Contemporary Pedagogies of Reading Early Modern Literature: Abstracts

Michael Albright: Inviting the "Character" Genre to the "great feast of languages"

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Moth, a pageboy, captures with succinct, damning accuracy the essence of the pedantic, pompous Holofernes, saying that he has "been at a great feast of languages, and stol'n the scraps" (V.i.38-39). Moth's perceptiveness is striking, as he makes visible from his vantage point just how mired Holofernes is in his own linguistic performativity. The schoolmaster's insistence on ornate, borrowed language makes him an object of widespread mockery. By the next scene, Holofernes becomes painfully aware of his place in the community and responds to the heckling he receives at the hands of the King and his lords by saying, "This is not generous, not gentle, not humble" (V.ii.700). At this moment, Holofernes' language is raw and devoid of verbosity. He also has been effectively disinvited from the "great feast" to which he so desperately lays claim.

For this seminar, I plan to explore what happens when students of literature—particularly, those for whom early modern texts are new or less than familiar—find themselves confronting the "scraps" of language instead of attending the "great feast." In my work with undergraduates and concurrent enrollment students, I have found that when students are predisposed to think that anything "old" is inaccessible, they are less inclined to rise to the challenge of navigating a new linguistic terrain. What happens, then, if students only subsist on "scraps" of language that seem, at first glance, seem to elude understanding? How do we make "a great feast of languages" a possibility for these readers?

To address these questions, I will share my experiences using the "character" genre to acclimate students to the richness of a contemporary, early modern English landscape. I will discuss how I have worked to integrate John Earle's compendium *Microcosmography* as part of my Shakespeare survey course. I will discuss my approach, offer examples of productive "characters," and invite feedback for other ways to promote accessibility without compromising the totality of the experience.

Frederick Bengtsson: Dissecting difficulty: structured close readings of the sonnet form

I'll be sharing a set of assignments from a sonnet survey course that I have taught various versions of over the past years. The sequence grew out of a frustration with students' diminished reading stamina, their tendency to read purely for comprehension (and sometimes not even that), and their lack of preparedness when it came to even starting to approach texts in a literary way.

The class as a whole starts from the premise that the sonnet offers an ideal form through which to really focus on deep close reading, while also keeping the volume of reading at minimal levels. The assignments attempt to slow the reading process down and break it into steps: line-by-line paraphrase, scansion and rhyme marking, thinking about form and structure, identifying rhetorical and figurative devices, thinking about diction and word-choices, etc.

Using the sonnet as a dense but manageable form, I treat difficulty as the point rather than the problem. I'm interested in how others are making the practices of expert reading more explicit and how we talk with students about what it means to read early modern texts carefully and well.

Valerie Billing: Reading *Richard III* With First-Year College Students

I teach at a small private liberal arts college in rural Iowa. Most of my classes serve a few English majors and many students from other majors who are satisfying a general education requirement. Many of these students are attending college primarily so that they can play their sport for another four years, and many are underprepared for college, especially in their reading skills. In Fall 2025, I taught our 100-level introductory English course for the first time since before the COVID-19 pandemic. I redesigned the way I teach the course based on how I have seen our students change in preparedness over the past five years and in order to try to motivate the students to do their own reading, thinking, and writing instead of relying on AI. The theme of the course is Disability and Literature, and we start with a unit on memoir, then poetry, short fiction, and finally drama, ending with *Richard III*. After a semester of relatively short, easy reads, *Richard III* was a difficult way to end, but I was pleased with the effort and motivation my students brought to this text, and in their final self-assessments, many reported being surprised that they could read, understand, and enjoy Shakespeare.

For this seminar, I will contribute the various materials I used for teaching *Richard III* to first-semester college students, the vast majority of whom were not English majors and many of whom clearly struggled to read long, challenging texts. These materials include lesson plans, reading prompts, activities based on re-reading, performance activities, assignments requiring small doses of research and engagement with scholarship, and a final collaborative performance project. Reflecting back on the semester, I can draw some conclusions about strategies that were particularly effective, including fostering intrinsic motivation for tackling the reading, allowing time and specific tasks for re-reading, using performance activities as a way of guiding reading, and encouraging student collaboration throughout the unit. Our conversations and writing assignments about *Richard III* also engaged reading from several different perspectives: students reflected on their own reading and re-reading practices and reading comprehension; we used disability theory to understand some of the different ways other characters in the play read Richard's body; and we looked to the text to see which characters were "bad" readers of Richard's actions and what, in the play, informs the difference between good and bad reading. In other words, students were asked to think about the processes and consequences of attentive and inattentive reading while challenging themselves to get better at—and even enjoy—reading Shakespeare.

