

SAA 2014
Seminar 13: “Erotics of Shakespeare’s Poetry”
Ian Frederick Moulton, Chair

ABSTRACTS:

Anthony Barthelemy
University of Miami

Handling the Boy: Tactile Erotics in *Venus and Adonis*

My paper will examine the erotics of touching in *Venus and Adonis*. The poem describes in detail and gleefully the unrelenting efforts of Venus to consummate her obsessive desire for Adonis. From Venus seizing Adonis’s “sweating palm” (25) to his lament “You hurt my hand with wringing” (421), hands play a very active role in the erotics and seduction of the poem. Kissing and touching of lips also intensify the titillating aspects of the poem. Some even call the poem pornographic, and scholars have noted the popularity of the poem and its nine editions in Shakespeare’s lifetime. But the significance of hands extends beyond the poem. I will look at some of the recent scholarship that investigates the symbolic importance of hands in religious discourse and dramatic realizations. I hope to understand how Shakespeare playful emphasis on touching and hands contribute to the erotic pleasure of reading of the poem and perhaps even encouraged its readers to contemplate autoeroticism.

Dr. Sonya Brockman
UNC-Charlotte

Trauma Theory and Lucrece’s Futile Rhetoric

The tale of Lucretia, as Coppelia Kahn has written, is one of patriarchy’s foundational myths: “Rape authorizes revenge; revenge comprises revolution; revolution establishes legitimate government” (27). *The Rape of Lucrece* acknowledges the political ramifications of this particular rape and revenge, but shifts the focus almost entirely away from the legend’s political signification. Shakespeare takes Ovid’s *Fasti* and Livy’s *History of Rome* as his primary classical sources; however, as Jane Newman has pointed out, Philomela “haunts the margins” of both “the poem itself and of its critical reception” (305). More specifically, in *Lucrece*, the political action that ends the poem comes about through the heroine’s own alignment with, and ultimate rejection of, the model of trauma and testimony presented by Ovid’s legend of Philomela.

In his expansion of Ovid’s Lucretia story, Shakespeare gives both heroine and her attacker incredible rhetorical and linguistic acumen, but what is its function? Why imbue Lucrece with such skill only to have it fail in her moment of greatest need? In this paper, I suggest that *Lucrece* deals specifically with trauma’s breakdown of language—at issue most strongly throughout the text are the moments when experience exceeds linguistic representation and how both the poem’s characters and its poet must negotiate those moments. The poem’s larger issue thus deals with the ramifications of linguistic failure in the face of trauma. In this respect,

Shakespeare, as the poet of *Lucrece*, follows in the path of Ovid and Chaucer, writing the traumatized woman's experience. The figure of the raped woman struggling to put her trauma into words at her writing desk thus suggests the poet attempting to translate historical trauma into poetry.

Christopher Clary
Emory and Henry College

“I know not love...nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar”: Animal Desire in Shakespeare’s “Venus and Adonis”

In this paper, I explore Shakespeare's 1593 poem with particular attention to its adaptation of the Ovidian economy of animal transformation into a Petrarchan system where animals function as persistent signifiers of erotic desire. In particular, this essay investigates the multiple parallelisms set up between Venus and Adonis, mares and male horses, and the boar and Adonis. Within these systems, the poem repeatedly recasts Venus' gender-inverted pursuit of the unwilling Adonis as aided by, akin to, and in competition with various forms of animal-animal desire and animal-human violence. Ultimately, the boar that kills Adonis does so by both mimicking Venus' own failed embrace of Adonis and by penetrating his body (“Sheath[ing] unaware the tusk in his soft groin”) that her seduction could only metaphorically and unsuccessfully pursue. Ultimately, I am less preoccupied with the ways that the boar recasts the violence of Venus' appropriated Petrarchan/male wooing as I am with the ways in which the poem insistently identifies animals as the fit vehicles for this action. While both Ovidian and Petrarchan traditions make use of animals in their own unique fashions, I aim to determine the specifically early modern English discourses at play in Shakespeare's text. In this, I reject, like Laurie Shannon, the anachronistic device of “‘animal imagery,’ a notion in which animals are successfully assimilated to human rhetorical, poetic, or literal control,” and instead pursue the poem's engagement with multiple discourses of animal life and action in order to “consider...what—or what *else*—could be thought about them.”

