

SAA Seminar 2025: New Paradigms of Embodiment

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Abstracts

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Embodied Jealousy and the Spider's Thread: Conceptual Blending, Disgust, and the Body in *The Winter's Tale*

This paper examines the image of the spider in the cup in *The Winter's Tale*, arguing that it is not derived from an early modern superstition but rather an adaptation of an existing proverb about cuckoldry. Through the lens of conceptual blending theory, the analysis demonstrates how Shakespeare modifies a familiar metaphor to heighten associations of contamination and psychological distress, thereby externalizing Leontes' jealousy as a visceral, embodied experience. The paper also explores recent theatrical interpretations, including the 2016 Cheek By Jowl production and the 2014 Royal Ballet adaptation, both of which use movement, lighting, and staging to externalize and embody Leontes' paranoid imagination.

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'I cut myself off so often for lack of breath': Passibility and Capacity in the *Essais*

In the final entry in Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, "De l'Experience," the author offers a sweeping account of his method of self-analysis. Reflecting on the pedagogical potential of personal experience, he writes, "I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics." Taking seriously the proposal that Montaigne's self-examination constitutes both a physical and a metaphysical endeavor, I chart the relationship between these two poles of analysis

throughout the essays. Paying particular attention to the essay “De la Force de l’Imagination,” I suggest that Montaigne develops an understanding of embodied life as fundamentally passible—that is, open to affect, change, and suffering—and that this treatment of materiality fundamentally modulates his articulation of metaphysical categories such as capacity. Ultimately, Montaigne’s choice to highlight the ways in which his own writing is shaped by and through his embodied limitation allows us to apprehend capacity as a quality that is contingent and dynamic.

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“[T]hey have joyned with many ingraftings and twistings together”: A New Lens for Reading Rhetoric and Medicine in Early Modern Studies

Gardening manuals like those of Thomas Hill (1558 etc.)^c and Barnabe Googe (1577) celebrate the gardener’s skill and careful observation, yet consistently underscore the limits of human control and the essential humility towards natural forces. Similarly, obstetrical treatises like Jane Sharp’s *Midwives Book* depict the maternal body as both a site of nurturing graft and vulnerable to outside influences. Reading how agency works in grafting in these gardening and obstetric texts prompts a reconsideration of the ways authorship is figured in early modern literature, where authorship is likened to the work of a gardener. Writers such as Hugh Plat and Isabella Whitney use the metaphor of planting and grafting to frame their texts as carefully selected collections, handed over to readers with the hope of successful reception and interpretation. Just as gardeners must protect their grafts but ultimately rely on the tree to nurture the union, authors must prepare their works with care while preparing to relinquish control to their audience. This article shows how early modern understandings of grafting and cultivation emphasize skillful preparation and humility towards outside forces.

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Constructing the Body and the Community in Thomas Cogan’s *The Haven of Health*

Offering an analysis of the literary and rhetorical methods by which the healthy body is constructed in Thomas Cogan’s early modern regimen book, *The Haven of Health* (1584), this excerpt from a longer introduction to that work explores the cultural work performed by these texts of vernacular medicine. Developing Lauren Berlant’s insight that communities are affect worlds, this piece introduces a frame for understanding the healthy body as a practice of affect and sociality, rather than a collection of humors or other biological systems. Regimen Books like Cogan’s offer a window onto a particular way of reading the healthy body as formed and coextensive with the healthy community.

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“Myself am moved”: Motion and Embodied Sensation in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*

