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“An Angler in the Lake of Darkness:” The Intersection of Shakespeare and Folk Horror

The term “folk horror” was coined by Shakespeare scholar Oscar James Campbell in **The English Journal** in 1936. The phrase has since become recognized as designating a literary and cinematic genre having roots in the cultural mythology and legends of Great Britain. While Shakespeare and other early modern playwrights certainly made use of such stories, several instances cross into the realm of folk horror – and indeed serve to help establish the genre’s later recognition.

The characters of Herne the Hunter in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the Faerie race in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* serve as examples of Shakespeare’s creation, adaptation, and appropriation of folkloric figures, and an examination of production history illustrates choices that either accentuate or diminish the danger and horror with which the characters might have been perceived by early modern audiences. Appearances by these same characters in the works of modern writers and filmmakers provide examples of Shakespearean figures that have now become figures of legend themselves as folk horror depictions bring them to new audiences.

Matthew Bryan Gillis
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“Shakespeare’s Weïrd Horror in *Macbeth*”

This paper offers readings from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to argue that his play is perhaps one of the earliest manifestations of what today is called “weïrd horror” in the pulp tradition of H.P. Lovecraft. Some of the most obvious similarities to modern horror fiction in the play are the strangeness of both seemingly natural phenomena, such as earthly darkness which enshrouds the drama, and supernatural forces like the three Weïrd Sisters, whose witchcraft and knowledge of the unseen world are central to the story. Yet I take the position that Shakespeare’s particular version of horror in *Macbeth*, what one might call “weïrd horror,” possesses features that place it as a forerunner to later weird literature. Most important of these is the English understanding of the word “weïrd,” from the Old English “wyrð,” as fate. At the play’s beginning, one has the sense that Macbeth is a heroic soldier and trustworthy thane. Yet upon encountering the strange predictions of the Weïrd Sisters, which quickly begin unfolding in reality, he suddenly turns down the grim path of regicide, urged on and prodded by Lady Macbeth, who upon his return seems suddenly touched by the weïrd prophecies. She calls on him to cease wrestling with his conscience and commit the crime. As the horrid events unfold, it becomes difficult to discern where the prophetic workings of weïrd end and where the characters’ human agency—now directed toward evil—begins. Thus, Shakespeare’s weïrd drama hurls the audience into a disturbing, gloomy landscape where the horror of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is that they are touched by an uncanny force that reshapes them into something monstrous, something alien to their former selves.

David Gram
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“Laugh Macabre”:

Examining the Uneasy Relationship Between Horror and Humor in *Titus Andronicus*, *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore* and *Gary: A Sequel to Titus Andronicus*

Why do copious amounts of blood onstage, or siblings cooked into pies and consumed by their mother, generate both disgust and laughter? Is it the incongruity among situation, character and action? Is it the cartoonish excess of the violence? Or is it the salacious wordplay and demented joy the characters revel in while committing acts of depravity?

On the surface, incest, infanticide, patricide, matricide, mass murder, and cannibalism should not be considered sources of amusement. Yet early modern dramatists explored these taboo subjects (and many more!) with relish, often shocking their audiences while daring them to live in an uncomfortable state blending dread, guilt, and ribaldry.

If laughter is a ‘reflexive’ emotional response to a given situation, and unique to everyone, why does the genre of horror elicit unforced smiles, even loud guffaws in the face of heinous acts of revenge and perceived sexual ‘immorality?’

This paper will explore both the unease and glee that exists between horror and humor by examining specific moments in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, John Ford’s *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, and Taylor Mac’s contemporary play, *Gary: A Sequel to Titus Andronicus*.

Ethan Guagliardo
University of British Columbia

Early Modern Arthouse Horror

Recent academic interest in horror owes not a little to the rise of “arthouse” horror in cinema, spearheaded over the last decade or so by the film production company A24. Arthouse or “elevated” horror’s high conceptuality and aesthetic lineage, dating back to German expressionism, has given it a veneer of respectability that supposedly transcends the grimy sensationalism often associated with the genre. But distinctions between high- and lowbrow are always fraught, and arthouse horror often finds itself anxiously wrestling with its relation to the low (for example, in the way this year’s *The Substance* tries to distance itself from “mere shock” by invoking high art classics like *The Shining*). Indeed, this dynamic is the explicit theme of one of horror’s longest-running subgenres, those literal “arthouse” thrillers such as *House of Wax* (1953). It is also a feature of some early modern plays (think of *Hamlet*’s embarrassment of its generic form and relation to *Titus Andronicus*). This paper, however, considers something of the reverse-dynamic in early modern literature. Rather than consider the way prestige horrors of the period worry about descending from high art to “low” sensationalism, it looks at scenes of horror, particularly the House of Busirane in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and Livia’s gallery in Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*, that turn on the horror of art itself. These literal “arthouse” horrors suggest a different mode of horror than that usually associated with art objects like waxworks, statues, and puppets; whereas in plays like *The Duchess of Malfi* they usually invoke “uncanny” or “abject” feelings of the instability of forms (warm flesh into thing, and vice versa), these arthouse horrors by contrast suggest the terrible permanence of form, and the possession of (typically female) flesh by “high” ideals and concepts.