Emily Bryan: Developing an Integrated Performance Seminar Based on Collaborative Reading

In 2021, I started working with Keith Hamilton Cobb on the Untitled Othello Project. This project has yielded numerous research and pedagogical opportunities over the past 5 years. Launching from Ayanna Thompson's claim that performing *Othello* usually reinscribes the racist and misogynist tropes without addressing the harms created by the tropes, Cobb sought to untitle the play and to search for what he called a "better version" of the play, without a direct adaptation. We never quite got to the "better version" of *Othello* that Cobb created with students at my university, but we did create a prequel to Othello called "Nine Moons." This play had an early production in 2025, off-off-Broadway,

but Cobb is eager to revise and develop it. In Fall 2026, I will be co-teaching a new course, an "Integrated Performance Seminar" with Cobb, in which a group of 20 students will work on developing *Nine Moons*. I am spending this semester developing the course objectives, syllabus, etc., and will be sharing that work in the seminar. This course is not for performance-based majors, but for students in the liberal arts core. I am interested in exploring the opportunities to merge theory and practice, professional and educational goals, to foreground text and embodiment, and to make a case for the personal, small-scale development work of human creativity. Centrally, for this seminar, I want to think about how collaborative reading (one of the main features of the Untitled Othello Project) creates opportunities for alternative learning modes and creative development.

Katharine Cleland: Refusing AI in the Renaissance Literature Classroom

I teach Shakespeare and other Renaissance literature courses, mainly Milton as well as an occasional Renaissance literature survey, at Virginia Tech, a large land-grant university in rural Southwest Virginia. For the most part, my students tend to be intellectually curious and engaged. After being on research leave for the past semester, however, I am anxious about returning to the classroom. AI seems to be much more of an issue than it was at this time just last year. While I recognize that AI is here to stay, I feel drawn to the movement, Refusing Generative AI in Writing Studies. According to the movement's leaders (Maggie Fernandes, Jennifer Sano-Franchini, and Megan McIntyre), "refusal" is not a rejection, but "a disciplinary and principled response to the emergence of Generative AI (GenAI) technologies." This refusal stems partly from the positions that "technologies, including GenAI, are never ideologically neutral," negatively impact the environment, and accelerate "linguistic homogenization." For my paper, therefore, I plan to think about and outline a Shakespeare and/or Renaissance literature course that "refuses" AI, including justifications, objectives, goals, classroom practices, and/or assignments.

In particular, I want to think about how the language of Shakespeare and other early modern authors "refuse" AI. Indeed, one of the whole purposes of poetic meter and form is that you cannot always "predict" what word is going to be next in a sentence. Meaning derives from this inherent complexity and unpredictability. As instructors, it is our job to get our students to embrace this unpredictability. I thus aim to explore how early modern writing provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate the shortcomings of LLMs, and how learning to read early modern literature will turn current students into the kinds of sophisticated writers, readers, and thinkers that we need to confront this historical moment.

Claire Dawkins: Reading History in Lanyer

This essay offers both my own reading of Aemilia Lanyer's "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women" from *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) and practical pedagogical strategies for teaching early modern literature.

My own reading: I argue that Lanyer constructs a counterfactual history by building an implicit syllogism through Pontius Pilate's wife: if Eve's sin justifies patriarchal oppression of all

women, then Pilate's equally grievous sin (*i.e.*, enabling Christ's crucifixion) should result in the oppression of all men. This syllogism exposes the hypocrisy of using biblical precedent to maintain gender hierarchy, creating a layering of what *should have* happened in history superimposed over what *did* happen in history. Lanyer teaches us to read history as a palimpsest, and she thus approximates the more modern idea of a double standard.

