

SAA 2026. Seminar 24. Abstracts

Leaders: Gerard Passannante and Susanne Wofford

1. Stephanie Chamberlain, Southeast Missouri State University

“Nowhere to Turn, Nowhere to Hide: Overwhelm as Emotional Exile in *Richard III*”

A cacophonous chorus of women overwhelmed by shared yet isolating loss. Lost husbands, lost children—lost identities as wives and mothers, the result of tyrannous political upheaval. Nowhere to turn, nowhere to hide—overwhelmed by the mind-numbing paralysis of familial loss, these women rage against a world they no longer know. Overwhelm describes not only their emotional state, but becomes the very embodiment of exile itself. My paper analyzes “overwhelm” in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* as emotional exile, focusing on how the women of the play—Elizabeth, Lady Anne, the Duchess, and even Margaret—struggle with the grievous anguish, fear, and anxiety attendant to loss of family as they are forced into an unfamiliar and uncertain world. Their responses include not only flight from and/or submission to one who employs overwhelm to manipulate them, but also demonstrates, in the case of Elizabeth, the means by which release from paralyzing emotional exile may be attained. Margaret’s brief return from physical exile in France to curse her enemies instructs Elizabeth in the art of resistance to tyrannous patriarchal and political authority. As the doomed Lady Anne submits to Richard’s oppression and the Duchess, after a brief retort, retreats in silence, Elizabeth confronts and overcomes her oppressor, thereby enabling escape from emotional exile.

2. Kathryn Crim, University of Chicago

“A Fit Vessel: Anna Trapnel, Overwhelmed”

This paper approaches our seminar topic, “Overwhelmed,” through a discussion of prophetic speech in mid-seventeenth-century England. Central to Protestant praxis from the Reformation through the Romantics, prophecy has been understood both as a way of reading historical crisis, affectively and physiologically, and as a mediation of collective spiritual and political struggle. I take up a few passages from Anna Trapnel’s *The Cry of a Stone* (1654) to consider two further aspects of the prophetic mode: First, I attend to the way the labor of managing an overwhelming spiritual experience is simultaneous with (at times indistinguishable from) the labor of securing a receptive audience. And second, I’m interested in what might be called the material surplus of these prophetic labors—that is, those qualitative transformations in social identities and values contingent with (but not the object of) the prophecy. I wager it is these transformations that inspire literary appropriations of the prophetic mode, from Shakespeare to Milton. Here, I aim to gesture (briefly!) at the way Revolutionary prophecy can tell us something about the process of gender consolidation in an early moment of capitalist transition.

3. Drew Daniel, Johns Hopkins University

“‘Will it consume me? Let me see it, then’: Desiring Overwhelm in *Titus Andronicus*”

Unflinching in its representations of human beings in extremis, “Titus Andronicus” constitutes an *overwhelming* object of aesthetic provocation. The play overwhelms readers and spectators, pressing them towards private and collective thresholds of endurance, as they witness waves of onstage harm, grief and cruelty overwhelm the figures suffering upon the stage. What does it mean to want to read or see “Titus Andronicus”? Is that desire a desire to be overwhelmed or a desire to be destroyed? How do spectatorial pleasure and sado-masochistic fantasy operate here? I think some possible answers to these questions might be found in Avgi Saketopolou’s *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia* (NYU Press, 2023). In this book, the analyst offers an account of “overwhelm” as an interim in which a subject, caught between the breakdown and the re-construction of the ego on either side of experiences of “limit consent” are taken beyond their own desire. By allowing us to “touch the drive,” states of overwhelm offer an opportunity to replace “traumatophobia”- a reactive psychic script seeking to disavow harm and damage-- with, instead, a “traumatophilia”- a stance of “exigent sadism” capable of consciously choosing to repeat and re-enact acts of harm, re-wiring the subject’s desire in the process. Can we control our decisions to lose control of ourselves? What conjunctions are possible between early modern faculty psychology and psychoanalytic drive theory? While space prohibits a full reading of the play, I hope to test the affordances of Saketopolou’s thinking by bringing her analysis to bear upon the poetics of overwhelm as they surface in key scenes within the play.