Caitlin Mahaffy
Mount Holyoke College

Reading *The Duchess of Malfi* as a Pre-Gothic Text

Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe famously draws a distinction between terror and horror. She argues that terror is the sensation of anxiety one experiences when they fear that something frightening is soon to happen while horror, by contrast, is a person's reaction to a devastating—or horrifying-- event that has occurred. Gothic stories constantly present situations of terror that eventually give way to horror. The horror, then, is the pay-off, the “reward” for the anxiety generated by the ever-present terror. I want to argue that Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* is an early Gothic text that relies on terror and horror in the same ways. The characters often find themselves in states of terror that inevitably give way to (arguably satisfying) moments of horror. Furthermore, the Duchess' two brothers, Ferdinand (who becomes, in his mind, a monstrous werewolf) and the corrupt Catholic priest, the Cardinal, are clear prototypes for the major villains in later Gothic texts, such as Lewis' *The Monk* or Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*. Finally, I propose that Webster's tragedy engages in an early form of the EcoGothic through its characters' obsessions with the decay of corpses. That our bodies, which are so much a part of who we are as individual people, can lose their sense of unique identity and become, instead, part of a broader ecosystem feels like an erasure of human exceptionalism and also individualism. The notion of human erasure is the ultimate horror in this play, and Webster invites the audience to engage in that horror. In this way, Webster is one writer (I argue Ford is another) who invites us to consider the possibility that the Gothic genre originates earlier than critics often suggest.

Curtis Perry
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Giraldi Cinthio's *Orbecce* and/as Senecan Horror-Tragedy

If one's understanding of the effect of horror is capacious enough to include the fear produced by watching the working out of something monstrous and hidden within the human psyche, then Seneca's *Thyestes* is a foundational instance of literary horror. The chilling effect of *Thyestes* resides not just in its extreme violence, but in the way its domineering central figure, Atreus, toys with his estranged brother Thyestes: the way he turns his brother into something like a prop in his own violent, playful, and nefarious psychodrama. Since this scenario—where one character turns another into something like a prop in their own violent psychodrama—seems central to several early modern plays that feel like horror to me, I am interested in how this Senecan effect is taken up in later drama. This paper, accordingly, will discuss how Senecan horror unfurls in one very influential sixteenth-century horror-tragedy, Giraldi Cinthio's *Orbecce*—which was performed to great acclaim in 1541 and printed and reprinted numerous times in second half of the sixteenth century. Although it is not a text that is formally taken up and recast/restaged in English theaters, it was well-known all over Europe and can be seen as an important conduit into subsequent renaissance drama for the eerie quality of cat-and-mouse sadism dramatized in *Thyestes*.

Caro Pirri
University of Pittsburgh

The Body in the Garden: Plotting *The Spanish Tragedy*

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* was first staged in the early 1590s, during a time when the English colonial project in the Americas was defined by colony collapse and mass death. The play reflects these themes, not in its setting, the Spanish Mediterranean, but through its investment in scenes of domestic horror that reflect these failures and the legacy of retributive colonial violence that attended them. The play's central scene, in which the main character, Hieronimo, finds his son Horatio hanging on a garden bower, speaks to the immediate conditions of England's colonial unsettlement. During a time when settlers were presented with the prospect of "plant[ing] themselves" in the Americas, *The Spanish Tragedy* invites a reassessment of the "plot" on which this planting might happen, asking us to read the garden simultaneously as a graveyard, a dramatic meta-structure, and representation of a collapsed settlement. Rather than relegating Horatio's murder as a past action that must be avenged, the play leaves Horatio's corpse to rot in the open: a representation of how the play's claustrophobic and isolated setting continues to cannibalistically consume the violent acts that it would like to spatially and temporally quarantine. I draw on First Nations film critic Jesse Wentz's reading of the "Indian burial ground" trope as a colonial fear of being colonized and show how *The Spanish Tragedy* tracks a reverse move. It leaves the dead unburied, and plants legacies of violence deep in the wild ferment of English theatricality.

