

Jonas Gardsby

"Putting the Law on Trial" (provisional title)

#### Abstract

In 1646, imprisoned in the Tower of London for political agitation, the Levellers' William Walwyn turned to and drew on Montaigne's essays, particularly those passages questioning standard European systems of law. Under the thumb of the law, Walwyn studied Montaigne's most skeptical, utopian, and anarchist passages as he contemplated a different governing structure for England, which was then in the midst of a civil war. I argue that the very aesthetic of the essay form itself was an inspiration for Walwyn's radical new proposals for a more equal society.

[Jonas has also sent through, for "essay inspiration" an earlier SAA paper of his that is exactly on topic for this seminar. Titled, "Shakespeare's Essay" I have put it in the "Essay Inspirations" folder! -- Huw]

SAA 2026  
Essaying Shakespeare

### The Falstaff-Paradox: Rejection, Playfulness and the Freedom of Conscience

I plan to offer a reading of Shakespeare's *H4* plays as following the structure of the medieval psychomachia, and exploring the character of Falstaff as the successor of the morality Vice, emphasizing not so much the Vice as a condemnable character, but rather as an agent engaging the audience in playful, eventually "essayistic" reflection. This approach aligns my project with trends and scholars rediscovering the importance of the medieval roots of Shakespearean drama (e.g. Cooper, Cartwright, Dessen or Belsey), but also allows me to resolve one of the recurring dilemmas for understanding the character's carnivalesque appeal and alleged moral corruption. Emphasizing the appeal of Falstaff as a Vice-successor despite the ambiguous sinfulness of the figure, I suggest that in Falstaff the "Vice-paradox" becomes explicit, functioning as a theatrical means to provoke reflection on moral values. Rather than focusing on whether Falstaff is the allegory of sin to be rejected in the end by a morally converted monarch (as well as the audience) or weighing the extent to which the figure may stand for the ultimate source of wit, merriment, or even for the idea of play that makes the (dramatic) world go round, my reading suggests that while his rejection is necessary in the plot, it is presented not as an event but as an ongoing, and never quite complete process. The wider relevance of the study lies in understanding Falstaff as the epitome of arguably empty but indispensable play – both theatrical and cognitive.

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### The Essay is Dead: Long Live the Essay?

My project will examine the necessary evolution of the essay as a teaching and assessment tool in the age of generative AI. In confronting the demise of the essay as the form of thinking and analysis that we have always known as students, scholars, and teachers, we have the opportunity to revisit what we have valued about the essay in the first place. As an art form, the essay's demise has been greatly exaggerated, judging from the proliferation of such writing on sites like Substack and Medium.

The paper will cite articles such as "The College Essay is Dead" by Stephen Marche and "What Happens after AI Destroys College Writing" by Hua Hsu, but I will gently push back against the idea that students can no longer benefit from essay writing. Returning to early essayists like Francis Bacon or Michel de Montaigne and their use of the form as both a scholarly and personal exploratory device can guide a more beneficial pedagogy that works for students, scholars, and faculty.

The key to preserving the essay form in humanities education is preserving the humanity of the essay, which is to say linking essay writing to personal experience, not just using it as an aggregation tool (which AI does better than people) to meet requirements. In Shakespeare Studies, such assignments might look like personal engagement with play performances or films, writing about the experience of publicizing or volunteering for a fine arts organization, or even writing about the experience of memorizing and reciting a monologue or sonnet. How does internalizing a piece of writing change its meaning and enable meaningful writing about it? I plan to include sample assignments and lessons along with my personal analysis of the essay as a living form.

**“Stars in Shakespeare”  
Henry Turner (Rutgers)**

SAA seminar: “Essaying Shakespeare”

This paper will explore the essay as a mode of writing that enables (and results from) acts of creative generalization, by which I simply mean a process that gives shape to a series of intuitive or associational ideas that feel connected but that need to be brought into focus and also “dispositioned” in relation to one another. The essays “sculpt” ideas through the medium of language and the tools it affords; it allows for a certain freedom and experimentation by means of which a balance is struck between rendering insights more clearly, illuminating a set of relationships among elements that emerge at different “sizes,” and unfolding an overall movement toward the shape of continuous argument.

Obviously there are many, many ways to do this, and I wouldn’t say my approach is especially original. The broad topic of the paper is going to be “the significance of stars in Shakespeare,” but it is likely going to fold in some thinking about Shakespeare as a polytheistic writer and is ultimately hoping to produce some insight into the idea of “ensoulment,” as a topic in his plays and as a question for writers and readers today. It is possible that the emphasis will remain on stars and possible that it will shift more strongly toward ensoulment, but “stars” are where I am now. My point of departure is the proposition that stars, our oldest companions and our most distant relatives, are the most interpreted objects in the history of human civilization.

Here are some writings that I always think of when I think of the essay and that have inspired my own reading and writing over the years, in no particular order:

Roland Barthes, *Barthes on Barthes* (1977)

Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table* (1975) as well as the brief pieces he wrote for Turin’s newspaper, *La Stampa* (c. 1961-86)

Jean Genet, *The Miracle of the Rose* (1946)

Maurice Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death” (1947)

A wonderful book that I always recommend to people who are in a certain mood or stage of life:

James Harmon, ed., *Take My Advice: Letters to the Next Generation from People Who Know a Thing or Two* (2002)

Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (2001)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “Discourse on the Origins of Inequality” (1754-55)

[Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay,] *The Federalist: A Collection of Essays, Written in Favour of the New Constitution, as Agreed Upon by the Federal Convention, September 17, 1787*. 2 vols. (1788) [yes, that’s the original collected title – not “Papers”!]

William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1904-5; 1912 pub)

## ***Baby Girl***

Phillis Wheatley published her poetry at the end of the 18th century in England. Although not typically categorized as an early modern writer, Phillis was given a Christian humanist education by her owners. Her writing embodies the praxis of 16th and 17th century humanism as the world started to shift into what we understand to be modernity. In my essay, I use a hybrid of academic and personal writing to think about the legacy of humanism and the purpose of teaching early modern literature in the present. Phillis had limits on her personal agency even as she was being taught the principles of humanist self-fashioning. I reflect on how Phillis represents her relationship to agency in her poetry. In turn, I use Phillis' poetry to think not only about my relationship to my students, but also reflect on the purpose of texts and stories when full control over one's body is not possible.

## Whatever Happened to One Common Ruin?

This essay is the coda of my book manuscript, which is about early modern representations of environmental catastrophe from Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Behn's *Oroonoko*.

The coda is composed of a series of propositions about the relevance of early modern literary storms, wildfires, and global cooling on understandings of contemporary climate change. Each of the entries will vary in length and style, and autobiographical material about my own encounters with natural disasters juxtaposed with literary theory and early modern literary sources. The goal is to theorize the jagged edge where our lived experience of environmental catastrophe meets scholarly practice.

### Essay Inspirations:

Werner Hamacher, "95 Theses on Philology," *Diacritics* 39.1 (2009): 25-44.

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, et al. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

Jeff Dolven, *Senses of Style* (UChicago Press, 2017).

Simon Palfrey, *Poor Tom: Living King Lear* (UChicago Press, 2014).