

Sarah Bischoff, Care without Understanding: beyond *King Lear*

Both Bruegel the Elder's *The Cripples* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* use begging, marginalization, and allegory to charge the gazes of the audience with either ableist stereotypes or, should the audience stare ethically, with empathy. When discussing these works, Garland-Thomson and C.H. McNabb argue that the use of a visual medium — of painting and of staged performance — allows the viewer to gather knowledge, narrative, and understanding from the disabled subject(s), and thus garner empathy. This paper puts pressure on this type of empathy, questioning the value of understanding as a vehicle for care. It does this through examining the overlooked figures of *The Cripples*, and through *Lear's* systemic dismantling of care contracts and networks as the play progresses.

This paper takes particular interest in the practice of disability studies and scholarship's own historiographical methods that build knowledge and care through empathy, particularly through the paradigm of ethical staring. It thinks through the ways that the works under study themselves shape the understanding of the gazer, contemporaneous and otherwise, even with scholarly remove. To better empathize through or via the work is thus, it argues, a limited project. The paper points toward the potentialities of caring without certainty or knowledge, using Saidiya Hartman's creative and necessarily imperfect historical method of critical fabulation to push the genres of scholarship to new modes of care.

## **'Bearing' and 'Bearing with' Infirmity in Julius Caesar**

Joseph Maddocks

'A friend should bear his friend's infirmities/ but Brutus makes mine greater than they are'. Defending himself from Brutus's scolding, Cassius's aphoristic declaration here, from the fourth act of *Julius Caesar*, raises questions about the limits of social accommodation. While self-identification with infirmity may be expedient for his moral excuses, by suggesting that the failure to accommodate such infirmities makes them 'greater than they are', he comes to describe a process akin to disablement. Of course, this functions as a moment of extreme hypocrisy, given the ableist motives underpinning the conspirators' assassination of the infirm Caesar. This paper will consider the early modern care ethic of 'bearing with infirmity', a principle of accommodation detailed in a variety of conduct manuals and emblem books from the early modern period. Further, it will consider the linguistic slippage between 'bearing' and 'bearing' with, as Cassius's words subtly evoke his earlier description of having borne Caesar from the Tiber, a parody of the equally common motif from the period of Aeneas bearing his elderly, disabled father Anchises. Ultimately, I argue that *Julius Caesar* plays upon the multiple valences contained within in the term 'bear' to expose the inevitable failure of care in the face of Rome's pervasive, compulsory able-bodiedness.

Sources:

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SAA 2025

Who Cares? Care, Caring and Disability in Shakespeare

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This paper engages with the question “who cares for whom, in what ways, and with what implications for social change” in relation to productions of Shakespeare’s plays. I examine, from the perspective of a Deaf audience member, the increase in Shakespeare productions that are made accessible to Deaf people through a combination of British Sign Language, captions, and lip reading. Specifically, the paper focuses on the Globe’s 2024 *Antony & Cleopatra* which was advertised as “an epic bilingual production... [in which] **some scenes will be performed only in BSL; some scenes will be performed only in Spoken English; and some scenes will feature both languages.**” The analysis draws upon interviews with a range of Globe practitioners as well as archival research into audience feedback. Finally, I argue that the mechanisms employed to allow Deaf practitioners and audience members to appreciate productions of Shakespeare’s plays are ultimately responsive to social change and political ideology.

SAA 2025: “There Shall No Care Be Wanting: Transactional Care in *The Changeling*”

Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling* thrives on cruelty. Its plot is supercharged by piercingly personal betrayals and vicious physical violence. The play showcases that cruelty by consistently contrasting it with care. Many of the play’s central characters are professional caregivers; its subplot takes place in a madhouse, which is presented as a location of caregiving; some of its most important plot points masquerade as caring actions. So why does caregiving fail so spectacularly in *The Changeling*? This paper examines the ways in which care networks dissolve and resolve in the world of the play, tracking who receives care, who gives it, what kinds of care are promised, and, especially, what payments are offered for care and what costs are paid to both give and receive it. Middleton and Rowley’s Alicante is a profoundly transactional world, yet, instead of suggesting that there is no place for care in a world dominated by commerce, *The Changeling* stages more complicated possibilities. Identity—especially disability, gender, race, and class—inflects who can give and receive care, but also who is allowed to experience the affective nature of care, instead of just paying its often terrible price.