Constance C. Relihan
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Thomas M. O'Shea
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***The Famous and Renowned History of Morindos (1609) and Sheridan LeFanu's Carmilla (1872):
Uncovering the Pre-History of the Vampire***

While it is commonplace to identify the Gothic novella, *Carmilla*, as an important precursor to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the origin of the tradition of the lesbian vampire, what has remained unobserved is that LeFanu's text has significant correspondences to the early 17th-c anonymous fiction, *The Famous and Renowned History of Morindos* ([STC\[2nd ed\] 18108](#)). This 1609 text is a morality parable that depicts the horrible punishments that await those who give themselves over to the Seven Deadly Sins, who are embodied in the narrative as the offspring of an evil and ambitious witch. This witch, named Miracola, overpowers and destroys the king she marries, placing him "in a brazen coffin" and feeding him "daily with human blood, which she poured into his mouth through quills of silver" (Mish, *Short Fiction*, 8-9). This seminar paper will explore the connections between *Morindos* and *Carmilla*.

Matthew Ritger
Dartmouth College

Hamlet's garbage: Premodern horror and the poetics of social tragedy

This essay begins by noticing the pre-modern occurrence of two critical clichés of modern horror, “hair-raising” and “blood-curdling” in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; both terms appear in convoluted ways in the ghost’s description of his own murder in Act 1. I connect the affective transference between these descriptions (of curdled milk, or the porcupine’s half-alive quills) and their embodied responses (involuntary abhorrence) with a larger pattern in the play’s metaphorical imaginary: what Gertrude will later describe as “life in excrements” (Q2 3.4.118), and what I will argue the play’s characters experience as an uncanny overlap between mundane or even extraneous details of social reality and the revelations of tragic affect. Thus this essay seeks to explore the interrelationship between linguistic metaphor and dramatic mimesis within the larger, structural tension between the genres (pre- or postmodern) of horror and tragedy, especially the undertheorized category of “social” or non-aesthetic tragedy.

Ali Scarlett
University of South Florida

“Refined Love’ for Nature: Decomposition and Donne’s Love Lyric”

The poetry of John Donne, while replete with terrifying metaphysical conceits such as corpses, is not often discussed as works of literary horror. Similarly, while scholarship on Donne’s love lyric frequently explores how the poet engages with nature, surprisingly very little has been discussed on Donne’s work in ecocritical discourse. Taken together, an ecological reading of corpses in Donne’s poetry provides a fascinating avenue for exploring human and nonhuman relations. In this paper, I build on discussions of Donne’s love lyric and nature, closely engaging with Eileen Sperry’s assertion that Donne uses decomposition in his poetry to explore and achieve intimacy between the speaker and his beloved. I argue that reading Donne’s decomposition conceit through an ecohorror lens expands Sperry’s focus on intimacy between lovers into an exploration of intimacy between humans and nonhumans. After supporting my argument with close readings of a selection of Donne’s love lyric, I conclude that Donne’s decomposition poetry directly confronts ecophobic attitudes on corpses and offers a more positive view on death as site for human/nonhuman intimacy. I also draw connections between Donne’s lyric poetry and the music of contemporary Indie Rock artist Hozier to demonstrate how Donne’s love for nature, refined through decomposition, haunts the popular imagination today.

Khristian S. Smith
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Unaware-wolf: Horror, Melancholy, and Possession in *The Duchess of Malfi*

Early modern theories of the imagination vary in their definition of the faculty's function, especially in the processes of vision and cognition. Writers disagree on how the division between faculty psychology (the theory that the mind is separated into "faculties" that govern individual mental functions, like imagination, reason, and memory) works or what impact those divisions make on processes of cognition and sensation. However, their disparate ideas about the imaginative faculty's function always emphasize the imagination's mercuriality. These writers explore in detail the breadth of the imaginative faculty's intellectual, emotional, and physical power.

According to Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, a period philosopher and skeptic, the imagination "enters into alliance with all the superior powers, inasmuch as they would fail in that function which nature has bestowed upon each of them unless imagination support and assist them" (*De imaginatione* 33). In his view, the early modern imagination exists on the border between intellect and sense, intermediating between the two and conjoining the rational soul with the irrational (and mutable) physical body.

For many period theorists, the imagination is *supposed* to be the wire between the imperfect body and the perfect soul; ideally, it's *supposed* to purify. However, external powers can complicate the imaginative process, including the environment and the invisible world of spirits and demons, which corrupt the brain's ability to reason, seduce humans to sin, or conspire to make them ill.

In this paper, I explore how horror experienced from the imagination's ability to transform the body without consent raises questions about the nature of these transformations, whether they stem from the body's dominance over the mind or the manifestation of hidden or deliberately ignored guilt. I argue we complicate the issue of Ferdinand's agency in *The Duchess of Malfi* by focusing on his lycanthropy and the Doctor's diagnosis of it as a form of "possession" (5.2.7-21). Earlier scholarship has emphasized Ferdinand's denial of guilt and how he often shields his gaze from his actions. My reading questions what we make of Ferdinand's agency and actions, how his imagination plays a role in his (mis)understanding of those actions, and whether *they* ultimately render him monstrous.