

SAA 2026; Saturday, April 4; Denver CO.

Shakespeare and Nonsense

ABSTRACTS and SHORT READING LISTS

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“So surprised my sense / That I was nothing”: (Non)Sense-Perception & Immediacy in *The Winter’s Tale*

This essay considers a recurring concern in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*: perceptual moments of such density or intensity that the perceiving subject experiences themselves as negated via the very act of perception. I suggest that these moments – what I am calling *nonsense* perceptions – index the play’s exploration of perception as a crucial, mediating cognitive mode between sensory input and knowledge. Given its sustained attention to mediation of all sorts (political, aesthetic, and, of course, oracular), the play presents Leontes’s urge for immediate sensory knowledge as an expression of a larger (and itself nonsensical) psycho-political desire. Pairing *The Winter’s Tale* with Anna Kornbluh’s *Immediacy: Or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism*, I aim to theorize this desire: the political and aesthetic dimensions of the wish for meaning to be readily and immediately accessible, the psychic contours of longing to never be on the hook for interpretation.

Bradin Cormack, “Shakespeare’s Other Sovereignty: On Particularity and Violence in *The Winter’s Tale* and the Sonnets,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.4 (Winter 2011): 485-513, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41350153>

Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy: Or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2023), especially pgs. 43-64.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Evelyn Tribble, “‘O, she’s warm’: Touch in *The Winter’s Tale*” in *Knowing Shakespeare: Senses, Embodiment, and Cognition*, eds. Lowell Gallagher and Shankar Raman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 65-81.

Ranelle Bradley

Précis

My analysis explores how the storm scene in Shakespeare's *King Lear* invites us to think about *nonsense* as a form of temporal and ecological disturbance, especially in relation to the play's representations of madness. I am interested in how Lear's storm-scene language opens up a sense of ecological temporality, time shaped by environmental force rather than human intention, and how madness becomes entangled with that altered temporality. A close reading of Lear's language during the storm raises questions about how ecological environments produce experiences of time that feel nonlinear or resistant to sense, and how such experiences might appear as "nonsense" within early modern frameworks of mental order. Drawing on mad studies, ecocritical approaches, and queer/crip temporal theory, I want to consider how nonsense functions not only as linguistic breakdown but as a temporal mode of madness, one that unsettles chronologies meant to stabilize identity and narrative. My analysis will explore how Shakespeare stages time in the play as environmentally enmeshed, and how nonsense in Lear's language becomes an alternative access to an ecological temporality that exceeds the limits of rational expression.

Neely, Carol Thomas. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Cornell University Press, 2004.

Kafer, Alison. "Bodies of Nature: The Environmental Politics of Disability." *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Indiana University Press, 2013, pp. 129–48.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Lars Engle

Sense-making and Nonsense in *Twelfth Night*

Following books on nonsense and sense-making by Stephen Booth and Adam Zucker, this paper focuses on the final lines of *Twelfth Night* and draws comparisons to final moments in other plays. It sets making sense of things as a mode of reading alongside other modes of reception, trying to assess the special features of sense-making and how they are implicated in our authority claims as teachers or critics.

Stephen Booth, *Precious Nonsense* (Berkeley: U California P, 2021)

Adam Zucker, *Shakespeare Unlearned* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2024)

William Germano

“Between the Acts”

Is nonsense doomed to be understood lexically? Is nonsense perpetually consigned to lexical structures and their interpretation? Aren't there other ways to make sense without making sense? In this little paper my focus is music (especially music in and based on Shakespeare's words); to that end I'd like us to think about *melisma*, or the musical setting of a word, or syllable, across pitches. In vocal settings, melisma is a rupture in language, the suppression or elastication of sense to extend the beauty of the vocal line. Can thinking about melisma complicate in useful ways our readings of Shakespeare's nonsense?

Vincento Colapietro, “Must We Mean What We Sing?” In Chase, Greg; Juliet Floyd; Sandra Laugier, eds. *Stanley Cavell's Must We Mean What We Say?* at 50, Cambridge UP, 2022.

Wagner, Cosima. *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 1978.

Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*, 1941.

Zucker, Adam. *Shakespeare Unlearned: Pedantry, Nonsense, and the Philology of Stupidity*, 2024.

Chris Klippenstein

Things Fall Apart:
Shakespearean Nonsense and Cheerful Nihilism in *Romeo and Juliet*

This paper approaches Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a loss of sense: a disorienting breakdown of order that takes place on both linguistic and social levels. After addressing several ways that language proves to be unreliable and open to manipulation in this play, I expand my scope to consider the social institutions that fail to protect the young lovers from tragedy. I am especially interested in the transmission of intergenerational wisdom as a failed source of order, and the final part of my paper draws on the recent Broadway show *Romeo + Juliet*, directed by Sam Gold, which ran from October 2024 to February 2025 at Circle in the Square Theatre, in New York City. I argue that the casting and styling choices of this production depict a world with a startling absence of authority figures, suggesting a progression from nonsense to a more extreme form of cheerful nihilism.

Green, Jesse. "Kit Connor and Rachel Zegler Make Puppy Love in the Puppy Pile." *The New York Times*, Oct 24, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/24/theater/romeo-juliet-broadway-kit-connor-rachel-zegler.html>

Herman, Peter C. "Tragedy and the Crisis of Authority in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*." *Intertexts* 12, no. 1-2 (2008): 89-109.

Hunter, Lynette, and Peter Lichtenfels. *Negotiating Shakespeare's Language in 'Romeo and Juliet.'* Routledge, 2016.

Mary Odbert

Setting the Table of Green Fields:

Expanding Interpretive Possibilities in Nonsensical Error

This seminar paper will approach the nonsense which arises from textual error. With a central focus on the famous textual crux of the *Henry V* Folio misprint, “A Table of green fields,” I’m interested in exploring the extent to which error enters into the reality of Shakespearean canon and, especially, how those errors produce a unique canonized nonsense. By holding at once the tension of “That’s not what it’s supposed to say,” and “That’s what it says,” this analysis asks why both statements matter and proposes that, in a body of work so thoroughly studied and explained, there may be value in the unexplained, spontaneous, illogical error as a part of not only the work’s textual history, but also a piece of dialogue participating in characterization.

A brief bibliographical sampling includes,

Gaby, Rosemary, Alice Leonard, James Mardock, and Helen Ostovich. “To Nell and Back: Revisiting Mistress Quickly.” *Renaissance Drama* (University of Chicago Press: Fall 2019).

Mazzio, Carla. *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

Orgel, Stephen. “Getting Things Wrong” in *The Invention of Shakespeare, and Other Essays* (University of Pennsylvania Press: 2022).