Andrew Fleck
San Jose State University

Representation and Deception in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*.

The sixteenth century epyllion is a poem obsessed with its own artifice. Indebted to Ovid and gesturing to the community of Elizabethan poets, these erotic poems abound in self-conscious revelations of themselves as poems. In this paper, I want to focus on two aspects of this reflexivity in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*: ekphrastic moments and moments that evoke the rivalry of the poet's art and untouched nature.

The erotic aspect of the epyllion relies on motion, not to say friction, frisson, or vibration. Bodies begin apart and strive to come together. And yet ekphrasis seeks to fix bodies in place, to

pin them to one region of a painting or a sculpture. What is the effect of this tension between stasis and motion in epyllion? How do Shakespeare and Marlowe exploit this tension in their erotic verse? Does the fixity of ekphrastic moments in an epyllion serve to prolong desire or to fulfill it?

Given such artificial moments in these poems, we might see the striving of art and nature for superiority as a commentary on the poets' own rivalries in writing and publishing epyllion? Does a contest for the superior representation of artistic deception signal a competition for the superiority in the world of late Elizabethan poets?

The heart of this paper, then, will be an exploration of the role of artifice in the erotic narrative poems of Shakespeare and Marlowe.

Laura Friedman
College of William and Mary

Desire and Perverse Masculinity in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

This essay examines Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in light of Catherine Bates' theorizing of perverse masculinity in Renaissance lyrics. "Perverse masculinity" characterizes speakers who "have turned away or deviated from a phallic rather than a strictly ethical standard, embracing castration and eschewing the powers and privileges that could have been their due." Though many readings of the *Sonnets* have explicitly or implicitly presented the poet-lover as ultimately masterful and consolidated, interpreting any displays of weakness as simulations remedied by (or shown to be in the service of) his exhibition of poetic skill and control, I draw attention to those moments (sonnets 20, 35, 38, 40, 42, 50, 57, 58, 73, 80, 98, 99, 106, 114, 129, 133, 138, 139, 154) where the speaker highlights his emasculation and even marks it as erotic or desirable.

Michael Gadaletto
University of Wisconsin-Madison

"O know, sweet love, I always write of you": Poetic *Eros*, Vulnerability, and the Reader-as-Beloved in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

This paper explores and attempts to reinterpret one of the central conceits of Shakespeare's sonnets, namely, poetry's singular power to preserve and protect worldly beauty from the destructive force of time. In the first seventeen sonnets, the speaker fears that the Fair Youth "among the wastes of time must go" (12.10) and urges him therefore to avoid this fate by marrying and producing an heir in his likeness. As the sequence continues, however, this emphasis on biological reproduction gives way to a new metapoetic line of argument, one in which the vulnerable poems themselves come to be seen as a more effective form of erotic offspring. Sonnet 18 is the first of many to argue for poetry itself as beauty's best defender and immortalizer: "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (18.13-14; see also sonnets 50, 60, 65, and 107). Shakespeare's theory of how his

sonnets might accomplish this feat, I will argue, is more complex than has often been recognized, and understanding it requires that we read the *Sonnets* as a profoundly metapoetic and philosophical work, as much a *Defence of Poesy* as an *Astrophil and Stella*. Seen in this light, Shakespeare's claim to poetry's time-defying power is revealed as having far less to do with the sonnets' faithful representation of any real-life beloved than with their ability to create or open up an erotic connection between the text and us, Shakespeare's unknown future readers.

My paper will therefore focus in particular on sonnets 76 and 83 and others loosely revolving around the figure of the so-called Rival Poet, for it is in this part of the sequence (~76 to 87) that Shakespeare is particularly explicit about his methodology. He here openly admits to the notable absence in his sonnets of specific details about either his beloved's physical appearance or predominant character traits; instead, he insists that he cannot "paint" or particularize the beloved in his poetry as the rival poet is apparently only too happy to do: "I never saw that you did painting need, / And therefore to your fair no painting set" (83.1-2). This refusal is more than rhetorical and is in fact borne out by most of the 154 sonnets in Shakespeare's sequence (though less so in the later ones); and I believe it reveals a larger poetic project at work throughout the sonnets.

