

SAA 2025: Shakespeare and Neurodiversity

Bartlett, "Toward (and Froward) Neurotrans Shakespeares"

Focusing on *The Taming of the Shrew*, this paper is an early attempt at bringing together early modern neurodiversity studies and trans studies. Neuroqueer critical lenses have always encompassed trans identities and concerns, so the use of "neurotrans" presented here may be best characterized as a tailored subset within an emerging body of neuroqueer early modern scholarship. Nevertheless, neurodiversity studies and trans studies on the whole are increasingly recognizing how imbricated their concerns are, and these developments can offer new ways of viewing early modern texts. This essay reads Petruchio's "taming" of Katherine alongside the widely observed similarities (and shared origins) of conversion and ABA therapies. Approaching the "taming" in this way, I endeavor to demonstrate how thoroughly imbricated the forces of compulsorily neurotypical and cisheterosexist normativity are both in the reforming of Katherine and in the general discursive context of Shakespeare's play. Paying special attention to 1) the neuronormative politics structuring the contrast between the apt pupil Bianca and "toward" and the intractable Katherine as "froward" and 2) how Katherine's forced blazon of Vincentio cements her reform through a compelled acknowledgement of anything but physically-determined cisness as absurd, this paper offers possibilities for future avenues in the exploration of Shakespeare and neurotrans themes.

Gale, "'Rudely Stamp'd': Reflection as Identity in *Richard III*"

This paper is a reading of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and particularly its titular king, from a sociological, quasi-psychoanalytic perspective. Specifically, I examine the play and its interpretations of Richard III through his depictions of reflective imagery, most especially looking glasses, mirrors, and shadows, but also in the self-proclaimed ways in which Richard interprets his understanding of the reactions of others (especially his future wife, Anne Neville, and his mother, Cecily, Dowager Duchess of York). Richard, as Shakespeare presents him in the titular history play, is physically deformed and attention is continually brought to his "shape," both by those around Richard and by Richard himself. From the beginning of the play, he wastes no time in taking for himself the label of "deformed [and] unfinish'd," attributing his physical disabilities to a premature birth: "sent before my time [and] scarce half made up" (I.i.21-2). Appearance is consistently an important marker of Richard's self-professed "deformity" and "villainy," and the audience's attention is brought, throughout the play, to the fact that these two concepts are so linked by Richard and the

society which has produced him that they become conflated. Richard again and again makes mention of his appearance as it is shown to him by objects and other people. All of the metaphors used within the play—mirrors, shadows, coins—as well as the reactions Richard experiences from others (human and animal) are reflections of reality, however, not reality itself.

Helms, “Shared Friction: Lines and Neurodivergence in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night”

Neurodiversity in the classroom creates moments of shared friction – access friction – where the styles of thinking, speaking, and occupying space with our diverse bodyminds shift the trajectory of class. This shared friction is more productive than it is disruptive, but it’s always something that my students and I must raise to the level of our awareness to some degree. Shared friction creates energy that propels discussion forward, that halts it surprisingly, that shifts it to new frontiers of thought, emotion, and community. In these ways and more, this shared friction bears a striking resemblance to shared lines in early modern verse drama: shared lines can interrupt, pivot, continue, hand off, frustrate, counter, and complete the communication between two characters. In this essay, I’ll attempt to illustrate the types of shared friction I’ve seen in my classroom by mapping them onto shared lines in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night.

Henderson, “Hiss Me into Madness: Overstimulation and Neurodivergent Affect in the Tempest”

It was not uncommon in the first theorizations of early modern neurodiversity studies to conceptualize neurodivergences as collections of characteristics. If we perceive neurodivergences as series of related attributes, what happens when we isolate one trait commonly associated with neurodivergence? If neurodivergence relies on cultural norms for definition, can any characteristic be innately neurodivergent? If certain traits are found to be neurodivergent, can they exist in neuronormative people? As I work through these questions, I focus on neurodivergent experiences of overstimulation, which occur when an excess of stimuli (e.g., loud noises, bright lights, strong smells, or particular textures) cause discomfort, pain, or distress for autistic people and ADHDers. I argue that, in *The Tempest*, the sensorium of the island causes otherwise neuronormative people to become overwhelmed by sensory input. Since this pervasive overstimulation appears to be caused by the magical effects of the island, close attention to one neurodivergent trait, as opposed to ascribing neurodivergence to individual characters, allows us to theorize neurodivergent affect, an atmosphere of overstimulation that moves beyond individual experiences of neurodivergence. Descriptions of affect theory and neurodivergent experiences of overstimulation often focus on unobserved sensations; theorists typically describe affect

as “in-betweenness” or “becoming,” a moment of tension that is challenging to name, while the sensory stimuli that cause overstimulation for neurodivergent people are often unnoticeable for neuronormative people. Similarly, through the environmental, affective diffusion of a neurodivergent trait, the sensoriums of the islanders are engulfed by an environment that causes inexpressible tension for human senses, flooded with input that usually seems beneath their notice or unnamable.

