

SAA Seminar 44 abstracts

Jewish Advocacy Work and *The Merchant of Venice* During (and After) October 7th

Sara Coodin

My essay for our seminar grows out of a persistent question that's been gnawing at me for well over a year now, one that also comes from my own highly specific vantage point as a onetime Shakespeare scholar-turned-advocacy practitioner. Nevertheless, it's a question that I think bears repeating out loud. In the wake of a turbulent year where campuses across North America have been riven by antisemitism, how and why has Shakespeare's Jewish play, an Ur-text for Western Jew-hatred, been so absent from conversations about the present surge in antisemitism, and campus antisemitism in particular? It's a question I find sincerely puzzling in an era where activist-scholarship, including in the field of Shakespeare Studies, routinely undertakes to forge these kinds of presentist connections, and public humanities work feels newly urgent.

My seminar paper won't attempt to dig into the changing landscape of academic theory in English Literature or undertake a sociological analysis of the field of Shakespeare Studies. I'd like to attempt to cast a more modest offering into the void by discussing one small piece of the work that I've been doing recently as a practitioner directing university engagement at American Jewish Committee, where I've been working as the Director of Academic Affairs since 2022.

These last turbulent fourteen months, I've enlisted *Merchant* in my educational advocacy work to help flesh out a program on economic antisemitism that I developed in partnership with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office at the University of Pennsylvania, and which I've since also brought to other Ivy League schools. The program focuses on the premodern infrastructure of economic antisemitism and asks about the relevance of the early modern past to present-day attitudes about Jews, money, and power, attitudes that are still remarkably current drivers of anti-Jewish sentiment, according to recent survey data.

At the time, this program felt to me like a way to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the past via the deep-seated theological architecture of anti-Jewish prejudice, whose original foundations, as M. Lindsey Kaplan and Magda Teter have persuasively argued, were laid in medieval Christian Europe. By implication, it argued for the ongoing relevance of Shakespeare's *Merchant*, a play that many students knew by name but had never read or seen. But in actuality, I developed this educational module in the real time of unfolding current events, where campus antisemitism became front-page news, attracting significant political and popular attention and a tremendous amount of outside pressure. I worked in collaboration with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team at a university that had, since early in the 2023-24 academic year, been embroiled in well-publicized antisemitic incidents, and the campus community was traumatized both by these incidents and the flood of public attention that followed from them. The Jewish community had grown increasingly impatient with institutions like UPenn and the responses of administrators and DEI offices that were perceived to be inadequate, rote, or tone-deaf. All this meant that programming like the one I was working on had to be aligned with a set of co-priorities that had become notoriously poor bedfellows: Jewish organizational goals and DEI imperatives. I'll discuss the process of collaborating on this program under these conditions, and share some of the key insights the program itself yielded for the immediate future of Jewish educational advocacy work at AJC, including what *Merchant* helped clarify about where that work has succeeded in meeting the present moment, and where it's failed.

The Balance of Truth: Othello and Iago

Lars Engle

This paper attempts to map the relations of truth and trust in *Othello*. Readers and audiences of this very uncomfortable play have access to truths that tell them whom to trust and whom not to trust. They have to cope with the pain of watching Othello gain access to lies that tell him whom to distrust and whom to trust. This paper argues that readers and audiences know a bit less than they think they know. If accepted, its claims open the play to yet another level of discomfort.

We know Iago lies. We know he twists truths so that they look damning. While we may not know why, we know that Iago seeks to destroy Othello, wreck Cassio, wring out Roderigo and throw him away. We infer that for Iago Desdemona either counts as collateral damage or needs besmirching out of a daily beauty she shares with Cassio or needs to be mastered for some other end, "not out of absolute lust" but something as bad as it (2.1.211).

Partly because Iago's ends appall us, we assume that whenever he says something positive about someone it's true: "The Moor . . . / Is of a constant, loving, noble nature," for instance (2.1.289-90). But in general we assume Iago only speaks truths that serve some practical purpose, usually wicked one.

We think we know Othello tells and relies on truth, and that he dislikes ambiguities and evasions. He believes that there is a clear distinction between false disloyal knaves and men who are just, and that he knows how to distinguish them. He believes, at least early on, that relational uncertainties, when they arise, exist to motivate the tests that will return him to a state of certainty: "I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove, / And on the proof there is no more but this: / Away at once with love or jealousy" (3.3.191-3). We may diagnose this as Othello's naivete, his philosophic vulnerability, his illustration of the folly of a quest for certainty in erotic relations. But in a way it reinforces our sense of his truthfulness.

