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The Morality Play, Recycled: New Acquisitions of Infamy

This paper takes a somewhat different response to our seminar's imperative to consider the "inter-theatrical recycling of objects, bodies, and spaces" in early theatre. As inventories and expenses attest, theatre makers regularly re-used, repaired, and replaced costumes, set pieces, and props designed for theatrical use in medieval and early modern England. For example, a pair of the devil's horns used by the actor playing Asmoroeth in *A Knack to Know A Knave* might have first appeared on the actor playing Mephistopheles during his first entrance in the tragic morality play *Doctor Faustus*. But what happens when the morality play offers up no devil in iconic horns? What if the materiality of the vices, too, are absent from the play? Rather than focusing on the recycling of existing theatrical objects, this paper explores how the dramaturgy of the morality play was recycled into political agit prop through the acquisition and theatrical use of unique material objects. Here, I focus on three moments of object-oriented defamatory transformation: the crafting of new habits for anti-Catholic performances in the mid-sixteenth century, the use of costumes and accessories used to stage a punitive mock funeral play in Lincolnshire (1603), and the object of infamy – Gondomar's "chair of ease" – featured in the Globe play, *A Game at Chess* by Thomas Middleton (1624). In all cases, social subjects or people were forcibly cast into the role of vice characters through identifying and humiliating theatrical accoutrements. In tracing a materially-oriented history of the morality play from c.1538 to 1624, I also hope to highlight how the mid-sixteenth century witnessed both a renewal of established theatrical practices as well as well as an innovative reconstituting of them. In a brief conclusion, I trace the afterlife of the Reformation morality play to the theatrical adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in nineteenth-century America and beyond.

Pierre Hecker, Carleton College
SAA 2025: “Matter in Time: New Theatrical Histories”

“This virtuous property”: prop design and the tyranny of choice.

Stage properties were not, as Jerome K. Jerome (who understandably adopted a stage name, “Harold Crichton”) supposed in the 19th century, commonly called “‘props’ . . . because they help to support the drama,” though he rightly understood that that is what they do. Rather, properties derive from the French for “proper,” i.e. “Suitable for a specified or implicit purpose or requirement; appropriate to the circumstances or conditions . . . apt, fitting; correct, right.” (Proper, Adj., N., & Adv. *OED*) “Here is a play fitted,” Quince says, satisfied that each of his colleagues has been aptly cast; and while they’re off learning their newly assigned lines, his final task before rehearsal will be to “draw a bill of properties, such as our play wants.” What, though, – and this is something Quince and his crew struggle with – makes a stage property apt, fitting, and right? While we, in classrooms, Arden footnotes, and SAA seminars can indulge in concurrent multivalent possibilities, directors, designers, and prop masters face what Renata Salecl would call “the tyranny of choice.” Will Macbeth’s dagger make an actual appearance, or not? Should Othello’s handkerchief be white or, as Ian Smith has argued, black? Might the rings given to Bassanio and Gratiano by Portia and Nerissa be posy rings, with inscriptions on the inside (the significance being, in part, that the inscribed words would touch the wearers’ skin), and how and to whom would these decisions matter? Every prop is, ultimately, a “ghostly palimpsest” (Andrew Sofer’s phrase) of all the iterations of that prop that have come before, carrying with it an accumulation of increasingly global meaning. My paper will explore the role of prop design in creating both legible (Othello’s handkerchief) and illegible (hidden design elements, like the rings or what’s been written on physical notes) signifiers.

Isabel Karremann (University of Zurich)

“Sensing Objects on the Shakespearean Stage: The sensory and temporal affordances of objects in *Hamlet*”

