

SAA 2025 Abstracts

Seminar 43: Shakespeare and Obsession

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Incapable of their Own Distress: Hollow Rituals and Male Mourning in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Hamlet is certainly a man obsessed—with his father's murderer, his mother's marriage, revenge—but this paper will argue that his central obsession is his own painful and ongoing grief. Hamlet is obsessed with trying to represent his grief to others, yet he continually fails to make his grief legible. This paper will argue that his obsessive failures result from his position as a male mourner in post-Reformation England. The play frequently surfaces the tensions between old Catholic ceremonies of grief and new Protestant rituals, and previous scholarship has read these tensions for the play's or playwright's confessional sympathies. This paper, however, will demonstrate that the play locates the Reformation's greatest impact on mourning not in the specific content of the changes but in the very fact of the change itself. As this change destabilized rituals of grief, hindering their ability to make a person's suffering collectively legible, contemporary funeral sermons and theological writings advised mourners to grieve "naturally." This advice was especially problematic for male mourners, as they were also reminded that overt displays of emotion were unnatural for men. Thus, male mourners in *Hamlet* are caught between two conflicting poles of the "natural" as they try to make their pain legible. This creates an obsessive state, in which the male mourner tries to effectively communicate his grief while maintaining his masculinity, but in doing so finds the two tasks fundamentally incongruent and yet desperately necessary. By attending to the religious and cultural instability underneath *Hamlet*, this paper reveals the ugly tragedy of the obsessive but illegible state of suffering that can from the intersection of gender and grief in early modern England.

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Nashe's Obsessive Style

Thomas Nashe has often struck critics as a writer of "empty energy," piling frenetic sentences one upon the other without *saying* anything. This paper considers the compulsive quality of Nashe's style by examining the work in which it is most inescapable—the eccentric lamentation *Christs Teares Over Jerusalem* (1593)—and the rhetorical figure that serves as the engine of its prose: *trductio*, the repetition of a single word and its derivatives. In its extreme reliance on *trductio*, *Christs Teares* realizes an obsessive repetition wherein sentence production—style itself—seems almost to be divorced from the writer's conscious control. The paradox of a style that is on the one hand mere compulsion and on the other (because of its very eccentricity)

markedly authorial, I suggest, responds to the theological concerns implicit in Nashe's sermon, which fixates on a passage in Matthew 23 that had become a flashpoint in Reformed debates about predestination and free will. For Nashe, prose style came to serve as a way to experiment with, and perhaps to ironize, the increasingly controversial Calvinist theology of grace—to serve, that is, as a form of action without will.

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Obsession and Interpretive Activity

This paper discusses obsession in *King Lear*, before examining how Shakespeare fans take to online forums to obsessively collect and discuss references to Shakespeare's plays as they appear in modern media. The aim is to stack several types of Shakespearean obsession together and to use that resulting structure to think about the relationship between obsession and arrangement. The types of obsessions I will examine include: 1) Besiegement: from the Latin terms *obsessio* and *possessio*. To be obsessed, as Lennard Davis explains in his history of the term, was to be surrounded but not yet taken. 2) Demonic obsession: the development of that sense of besiegement from physical warfare to mental warfare. Obsession was hearing a thought and recognizing that the insidious voices in your head were not your own. 3) The way that demonic obsession appears in *King Lear*, a play otherwise obsessed with the mental and physical structures that shield its characters. The early modern performance space engaged with this idea of obsession as a route to total possession. 4) The online fan-related obsession with Shakespeare references in modern television programs—the tendency of modern TV shows to reference Shakespeare in their plot and characters has prompted users on the internet to sort and examine these Shakespeare references, using them to analyze these shows and to predict later plot developments in these programs. Obsession can be thought of as a motor—a mechanism for compulsive behavior; this paper suggests that its relationship to structure, to arrangement, and to the acts of sorting and compiling can provide new ways of understanding reception as an active, creative force.

