

SAA Boston 2025: Mourning, Memorializing, and Grieving in Shakespeare's World (24)

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Abstracts

"Shapes of Grief in *Hamlet* and other Conversion Narratives"

Naomi Baker (U Manchester)

Recent discussions of *Hamlet* have drawn attention to the significance of concepts of conversion in the play. Building on these insights, this paper considers the representation of Hamlet's grief alongside accounts of loss and grief in seventeenth-century conversion narratives. Situating Shakespeare's tragedy in relation to the Augustinian-Christian frameworks that also inform conversion narratives has important consequences for our understanding of Hamlet's grief. Far from being pathological, as Freud's reading of *Hamlet* led us to believe, Hamlet's so-called 'melancholy' can be interpreted as a stage in the process of conversion as it was influentially modelled by Augustine in the *Confessions* and reiterated in many Protestant conversion narratives.

"*Hamlet* and the Six Stages of Grief"

Effie Botonaki (U Aristotle, Thessaloniki)

One of the reasons that *Hamlet* has been characterized as one of the most enigmatic plays of all times is the inaccessibility of its main characters and, especially, its protagonist. Mountains of speculation have tried to explain Hamlet's complex emotions and, often, incomprehensible conduct. This paper is going to discuss the play and its major characters by focusing on loss and the theory of the six stages of grief. As we shall see, Hamlet's inner conflicts and bewildering actions become more intelligible when they are approached as stages of grief. The protagonist suffers multiple losses and finally proves unable to rise above them, despite his ceaseless self-reflection and indefatigable philosophizing about the meaning of life and death. Other important characters struggle with loss too and go through the various stages of grief, but most of them, like Hamlet, experience only the first four stages, i.e. denial, anger, bargaining and depression. Those who do not eventually reach the last two stages—acceptance and meaning—remain tortured by grief until their final breath, tragically unable to die in peace. This paper will conclude with a brief reference to *King Lear* to suggest that Shakespeare's most depressing tragedies are those in which the protagonists' pain of loss does not end in acceptance and meaning. It seems that the end of these plays is overcast, above all, by the darkness of unresolved grief—a darkness that engulfs not just the tragedy-stricken characters but also the distressed, and unrelieved too, audience.

"The Materiality of Loss in William Shakespeare's World"

Abigail Gomulkiewicz (U St Francis)

The Protestant Reformation precipitated changes in early modern mourning culture for people in Britain and across Europe. Once accepted means of commemoration and remembrance, such as intercession for the dead or bell ringing, were eliminated and viewed suspiciously as Catholic remnants. Still, despite criticism and suspicion, certain Catholic practices associated with memory persisted even in strongly Protestant places. Additionally, entirely new and altered mourning practices emerged across Europe as individuals grappled with the connection between the living and the dead in this evolving religious landscape. It is within this complex and often fraught context that Shakespeare wrote, and his plays were performed. Thus, these texts offer valuable insight into

the lived experience of religion particularly when it comes to the use and acceptability of mourning rituals and practices both in Protestant and Catholic contexts. This paper will explore how *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* present the material conditions of loss. In particular, it focuses on how objects and places create pivotal space for the expression of grief, the focus on remembrance, and the crafting of legacy both real and imagined. In doing so, the paper reveals what remained significant in Protestant remembrance culture as well as the shared practices of memorializing centered on objects, tombs, and monuments which persisted across religious and cultural differences. Shakespeare's plays seemingly confirm the elevation of certain material objects focused on the individual in this new religious landscape versus highlighting more communal activities of remembrance and mourning.

“Speak of me as I am’: Self-Memorialisation and the Conventions of Post-Reformation Epitaph Writing in Othello’s Deathbed Speech”

Sarah Hodgson (Shakespeare Institute/U Birmingham)

Before the Reformation, there was a congregational obligation to memorialise the dead, and parishioners regularly engaged in communal rituals of remembrance, such as intercessory prayer. After the introduction of Reformed Protestant eschatology in England and the nullification of Catholic commemorative ceremonies, there developed a sense of concern among the living about post-mortem remembrance, as individuals became increasingly apprehensive that their memory might be consigned to oblivion after death. By the end of the sixteenth century, members of the English social elite sought to assuage these anxieties in various ways, including by commissioning monuments and epitaphs during their lifetimes to formulate their own posthumous legacies and to ensure that the memory of their virtues would be preserved for future generations.