How do we experience objects in the theatre? This essay builds on insights from object-oriented theory, cognition studies and historical phenomenology to explore the cognitive and affective work objects do, in the playworld as well as the playhouse. As Andrew Sofer has argued, stage objects “come to life in performance”, as they demand “actual embodiment and motion on the stage in order to spring to imaginative life” (*The Stage Life of Props*, 2003: 2); and Shakespeare’s playtext shapes for us the experience of these stage objects through evocative descriptions that cue sensory perceptions and affective as well as cognitive engagements with them, inviting individual and collective responses to them (Susan Sochon, *Shakespeare Phenomenology, Objects*, 2020: 3). The combination of material presence, handling by actors, and evocative description can infuse an object with ‘vibrancy’, and even agency (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*). We should therefore consider objects not as passive, closed-off entities, but as co-agents in performance, and pay attention to the interactions between objects and actor – not just what the latter do with the former, but also what activities specific objects afford in performance and in specific performance-sites (see Dustagheer, *Shakespeare’s Two Playhouses*, 2017; Karim-Cooper and Stern, *Shakespeare’s Theatre and the Effects of Performance*, 2012). In particular, I am interested in exploring the sensory and temporal affordances of objects: how they may cue, shape or transform individual, collective and intertheatrical memories in characters as well as spectators, and how we can conceptualise these co-agential intercurrents of theatrical sense-making through sensing objects. My prime example will be the many objects in *Hamlet*, be they materially present, imaginatively evoked, or remembered across plays, productions, and performances-sites: skulls, books, flowers, cloaks, portraits, letters, tapestries, swords, drinking goblets, corpses.

Natasha Korda
Wesleyan University

“Wouldst thou lose thy Rose?": Shoe-ties and Material Memory at the Rose”

In this paper I hope to build on previous work I have done on theatrical footwork and footwear, and what the evidence of the Museum of London Archaeology's shoe-finds at the Rose playhouse might tell us about the plays staged there, focusing in particular on *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. I am particularly interested in the temporalities of footwork in the play as they relate to the material memories inscribed in its shoes. How might the material affordances and accommodations of footwear worn at the Rose be paired (or unpaired) with those of the stage itself as it morphs over time? With what methods might we study how material artifacts of theatrical culture are formed, deformed, and reformed through treading the boards through time via artifacts of footwear, including shoe-roses, staged at the Rose, including those lost and found, paired and unpaired, tied and untied, in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*.

Dave Landreth, UC Berkeley
SAA 2025: "Matter in Time: New Theatrical Histories"

Edgar's Blanket: Charity, Shame, and the Problem of Institutions in *King Lear*

This seminar paper will think about Edgar as performing de-institutionalization, in the role of a "Bedlam beggar" who is not confined to Bethlehem Hospital in Shoreditch but rather roams the impoverished countryside to "enforce [his] charity." His costume in that performance is make-up on bare skin for most of his body, but over his loins (says the Fool, in a remarkable phrase) "he reserved a blanket, else we had all been shamed." I'm interested in how, in acting to prevent genital exposure, the blanket works more as a prop than as a costume denoting identity; in how the blanket's status as actant operates a powerful lever between "charity" and "shame" as interpersonal affects; and how that leverage in turn implicates a set of historical concerns about institutions that connect medieval critiques to present conditions. The topos of the materialization of charitable ideals into the enduring form of the institution as the inevitable betrayal those ideals is a hallmark of Reformation anti-monastic discourse, but it reaches back to Lollard critiques of the temporal power of the Church, and--I will argue--implicates not only Jacobean England's state Church, its new parish-based Poor Law, and its reformed and refounded charitable institutions, but also the theater as an institution that is beginning to be self-conscious of its own history as well as of its peculiar materializations.

Anouska Lester, University of York

Searching for the Norwich Grocers' Griffin

In sixteenth-century Norwich, the Grocers' company advertised their mystery play with a perfumed griffin atop their pageant wagon. Their play told the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve every year from the 1530s to the 1560s, and the fruit and perfumes which adorned their wagon were a multi-sensory temptation to both the play and their wares. This paper recovers the Grocers' griffin from textual evidence and tracks how it changed over time, pre- and post-Reformation. The 'Grocers' Book' contains records of the griffin's upkeep and eventual demise, with payments including "mendyng of ye Gryffyn" in 1546, and "payntyng & gyldyng ye Gryffon" in 1556. Once mystery plays fell out of favour, the pageant wagon was abandoned, and by 1570 it was "so weather beaten" and "rotton" that it was dismantled.