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Shakespeare Sucks: Sugrophobia and *The Winter's Tale*

Just prior to the sudden onset of his destructive paranoid obsession with his wife's fidelity, Leontes muses fondly about his boyhood with the man he will soon suspect of impregnating his wife: "We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk in the sun," he says, adding, "we knew not/ The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd/ That any did" (1.2.69, 71-73). His subsequently abrupt shift from meditative nostalgia to conspiratorial hallucination seems an overcorrecting response to his remembered naivete. No longer the vulnerable suckling who could not conceive of malice, he

enters a hypervigilant state in which he interprets every word and gesture as evidence of a humiliating and emasculating plot against him. In contemporary psychological terms, we could assess that Leontes here experiences an abrupt onset of sugrophobia—a term coined in the early twenty-first century to describe an intense fear of being duped and the irrational compensatory strategies one adopts to thwart such humiliation. From the Latin *sugere*, meaning “to suck,” the term shares its origins with one of the most regular labels assigned the dupe: the sucker. However, long before *sucker* entered the lexicon to denote a simpleton, the act of sucking, or suckling, was similarly associated in early modernity with credulousness and susceptibility to manipulation. This paper employs contemporary research on sugrophobia in its examination of Leontes’s obsessive jealousy, triggered by reminiscences of an innocent, vulnerable youth and contextualized within the play’s numerous references to both suckling and swindling. As this paper explores the link between images of suckling and the threat of being duped as meet in sugrophobia, it will also explore both the particularities of the threat that lies at the phobia’s core as well as the spiraling and destructive counter-impulses it provokes.

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Helen’s Obsession

To what extent can we define *All’s Well That Ends Well* as a drama—or comedy—of obsession? In this paper I want to use the seminar’s focus on obsession to think through the role obsessive thoughts, longings, and actions play in *All’s Well*, a text that I am currently editing. Helen is, to my knowledge, the only female character in Shakespeare who pursues her would-be lover with absolutely no encouragement from him. She explains to the audience that she adores ‘His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls’, and that being in his presence is both ‘pretty’ to her ‘idoltrous fancy’ and ‘a plague’ (1.1.97, 99, 102). In doing so, she enlists the language of both the Renaissance blazon and Catholic piety (in his absence, she ‘Must sanctify his relics’) (103). How might these distinctive traditions of obsessive worship inform both our reading of Helen and of the emerging language of obsession in Shakespeare’s time? My paper will trace the development of Helen’s obsession in *All’s Well*, paying particular attention to both her role as a sonneteer after Bertram’s flight and her decision to disguise herself as a nun as she pursues him. Is there something empowering about obsession, particularly for a woman, even as it potentially degrades and misguides?

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Breaking Habits: Minor Obsessions in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Everyone in Shakespeare’s Messina is obsessed with breaking things up or breaking things down: characters long to “break with” each other about the latest gossip, a love-addled Benedick

dismisses the jests that will be “broken upon” him at his intention to marry, and the gentlemen of Don Pedro’s retinue conclude a collaborative joke on epistolary closings with a mock-fable that language is best “guarded with fragments.” This paper takes *Much Ado*’s title at its word, exploring how the play thematizes affection through an obsession with minor and fragmentary textual effects. The comedy’s scenes abound in precise verbal echoes as characters hyper-analyze conversational details, and its monologue-prone protagonists slip into quippy stichomythia once assured of reciprocity, breaking into each other’s speeches as they dramatize how intimacy allows for implicit forms of communication. In the second half of the paper, I turn to hints of Shakespeare’s textual obsession with one of his poetic predecessors, suggesting that *Much Ado* incarnates the Elizabethan genre of the minor epic in the diminutive figure of Hero, “Leonato’s short daughter.” Her name continuously recalls Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, itself a broken text that remains infamously incomplete. Claudio makes much ado over Hero’s name, dwelling on her blushes in ways that echo Marlowe’s mockery of his Hero’s dawning embarrassment after a night with Leander, while Benedick pointedly speaks of Leander without Hero while kvetching about his love life. Hero is a minor character, but Benedick’s and Beatrice’s most affecting lines nonetheless inquire after her, routing the couple’s mutual obsession through a gentler preoccupation with her well-being. The play, in short, tracks how delicate phrases and vestiges of poems past can spin out a web of obsessive intimacies, inviting us to consider how the excesses we associate with obsession counterintuitively rest on a sense of smallness.