs and fairy-gifted jewels, offers a celebration of creative inspiration envisaged as a nugget of original thought. This celebration, however, is not devoid of ambivalence, at a time when a flash of inspiration might have seemed difficult to distinguish from the visitation of divine grace. As England inched towards the Baconian dissociation of science and religion, the flash of inspiration seems to have commanded both fascination and wariness, not least by professionals of the stage who depended on it to offer their audiences new and exciting material.

**Laura Hatch (Brigham Young University), Mind the Gap: “Offstage” Cognition in *The Winter’s Tale***

This paper examines *The Winter’s Tale* as a case study for how Shakespearean drama stages the complexities of cognitive and emotional processes in romance, particularly in the context of decision-making and temporal gaps. Through its juxtaposition of onstage action and offstage absence, the play foregrounds the unseen elements of cognition and choice, requiring the audience to grapple with gaps in characters’ interior lives.

The play’s dramatic structure and use of offstage space—most notably during Hermione’s trial, her apparent death, the sixteen-year temporal gap, and Paulina’s home—transform the romance tradition’s narrative conventions. By leaving key moments unperformed, Shakespeare shifts the burden of interpretation onto the audience, making absence a site of cognitive engagement. This paper argues that *The Winter’s Tale* exemplifies how early modern drama’s spatial and temporal dynamics expand the genre of romance, inviting audiences to experience trust, reconciliation, and transformation as live, interpretive processes uniquely afforded by the stage.

**Jim Kearney (University of California, Santa Barbara),** **Hecuba Again: *Hamlet*, the Performance of Mind, and the Phenomenological Arts**

In his famous soliloquy on the Player’s Speech (“What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba”), Hamlet reflects on the cognitive and emotional immersion of the player in this impromptu scene. Hamlet’s speech is itself just such a moment of immersion, of course, one in which the character reflects with great intensity on the relation of cognitive disposition and affective mode to ethical action. In doing so, it both draws on and speaks to imitative and imaginative exercises that date back to antiquity. The early modern stage was a platform on which playwrights like Shakespeare drew on established cultural resources to experiment with virtual experience and the performance of thought and emotion. In this paper, I return to this famous speech to consider *Hamlet’s* staging of thinking-feeling events in relation to what I am calling the phenomenological arts, rhetorical and philosophical practices geared toward the performance of mind and the creation of immersive virtual experience.

**Allison Lemley (Goethe University Frankfurt / University of Bamberg),** **“We must longer kneel”: *King Henry VIII*, Space, and Spectacle**

*King Henry VIII* features a striking number of stage directions, which in performance includes remarkable visual spectacles. Henry Wotton’s commentary on a performance of *Henry VIII*, remarks on the play as one “set forth with many extraordinary circumstances of pomp and majesty, even to the matting of the stage” (Shakespeare Documented). *Henry VIII*’s prioritization of the visual suggests what is seen and what is said are at least of equal importance. The ways in which *Henry VIII* uses its performance space to draw in or distance audience members creates tension between the drama unfolding onstage and the audience’s position in relation to the stage. This paper will examine in particular how Katherine’s acts of kneeling complicate her sympathetic characterization, a perspective which has largely been based on her speeches. The play’s use of space as Katherine kneels reveals a complex range of meanings for members of the audience, requiring negotiation between the ‘truth’ which Katherine asserts and their own positions. In discussing this example from *Henry VIII*, I demonstrate how the play sustains questions of truth in part through audience members’ perspectives to the stage.

**Anne Sophie Refskou (Aarhus University), ‘Compassion and Cognition in *The Spanish Tragedy*’**

In this paper, I trace the relationship between compassion – broadly understood as emotional involvement – and cognition in the early modern theatre auditorium by analyzing one of the early successes on the London stage: Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. I argue that Kyd’s play exemplifies a key point about the early modern stage, namely that emotion and cognition on and off the stage should not be understood as distinct but as closely intertwined. In Kyd’s play – and in many of the plays that followed it – the action and dialogue seem to seek to please audiences both by encouraging emotional involvement and by offering complex cognitive challenges to that emotional involvement, sometimes in the form of a self-referential joke and sometimes in a more serious vein. *The Spanish Tragedy*undeniably seeks to arouse strong emotional responses from its audience, but I suggest that the play simultaneously encourages what may be understood as a meta-cognitive experience of emotion where audiences are invited to ‘mind’ their emotions through a series of meta-theatrical and self-referential devices.