'The Grocers' Book' is invaluable for revealing material details of an object that is now lost to us, but the document has a complex history. In the eighteenth century, extracts from 'The Grocers' Book' were transcribed by the antiquarian Thomas Kirkpatrick and a collaborator, and the sixteenth-century manuscripts were subsequently lost. I draw a parallel between the loss of the griffin and the loss of the manuscripts to consider the nature of the early modern performance archive. In examining how the evidence has changed over time, I recognise the labour of individuals who have contributed to the survival of performance evidence, while also acknowledging the potential for errors and misinterpretations to accrue with every additional layer of mediation. I outline methods of reconstructing the griffin from its textual vestiges and, in doing so, propose ways of navigating the loss and archival gaps which characterise the study of early modern performance and its evidence.

The Force by the Duello: Speculative Lightsaber Combat in William Shakespeare's Star Wars

By Danielle Rosvally

As a fight director and a Shakespearean, *William Shakespeare's Star Wars* causes me to lose sleep at night.

This series of nine scripts by Ian Doescher published between 2013 and 2018 plays fast and loose with the idea of Shakespearean verse, remixing direct quotations from Shakespeare's oeuvre and tropes such as the soliloquy with Doescher's own imaginings of how characters like Boba Fett might speak under the pressures of iambic pentameter. But it is neither this playful use of language nor the imaginative (if not quite innovative) use of titanic forms of cultural capital that really gets my brain turning. My biggest question is about lightsabers.

The lightsaber is (arguably) the most iconic weapon in the history of cinema. Its pervasiveness as an imaginative device has spawned an entire set of martial forms: extended universe novels and comic books imagine what learning lightsaber combat might look like, and martial artists have similarly engaged with this kind of speculative play. There are even sanctioned lightsaber combat organizations; the form has spawned multiple sporting leagues. As a kinesthetic language on screen, lightsaber combat is heavily influenced by the Asian martial arts experience of stuntman Ray Park (particularly his experience in wushu) who played Darth Maul (first seen in the 1999 abomination *The Phantom Menace*). The lightsaber is a two-handed weapon in form and fashion most similar to what stage combat practitioners call a longsword or broadsword, and can also be wielded like a Japanese katana.

And here's the rub: a lightsaber is antithetical to Shakespearean weapons; the rapier of Shakespeare's England must be handled very differently than the Jedi knight's "elegant weapon for a more civilized age." Stylistically, the lightsaber and Early Modern English martial forms are completely incompatible.

What, then, is one to make of lightsaber combat in William Shakespeare's *Star Wars*? Doescher's carefully dramaturged adaptation of language implies a use pattern for both Shakespearean performance tropes and *Star Wars* that must be obeyed in order for form to match the function. One cannot simply transpose Lucas' cinematic language directly onto Doescher's characters or it will violate the dramaturgical world that Doescher has created. How, then, must combat be reconfigured in this world to match the demands of both Doescher's dramaturgy and the *Star Wars* universe?

Will Roudabush
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Playhouse as Palimpsest

This essay examines how the materiality of playhouses shaped the reception of verse forms to better understand one of Shakespeare's most ambiguous scenes. In the theophany at the end of *Cymbeline*, Jupiter, in a hardly veiled allusion to King James, quells the spectral voices of Posthumus's ancestors to unite him with Imogen and prophesy Britain's future peace and prosperity. Notably, the voices Jupiter silences had been speaking in what Ben Jonson called "long alexandrines," or what we now call fourteeners, a form Shakespeare had not used for over a decade. Poets, theater critics, and scholars have puzzled over why Shakespeare would return to this outmoded form. On the one hand, it evoked England's national literary history from major Elizabethan translations of classical poetry and plays written for London's early amphitheaters, both of which aspired to elevate English poetry and drama to the status of the ancients. On the other, given that the fourteener's fashion had mostly faded, it suggested a stilted model of English poetry supplanted by the more supple blank verse, and its archaism was parodied on indoor stages such as Whitefriars and Blackfriars. Given that Shakespeare wrote *Cymbeline* shortly after his company had begun performing at both the Globe and Blackfriars, this essay argues that Shakespeare returned to the form to capitalize on its past and current associations, enabling his play to produce different responses in different material settings. Shakespeare did not simply design his plays to be performable at both playhouses: he designed them to take on opposed meanings and resonances depending on venue. While the fourteeners contribute to a patriotic resolution at the Globe, they subvert Jupiter's prophecy for British prosperity when performed at the Blackfriars.