Practical pedagogy: Using "Eve's Apology" as a case study, I demonstrate how scaffolding students through the poem's opening syllogism—especially using practical tools like comparative charts—enables them to recognize where Lanyer's rhetorical strategies shift and contradict themselves. While critics often read Lanyer's poem as proto-feminist, students frequently resist that reading because her defense positions Eve as being intellectually weak (*i.e.,* Lanyer attempts to weaponize the double standard to her own ends). This divergence between critical and student "reading" is a productive moment in the classroom. It allows for discussion of how texts support multiple interpretations and invites students to stake their own claims about whether Lanyer successfully defends women.

Nic Helms: Thy Reels Are Quick! Micro-Drama and Student Storytelling

Throughout 2025 at Plymouth State University, I worked closely with my colleague Scott Coykendall, Professor of Communication and Media Studies, to line up our respective introductory courses (Studies in English and Studies in CMS). Our primary goal was to build community for our students outside their own majors but within the humanities at large. Our secondary goal was to directly connect the core skills of our disciplines to career skills in a way that would be visible to our students *and* our administrators.

The cross-class project we came up with was a Pandora's Box of pitfalls and possibilities, but it succeeded with our students well beyond our hopes. We tasked our students with making two-minute micro-dramas (also known as verticals) in small groups of CMS and English majors, and with analyzing their own work using lenses from each discipline. The two-minute micro-drama format has exploded in China and East Asia in recent years and has been making inroads into the American market via streaming apps like DramaBox, ReelShort, and MicroDrama. As the NYT describes the genre, "Shot vertically for viewing on phones, micro dramas are soapy, scripted and serialized — video romance novels for the TikTok era." These dramas are characterized by melodrama, jump-cuts, and trope-filled scripts, but they span a wide range of contemporary genres and appeal to a growing popular audience (often by utilizing the gamified and dopamine-infused strategies of mobile apps).

In Scott's class, this project followed discussions on media convergence and participatory culture, both theories of contemporary media production and consumption that micro-dramas almost seem created to illustrate. In my class, the project followed our reading of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and our viewing of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film adaptation. The medium of micro-dramas proved to be a wondrous fit with the themes and techniques of *Romeo and Juliet*: melodrama as social critique, the interaction between time and the affordances of genre, and the muddied distinctions between popular and literary storytelling. Our students proved capable of claiming mastery over the concepts and texts of our classes in a way that traditional teaching methods had not yet mastered for us.

For our seminar at SAA 2026, I aim to represent and reflect upon this project process, drawing upon assignment instructions and rubrics, student writing, and student films (pending approval by said students).

Hannah Korell: Reading with the Monster in Early Modern Literature

I currently teach the pre-1700 literature curriculum at a rural, STEM, regional comprehensive university in Southwestern Wisconsin. My students come from a variety of educational backgrounds, but I teach a large number of first-gen students who have graduated from extremely small, underfunded high schools who view university, understandably, as a kind of niche job training that will help them to get the elusive high-paying job straight from college. As such, many of the issues outlined in the recent articles about declining literacy rates in young adults – both because they lack the skills and, crucially, the interest – are on frequent display in my courses.

My project for this seminar will be to reflect on my experiences addressing this issue in my 3000-level Medieval and Renaissance Topics course, which I theme around the concept of "monstrosity." I taught this course first in Fall 2023, and I will be teaching it again this Spring 2026 during our seminar. In this class, students tackle a wide range of early modern writing, from canonical texts like early modern plays such as *Doctor Faustus* and *The Witch of Edmonton* to epic poetry (*Paradise Lost*) through to long-form prose in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*. However, students also read less accessible texts such as witch trial documents, treatises, and pamphlets, monstrous birth ballads, and scientific and medical treatises to give historical and cultural context.

My goal will be to chart the students' ability to handle this material, compare it to my previous experience in this course, and to reflect on what this might mean as one model for helping students read and engage with early modern literature. How can monster pedagogies unlock excitement in older literature and help students to develop stamina for productive struggle?

Matthew Kozusko: Reflective Pedagogy

I've been teaching at a small liberal arts college since 2004, a period during which I've become ever more invested in the project of liberal education. From a typical R1 interest in research and publication, I have moved steadily toward a devotion to students and classrooms, but this seminar caught my eye primarily because I admire the work of Jess Hamlet.