4. Morgan Farina-Shaw, Syracuse University

(Re)turning from Perversity in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*

During a period that oversaw the advent of science, the calcification of capitalism, the Protestant Reformation, and the rise of print culture, English Renaissance writers deployed many rhetorical strategies to orient themselves amid contemporary turbulence. My dissertation project posits “return” as one such method that proffered a sense of order. Simply, “return” signifies going back to something prior, such as when Desiderius Erasmus urged the European intelligentsia to return *ad fontes* [“back to”] classical sources to spur their learning. However, despite its ability to garner rhetorical momentum amid early modern upheavals, Shakespeare’s corpus offers an ambivalent account of this cultural form. In this paper, an excerpt of my first dissertation chapter, I argue that characters in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* unconsciously return to troubling themes—from incest to unruly femininity—in a way that saps them of their original perversity. Whereas the play opens with a riddle whose solution is “foul incest,” it ends with an arrival at a more wholesome possibility: Marina not only “beget’st him that did [her] beget,” but, owing to her uncanny similarity to Thaisa, she represents how “mother, wife, and yet his child” may be one. As a rhetorical strategy, “return” transforms perversity into orthodoxy in *Pericles*, yet it offers no security against backsliding from the moral to the perverse. Thus, the play not only posits an underlying similitude between these otherwise opposing categories of order, but it also suggests the need for faith to maintain a proper orientation.

5. Jean E. Feerick, John Carroll University

“Cosmic Undoing in *Titus Andronicus* and *Macbeth*”

My paper will explore a pattern in *Titus Andronicus* and *Macbeth* whereby patriarchs who experience a fundamental assault to their identities -- physically, psychologically, or politically -- link this experience of being overwhelmed to the material dynamics of the cosmos. Philosophically, these reveries posit humanity's deep enmeshment in cosmic materiality, which was being radically reimagined in response to the circulation of the ideas of ancient philosophers like Empedocles and Lucretius. Their philosophies offered a view of the cosmos as infinite, various, and dynamic, contesting in fundamental ways the Aristotelian view of an unchanging and finite universe and sparking a wave of speculative thinking both about the cosmos and earth's place within it. Shakespeare's tragedies participated in this work, tapping disparate theories of cosmic materialism to do so and exploring their subversive implications. Hence, when Titus turns to the skies to express his woes at seeing his family violently dismembered, he not only lends cosmic dimensions to his grief but discovers a principle of cosmic unmaking that serves him politically. And as Macbeth grapples with regicide, his cosmic reveries not only capture his narcissism but serve to undermine a transcendent order. Ultimately, where the plays' patriarchs tend to see themselves as the measure of creation or as having special purview over nature, the plays foreground much more powerful material forces – what Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects – that pulsate through them and largely shape their destinies. By directing the audience's attention to these dynamics, the plays engage in a form of speculative work that defamiliarizes the status quo and unleashes alternate futures.

6. James A. Knapp, Loyola University Chicago

“Diving into the depths of all delights”: Thomas Traherne's Overwhelming Divinity

Life's ethical challenge is, for Thomas Traherne, to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the products of human commerce, both material and social: “Disorders, Injuries, /Ingratitudes, Calamities, / Affronts, Oppressions, Slanders, Wrongs, /Lies, Angers, bitter Tongues” (from *Christian Ethics*). To do so, Traherne revels in an alternate form of overwhelm: an unbounded innocence associated with childlike wonder, figured by Traherne as acceptance of the more profoundly overwhelming reality of infinite existence. Separated from this childlike innocence by experience and the language we use to make sense of it, the world becomes a burdensome storehouse of objects. In this paper I trace how Traherne seeks to undo the differentiating work of language in an attempt to reveal the plenitude of a lived experience that exceeds comprehension even as it instructs. For the purposes of this seminar on early modern overwhelm, I argue that Traherne provides an example of an early modern desire for overwhelming experience. Like a more upbeat Lear on the heath begging for a deluge, Traherne celebrates a world submerged, all combined as one, not literally, but in thought. His insistence on figures of conceptual excess—abysses, illimitable dwelling places, infinities, oceans, and springs—marks his embrace of the overwhelming, which for the poet is the only defense against mis-investment in a material world that is intended not to be contained but to overwhelm.