**Emily Shortslef (University of Kentucky), (Un)conventional motives in *The Duchess of Malfi***

This paper takes Ferdinand’s notoriously underdetermined motive for revenge in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* as the occasion for exploring some larger questions about how the conventions of early modern drama shape the psychology of dramatic characters. Although Ferdinand readily identifies the Duchess’s remarriage as the cause of his anger, his drive to punish his twin sister by having her tormented and murdered is marked as excessive and strange, both by the Cardinal and by Ferdinand himself (“Let me but examine well the cause: / What was the meanness of her match to me?”) Critics have often offered psychosexual explanations for Ferdinand’s revenge, positing that Webster has created a character who suffers from repressed incestuous desire for his sister. By contrast, I will argue that his vindictive rage is the crystallization of a trope of early modern revenge tragedy: that it is the apotheosis of the genre’s negative characterization of female erotic seriality. What is unconscious, in my reading, is not the character’s socially prohibited desire but rather the informing of character by generic convention, which—at least in *The Duchess of Malfi*—renders a character strange to himself, and necessitates that audiences look for motive beyond the bounds of individual character.

**Amina H. Tajbhai (Hostos Community College, CUNY), “‘This Palpable Device’: Controlling Memory in Shakespeare’s First Tetralogy”**

This paper explores the manipulation of political memory in Shakespeare’s first tetralogy, revealing that control is best achieved through objects, rather than language. By examining the repeated appearances of roses, crowns, and papers throughout the plays, we can see how objects become containers of political memory that characters attempt to shape and control. While characters like Henry VI attempt to control memory through language—particularly invoking the name of Henry V—these efforts consistently fail. Instead, two characters who control objects show the best understanding memory's mechanics: Jack Cade and Richmond. Cade takes a destructive approach, attempting to control memory by eliminating written records. Richmond is more successful, using objects to gesture toward political reconciliation. Through these characters, we understand that Shakespeare ultimately sees political memory as fundamentally unstable: something that can be momentarily influenced but never completely controlled.

**Suzanne Tanner (Avila University), Reader Marginalia and Mental Experience: Mr. Johnstoune Imagines *The Tempest***

Reception studies, as a branch of literary study, is less concerned with developing critical interpretations of texts and more concerned with why and how people respond to texts at all. Such a view recognizes two important features of literary works: 1.) readers are just as important as authors (if not more so) in determining the meaning and value of a literary text, and 2.) what happens in the audience’s or reader’s mind – their cognitive experience with comprehending, visually imagining, and emotionally responding to a text – constitute one of the most important points of literary experience and interpretation. This paper examines the marginalia of one seventeenth-century reader of Shakespeare’s First Folio to gain insight into this reader’s attention to the text, his mental imagery while reading, and how the design of the text allowed this reader to negotiate and co-construct meaning and interpretation. In looking particularly at several instances of this reader’s engagement with *The Tempest*, we can see how this reader’s marginalia records a reading practice of negotiation between authorial intention (text design) and reader conception and mental interpretation of the text.

**Evelyn Tribble (University of Connecticut), Gesture and the "Aspiring Mind": *Tamburlaine***

One of the best-known accounts of the early modern actor emphasizes his powerful attractive force:

Whatever is commendable in the graue Orator, is most exquisitely perfect in [the actor]; for by a full and significant action of body, he charmes our attention: sit in a full Theatre, and you will thinke you see so many lines drawne from the circumference of so many eares, whiles the Actor is the Center.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The "excellent actor" commands attention, figured here as a power akin to magic. Gesture and movement -- 'a full and significant action of body'-- rivets the audience, tethering them to the player. This description links the player, the audience and the playing space in what might be thought of as an affective atmosphere. As Joel Krueger writes, "Atmospheres are tied to world, rooted in features of the natural and built environment . . But atmospheres only arise if subjects are present and poised to engage with them in some way."[[2]](#footnote-2) The built environment of early modern theatres afforded the affective transmission of the vital spirits across and through the bodies of the actors out to the audience in what Joseph Roach has described as the "player's passion."[[3]](#footnote-3) These accounts of the power of the actor illuminate one of the most salient features of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*: his uncanny ability to conquer through the force of the magnetic attraction he exerts on others. I argue that a major component of his adamantine power is gesture, or what "An Excellent Actor" describes as "a full and significant action of body." This chapter will examine the embedded gestures in the play, especially the pattern of vertical gestures that accord with Tamburlaine's "aspiring mind." I argue that the attention to the gestural dynamics of the plays reveals Marlowe's techniques for creating the affective atmosphere that underpins the power of both actor and character. In so doing, I will discuss the intimate relationship between hand and mind that recent researchers in gesture have discovered and explore its implications for historical studies of gesture.

1. ‘An Excellent Actor’, in *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660,* ed. G. Wickham, H. Berry and W. Ingram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joel Krueger, " Agency and atmospheres of inclusion and exclusion,” in *Atmospheres and Shared Emotions*. Routledge, 2021. 111-132, at 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion*: *Studies in the science of acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)