Our department no longer offers composition courses or literature surveys, so I end up teaching two or three Shakespeare-focused courses per year, with the occasional Milton/Spenser/Marlowe course. I also teach and administrate in our first-year seminar program, a required two-semester great-books-looking class that actually isn't a great books affair at all but is instead the discussion-based foundation of our general curriculum. As a result, much of my classroom work involves motivating students to become interested in difficult texts—early modern literature, primarily, but also the many readings in our first-year seminar that feature older and often archaic syntax and diction.

So my initial plan for this seminar was to think about how this has worked for me, and whether my pedagogical tactics have actually changed in the past decade. I teach Shakespeare primarily through

performance (a rich topic we are sure to get into) and what should probably be called narrative theory: I have students think about the narrative regularities that both link and differentiate Shakespeare plays, and I encourage them to see in contemporary film and storytelling the same devices and structures deployed by Shakespeare. Has there been a shift in how students respond to these tactics? Should I reconsider my comfortable certainty that students still find similar paths to and through the difficult texts we read together? Finally and separately, I'm currently working on a project about Michel Foucault and LLMs, so I'm very happy to hear what we're all doing and thinking with regard to AI.

Sara D. Luttfring: Thinking Outside the Research Paper in Upper-Level Renaissance Drama Classes

For this seminar, I plan to present three assignments that I've recently developed for my two upper-level courses in Renaissance drama. These two classes fulfill a requirement for our English and Creative Writing majors; all students in both majors must take one or the other. I used to conclude the semester in these classes by having the students write a "traditional" research paper that was worth a relatively large portion of their grade. However, I came to realize that my students did not seem particularly inspired by this assignment, and since it was a large assignment due at the end of the semester, they were often too burnt out to do their best work. As a result, I've been working on assigning multiple smaller assignments in place of the one big paper.

In 2024, I participated in Jess Hamlet, Courtney Parker, and Eileen Sperry's Practical Pedagogy Workshop at SAA. I found it very inspiring, and I developed three new assignments based on work shared by my fellow participants. I've used two of the assignments already, and I hope to debut the third next fall. In addition to presenting these assignments for the seminar, I plan to explain in more detail my process and rationale for developing them, the objectives they achieve, and how they fit into the overall scope of my classes. Finally, I will describe my experience assigning the two I've already used, including how students approached them and what kinds of troubleshooting I might need to do before assigning them again.

Conor O'Sullivan: Engaging Secondary Students in Critical Conversations

As a high school teacher, I find that one of the most important parts of my job when I teach Shakespeare to honors-level seniors is to introduce them to the concept of argumentation: of developing their own idea in response to what others have said. In previous iterations of this seminar/workshop, when I've asked what college teachers wish their incoming students knew, the most common response has been that students need to realize that there is never one one way of analyzing a text, that there are multiple interpretations possible at any time. In my own teaching, I see students use secondary criticism only as sound bites to support their thoughts, rather than engaging with and responding to the arguments of others. So, after we read *Midsummer*, I introduce students to a challenging journal article that both makes an engaging and counterintuitive argument and is very clear about what it owes to previous thinkers: Melissa Sanchez's "'Use Me But as Your Spaniel': Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities" (*PMLA* 2012). For the seminar, I will submit both the assignment I work through with my students, which asks them to analyze the content and form of

Sanchez's article; the next steps I take with them as we move into making our own arguments; and a reflection on what I've seen as successes and challenges with this assignment and the goals that underpin it.

Danielle St. Hilaire: "In Wandering Mazes Lost": Addressing the Literacy Gap in the Early Modern Classroom through the Science of Learning

For a few years now, concerns about students' ability to read at the college-level have made headlines. Essays like "The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books" have traced the various ways in which reading long, complicated texts has fallen out of many middle school and high school curricula, leading to college students who are less prepared to engage in the rigors of college-level reading loads. As someone teaching in the early modern period, I have found that the decline in literacy levels among many college students presents unique challenges. Early modern syntax and vocabulary are unfamiliar and difficult to decode, even to many of our English majors, as are the frameworks and historical contexts these works operate within. All of this makes sustained reading of early modern literature a heavy lift for many students. In my essay, I will propose that the science of learning, a field of research conducted primarily by cognitive scientists, offers ways to negotiate the literacy gap and help our students learn to read difficult texts more effectively. Drawing on this research, I will discuss the techniques for managing students' cognitive load and building the foundational knowledge for understanding early modern contexts that I have been using in my Fall 2025 Survey of British Literature I course. These techniques have yielded noticeable, measurable improvements in my students' performance comprehending, discussing, and writing about early modern literature, and they suggest a way forward that can help our students close the gap between their preparation and our expectations without overburdening us or them with additional work.