Irigoyen, “Nocturnal Cognition in Shakespeare’s Poetry”

This paper explores the cognitive poetics explored in Shakespeare’s poetry that I call “nocturnal cognition.” Shakespeare’s sonnets and narrative poems frequently return to images and metaphors of night, dreams, and sleeplessness—the term “nocturnal” aptly covers descriptions of both wakeful and somnolent encounters with night. These expressions of nightly subjectivities complicate traditional usages that stress nocturnal spaces as a breeding ground for moral, sensory, and intellectual deprivation, formulating qualities of cognition stimulated by the night. The nocturnal brain in Shakespeare’s influences and contemporaries (in this paper, Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Nashe) typically pathologize mindfulness at night. Shakespeare follows this tradition in the *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) while drawing attention to the heightened cognitive complexity activated by nocturnality. Shakespeare’s sonnets build on these conventions by intimately reimagining the relationship between the literary, the nocturnal, and the cognitive. Sonnets 12, 27, and 43 experiment with “night” and insomnia as alternative states of cognition overwhelmed by thought and fixated on temporality, not reducible to simply contrasting more promoted states of diurnal cognition, so to speak. Thus, Shakespeare’s poetry sketches notably distinct qualities of cognition by repeatedly articulating the excesses and anxieties of minds most active at night.

Loftis, “Shakespeare is Autistic”

A lot of people will disagree with my title. However, being an autistic person who has devoted her life to the study of Shakespeare, I think the question is worth asking: “Is there anything autistic about Shakespeare?” The answer is complicated—both “yes” and “no.” The ideological, scholarly, and historical reasons for both the “yes” and the “no” are deep enough to help us explore important aspects of early modern literature, modern reading, and the world of Shakespeare studies at large. The answers tell us information about autistic culture and about autistic ways of thinking—and information about neurotypical culture and neurotypical ways of thinking as well. Specifically, this question can help us to examine the historical and social contours of mental difference, to plumb the depths of autistic special interests and to think more broadly about the way that autistic culture, and by extension neurotypical culture, has formed. Shakespeare isn’t unique in helping us to

explore these aspects of early modern studies and modern culture—but the artistic richness, size, and popularity of his canon, in combination with the historical lineage and scope of the industry and scholarly corpus it has given rise to make Shakespeare studies a particularly powerful and fruitful cultural and historical nexus where we might explore these issues and ask these questions. In answer to the question “Was Shakespeare the historical person autistic?” the answer is almost certainly “no.” In answer to the question “Is Shakespeare studies as a field of critical inquiry autistic?” the answer is a resounding and emphatic “yes.”

Nicholls, “Anamorphic Experience and Neurocosmopolitan “Vision” in Hamlet’s Ghost Scenes”

Focusing on the ghost scenes, this paper examines how the language and dramaturgy of Hamlet evince and model a “neurocosmopolitan” openness to diverse cognitive and perceptual styles. Drawing on Ralph Savarese and Nick Walker’s concept of neurocosmopolitanism—an empathic and curious engagement with diverse neurocognitive worlds—I argue that Shakespeare’s theatrical strategies destabilize fixed notions of reality and reason, prompting audiences to recalibrate their own interpretive frameworks as they adopt the vantage points of different onstage observers. By combining the Renaissance concept of anamorphosis (distorted images that require a shift of perspective to become comprehensible) with contemporary neuroscientific theories of predictive coding, I explore how Hamlet’s ghost radically “re-forms” characters’ “generative models” of the world. Barnardo, Marcellus, Horatio, and Hamlet each respond differently to the spectre, illustrating the multiplicity of cognitive and sensory reactions the text invites. The play thus resists reductive diagnoses of Hamlet’s “madness,” guiding us instead toward a more pluralistic, empathy-driven engagement with difference. Through these spectral encounters, Shakespeare exemplifies the potential of poetic language and stage spectacle to cultivate an always shifting “curious perspective,” aligning with neurodiversity’s call to recognize seemingly “strange” perceptions and behaviours as richly meaningful—or “meaning” differently conceived.

Pensky, “Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and the Limits of Empathy”

In the last 20 years, literary empathy studies has emerged as an important scholarly approach, and yet many questions remain concerning the efficacy of empathy as a desired result of literary reception, and likewise as a necessary precursor to prosocial behavior. Two such critiques by Lauren Berlant and bell hooks invoke the problem of empathy centering individual affective response, while eliding structural or institutional forces at work. hooks’s and Berlant’s theories frame the inefficacy of empathy in terms of another controversial term of study, *subjectivity*; for them, empathy fails where the subjectivity of

the empathizer either oversteps by appropriating the experience of the other or underperforms by centering itself. Of course, so-called failures of empathy have also been cited in autism studies, though with a difference. Here empathy deficits have figured as a symptom and a key marker for diagnosis, though the articulation of the “double-empathy problem” has shown that perceived lack of empathy between autistic and non-autistic people is due more to “a breakdown in mutual understanding (that can happen between any two people) and hence a problem for both parties to contend with”. Such reframing of the limits of empathy recontextualizes pervasive critiques of Renaissance subjectivity, in particular where such critiques intersect with analysis of early modern revengers. This paper offers a reading of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* with such limits of empathy in mind.

Walker, “Hyperactive, hyperfixated Hotspur”

Behaviors now commonly associated with ADHD often serve as sites of disruption on Shakespeare’s stage; just as in psychiatric diagnosis of the disorder, characteristics considered beneficial in some contexts become dangerous when a shift in expectations renders them “inappropriate.” ADHD is in many ways a disorder of “bad timing” leading to impulsive or inappropriate actions--traits that are frequently on display in *1 Henry IV*, a play altogether consumed with time and the proper management of it. While Henry IV and Prince Hal cement their power through an impeccable sense of timing, Hotspur demonstrates the struggle conceptualizing time characteristic of many people with ADHD: taking dangerous risks due to an abstract sense of future glory; proving incapable of adjusting his behavior to the demands of a particular “time” or context; throwing himself into the hyperfixation of overthrowing the king but easily bored by the slow work of managing the details. Ultimately, his inability to adjust to the demands of the “time” mean that the same behaviors that earned his renown will bring about his downfall.