My paper explores the relationship between embodied sensation and bodily motion in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (c.1592). Focusing on moments of forceful motion and of enforced stillness, the paper mobilises three concepts from neurobiology and cognition studies – “proprioception”, “kinaesthesia”, and “kinesic intelligence” – to approach the play’s struggle over the veracity of sense perceptions and its representations of embodied subjectivity more broadly. “Proprioception” and “kinaesthesia” describe the subjective experience of perceiving, respectively, limb position and body movement. Conversely, “kinesic intelligence” relates to an intersubjective dimension of cognitive and perceptual embodiment, denoting the ability to understand, respond to, and influence other people’s postures, motions, and sensations. These concepts offer a framework to expand Laura Seymour’s proposition that investigations of *Shrew*’s that aim to challenge straightforward approaches to female agency must not only account for Katherine’s silence, but also for the significance of her increasing stillness as an embodied and perceptual performance. From this perspective, I suggest that when Petruchio manipulates and physically restrains Katherine throughout the play, he is leveraging his kinesic intelligence to frame and determine her subjective sensory experiences, particularly the sensation of her own body, her proprioception and kinaesthesia. In this sense, the movements of Petruchio’s courtship – who is himself “moved to woo” (2.1.198) – are attempts at moving and increasingly restraining Katherine. More broadly, therefore, the play frames subjective verbal, bodily, and social agency in the prism of intersubjective restraints, which call into question body position and motion, as well as the sensory perception of these embodied phenomena.

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Imagined Embodiments: Webster’s Melancholic Revenge and Race

As Benedict Robinson notes in his recent Arden edition of John Webster’s *The White Devil*, Francisco’s remark about “how strong the imagination works” after Isabella’s ghost enters onstage shows Webster clearly stating that this “figure” is not a real ghost but rather a figment of Francisco’s melancholic imagination (2019, p. 39). Robinson, however, does not comment on any racial implications that this scene might have. His article examining Edmund Spenser’s racialization of Phantastes—the allegorical character representing the imagination in book two of his *The Faerie Queene*—should prompt us to question if the imagination takes on racially embodiments in Webster’s play (2021, pp. 136–37). This paper therefore expands upon recent work on melancholy and revenge as racialized concepts in the early modern period (Brown 2021, p. 111; Shaw 2019, p. 174; Smith 2022, pp. 143–45), for Francisco’s imagined ghost, joint quest for revenge, and ensuing blackface can be understood as evoking these habits of thought while simultaneously complicating them. The

imagined ghost of his sister—concocted in a melancholic and vengeful mood—already disrupts the neat divisions between the material and immaterial through the ghost appearing onstage but clearly functioning as an image of Francisco’s mind rather than a true spirit. Webster disrupts binaries further by having the imagined white ghost evoke a black melancholic vengeance, one that Francisco then embodies through the blackface projection of the fictitious persona of Mulsinaar. Although ridden with the influence of a systemic white supremacist rhetoric through its theatrical embodiments, Webster’s play thus prompts his audience to question these associations simultaneously or at least bear witness to their contradictions. Is Francisco, who abandons his blackface disguise and flees before the finale, innocent? Can blackness actually be tied to melancholy and vengeance in early modern thought when white figments can inspire these actions, and white persons carry them out? Hence, Webster’s melancholic revenge detangles the false and fabricated logic of the melancholic humor’s relationship to racial embodiments—both blackness and whiteness—to reveal the imaginary construction of such connections.

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“The Infection of my Brain / And Hardening of my Brows”: The Husband’s Horns as Parodic Embodiment

Scholarship from the last three decades has emphasized the uncanny unity of mind and matter that mark early modern conceptions of sexuality and reproduction: passions keyed to the body’s sloshing humors; unborn children “impressed” with their mothers’ thoughts. Sprouting from the heads of unluckily married men, the cuckold’s proverbial horns are apt to strike us as something similar. Indeed, recent critics have suggested that the prevalence of this image in Shakespeare and his contemporaries indexes a genuinely held belief about the effect of female adultery on male physiognomy—in short, that people in early modernity really did think that jealous or deceived husbands grew horns.

My paper argues against this view. No author from this period suggests that the horns are anything other than a metaphor or tries to lend the conceit some physiological basis. But if authors and audiences knew that the cuckold’s crest was, as George Chapman put it, “a meere fiction,” cuckolds *qua* literary characters did not. The paper looks at moments in late 16th- and early 17th-century drama where the trope infects the brain—scenes of parodic embodiment in which suspicious husbands try to saw off invisible antlers or imagine their brows hardening into keratinous bumps. I argue that these moments complicate our understanding of early modern embodiment and its literary representation.