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Seminar 57: Who Cares? Care, Caring and Disability in Shakespeare

L. Bellee Jones-Pierce—Abstract Draft, December 9, 2024

### **Caring about/through/with the Lyric**

*Who cares about poetry? Who cares about lexicography of cells?*

*Sara Wainscott, "Ghazal of Algorithms"*

While poetry often appears in the pages of *Virtual Mentor*, the American Medical Association's Journal of Ethics, the medical humanities direct much more energy toward narrative. "In attempting to respond to human needs incarnated in language," Hurwitz and Bates explain, "narrativity and medicine have long been co-implicated" (559). This relationship is due, in part, to narrative's "commitment to connectedness and structure," which "medicine valorizes in the construction of clinical cases" (561). Medical schools wield narrative to teach interpretative skills, ethical wherewithal, metacognition, and empathy to future clinicians, "often in the service of a practical outcome of clinical care" (565). In the hands of medical practitioners, narrative is a tool for meaning making, for making sense of a patient and moving toward cure. By contrast, poetry is often seen as an escape from the coldly clinical, a method of self-care.

Literary disability studies replicates medicine's narrative/poetry divide. As Susan Schweik observed in 2007, our "foundational texts" have "trained their attention primarily on novels" and "set narrative...at the center" (49). Comparatively little work has interrogated the relationships between disability and poetry—especially in the early modern period. We tend instead toward dramatic works and epic, leaving the lyric unattended.

Why *should* practitioners of disability studies (and/or medicine) care about lyric? What models might the early modern lyric provide for care? Drawing on contemporary disability poetics and recent scholarship on care—and using George Herbert's *The Temple* as a case study—this paper will offer templates for exploring the subject of care and caring about/through/with lyric.

"I Fear Me the Folks Be Not Well in Their Wits:"  
Bedlam Beggars and the Aims of Institutional Care  
Abstract

Delanie Harrington Dummit

The Poor Laws define dis/ability in terms of labor and begging in its trajectory toward a welfare state, in an effort to "care" for the poor; one such effort includes state institutionalization and the pathologization of disability. However, the iconography of the "Bedlam Beggar" as a result of public institutionalization demonstrates a failure of such care.

What does it mean to have come from Bedlam? The "Bedlam Beggar" archetype is just as, if not more frequent than, depictions of Bedlam and similar "madhouses" in Early Modern plays. These depictions often foreground anxieties surrounding whether disabled or mad beggars are faking their conditions to be excused from "labor"; such anxieties are central to the Poor Laws' dichotomy between "vagrants" and those "unable to labor." Although scholars often assume that Diccon the "Bedlam" in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* is a feigning beggar, I argue both that his 'authenticity' is irrelevant and that his beggarly status demonstrates a failure of institutional care. What it means to have potentially come from the hospital and still require assistance raises issues surrounding the intended, perceived, and actual functions of the theatricalized medical institution. This paper analyzes how Diccon subverts the disabled-vagrant binary in anticipation of a dissertation that investigates these institutional functions.

Bibliography

- Neely, Carol Thomas. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.
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## **SAA Annual Meeting 2025 in Boston (19-22 March 2025)**

### **Abstract for Seminar 57: “Who Cares? Care, Caring and Disability in Shakespeare”**

**Submitted by:** Ann-Sophie Bosshard, University of Zurich, ann-sophie.bosshard@es.uzh.ch

#### **Preliminary Title:**

Conscription and Communal Care: Wounded Soldiers in Early Modern Plays

Being conscripted into military service was an experience that affected many men in early modern England. Towards the end of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, it is estimated that around 55% of men between the ages of 18 and 39 (had) served in the military.<sup>1</sup> If wounded in action, the likelihood of returning from their service with a disabling impairment was high and could have far-reaching consequences if their ability to provide for themselves and their families was challenged. Having suffered “In right and service of their noble country” (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.200), who should now be tasked with caring for these soldiers and their families?