Thus we assume Iago lies when he tells Roderigo that he should take pin his hopes for Desdemona in how she and Othello fell in love: "Mark me with what violence she did first love the Moor, but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies" (2.1.224-5). Iago is a liar, he says this with malevolent intent, it traduces Desdemona, but is it wrong about Othello's truthfulness? This paper argues that Shakespeare salts *Othello* with suggestions that in saying this Iago may be right. The main pieces of evidence are the well-known inconsistency about who gave whom the handkerchief in Othello's parents' generation, and the less well-known contradiction between what is said about Othello's wooing process in Act One and what is revealed about in Act Three.

Shakespeare in Conversations Beyond England: Towards a New Model for Shakespeare Heritage in Scotland

Toria Johnson

To what extent can an English playwright, who only ever knew a place like Scotland as a distinct and separate kingdom, be meaningfully situated as part of Scotland's literary and heritage story?

While British Council polls found that Shakespeare was 'the person young people overseas identified more than anyone else with contemporary British culture' (As Others See Us, 2014), UK residents were significantly less likely than international respondents to report liking, understanding, or finding Shakespeare's work relevant to their lives (*All The World's*, British Council, 2016). Over 44 pages long, the *All The World's* report also never mentions any of the

UK's constituent nations individually, referring only to the UK and to British residents in homogenous terms. Shakespeare's own national identity is often similarly conflated. When, for example, Sir Kenneth Branagh began the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony with lines from *The Tempest*, he also launched a longform celebration of the UK's cultural history that positioned Shakespeare not just as a representative of *England*, but as a dominant and defining *British* voice.

With 24 sites variously connected to the 11th-century king of Scots, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and a 400-year history of performance, production, and literary tourism, Scotland possesses the UK's largest collection of Shakespeare heritage assets – while, at the same time, being the only UK constituent nation that makes it possible to complete a secondary education without encountering Shakespeare's work.

Acknowledging that this educational policy indicates a comparatively less central position for Shakespeare in Scotland's cultural identity frameworks, and placing this alongside Graeme Morton's influential principle of Scottish 'unionist nationalism', this paper looks to British Shakespeare heritage, and asks what Scotland – with its unique positioning with the UK – could do for Shakespeare by engaging differently with the playwright to develop its suite of 'Macbeth' locations. In offering new pathways for modernising, reframing, and thinking beyond the playwright to create accessible, sustainable, and locally co-authored 'Shakespeare' heritage sites beyond the English locations of the poet's own life, this paper – focusing particularly on the 'Birnam Oak' in Perthshire – suggests a new, distinctively Scottish model for Shakespeare heritage placemaking as a way of advancing the United Kingdom's ethos and approach to presenting Shakespeare's cultural value.

Is there in beauty no truth? : searching for truth with *Hamlet*

Anna Lewton-Brain

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* offers his most sustained exploration of *mimesis* and the ways that theatre, poetry, and playing can connect us to deep inner truths while also being a performance, and in a way, a lie, inauthentic. This essay, after elucidating the ethical and aesthetic principles of *mimesis* suggested within the action of the play, especially in its metatheatrical moments, will interrogate the lies in *Hamlet*, in particular focusing on Gertrude's poetic description of Ophelia's death, which Gertrude paints as beautifully passive and peaceful. At the same time, the essay will ask how much we can know of another person's truth, and particularly, another person's death. As a response to Gertrude's poetic description of Ophelia's suicide, this essay concludes with my own poetic response and description of my mother's suicide. Thus, Shakespeare's mother's poem for a daughter (Gertrude is the closest thing Ophelia has to a mother figure in the play) is answered in conversation by a daughter's poem about a mother's death.

The longest night of the year.

I still don't know how you felt that dark
And stormy night, December 21st.
You said you had some shopping left to do,