Elizabeth Steinway: Teaching with Student-Led Reading Groups

My contribution to this seminar-workshop is a description and reflection on a "Reading Groups" assignment that I am piloting in my undergraduate British literature course. In this assignment, students meet in small groups outside of class to talk about readings and create discussion questions for our texts. My submission includes a discussion of objectives for the assignment, the prompts that I distribute to students, and my reflection on the assignment so far.

I was motivated to create this assignment to foster my students' ability and desire to critically engage with our readings. Because I regularly teach literature courses that count for a university-wide humanities requirement, my classes often include students who are taking their first (or only) literature course at Colorado State. Combined with the variety of learning experiences that my students bring to the classroom (including both pre- and post-Covid environments), I have tried to have explicit discussions about what we do in a literature course, why we do it, and how to do it well. In that spirit, I frame our class as a discourse community where we engage with specific disciplinary conventions for reading, analyzing, and writing about literature. A big part of this includes how to enter classroom discussion, which some students find intimidating, especially in early modern literature courses. I

created this “Reading Groups” assignment as a way to get students more involved in classroom discussion, provide comfortable spaces for testing out ideas, and to facilitate opportunities for all students to contribute.

Lauren Weindling: Reflection: Filmed Performance Assignment with Oral Interview

In playing around with my assessments to meet the challenge posed by GenAI, I trialed a new performance assignment paired with an oral assessment for the Fall 2025 term. I will be providing my assignment sheet and rubric as well as a short reflection piece on the experience and how it went.

For a quick summary, students were asked to film themselves performing a scene from one of our four plays from the term. They could complete the project in a group or alone, but each speaker was required to deliver a minimum of twenty lines of verse. Students then met with me individually (approximately 10-15 minutes) to discuss the following: the interpretation/message that they had hoped to convey with their performance; the choices that they made to support that message (e.g., tone, speed, pauses for emphasis, costuming, makeup, camera angles, soundtrack, etc.); and what they would have liked to execute with unlimited resources.

While this isn’t a novel project for a “Shakespeare and Performance” course by any means, traditionally performances are done in class, and a written reflection paper might be assigned. The long and the short of my experience with this variation on this assignment is that watching these performances and conversing with students was some of the most fun I’ve ever had when grading. I was not only impressed on several occasions, but the experience clearly contributed to meeting the learning goals for the course. More reflections to come.

Wenhan Zhang: "The present death of Hamlet”: Adaptation, Alterity, and the Hermeneutical Classroom

This paper reflects on a pedagogical experiment teaching Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* alongside James Ijames’s *Fat Ham* during its production at the Goodman Theater in Chicago (Spring 2025). While Ijames’s queer, comedic adaptation successfully lowered barriers to entry, its relatability also posed a unique pedagogical challenge. I observed in class discussions and written assignments a widespread tendency to apply the adaptation’s gender critique and therapeutic resolution retroactively to their reading of *Hamlet*, reducing the play’s tragic mechanism to a manifestation of, in students’ uniform expression, the “toxic masculinity.”In this narrative, Hamlet loses his ontological independence and becomes an embodiment of cultural and psychological otherness, a failed character whose tragic fate could have been averted had he performed like the protagonist of *Fat Ham*. As a result, the classroom risked becoming a site to re-affirm the standards of our present age, where the students’ reading experience is conflated with and subjugated to their living experience. This inadvertent outcome highlights the need to reconsider the ethics of using contemporary literary, theatrical, and cinematic productions in university classrooms. I argue that while adaptations like *Fat Ham* are invaluable tools for teaching early modern texts, it is incumbent upon instructors to perform

the hermeneutical task of consciously negotiating the gap between the texts and value systems they embody. This paper hence seeks to initiate a scholarly dialogue on pedagogical techniques that validate contemporary concerns without domesticating the alterity of the early modern world in the form of Hamlet's "present death."