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“But yet I have a braver way”: Trans Embodiment and Affect in *Edward II*

As both playwright and political figure, Christopher Marlowe features prominently in the history of transgressive sexuality. Marlowe’s biography and his literary work have inspired far-reaching scholarly debates about the representation of nonnormative sexuality on the early modern stage as well as broader cultural views of homosexuality, homoeroticism, and sodomy. This paper focuses on Marlowe’s *Edward II*, which is a foundational text in the early modern queer canon due to its depiction of Edward’s open affection for and intimacy with other men as well as the fabled scene of sodomitical retribution conjured up by the play’s ending. Largely, scholars who consider the play as evidence of Marlowe’s queer resistance to a social order predicated on compulsory heterosexuality yet concede that *Edward II*’s queer play is circumscribed by its ending. As Jeffrey Masten puts it, Edward “ends face down, overthrown, arsieversie, bottoms up,” eliminated from the social body in a manner that cements his association with anality and excrement. In this paper, I re-examine the spatial orientation of Edward’s body in conversation with recent work on trans embodiment. I argue that Edward’s embodiment has been fitted into a critical discourse on homoeroticism and sodomy, often at the cost of *cisfiguring* Edward, or flattening certain aspects of Edward’s embodiment in service of producing a presumptively cisgender image of what constitutes Edward’s queerness.

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“Feel what wretches feel”: Eco-materiality, Disability, and Care for the Body in *King*

O, I have ta’en
 Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
 That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
 And show the heavens more just. (*King Lear*, 3.4.32-36)

Cold, drenched by rain, and about to enter the only shelter he has against the tempestuous night, King Lear offers a prayer for the “poor naked wretches” of his kingdom that ends with his reflection that he has done too little to alleviate their suffering. His interest in “feeling” his way into their suffering is made manifest when, moments later, he strips off his clothing and exposes himself to the destructive power of the storm. In doing so, he attempts to “feel” his way into the debilitated and disabled bodies he both sees by the hovel and imagines in his kingdom. In this paper, I examine how the materiality of the environment provokes these attempts to understand other bodies, and how those acts of fellow feeling raise larger questions about how we ethically relate to and care for the body. Lear’s early failure to recognize others is embodied in his argument with the storm, only to shift as his gaze moves from the heavens to the earth. I argue that this turn towards the earth allows

for a reckoning with abjected modalities of embodiment, including the madness, debility, and poverty found in Edgar/Poor Tom and the Fool. Further, I argue that care for these bodies can only begin with a recognition of the deep relationships between bodies and their material environments that structure both meaning and being.

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“Pangs which can’t be told by tongue”: Debility and Maternal Labor in Ann Bradstreet’s Verse

Early modern maternal bodies were writ large with significance. Biblical directives to increase and multiply linked godliness with reproduction, effectively constructing a “protestant birth ethic” correlating women’s social and spiritual value in direct relation to their ability to conceive, carry to term, and successfully birth children. Popular belief also linked deformed or ailing children with a mother’s sins. After confirming her spiritual and physical health by producing whole and healthy infants, early modern mothers were charged with continuing to exhibit moral living by caring for children in an era of staggering child mortality rates. Proof of a woman’s fertility, or fruitfulness as it was often metaphorized, initiated a long cycle of maternal labor that also served as a public marker of her godliness. Given the uniquely charged contexts of establishing both a fruitful and godly community in Puritan New England, the pressure to not only produce and sustain children but also interpret child mortality as a divine correction serves as a constant tension in Anne Bradstreet’s devotional writing.

This paper reads Ann Bradstreet’s physical, spiritual, and emotional exhaustion as articulating a Feminist Disability Studies approach to care-work that reveals the debilitating aspects of early modern motherhood. I argue that debility—the slow, wearing out of the body—has both gendered and spiritual dimensions in the early modern era. By focusing on Bradstreet’s portrayal of her own chronically fatigued and wasting body alongside expressions of maternal grief that leads to spiritual angst, I highlight how early modern women’s devotional writing can be read as a further extension of the care work at the heart of maternal labor. Ultimately, Bradstreet “crips” contemporary moral models of disability, which interpreted bodily impairment as a sign of spiritual dis/ability, by problematizing patriarchal models of spirituality that privilege an idealized separation between body and spirit that was impossible to achieve when engaged in the type of body labor celebrated as the mark of a good early modern woman.