But left your purse behind (but not a note).
You drove to Crystal Crescent beach, and parked
The car at the gate, (the beach is closed at night).
Perhaps you slept a while, hoping the storm
Would pass. (There was a pillow in the back
And blanket too). But sometime in the dead
Of night, you walked alone towards the beach.
You took the pills; they made you warm and maybe
Also mad. At some point you got undressed
Except your boots. Your feet must have been cold.
I guess you waded in, or else you ran.
The waves at Crystal Crescent beach are big;
It's always windy, and that dark night
A Nor'easter was blowing up a storm.
The drop off there is pretty quick. Who knows
How far you got before the ocean took
You out. We'll never know the cause of death.
The autopsy was vague: exposure, drowning,
Or overdose. Perhaps it was all three.
Like Claudius—A triple death for you.
The ocean water, cold and dark, would take
The breath away. And what I wonder still
Is if you tried to breathe and swim and fight.
It seems to me the body always wants
To live. But maybe yours did not. And what
You thought or felt that night is almost moot.
Those pills, SSRI's they're called, you took
For a few days, so maybe you were not
Yourself. But whether you were warm and peaceful
Or whether you were scared, I'll never know.
The ocean took you for three whole days,
But brought you back. The coast guard found your body
On the rocks, face down, your head was jammed
Between two granite boulders, where waves had pounded hard.
I saw you later in a plastic bag.
Your face was purple, visible your pain.
Your hair was wet and sandy, your skin so smooth
And wrinkleless as when I was a child.
The ocean water cleaned your cares
And left you beautiful and true.

The Hospital on the Horizon: A Love Letter to *Love's Labour's Lost*
Scott Maisano

What's a hospital to Shakespeare, or Shakespeare to a hospital? That question occurred to me in 2008 as I sat in the Intensive Care Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital with my wife,

Michelle, who at age 34 had suffered her first spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD) and been life-flighted via helicopter from our local hospital in Newburyport to MGH. *Love's Labour's Lost* does not end, like every other Shakespearean comedy, with marriage but instead with its leading man, Berowne, preparing to “jest a twelvemonth in a hospital.” What a strange (way to end a) play. Michael Bristol has suggested that “Shakespeare deliberately provokes your curiosity by organizing his stories around incidents that happen offstage.” If that’s true, then *Love's Labour's Lost* ends by inviting us to imagine Berowne heading toward a hospital. Returning to this play (which I hadn’t read since graduate school and had never taught) in a life-or-death context, I found everything about it at once urgent and intimate—more than that. Reading the play I suddenly found myself laughing out loud and weeping real tears. What happens when a professor falls in love with a play? How do you continue to have a professional relationship with—and keep a respectable, critical distance from—a text you feel this passionately about? You don’t. Or at least I didn’t.

My favorite sentence in all of Shakespeare is Armado’s auxesis in praise of Jaquenetta: “I do affect the very ground, which is base, where her shoe, which is baser, guided by her foot, which is basest, doth tread.” In this line William Carroll hears only “a schematic and rigid formalism, an intricate but completely predictable” bombast. But a closer look reveals something surprising: why is Jaquenetta’s shoe “baser” (dirtier, fouler, and lower) than the ground on which it walks? Why are her feet even baser (dirtier, fouler, and lower) than her shoes? Perhaps the more abject the object of affection, the more heroic the affecting. I find myself enamored of a base play. Indeed, two centuries ago, William Hazlitt began his essay on the play with an inauspicious sentence: “If we were to part with any of the author’s comedies, it should be this.” I’ve spent very few days apart from *Love's Labour's Lost* in more than ten years. And I’ve also reconstructed its long-lost companion play, *Love's Labour's Won*. (The irony of Hazlitt’s decree is that we had always already parted with a Shakespearean comedy, one which, I would argue, is “indispensable for understanding”—to borrow a phrase from Michael Bristol*—the play we still have). In doing so, I’ve followed Berowne to that hospital on the horizon. In an October email, Paul Yachnin indicated that our seminar “will undertake to get up close to Shakespeare.” Many artists successfully bring Shakespeare’s works closer to us through adaptations and appropriations. But my paper will describe how I brought myself closer to one particular Shakespeare play through anachronism, imagination, imitation, and immersion.

Comical or Disturbing?

Toeing the Line in *Venus and Adonis*

Ashley-Marie Maxwell

This paper examines the unusual relationship between a goddess and a human in Shakespeare’s narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*. Inspired by the Ovidian myth before him, Shakespeare’s 1191-line poem features a powerful and aggressive female suitor in pursuit of a young mortal. *Venus and Adonis* is much more detailed than Ovid’s myth in his *Metamorphoses*, and the focus on Venus’ sexual violence is a strong departure from typical conventions and norms. However, Shakespeare’s poem is not unique in this approach; indeed, he draws from medieval courtly love traditions in which it is more common to see women in a position of power over men who are powerful in appearance only. Venus’ relentless pursuit of the unwilling Adonis creates discomfort and unease despite the comedic undertones of the poem. Like in his tragicomedies, we find ourselves laughing at a situation that is anything but laughable. *Venus*

and Adonis' unusual narrative is further linked to Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare's other narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, in how sexual desire—and deviance—leads to tragic outcomes. With this in mind, this paper addresses this imbalance of power from the perspective of ancient literary traditions and Shakespeare's use of questionable narrative motifs to criticize courtship culture.