7. Jonathan Koch, Pepperdine University

“‘Past the Endurance of a Block’: Hardening Body and Mind against an Overwhelming World”

When Benedict complains of his treatment by “my Lady Tongue” after the masquerade in *Much Ado*, he figures himself unable to endure Beatrice’s stabbing words: she “misused [him] past the endurance of a block.” In seventeenth-century England, the term “endurance” came to be understood as something of a virtue, but it carried as well the sclerotic threat of its root, dur—that by persisting through trial or pain one might become irreversibly hardened in mind or body or, indeed, both. While such obduracy seems an unlikely result of Beatrice and Benedict’s “merry war,” the stakes are much higher in *King Lear*, where upheavals in the natural and political world test the limits of “the patience... That [Lear] so oft have boasted to retain” in the play’s storm scene. By tracing the concept and practice of endurance as it moved through didactic writings (like husbandry manuals and sermons) into theatrical performance, this paper asks after the opportunity, the viability, and the costs of endurance as a habit of living in and against an overwhelming world.

8. Ross Lerner, Occidental College

“Overview of Overwhelm in Spenser’s *Amoretti*”

The Petrarchan poet is archetypically overwhelmed by love, desire, shame, anger, regret, the physical process of sighing. Petrarch already announces in the first of his *Canzoniere* that he’s been “raving” (*vaneggiar*) for some time; his “varied style” (*vario stile*) applies to both his weeping and his speaking about his beloved Laura in ways that make it hard to tell the difference between one mode of expression and the other. Poets coming after Petrarch have to deal with feeling overwhelmed by their beloveds too, from Ronsard’s triple threat to Sidney’s Stella, but they also feel overwhelmed by Petrarch, inaccessible in his exhausting and exhausted innovativeness, almost impossible to innovate on further. This paper explores the varieties of overwhelm in a later Petrarchan sonnet sequence, Spenser’s *Amoretti*, exploring how Spenser finds ways, sometimes on his own and sometimes with the help of his soon-to-be wife, Elizabeth, to transfigure a variety of positions of overwhelm—paralyzing narcissism; physical exhaustion; the anxiety of Petrarchan influence; the literal covering over of his writing by waves (“overwhelm” has its etymological root in Old Saxon *bihwelbian*, to cover over)—into experiences of comedy and cartoonish play, though often at his own expense.

9. Naomi C. Liebler, Montclair State University

“‘O Cursed Spite’: the overwhelming problem of responsibility”

“Overwhelm” in Shakespeare seems mainly to be the consequence of a requirement to act. To trace this hypothesis, I work “backwards,” as it were, by first asking where and how it appears in the plays, and then considering what patterns showed up. Some plays, speeches, characters, and kinds of action (or inactions) immediately answered the call and lined up like good soldiers: Hamlet, of course, and then almost immediately 1 and 2 Henry IV and then Henry V: overwhelm quickly emerged as an inherited condition of royalty. It also seemed to afflict older characters

who bear great responsibilities. I came to consider overwhelm as the affect of a mandate to act—the fuse that lights every tragedy. In the aggregate, these examples followed a common generic thread: overwhelm happens when someone reaches a crux or confluence of urgently (and equally) necessary contradictory choices of action; in other words, dilemma. Hamlet is certainly the poster child for the existential kvetch and the unfinished to-do list (“I do not know why yet I live to say.../ Since I have means....to do it”), but he is not unique among Shakespeare’s characters in feeling overwhelmed by his circumstances. Brutus, the Henries, even Macbeth all suffer insomnia born of dilemma. I also want to consider who does not shoulder the burden of overwhelm. Juliet, for example, simply (if impractically) declares her emancipation and dispatches the problem of loving her family’s enemy by deciding to change her name and “no longer be a Capulet.” Lear’s Edmund snatches agency from the jaws of unlucky nativity (KL 1.2.1-22); since custom and law cause his oppression, he invokes the alternatives “Nature” and the “gods” to “stand up for bastards,” and takes actions. He acknowledges oppression but not overwhelm. The sufferers, in contrast, speak the resentment and the anxiety of those who are not ready for what their situation demands of them: a responsibility to fix the world.