As early modern plays perform a range of different answers, this paper asks how early modern plays stage the role of communities vis-à-vis the care of returned soldiers with disabling impairments. To approach this question, this paper will mainly engage with two characters that have been in the focus of early modern disability studies in recent years, namely Ralph in Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (perf. 1599) and Stump in the anonymous *A Larum for London* (1602). As both Ralph and Stump are not only presented as requiring communal care, but are also tasked with extending care towards other characters, this paper argues that the question of who is caring for whom in these plays does not have a straightforward answer. Instead, the audiences are presented with disabled characters who are both receivers and providers of communal care. Hence, the plays also prompt their audiences to cognitively and affectively investigate their own ethical standpoints towards impaired soldiers and their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Clark, “Lame Doings”, p. 24.

Care in *The Winter's Tale* and on Earth Today

Rebecca Ann Bach

SAA Seminar Abstract

The first conversation in *The Winter's Tale* invokes a princely international care network based in a childhood friendship. Camillo, a man employed to care for Leontes (and his family), envisions that friendship extending in an imaginary web: Polixenes and Leontes appear “together, though absent.” In his account, their “hands” clasp and their bodies embrace even though the world that separates them is “vast” and conflicted, at least in its “winds” (1.1.27-29). In my paper, I will explore the care networks and the “care-in-practice” that the play presents (The Care Collective 19). *The Winter's Tale* interests me in relation to care in that it displays conflicting care networks and the deep need for women, children, and other animals if the world that the play opens with can be rebuilt. In *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*, The Care Collective (Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, and Lynne Segal) asks and answers perhaps the most serious of questions for the linked nonhuman and human world on earth today: “How do we even begin to address the pervasiveness of carelessness? We suggest that we can do so by building on a wealth of examples of what we call ‘care-in-practice’, from the radical past” (19). By “radical past” the Collective means examples from the AIDs crisis and other recent demanding situations and collective movements. But can we see Renaissance texts and practices as examples of “care-in-practice”? I hope that my paper for the seminar will show that we can.



Cunning Women, Disability, and Care on the Early Modern Stage<sup>2</sup>  
Rachel Ellen Clark ([rachel.clark@wartburg.edu](mailto:rachel.clark@wartburg.edu))

In early modern England, the women (and some men) accused of witchcraft threatened the orderly hierarchy of society by embodying excess: excess power, excess ability, excess persuasion, all derived from sources that exceeded the bounds of acceptability. In this essay, I explore how more benignly (or fraudulently) magical cunning folk practice care in such a way that they collapse the usual ableist boundaries of compulsory sexuality. I focus on two literary cunning women who superintend heterosexual community relations while they themselves remain outside the conventions of marriage: Mother Bombie in John Lyly's *Mother Bombie* (ca. 1590, published 1594) and the Wise Woman in Thomas Heywood's *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* (ca. 1604, published 1638). In addition to the allosexual queerness that Christine Varnado has analyzed in early modern witch hunts,<sup>3</sup> I argue that figures such as these also share asexual resonances with the aging spinster. According to Ela Przybylo, the spinster embodies both "lack" and "excess," "a counterpoint and extension of bourgeois maternity unfettered by heterosexual marriage."<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the queer erotics that Varnado associates with witch trials can become an umbrella capacious enough for asexual readings, as well.

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<sup>2</sup> NB This essay is adapted from a chapter in a forthcoming volume, *Early Modern Asexualities*, ed. Liza Blake, Catherine Clifford, and Aley O'Mara.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Varnado, *Shapes of Fancy: Reading for Queer Desire in Early Modern Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 129.