Conversing with Shakespeare in the Community

Niamh J. O'Leary

Since 2017, I have been facilitating a community Shakespeare reading group called [Canon Club](#) at Cincinnati's historic Mercantile Library. The group, founded in 2003 in cooperation with Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's plan to perform the entire 38-play canon, has evolved into a discussion group comprising community members fascinated by the works of Shakespeare. As the facilitator, I have introduced what I call "Shakespeare-adjacent texts": adaptations of the plays, texts (fictional or not) *about* Shakespeare, plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries, and general-audience scholarship. In this vein, we've read John Fletcher's *The Tamer Tamed*, Jim Shapiro's *1599*, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, and Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet*, for example. I have found conversing about Shakespeare with community members of all ages (from young professionals to retirees) and professions (academics, attorneys, marketers, accountants, chaplains)—genuinely curious folk who are not beholden to me for a GPA, who aren't producing work I'm in charge of judging—to be an incredibly rewarding and rich experience.

This paper is the early stages of my attempt to analyze and articulate the benefits and outcomes of such conversation, via a case study of our discussion of Lauren Gunderson's 2018 play, *The Book of Will*. This play depicts Shakespeare's family and theatre troupe assembling the First Folio in the wake of the playwright's death. In reading it, Canon Club engages in a particularly layered consideration of Shakespeare as cultural icon: what does it mean to listen in on an imagined version of the conversations that laid the foundation for this playwright's works to endure? What is at stake in imagining these conversations? How are the characters in this play—Heminges and Condell, among others—in conversation with Shakespeare? And how does that conversational approach compare with our own, when we take on his works?

My work here dovetails with my interest in Shakespeare in American regions, and I hope to engage with scholarship on public Shakespeares, Shakespeare beyond the academy, and community reading groups. Additionally, I'm curious about the particulars of conversing with our imagined version of Shakespeare *the man*, and not just with his work. While I was trained to reject biographical criticism, I'm fascinated by biofiction and how it both reflects and shapes our thinking about the output of a given author. This essay will be an attempt to weave together these many interrogatory threads.

Staying in the Conversation

Michael W. Shurgot

The paper I propose for this seminar has nary a snow ball's chance in hell of being published anywhere. That is perfectly fine with me. At my age (81) pursuing critical glory in various upbeat Shakespeare journals matters nothing. I am interested only in dialogue with (I presume) much younger colleagues about the direction(s) of some current Shakespeare scholarship. During my career I received four National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar

scholarships: “Shakespeare’s Plays in the Theatre,” with Dan Seltzer at Princeton University in 1978; “Shakespeare’s Plays as Scripts,” with Miriam Gilbert at The University of Iowa in 1981; “Shakespeare and Human Experience” with Arthur Kirsch at The University of Virginia in 1988; and finally “The Center for Renaissance and Shakespearean Staging” with Ralph Alan Cohen at James Madison University in 1995. The emphases in all four of these seminars were similar; Shakespeare’s plays as dramatic scripts; i.e., the plays as plays; the actual physical theaters in which his plays were performed; the actors who performed his roles; and, to borrow the title of the book Yu Jin Ko and I co-edited, Shakespeare’s Sense of Character: From the Page and on the Stage (Ashgate, 2012).

These summer excursions, replete with vigorous debates among distinguished colleagues and the directing of individual scenes (Iowa) and a whole play (James Madison), have affected every word I have ever written about any aspect of any one of Shakespeare’s characters and/or his plays as plays. (Whether any of those words ever had or still have any critical value is an entirely different matter.) I propose to examine several plays and their characters from perspectives influenced, if not formed, by the above seminars and the brilliant professors who taught them. While I am not yet certain which plays I shall discuss, possibilities include *Shrew*, *All’s Well*, and *Othello*. I hope to include references to performance choices that will enable us to “stay in conversation” with several of Shakespeare’s plays and the characters who still bedevil us.