Elizabeth E. Tavares, PhD
The University of Alabama
2 December 2024
SAA 2025 Seminar 22

Paper Proposal

Title: Pageant Dramaturgy: The Social Lives of Wagons

Abstract (295/300): For more than two decades, increasing attention has been paid to the materiality of performance, driven by what Catherine Richardson has described as an interest in ‘unpicking the rich complexity and luminous power of things on Shakespeare’s stage’. No aspect of staging has received more attention than the prop. While studies of stage properties have focused on these objects for specific plays, the first intervention of this chapter is to draw out the opportunities made available in the repeated use of a prop across a repertory. To do so, the first part of this chapter argues that an ethos of up-cycling was built into repertory as a system of playing by surveying how materials were sourced for performance. The second intervention extends the field of prop studies to include large-format objects, illuminating their ontological possibilities through a repertory approach. The pageant wagon provides an exemplum of a large-format prop activating this ‘intertextual resonance’ from the tenth through eighteenth centuries. The final section examines the pre-1594 repertory of the Lord Admiral’s Men as a case study in their recycling of a chariot-wagon prop among several large-format props—beds, heads, hangings—to convey, and at times foist, an impression of national continuity in a moment otherwise characterized by political transition, rupture, or conquest. In the first decade of their fifty-year career, Admiral’s experimented with the affective potential of large-format moveable props to cultivate a theatrical experience characterized by cycles of tyranny and interrogating the limits of global conquest. Reframing our understanding of property-making as predominantly a practice of up-cycling, this chapter argues that when played in repertory, properties impress a sense of continuity by suturing past memories to a present moment.

I plan to share only an excerpt of this larger chapter project as my seminar contribution.

Keywords: pageant, procession, repertory, Admiral’s Men, wagon, chariot, prop

Abstract

Thrice Dead and Beyond: Complicating the Lacanian Gaze on Gounod's Juliette

Julie Thompson (Burman University)

In *Romeo and Juliet*, both title characters take their lives at the end of the play in full view of the audience. However, Juliet is the only Shakespearean character to die and be resurrected thrice on stage, thus complicating the Lacanian gaze upon both character and performer. One of Juliet's operatic incarnations, Gounod's Juliette from *Romeo et Juliette* (1867) dies and is resurrected five times in a relatively short opera. Juliette exists in a liminal space postulated by Marvin Carlson and Freddie Rokum—the haunted stage—and in the embodiment of the performer—the haunted body. These deaths and resurrections destabilize the gaze on Juliette so the gaze cannot trap her in life and desire her dead, nor can it ensnare her in death and gaze upon her as Lacan's *objet petit a*.

The gaze upon Juliette is never able to ensnare her fully due to the “little death” of her wedding night (3.5), her two perceived deaths (4.3) where she dies both before and after the ballet duet, and finally choosing death, twice, with Romeo's dagger (5.3) as she dies upon the “happy sheath”. Juliette then performs a duet with a poisoned Romeo before dying for a fifth time, calling back to the ballet duet at her perceived death. Juliette is resurrected from all five deaths in a perpetual loop of diegetic and extradiegetic space and time. Juliette is never fully present or fully absent in the theater, in the mind of the audience, or in the Lacanian gaze. Even when Juliette is onstage physically, traces of her remain from previous deaths, scenes, productions, and adaptations. When she is living onstage traces of her death are present and when she is dead onstage, traces of her life are present and reinforced by her resurrection for the curtain call.

The Tempest as Romance of Recycling

Christina Wald (University of Konstanz, Germany)

Abstract:

As Randall Martin concludes in his study *Shakespeare and Ecology*, ‘Shakespeare’s greatest possibilities for becoming our eco-contemporary arguably lie [...] in performance’ (2015: 167). After having been used in the last decades of the twentieth century to focus on postmodern, postpatriarchal and postcolonial concerns (Zabus 2002), *The Tempest* has become a productive starting point for ecological adaptations in the new millennium; and materiality on and off stage is of course of primary relevance to ecological questions. For our seminar, I will discuss two case studies: RSC’s latest production of *The Tempest* directed by Elizabeth Freestone in 2023 and the complex TV miniseries *Station Eleven* (HBO 2021/2022), based on Emily St. John Mandel’s 2014 novel of the same title, which adapts and enmeshes *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* and presents snippets of several *Hamlet* performances in post-apocalyptic circumstances.

