

SAA 2025 – Boston, MA
Seminar 26
New Psychoanalytic Methods: Race, Sex, Sexuality
Organizer: Christine Varnado

Abstracts

Katie Adkison **Voices, Wounds, and Other Public Things: Coriolanus and the Unrepresentable**

Saturated with voices speaking, shouting, shaming, soliciting, and, of course, voting, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* attends somewhat obsessively to the manner in which a person's vocalized sound – sometimes linguistic, sometimes not – is transmuted into the symbolic representation of their political position. Indeed, the play has become a bit of a cipher for theorizing Shakespeare's approach to politics qua politics, with critics understanding the play as everything from a proto-liberal republican manifesto, to a cynical critique of representative politics, to an anti-social vision of "a world elsewhere" than in the political arena. This essay will attempt a quasi-reparative reading of these disparate, often antithetical interpretations. Putting Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic notion of the pre-linguistic space-time of the chora into conversation with Bonnie Honig's focus on the "things" that sustain democracy, I suggest that *Coriolanus* offers a nascent theory of the unrepresentable as a crucial concept for politics. Even as *Coriolanus* encounters the excesses of voice beyond language as if this would be the wound he cannot bear (or bare), the play insists on imagining these excesses not as Aristotelian "mereness" that must be banished from the political, but as necessary public things on which politics relies – and for which politics must attempt to account if it is to remain accountable.

Kathryn Corah **Black Despair, White Hope: Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) and *The Masque of Beauty* (1608)**

This article picks up the challenge posed by the RaceB4Race symposia, to apply a premodern critical race lens to early modern literature, to elucidate the way race-making of the past has directly contributed to our present moment. I will interrogate two blackface and whitewashing masques written by Ben Jonson for Queen Anne, and how they present Blackness as a state of physical and mental ailment: despair, or melancholy. Despair, according to Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), is both an embodied psychological state and borne of a type of "accusing or calumniating devil" that he calls a *Diabolos*. Despair is thus made the realm of devilry, hopelessness, and evil. The "black despair" of the nymph daughters of Niger exists in distinct juxtaposition with Jonson's treatment of whiteness, through the figure of *Beauty's* Harmonia. As the queen of the whitened nymphs, Harmonia is presented as a synthesis of all that is beautiful and good - a being of perfect health and wellbeing, and a representative of hope and white patriarchal legacy. To create Harmonia, the Black nymphs must engage in a ritual together to cure themselves of their sickening desire for whiteness. They weave a potent affective fabric within and between their bodies as they wash, lather, and lave. They ritualistically dissolve and

reform their Black bodies underneath the white moon, washing away their “black despair” and soaking up the “white hope” promised to them by their white-faced goddess, Aethiopia. Thus, Jonson’s masques present Blackness as a malady of body and mind and whiteness as a state of being one can receive or achieve through chymical intervention.

Drew Daniel **The Epistemology of the Bed Trick**

Inheriting a tradition established by its numerous scriptural appearances (Laban’s deceptive substitution of Leah for Rachel on Jacob’s wedding night, Ruth’s encroachment under Boaz’s cloak, etc.) and its prior deployment by Chaucer in “The Reeve’s Tale” and Sir Philip Sidney in “The Old Arcadia”, the bed trick arrives on the Shakespearean stage as a wearily overfamiliar narrative readymade: under cover of darkness, at once occulted from direct representation and made visible by subsequent testimony, nonconsensual sex is infolded within the couple form, to the wonder and consternation of those whose interpretive desire is solicited by a structure that folds our knowledge and the protagonist’s ignorance into a complicitous relationship of distributed agency. How does Shakespeare’s use of the bed trick motif in “All’s Well That Ends Well” both complicate and exemplify the bed trick’s eroticization of the ignorance / knowledge dyad, and what might psychoanalytic modes of reading tell us about the role of desire in this structural conceit? In an attempt to answer this question, this paper will build upon the account of the family as a site of substitutionary logic within Freud’s “On Narcissism: An Introduction” as recently re-theorized by Eric Song in his monograph *Love Against Substitution: Seventeenth Century English Literature and the Meaning of Marriage*. By its close, I hope to also respond to two recent and relevant works of “All’s Well That Ends Well” criticism: Kaara Peterson’s account of virginity and Julia Reinhard Lupton’s account of consent.

Joseph Gamble **Hate in the Countertransference**

This paper takes up Shakespeare’s representation of Caius Martius as the “chief enemy of the people” as an opportunity to analyze the psychic life of living in community with others. In particular, I turn to D. W. Winnicott’s indispensable essay, “Hate in the Countertransference,” to understand how Shakespeare scripts the ambivalence of hate and love that structure object relations, from the mother to the *polis*. Object relations psychoanalysis, I argue, may be uniquely suited to understanding the thick psychic work of sharing the world with others (and all of the gendered, sexual, and racial negotiations that that “sharing” entails)—as well as the thick literary work of *imagining* how it feels to share a world. And Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* may be uniquely suited to helping us understand our current academic moment, where universities and professors are construed as “the enemy” of the people.