Shakespeare Revisited: Completing the Canon

Tina Simpson

In their 2015 season, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival launched their "Canon in a Decade" initiative, where they committed to producing the full 37-play canon in the following ten years. At this point, I had already started my own canon, which I began to track when I saw my first show in Ashland in 2010: in those first four years I had seen 21 different plays, including various plays multiple times. Although the COVID pandemic restricted my access to live theater and therefore delayed my own canon in a decade, I finished my first Shakespearean canon in March 2022 and have since restarted my attempt: I am 23 plays into the second canon completion.

In this essay I want to consider the question of "Why Shakespeare" by analyzing my own journey with his productions. By considering what different plays and different productions have offered me at different moments in my life, I hope to provide insight into the usefulness of Shakespeare as an ongoing conversation partner. I plan to consider the productions themselves, the ease of the play's completion, and the perspective I was bringing to a play at the time (such as when I saw *Coriolanus* three days after the 2016 presidential election.). I have always been drawn to the Emerson quote: "[Shakespeare] can tell us nothing, except to the Shakespeare in us" and I hope to use this paper to delineate and understand how my own self is changing and is changed by Shakespeare.

Straining for Mercy: The Coercive Gift of *The Merchant of Venice*

Marie Trotter

Portia’s courtroom speech in *The Merchant of Venice* proposes an idyllic vision for the giving and receiving of mercy: “The quality of mercy is not strain’d. / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: / It blesseth him that gives and him that

takes.” The Christian idealism of this vision is, of course, complicated by the scene’s purpose. Portia is trying to extort mercy from Shylock for Antonio, and, later, will use her own mercy towards Bassanio as a weapon, permanently indebting him to her.

I have never liked *The Merchant of Venice* for these most obvious of reasons: its cold, economic dealings, its coercive perversions of mercy for shame. And then—with little warning, I lived through an event in which someone did something arguably unforgivable to me, and I wondered if I was capable of giving the kind of mercy Portia speaks of to Shylock: unstrained, dropping gently from heaven, blessing me and the other person. Shortly after this, I read Harry Berger’s “Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*: The Riches of Embarrassment,” and wondered again if my attempt to show mercy was exactly what Berger names: a mercifixion, not a redemptive gift, but a punishment that could only shame the receiver in the offering.

The Merchant of Venice crept into my life sideways at a terrible, perfect time, as I tried to understand how both shame and mercy can evade all reason. In this essay I try to stay in the conversation with this play that I find both pleasing and deeply unpleasant by staying in conversation with my own life. I propose that the discomfort incited by the play’s failures of mercy can act as a moral provocation, inviting readers and audiences to recognize mercy through the depiction of its opposite. To this end, I focus my analysis on Portia’s hypocritical rhetoric in Act 4, Scene 1, contrasting her speech with early theological accounts for God’s mercy. Through this juxtaposition, I suggest Shakespeare is illuminating mercy as a divine virtue through its conspicuous absence in the play’s human characters.

I further propose we understand *The Merchant of Venice* as a coercive gift—that which provokes discomfort in its demand for a response. The play asks that we wrestle with Portia’s own coercive gratuities of “mercy”. Drawing on my own life, I reconsider my attempts to be Christian and to show mercy, contemplating the place of that virtue for a recipient and a modern culture that does not seem to want it. Inspired by the play’s uneasy ending, I read *The Merchant of Venice* uneasily, speaking with Shakespeare as my foremost conversation partner for my desire to understand mercy and its irresolution in my own life.

“I Hate Desdemona”

Megan Vinson

In this essay, I use a hybrid of personal narrative and literary criticism to think about how Desdemona chooses to use her gender and sexuality as a commodity. In eloping with Othello, Desdemona willfully performs the erotic labor typically assigned to daughters of wealthy Renaissance families. Writers like Ania Loomba have already pointed out how Othello and Desdemona show the way race and gender were mutually constructed in early modern culture; the lovers use the rules of patriarchy to try and evade the limits placed on women and black men. Desdemona chooses to be a sexual possession for Othello because it is a way for both of them to express agency. Reception to Desdemona and Othello’s love story usually fixates on Desdemona’s sexual innocence. My reading of the play is done alongside parts of my life from the year I wasn’t working in academia. During that year, I struggled with my project. I wasn’t sure what I was trying to say. Inspired by Debra Ann Byrd, I started mixing together the academic and personal aspects of *Othello* to try and show how the discourses of the play are attached to the culture of the present. I think that Shakespeare feels relevant because his plays snapshot our own history for us. The way we perceive ourselves evolved out of how people in

16th and 17th England thought about themselves and others. The gendered world that Shakespeare depicts in *Othello* is entangled with how gender shapes us in the present.