This silence for my sin you did impute,
Which shall be most my glory, being dumb;
For I impair not beauty, being mute,
When others would give life, and bring a tomb. (83.9-12)

In refusing to particularize or flesh out his real-life beloved while insisting that Love is the sole theme of these infinitely variable poems, I read Shakespeare as suggesting that the beauty of these poems – whose material fragility he points back to again and again – is immortalized precisely through the vulnerable openness between speaker and reader. The sonnets' theory of poetic immortality is necessarily tied to poetry's vulnerability and to poetry's dependence not only on readers in general but on vulnerable readers in particular, i.e. readers capable of sensitively engaging with the sonnets in a kind of relationship that parallels that between lover and beloved. In other words, the sonnets seem to argue that their singular potential to withstand Time's devastation lies precisely in poetry's unusual vulnerability, meaning not merely its material weakness or fragility but, more importantly, its linguistic and metaphoric openness. The material text is of course more fragile than harder substances like brass and stone, but it is also more vulnerable in the sense that unlike those lifeless things its potential is not realized without someone there to read and interpret it. This is its participatory nature. But Shakespeare's sonnets think poetic vulnerability more deeply than his contemporaries by refusing to particularize the speaker's "real" love and instead insisting upon "love" itself as their theme:

Why write I still all one, ever the same,
And keep invention in a noted weed,
That every word doth almost tell my name,
Showing their birth, and where they did proceed?
O know, sweet love, I always write of you,
And you and love are still my argument... (76.5-10)

Here, as in the other Rival Poet sonnets, the speaker seeks to defend his own artistic method against the more immediately flattering techniques of his unnamed competitor. He insists on his faithful devotion to only one theme – “sweet love I always write of you” – and attempts to explain why he consistently avoids “painting” or mimetically representing the actual beloved in his sonnets, preferring instead to focus on love itself as his chief subject. Shakespeare’s sonnets are less interested in any particular real-life beloved and instead evolve from observations on a specific relationship to a meditative *enactment* of the motions of “love” itself, an erotic process that must be shown, not merely told, and that must be shown through poetry. This art, this openness, is participatory and thus places an equal responsibility on the future reader. The sonnet is not a static image (or idol, as Milton might call it) that need only be read in order for its meaning and beauty to be somehow transmitted. Rather, Shakespeare appears to conceive of his sonnets as having an erotic potential that can be activated only by the loving reader; and thus the fragile beauty he describes can only live on and avoid that “tomb” of fruitless, hyperbolic praise by forever being *remade* through meaningful participation between vulnerable text and open reader.

Erin K. Kelly
Ohio State University

The Erotics of the Hunt in *Venus and Adonis*

Hunting plays a crucial role in William Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*. I examine the poem through the lens of the practice of early modern hunting. Elite hunting is characterized by an emphasis on technical language and procedures, and hunters demonstrate skill and status through the proper deployment of that language and execution of those procedures. Early modern writers, drawing on personal experience or familiarity with hunting manuals like George Gascoigne’s *The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (1575), expand conventional literary tropes, like the love chase, and exploit the technical language and procedures of hunting to position their speakers and addressees or readers in relative positions of power that can be used to their rhetorical advantage. In *Venus and Adonis*, hunting serves as a model for the kind of love in which Shakespeare’s addressee, the earl of Southampton, should be engaged. Edward Berry reads the boar hunt as a masculine, homoerotic pursuit and Venus’ description of the hare hunt as the effeminate and emasculated alternative. In contrast, I read the hare hunt as a crucial moment of appeal; the delights of the fast moving and complicated chase of the hare are set against the disordered display of brute strength later in the poem. Shakespeare uses the hunt, in the two extended descriptions as well as in the numerous similes throughout the poem, to urge Southampton to take control of his erotic and marital situation, to pursue instead of be pursued. Shakespeare’s use of hunting allows him to make various, and at times conflicting, claims about the nature of love and lust, and my approach will explore these moments and demonstrate the need for close attention to the language of hunting in this poem and in other texts.