This paper investigates Shakespeare's dramatic engagement with this burgeoning social demand for self-memorialisation. Building upon existing scholarship, I propose that the genre of the Shakespearean epitaph should be expanded to incorporate not only the commemorative inscriptions identified by textual cues but also the self-eulogising speeches that some of his characters deliver in their dying moments. The final words uttered by moribund and condemned individuals were widely regarded as epitaphic statements in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England due to their commemorative and didactic qualities. Through a close reading of Othello's final monologue, I draw attention to how, in the manner of a self-written epitaph, the hero uses his last breaths to delineate his legacy, anticipating and subsequently seeking to counteract antagonistic narratives about his character and deeds that his survivors may propagate. This paper demonstrates that Shakespeare used the oral epitaph form to imitate contemporary fashions in memorial culture, to engage with growing anxieties about post-mortem obscurity, and to draw attention to the social prejudices that can affect how individuals are remembered after death.

“All in war with time for love of you’: Grief, Asexuality, and Futurity in Shakespeare’s Sonnets”

Liesl Jensen (Shakespeare Institute/U Birmingham)

Over the course of the first nineteen of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the poet wrestles with love and its attendant grief, and tries to come to terms with the inevitable loss of his beloved by considering how the young man will be memorialized. Initially, Shakespeare approaches biological reproduction through children as the only form of memorialization that could possibly preserve or represent his beloved. By the end of the nineteen sonnets, Shakespeare eschews biological reproduction in favour of textual reproduction. In conversation with Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, I trace how throughout this sub-sequence, the poet's desire to ensure the memorialization of his beloved through biological reproduction is thrown into crisis when his beloved refuses to marry

or reproduce, a state I read as asexuality, a sexual orientation defined as experiencing little-to-no sexual attraction. This asexuality is made visible through refusal of reproduction, and thus refusal of the future. As the sonnet sequence progresses, the poet responds to his beloved's sexual refusal by leaving behind biological sexual futurity and instead develops and embraces textual futurity and asexual reproduction, leading to an asexual verse futurity that allows asexuality to remain outside the norms of sexual reproductive futurity. Instead of rejecting the 'viability of the social', as Edelman argues all queer positionalities must do, the sonnets embrace an asexual reproduction, and with it, an asexual futurity that is utopic and queerly excessive – creating a futurity that has far outlasted any children that biological reproduction could have created, and a futurity that is lived out today as the sonnets are read.

“To Suffer a Key-Change, or Re-Enter Ghost; *Hamlet*, *Fanny and Alexander*, and the Purgatory of Reception”

Joseph Kidney (Stanford U)

Early in the conception of *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), the five-hour film intended to be the culmination of his career, the Swedish film and theatre director Ingmar Bergman wrote: “[e]verything should happen in a major key.” It is no surprise then that Bergman's film, both in structure and surface, draws heavily on Shakespeare's most cheerful play: *Hamlet*. This paper works through the relation between *Hamlet* and *Fanny and Alexander*, particularly focusing on the figure of the father's ghost. Alexander's father, the actor and theatre-manager Oscar, is rehearsing the role of King Hamlet's ghost, exhorting his son to revenge his most foul and unnatural murder, when he suffers a fatal stroke. Yet when Oscar's ghost returns to Alexander, now dominated by a cruel ecclesiastical stepfather, the revenant presents himself as a comfort and urges his grieving son not toward vengeance but toward gentleness. Reading this tonal shift in numerous ways, this paper asks how Bergman, in reorienting Shakespeare, echoes Shakespearean modes of adaptation that are reparative or morally ameliorative. I am also interested in how Bergman, like other non-English artists, participates in the global re-working of Shakespeare (is it, here, re-appropriation? a Scandinavian director, a Scandinavian play). Finally, can we read this interaction between Bergman and Shakespeare, an engagement between the living and the dead, as the playing out of a purgatorial model of spectral influence, something that perpetuates early modern ideas about death as a state of temperamental improvement? With his anger and bloody expectation burnt and purged away, as he moves from Shakespeare into Bergman, has the ghost, as a character in another play says, been put in the ground to be made sweet?

“Attending to Pain: Disenfranchised Grief and Compassionate Religion in *Hamlet*”

Kelly Lehtonen (Campbellsville U)

In this essay on *Hamlet*, I would like to explore Shakespeare's critique of a cultural attitude toward grieving in the early modern world: the resistance to giving *attention* to people in mourning. Attention, as theorized by philosophers Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, is the virtue of concentrating the powers of the intellect and emotions on whatever is true – particularly the experiences of people who are suffering – and an essential part of Christian practice. Yet, as we see from the first act of the play, Hamlet's grief for his father's death is repeatedly discounted and condemned, and by people who deliver their criticism in piously religious terms. As I will argue, the play depicts this criticism – what modern psychologists would call the “disenfranchisement of grief” – as part of a broader pattern of emotional neglect and religious malpractice. For as Hamlet's suffering remains unacknowledged and unattended, the play suggests, not only does his recovery become impossible,

but his own capacity for compassion erodes, contributing to the destruction depicted across the final acts.