In the fictional worlds of both adaptations, the material left-overs of a past that was lived in overabundance are repurposed in a new situation of scarcity; in both cases, the use of props, costumes and film/stage sets signals a larger concern with recycling, and in particular with what I would like to call the ‘romance of recycling’: the promise of a future in which we will have learnt to repurpose creatively rather than consume and dispose; a future in which we will acknowledge pain and loss, but also appreciate the liberation from some aspects of current Western modernity. In this regard, both productions return to what McKenna Rose has described as *The Tempest*’s ‘ecology of salvage’ (2017; see our shared bibliography), but with a decisive difference: whereas *Station Eleven* had high financial and ecological costs to create its scenes of creative repurposing in renaturalised, abandoned sites of civilization that exude the fascination of what has been called ‘ruin porn’, Freestone’s romance of recycling not only offers an ecofeminist scenario of alternative life on stage, but also tests new, more sustainable ways of theatre-making.

SAA 2025
Seminar 22 Abstract
Denise A. Walen

The Theatrical Ghosting of Henry Fuseli's *Three Witches*

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson argues that theatre “is a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition” (11). He uses the term “ghosting” to identify the process in which theatre presents to an audience what “they have encountered before” (7). While Carlson’s concept of ghosting is expansive, this essay will focus on its application to nineteenth century audiences who expected to see traditional lines of business enacted in successive productions of a play by different actors; or, what Carlson refers to as “performance citationality” (11). The essay will also rely on Jacky Bratton’s term “intertheatricality,” from *New Readings in Theatre History*, which examines the intersections and associations that form between “all kinds of theatre texts, and between texts and their users” (37). The work will focus on the network of connections between theatrical performances of *Macbeth* and the gothic art of Henry Fuseli, specifically his 1785 work *The Three Witches*. Fuseli’s image depicts the moment in 1.3 during which Macbeth and Banquo first encounter the weird sisters. In the image, the witches have their right forefinger on their lips and are pointing with their left arms outstretched. A succession of productions from 1803 through 1927 include stage directions that recreate Fuseli’s image. For example, J. P. Kemble’s promptbook used at Covent Garden in the early 1800s includes the manuscript stage direction “Each Witch lays the fore finger of her right hand on her lips, and with her left hand points to Macbeth” (Folger Shakespeare Library Prompt Mac. 54). By 1901 this stage direction had become a printed marginal note in the Samuel French edition that published the play as produced by Edwin Booth. The same stage direction appears in manuscript as late as 1927 in the promptbook used by Henry Jewett for his production of *Macbeth* at the Repertory Theatre of Boston (Folger Shakespeare Library Mac. Fo. 9).

'Stabs Herself': Suicide by Sword, Embodied Skill, and Boy Actors.¹

Hannah Wilson

In 1611, the audiences of the Globe theatre watched Richard Robinson, a boy actor with the King's Men, stab himself to death as the Lady in Thomas Middleton's *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*. Robinson's prowess as an actor has most recently been explored by Roberta Barker (2022), but very little attention has been paid to the embodied abilities behind such violent scenes.

This paper investigates scenes in which female characters commit suicide by sword in early modern plays to explore the embodied experience of a boy actor. My argument builds on Evelyn Tribble's (2017) work on actor skill, considering the ways in which an actor's embodied experience is actualised through a moment of active performance. I examine the material interactions between stage properties, the actor's body, and their emotional and verbal performance in order to understand the skills necessary to simulate extreme bodily harm.

I begin with an overview of the complex stage mechanisms available to an actor in a scene of on-stage violence and the skills required to successfully use them, paying particular attention to the physical and emotional demands of these scenes. I then use this specialised skillset as a starting point from which to speculate about what other sword-centric roles Robinson may have played between 1610-1614. In this, I do not mean to suggest that Robinson categorially played these roles but demonstrate how we might use the embodied requirements of a role to better understand an actor's skillset and speculate as to the ways in which specialised skills, like swordplay, follow an actor throughout a company's repertory. Overall, this paper argues that suicide scenes required a high level of skill and proposes that a close analysis of these skills may help us better understanding early modern casting practices and repertory playing.

¹ Please be aware that this paper deals with depictions of suicide, murder and assault.