**Katherine Romack,
University of West Florida**

The 1675 Venus and Adonis

With at least fifteen printings before 1640, *Venus and Adonis* was Shakespeare's most popular printed work. My essay, "*The 1675 Venus and Adonis*," investigates the reception of Shakespeare's poem in the Restoration when the poem is said to have fallen into critical obscurity. The 1675 edition of *Venus and Adonis* was printed by Elizabeth Hodgkinson for Francis Coles, Thomas Vere, John Wright, and John Clark. These booksellers and printers were very prominent players in the ballad and broadside publishing markets. My paper looks at these publishers of the 1675 edition in an attempt to fill in a gap in the reception history of the poem.

**Dr. Lisa S. Starks-Estes
University of South Florida St. Petersburg**

**The Origin of Love: Trauma, Love-melancholy, and Ovidian Desire in
Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis***

In this paper, I examine Shakespeare's use of Ovidian intertexts—the tales of Venus and Adonis, Echo and Narcissus, and Salmacis and Hermaphroditus from *Metamorphoses*; the ironic speaker from *Amores*; and the "mournful love" elegies—to create a myth explaining the origin of love as sorrow. Drawing from Ovid, Petrarch, and his own Sonnets, Shakespeare develops the idea of love as the fusion of torment and ecstasy that crosses boundaries of gender and object choice. I show how Shakespeare appropriates Ovid to explore early modern lovesickness, with its parallels in psychoanalytic concepts of melancholia and sadomasochism. I conclude that through his full investigation of unrequited love and painful loss, Shakespeare moves from a playful eroticism to a deeply profound exploration of trauma in his Ovidian *Venus and Adonis*.

**Paul Joseph Zajac
Pennsylvania State University**

"Desire my pilot is": The Failure of Contentment in Shakespeare's Epyllia

Authors in the English Renaissance participated in a contentious debate on the topic of contentment. This debate spanned religious, philosophical, and political texts, as well as literary works of prose, poetry, and drama. Though the authors of this debate differed in their opinions of contentment's attainability, desirability, and consequences, they overwhelmingly represent (if only to test) contentment as a means of fortifying the self: of protecting the individual from the external threats of fickle fortune and the internal divisions caused by powerful emotions. Literary authors made use of the full range of genres and modes in order to engage these historical

conversations from a variety of perspectives and with different results. Pastoral, for example, became an important medium through which writers could represent contented selfhood in a positive fashion. By contrast, the epyllion characteristically exposed the limitations of the Renaissance ideal of contentment in a world dominated by desire.

Shakespeare mounts a profound challenge to period concepts of contentment in his two epyllia, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Defined as “Having one’s desires bounded by what one has (though that may be less than one could have wished),” content seems strictly opposed to Shakespeare’s depictions of desiring, erotic individuals in the narrative poems. The desirous characters prove utterly unable to contain themselves, thereby transgressing the boundaries of social decorum, sexual mores, and their own embodied selves. In his comedies, Shakespeare had represented contentment as part of a dynamic process of compromise between the self and other that provided a foundation for successful social, sexual, and political relationships. However, Shakespeare’s poems suggest the tremendous difficulties of bounding one’s desires, and they identify discontent as the result of being subject to the desires of another. If Shakespeare successfully reconciles love and contentment in his comedies, he finds no place for an erotics of contentment in his epyllia.

This essay will contextualize *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* with reference to Renaissance and Reformation concepts of contentment, which have remained largely unstudied by literary critics. I will briefly survey the larger historical conversation before discussing Shakespeare’s treatment of contentment in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *As You Like It*. This understanding of Shakespearean comedic contentment will provide a stark contrast with the epyllia; using this intellectual and literary context, I will examine key passages in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* and conclude by suggesting what is at stake in Shakespeare’s representations of content and eros, discontent and desire.