In featuring the consequences of neglecting responsive attention, the play calls for a new approach to mourning, particularly within the early modern church. In place of revenge, or calls to spiritual resignation and patience – all options suggested throughout the play – intense grief requires emotional validation and compassionate attention. In the absence of such responses, *Hamlet* suggests, religion itself becomes a form of control, making its own victims into participants in an ongoing cycle of abusive disenfranchisement from which it becomes nearly impossible to break free.

“Monuments and Memory: Performing English History in the 1590s”

Nina Levine (U South Carolina)

Much has been written about the politics of what gets remembered and what is forgotten or suppressed in early adaptations of chronicle history by Shakespeare and his collaborators. The question I want to ask here, though, is about the forms of memorialization with the purpose of exploring ways in which this self-conscious remediation of chronicle history might reframe even as it enacts national stories on the public stage. My playtext is *2 Henry VI*, one of the first English history plays and one in which contentions over grief, grievances, and memory drive the plot. The play makes several explicit references to monuments that, taken in sequence, seem to chart a movement from heroic memorialization to the iconoclastic performance of rebellion. Voiced by Gloucester in the opening scene, the first reference exposes the unstable foundations of martial conquest memorialized in the nation’s written records. As Gloucester sees it, the royal marriage destroys not only hard-won territorial gains but the very memory of heroic conquest, “Defacing monuments of conquered France” (1.1.101). Later in the play, another invocation comes from Cade, who brazenly picks up the armor of fallen Stafford, claiming it as a “monument of the victory” (4.3.9-10). Taking the accoutrements of heroic valor as his own, Cade recasts received tradition as a kind of performance, restaging history with stolen props and armaments. I will be interested in exploring how Cade’s version of history as embodied performance might connect with the play’s larger poetics of memory, which depend on recasting the martial exploits of English nobility for the common players of the commercial stage.

“Victorious in thy mourning weeds!’ Competitive Grief in *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*”

Andrew D. McCarthy (U Tennessee, Chattanooga)

In women’s laments for the dead, competitive displays of grief are meant to bring mourners together, providing a public opportunity for the community to memorialize the loss. Competition is also an integral component in the construction and maintenance of early modern masculinity. Strikingly, Shakespeare repeatedly stages scenes of masculine grief wherein men compete. Beginning with his earliest revenge tragedy, I consider how competition is initially presented as an expected response to loss for the men of *Titus Andronicus*. Rather than an integrated part of the grieving process, competition initially obscures death. But with the introduction of Tamora’s grief over Alarbus, the play pivots to reflect a different kind of competition: one of grief-fueled escalating acts of revenge. In a later depiction, the competition between forms of mourning is mapped onto the graveyard scene where the grieving prince grapples with Laertes over Ophelia’s death, competing over who can perform the best display of grief. Because early modern masculinity is always a product of competition, these scenes reflect Shakespeare’s thinking on the nexus between masculinity, grief, and competing ideological systems in late sixteenth, early seventeenth century in England.

“Mourning the Loss of Mourning: John Weever, *The Widow’s Tears*, and the Impossibility of Grief”

Anne Myers (U Missouri)

Scholars have pointed out that post-Reformation funeral monuments served many social and historiographic functions, including recording family lineage and visibly materializing an individual’s rank and prominence. During the same period, funeral monuments and epitaphs became the targets of both antiquarian preservation efforts and iconoclastic destruction, defended as repositories of history and derided as superstitious reminders of a Catholic past.

This paper pairs John Weever’s “Discourse of Funeral Monuments,” with George Chapman’s play *The Widow’s Tears* (1605) to argue that the same social, historiographic and theological concerns that made funeral monuments interesting and controversial during this period made grieving itself a complicated matter. Weever’s “Discourse” is a 200-page essay that precedes his massive collection of epitaphs and historical documents in *The Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631). For a man who spent so many hours looking at tombs, Weever is strangely noncommittal about grief. At one point, for instance, he decries “Ethnicke lamentations, fearefull howlings for the dead, by hired mourners,” which he associates with pagans, Jews, and, implicitly, Catholics, only to continue with the tender opinion that “we should not be as stocks and stones, voide of all kinde and naturall affection, but that living and loving together, the love of the one should not end with the life of the other” (p. 16). With the loss of the sepulchers he studied, accepted modes of public are also in danger of being lost.