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Embodiment, Care and Political Theology in Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

Donne's *Devotions* figure a "state of emergency of the soul" (Benjamin) in fluctuating states of bodily distress. This distressed body is the "occasion" of an emergent discourse of governmentality that conflates medical care of the body and pastoral care of the soul with a Machiavellian theory of state (*raison d'état*). Donne emphasizes the conceptual flexibility or pliability of the body as a staging area for political and theological reflection. The bodies that Donne's text summons forth not only convey various forms of emergency: the body itself is an emergency that generates tactics and strategies of government that manifest as distinct modes of care. Specifically, in Station 7 of *Devotions*, entitled "The physician desires to have others joined with him" (*Socios sibi jungier instat*), Donne's mysteriously disordered body provokes a proliferation of care dispersed among a number of agents, as Donne's doctor calls for consultation among physicians. Donne imaginatively expands this scene of collective consultation beyond his immediate bodily crisis to encompass political and angelic realms. This dispersal of governing agents that enact care represents an implicit challenge to the absolute singularity of divine right rule, while at the same time reinforcing its theological pretensions by projecting a divinely-ordered cosmos. Yet even while promulgating this narrative, Donne also exposes the lack of care experienced by the vulnerable embodied multitude of his moment, which was also a time of recurrent pandemic plague. Donne qualifies political theological analogies between the king and God by emphasizing the associative, horizontal work of ministers in the physical realm and the angelic cosmos rather than vertical power structures and by leveling the differences between doctor and king in ways that show their authority to be contingent and reversible. Within this context, Donne's discourse opens the possibility of a pastoral government that encounters the body within a twofold frame of worldly realism and divine providence. This dual framing is the conceptual structure that allows Donne to yoke the seemingly "heterogenous ideas" of a Machiavellian-style analysis of the state and the population to a personal narrative of bodily suffering and anxiety about salvation.

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"Cracked in a hundred shivers": Reflective Embodiment in Shakespeare's *Richard II*

The image of shattered glass dominates Shakespeare's *Richard II*. The mirror that Richard requests in order to view the "brittle glory" of his face, and which he soon "crack[s] in a hundred shivers," has fascinated critics and directors alike due to the way in which it seems to materialize the theological and political processes of Richard's deposition (4.1.287-300). But the full significance of this moment of shattering cannot be understood unless we pay attention to the way in which these shining mirror shards echo another of the play's crucial images: the "water-drops" of sorrowful tears (4.1.262). My paper traces the shimmering network of glassy imagery that laces the play in order to

explore the political limitations and possibilities of the ‘reflective’ form of embodiment experienced by early modern kings.

This trail of teardrops and mirror shards leads to a form of kingship that is deeply feminine—not through any association with sexual excess or debasement of a heroic masculine past, as has been argued in many accounts of this play, but through a form of political embodiment that is characteristic of both women and kings throughout early modern literature. The feminine body is fragile yet manipulable, passive yet productive, marginalized yet central to the construction of power. It is the glass which reflects the image of sovereignty, the material medium through which that image is created. And although we typically think of the early modern king as *wielding* rather than being *caught by* power, this play reveals a kind of sovereignty whose agency is severely constrained.

It also, however, allows us glimpses of a radical potential inherent within the ‘reflective’ embodiment of the king. In the fluidity and fragmentation of the play’s second half, we can see Richard formulating an embodied mode of interaction with power that depends upon a refusal to cohere—upon shattering, melting, and dissolution. I argue that the play’s exploration of the continuum between fluid and glass—a link based in the actual process of glassmaking—outlines a form of political embodiment which opens up the possibility of radically disruptive engagement with structures of power for those upon whose bodies that power is constructed.