10. James M. Sutton, Florida International University

“Shammed Hope and Buried Grief: The Overwhelmed Exile in Shakespeare”

My title stems from Sarah Ruden’s translation of *The Aeneid*, Book I, shortly after the exiled Trojans, shipwrecked, first arrive on the shores of Libya. Provisioning a feast for his men, then regaling them with the prophecy of a “peaceful homeland” in “Latium,” Aeneas essays comfort. In Ruden’s rendition, “Sick with colossal burdens, he shammed hope / On his face, and buried grief deep in his heart” (I. 208 - 209). The experience of being exiled, in the ancient Roman world, in the late medieval and early modern periods, and in our contemporary moment, is overwhelming: loss of home, language, familial and social comforts, identity—replaced by uncertainty and aimlessness. The early books of the *Aeneid* and Ovid’s letters and poems from his relegation to Tomis demonstrate this, as does Dante’s *Commedia*, repeatedly. So too Wiesel, Aciman, Said and so many other contemporary displaced and uprooted authors. In my brief essay for this seminar, I wish to examine the overwhelmed exile in Shakespearean drama. At the very moment their exile originates, or as they recall and relive such memories later, how do they process and work through their loss? How is this rupture, this definitive break, represented? Do they, like Aeneas, “sham hope” and “bury their grief,” or, Ovid-like, toggle between bitter complaint and tearful nostalgia? And, for whom do they thus perform? Themselves? Their “betters”? Their children, who have, or will inherit their exile? Their parents or friends, whom they leave behind or carry with them? Among the overwhelmed Shakespearean exiles I might examine: Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk in *Richard II*, and *Richard II* later in the same play; *As You Like It*’s many outcasts, but especially Duke Senior and daughter Rosalind; Viola; Shylock; Cordelia; Prospero and Miranda. This is, admittedly, very broad and vague at present; as I refine and sharpen, perhaps a pattern or convention will emerge.

11. Penelope Usher, Barnard College

“Overwhelmed by Bloody Thoughts: The Downfall of Lady Macbeth”

Whereas Macbeth spends the opening acts of his play fearful, guilt-ridden, and anxious, his wife has no qualms about encouraging and participating in brutal and bloody acts. She is calculating and collected and cold-blooded. And yet, it's Lady Macbeth—rather than Macbeth—who finds herself completely overwhelmed by her own bloody thoughts and deeds at the end of *Macbeth*. This paper explores why it is that Lady Macbeth (rather than her husband) goes mad, succumbing to the psychic aftermath of the violence she has witnessed, encouraged, and in which she has participated. Examining her psychological trajectory, I argue that Lady Macbeth's downfall—her madness and death at the end of the play—stems from her earlier insistence on repressing and banishing all bloody thoughts, which sets the groundwork for them to subsequently come rushing back to overpower her. In contrast, despite Lady Macbeth's pressure on her husband not to “think/ so brainsickly of things” (2.1.46-47), it is precisely by exposing himself to and grappling with his bloody thoughts that Macbeth develops a degree of immunity to them.

12. Cora Fox, Arizona State University

Our respondent, Cora Fox, is Professor of English and Associate Dean Health Humanities, Course Director Health Humanities and Associate Professor, John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering, at ASU. She is an early modern scholar and a Shakespearean as well as a medical humanities scholar. She will present on “Overwhelm and Burnout: Histories of the Bodymind Under Stress” and give an overview of Medical Humanities approaches to “Overwhelm” in response to the issues raised in the papers.

My contribution to the seminar will be a short reflection on how research into early modern representations of affective states and narratives like those related to “overwhelm” might be used to bridge the divide between research and training in the professions (in this case, the health professions) and the humanities. Responding to calls to address the emergent crisis of burnout among physicians, nurses, and others working on the front lines of healthcare, studies such as those represented in this seminar's contributions offer locations for analysis, reflection, and denaturalization. Reading for the details of lived experience in these documents of social history can have therapeutic, as well as political, effects, generating movements for advocacy and creating communities of practice focused on the real, historical complexities of this everyday experience of emotions—both shared and individual. Overwhelm has a complex past and legacy, and cultural archaeologies of that past offer space for reflections and engagements that might lead to better care for health professionals, and therefore their patients and the communities they serve.