In a culture preoccupied with the problems of knowing another’s heart and mind, then, shifting conventions surrounding memorialization seem to have intensified anxieties about the impossibility articulating grief. In *The Widow’s Tears*, Cynthia’s only apparent option for proving the authenticity of her grief is to die herself, raising questions about whether the devaluation of public and ritualized grieving is, in itself, something to mourn.

“Mourning and Madness: Ophelia’s Suicide as Response to Grief in *Hamlet*”

Jayme Peacock (Quincy U)

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a play deeply concerned with grief and its consequences, yet critical discussions of mourning within the text often center on the title character while neglecting Ophelia’s parallel experience. This paper examines Ophelia’s descent into madness and ultimate suicide result from the gendered limitations of the public expression of grief. As a woman, Ophelia can neither avenge her father nor rave the way Hamlet does. Thus suppressed, her grief turns to what has been understood as “madness.” However, I show that Ophelia’s madness is neither nonsensical nor purely accidental. Rather, she mirrors Hamlet’s put-on madness in that she is mad only “north-north-west” (2.2.374).

Further, this paper situates Ophelia’s grief within the religious shifts of early modern England, particularly the Protestant Reformation’s abolition of purgatory. Pre-Reformation beliefs allowed for an ongoing relationship with the dead through prayer and intercession, but Protestant doctrine rendered death final and the dead fixed. Without the comforting possibility of spiritual intercession, Ophelia’s grief is fueled by the permanence of her father’s absence. Her so-called mad songs are anything but, suggesting an underlying sanity, if not sensibility. Her suicide, then, can be understood as the deliberate decision to leave a world to which, in the Protestant model, the dead may never return. Ultimately, this reading challenges the traditional assumption of Ophelia must lose her sanity

to commit suicide and argues instead that she, unlike Hamlet, chooses to respond to the constraints of gender and Reformation belief with the resignation of her own life.

“One Vial Crack’d: Queered Grief, Images of Breaking, and Fragments of Loss in the Stratford Festival’s *Richard II*”

Susan Rojas (Independent Scholar, Naples, FL)

In 2023, the Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ontario staged Canadian playwright Brad Fraser’s adaptation of *Richard II*. The show opened with the king, their court, and a cadre of IBPOC angel attendants dancing to pounding disco music while surrounded by plenty of mirrors: a royal orb-shaped disco ball, mirrored benches, sequined clothing and accessories. The setting was the disco age of 1970s–80s New York, and the king was flamboyant, extravagant, and queer—as were many in their court. Shakespeare’s text was heavily edited by Fraser (who is queer); his changes included Richard and Aumerle as lovers, the addition of lines from other Shakespeare works, and a subplot highlighting the devastation of HIV/AIDS. In my paper, I consider the Stratford production and what it means to view *Richard II* through a similarly queer lens. I find this focus places greater emphasis on the play’s instances of grief, the gendering of responses to the emotion, and grief’s relationship to breaking/cracking.

My point of departure is the Duchess of Gloucester’s lament, “One vial full of Edward’s sacred blood...Is cracked, and all the precious liquor spilt” (*Rll* 1.2.17, 20). Despite Fraser’s cutting her lines, the Stratford production retained their essence through images of continuity, shattered objects, and the text’s references to fragmentation. These varied instances of things tangible (such as mirrors) and intangible (families, relationships) breaking or cracking suggest a capacious view of grief, highlighting the sweeping properties of the emotion. I explore these tropes and consider how the Stratford production’s representation of loss might help reveal clues to Shakespeare’s concept of grief and mourning.

“Substantial Pageants: Masques, Wakes, and the Theatrical Historiography of Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII*”

Amy Scott (Toronto, ON)

This paper explores the features of an ethical historiography in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII*. I argue that the play’s consideration of an “honest chronicler”¹ is at its most introspective and self-reflective when two very different rituals from within and beyond the walls of the theatre are drawn together within the action of the play: court masques and waking (watching) of the dead. When the playwrights stage or reference real early modern waking rituals, they often signal the translation of these death rituals into a dramatic form in their evocation of or proximity to masques. Within the framework of masquing, the dead body as an object of vision is no longer “vile,” something that must be disregarded (as Protestant funeral liturgy urges). In turn, in its association with waking, the masque can be re-valued as a dramatic form, invested with the power to maintain a bond of care between the living and the dead. *Henry VIII* reveals that visually powerful performances like masques are not “insubstantial pageants,” (as Prospero calls them in *The Tempest*). Ultimately, the play defines an ethical theatrical historiography as one that requires and rewards the spectator’s vigilance over the dead, an attentiveness that ensures the past and its lingering materiality will remain as objects of scrutiny and affection.

¹ 4.2.72. *King Henry VIII*. Arden Shakespeare. Ed. Gordon McMullan. 2000.