Jessie Hock

A NAME, A GAME (Saussure's Anagrams, Freudian Analysis, Lucretian Letters, Renaissance Love)

During the same years that he was offering the lectures that later gained fame as the *Cours de linguistique générale*—and at the same time that Sigmund Freud was publishing his work on dreams, jokes, and parapraxes—Ferdinand de Saussure was working furiously on a secret project that would not become known to the public until more than fifty years after his death in 1913: the theory of anagrams, which Saussure believed to be the basis of all Western poetry. Homing in on an error in the anagram notebooks, when Saussure substitutes the name “Leonora” for “Lucrezia,” this paper unearths the psychic content motivating Saussure’s (Freudian) slip: the Roman poet Lucretius, whose *De rerum natura* Saussure analyzed at length, and whose analogy of atoms and alphabetical letters could have provided Saussure with the theoretical backdrop to his anagram work, had he not shied away from Lucretius’s identification of eros as the driver of both natural and linguistic creativity. Following this winding path, I end with English Renaissance lyric, which draw on Lucretius to subvert a traditionally devotional anagrammatic practice to brazenly erotic ends. The anagrammatic poetics Saussure toiled to verify was there, in a guise he refused to see.

Morgan Shaw, Syracuse University

(Re-)Turning Back to Move Forward: The Politics of “Return” in Early Modern English Literature

How do we represent the tangle of structures—aesthetic, religious, ideological—that order our lives? As a period which oversaw the advent of science, the calcification of capitalism, the Protestant Reformation, and the rise of print culture, the English early modern era was one of turbulence. Order, however, was imposed upon this period of flux through one dominant figure: “return.” As Desiderius Erasmus shepherded Humanists ad fontes [back to] antique sources, so too did Lutheran reformers urge the faithful to return to scripture. Across Shakespearean drama, Spenserian epic, and Ovidian epyllia, “return” crystallizes into a politicized form that orders human experience. When Spenser’s Redcross Knight delays his wedding to “returne” to his fairy queen or Shakespeare’s Prospero angles homeward offstage, “return” figures anticlimax into a literary narrative of progression. Simultaneously desirable and futile, “return” is a dominant figure through which turbulence is rendered into forward momentum.

Stephen Spiess, Babson College

The Melancholy of Prostitution in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*

Reading *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1609), I argue for a constitutive link between the protagonist’s humoral disposition, the play’s brothel discourse, and the broader histories of English prostitution. I begin at Antioch, where Pericles famously misreads the Daughter’s sexual status—an interpretive failure, I argue, that both informs his subsequent melancholic condition and opens

onto a broader epistemological quandary central to the play and the historical culture in which it was first staged: how can one know the sexual status of another? While scholars have traditionally disregarded Pericles's melancholy or read it as a symptom of arrested sexual development, I reveal how this affective condition illuminates issues of visibility and legibility, speech and sexual knowledge, central to the play's representation of sexual commerce. From this perspective, the play's notorious brothel scenes, by making one form of illicit sex "visible," appears to resolve the interpretive crisis of the first act and render palatable a marital exchange in the dénouement. Yet by graphically depicting the Mytilene sex trade, the play enacts a form of cultural mourning for legal prostitution: a yearning for the conceptual clarity implied by a clear differentiation between licit and illicit sexual exchanges. It is precisely this distinction upon which the marital traffic in women, and thus Pericles' personal and familiar restoration, depends. In this way, the play reveals the idea of a clearly knowable whore to be a cultural fantasy that subtends culturally central institutions of early modern England. The "melancholy of prostitution," I argue, thus provides a name and conceptual structure for understanding both how licit sexual commerce operates in the cultural imaginary of early modern England and the ambivalences that attend its various representations.

Jessica Tooker

Language Games in *The Taming of the Shrew*

The question of what desire means is, of course, foundational to Shakespeare's early romantic comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*. Significantly, the play pivots upon the courtship of Katherina by Petruccio, whose name means "Little Peter" or "small stone." Crucial to materializing relational and personal desire—as desire would be construed through active embodiment—are the skillful language games which Katherina and Petruccio play with each other, including in their memorable initial conversation. These significant verbal provocations shape how they understand their own desires involving the cementing of a new relationship. Subsequently, my essay argues that the games which the pair engage with—as an improvisatory way of learning about another person—present a fresh methodology for speaking of desire, and what is wished. Principle among these flexible linguistic sorties are games creating a space, "ex nihilo," for establishing personal identity and ascertaining the value of naming someone. Resultantly, and as I want to suggest, specific tenets of psychoanalysis—perceptible within Katherina and Petruccio's language games—illuminate their shared desires, especially as these desires would be connected to important questions of sexuality and sex, and the cathartic instantiation of fantasies and identificatory gender positions (such as "woman" vs. "man") within real life. Asking what, exactly, is desired—or as Katherina and Petruccio put it in Lacanian terms, "Che Vuoi?", and perhaps "Qui Demande?"—presents their shared desire for truth, conveyed verbally. "Good morrow, Kate, for that's your name, I hear," Petruccio greets Katherina, consequently instantiating a space for dialogic transformation.