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Modelling Detachment: Ceroplastic Art and the Transfiguration of Monogamy in John Donne’s “Sappho to Philaenis”

In “Sappho to Philaenis,” the early modern poet John Donne ventriloquizes the Classical lesbian poet Sappho lamenting the faithlessness of her female beloved Philaenis. In this sense, “Sappho to Philaenis” is a variation on a theme explored in several of Donne’s elegies—the inconstancy of a sexually active mistress. While the tendency has been to focus on the misogynistic rhetoric of female faithlessness, deception, and betrayal in these elegies, erotic mutability in “Sappho to Philaenis” partakes of a different ethics. Here, I argue, Donne poses a question about sexual autonomy and the contingencies of love and desire. Comparing her unfaithful lover to a wax effigy encircled by passion’s flames, Donne’s Sappho theorizes romantic inconstancy via the material instability of wax. As a form of fleshly resemblance, the wax effigy destabilizes coherence. Its use in the anatomic art of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries troubled an understanding of the body as stable and fixed. In Donne’s elegy, then, the material affordances of Philaenis’ wax effigy link the ungovernability of desire to a mouldable and ultimately mutable body.

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Hester Pulter's Experimental Poetics

When Hester Pulter imagines herself liberated, she imagines her own death. Her body bursts into atoms or dissolves into dust, releasing her from the pain of her ailing body and the confines of her isolated household. Throughout her manuscript, Pulter yearns for freedom through death, imagining it through the lens of natural philosophy. Alchemical refinement, atomic collisions, and dissolution into matter are frequent themes throughout her work. These processes not only frame her understanding of bodily decay, but also provoke questions about her material embodiment in heaven. But what exactly is Pulter's investment in these scientific lenses? Is she attempting to create a theory of matter when she experiments with different kinds of bodily death?

Scholars have explored this question by comparing Pulter's poetry to the work of other natural philosophers, asking to what extent Pulter seems to support or reject their ideas. However, I argue that Pulter approaches her poetry from a highly *experimental* standpoint. The deeply personal, elegiac, and uncertain nature of her poems does not lend itself to the linear construction of philosophy. Rather, Pulter pulls strands from many material theories in order to build a laboratory where she may test if her faith, mixed with the laws of nature, will lead her and her loved ones to the salvation she is hoping for.

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Marking Breath, Marking Difference in *Richard II*

While scholarship on embodiment, air, and the environment in relation to the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage specifically is growing, the cultural attitudes that shape the representation of inhaled and exhaled air in the period remain neglected. The paper seeks to generate new insights by drawing on Shakespeare's history play, *Richard II* (first performed in 1595), to argue that breath often works to corroborate or dismantle social inequalities. Bolingbroke, for instance, voices such injustice when he refers to his banishment by his cousin, King Richard, as "the breath of kings" (1.3.215), while his opponent, Mowbray, laments that the king's sentence "robs [his] tongue from breathing native breath" (1.3.173). The paper focuses on the socio-ecologies of breathing and air in the play and the extent to which they underlie the construction of national identity and social rank.

If embodiment in its simplest definition is "an ongoing engagement with (and in) the world", the paper understands this engagement to be primarily pneumatic. One of the most valuable contributions of the critical work on embodiment in the last three decades has been the shift from studying the representations of the material and corporeal as socially determined to acknowledging the arbitrary nature of the social vs organic dichotomy and their interconnectedness. The critical vocabularies of "process", "continuity", "contingency", and "constellation" have allowed scholars in

the last two decades particularly to pay more sustained and sensitive attention to a plethora of psychosomatic phenomena and representations that alert us not only to the complexity of early modern thinking about the body but to our own unstable role as readers or audiences who experience literature through our senses, memory, cognitive and affective perceptions. Traub has recently invited us to think about the diversity and multivalence of the methods and approaches captured by the analytic of embodiment

in terms of an orchestral score, which allows for different instruments and melodies to be played at the same time that a synchronic structure ensures a degree of phrasing and structure throughout. Whether the melodies that emerge are harmonious or discordant, the score offers multiple patterns, synergies, chords, and discordances, each of which could provide a point of access to new questions and new melodies.

While the analogy here captures the open-endedness, messiness, and unpredictability of investigating the body and/in its world, the field has been dominated and to some extent justifiably so by work on the body's anatomically visible attributes such as its skin, its waste, its humours. But what about the invisible? The paper examines how instances such as Richard II's references to his "sighs" and Bolingbroke's fixation on his "native breath" might be seen to in fact *disengage* bodies with (and in) the world, disrupting embodiment as an intersubjective exchange model on and off the stage.