

**SAA 2014, St. Louis**

**Abstracts for “Reimagining Topicality”**

**Seminar organized by Barbara Sebek, Colorado State University**

**“Transported by Calamity”: Eventful Politics in *Coriolanus***

**Thomas P. Anderson**

The citizens’ revolt in *Coriolanus* has long been associated with historical analogues such as the Midlands Insurrection of 1607 or the food riots of Point Tower Hill in 1592. The critical emphasis on the topicality of an historical event, I argue, is a misreading that localizes the force of dissent in the play, mitigating its productive potential. Exploring the concept of the event put forth by Alain Badiou in *Being and Event* to recover the scandal at the core of the Citizen’s insurrection in *Coriolanus*, I hope to re-conceptualize what topicality might mean to a political reading of the play. Badiou’s discussion of the event hinges on the distinction between an event that carries with it the potential for “radical transformational action” (176) and an event which undoes itself to the point of “being no more than the forever infinite numbering of the gestures, things and words that co-existed with it” (180). Literary criticism that reads for topical connection engages only one form of an historical event, and in doing so, it alienates the event from its own transformational potential. A critical discourse of topicality affirms an event’s occurrence but only, as Badiou suggests, by sacrificing its political intensity in time. I will argue that in *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare offers theatergoers an eventful politics in the citizen’s riot that critics tend to recognize as topical reference, and in this reductive transformation, Shakespeare’s own progressive critique of sovereignty and subjectivity is redistributed into a cautionary tale of historical reflection.

**Staging Urban Civilities in Caroline London**

**Diana Barnes**

This is a paper about the relationship between genre and place, specifically between city comedy and early seventeenth-century London. It has been argued that city comedy provided audiences with a means of making sense of the rapidly developing commercial metropolis of London. I will consider the degree to which a range of plays concerning London and its environs—performed during the 1630s and written by playwrights such as Richard Brome, James Shirley and/or Thomas Nabbes—anchor a coherent theory of community to the places they describe and encourage public discussion about the proper nature of political association. This popular and open discussion about citizenship, I will argue, anticipates key concerns preoccupying political philosophy of the mid-century.

**Noisy Pageantry and Quiet Trances: Reimagining Topicality in *Henry VIII***

**Dr. Christina M. Carlson**

**Emerson College**

This paper attempts a work of assimilation, bringing together both older and more recent criticism of the play. It argues that *Henry VIII* operates as both a work of overt Foxeian nationalism and as a more skeptical or topically diverse play, offering a pro-Catholic

history of the Reformation as a critical and partially satiric antidote to a too-venerating pro-Protestant (and pro-James I) world view. The play's conventionality, including its allusions to Holinshed and to Foxe, its *de casibus* pattern (Edward I. Berry), its emphasis on spectacle and theatricality, its internal and external framing devices (William M. Baillie), and its straightforward validation of Protestantism, especially in its overt celebration of the marriage of Princess Elizabeth and Frederick of Palatine, point in the direction of reinforcing traditional values and a Protestant national world view. By contrast, the reference to the Frances Howard divorce proceedings, including the arrest of Overbury, and the possible decline of Rochester as court favorite, as well as features of historical anachronism, the Cranmer prophecy, and Katherine's dream vision, all function as sources of topical political satire in the play. According to Baillie "the real motive" behind the divorce was "politics," namely the fact that the Howard family sought to align the King's favorite with their pro-Catholic party, separating him from the Puritan faction under Overbury (257). In its re-assessment of Henry VIII's divorce proceedings, its emphasis on the pity to which Katherine of Aragon is entitled, its implicit criticism of the king's motives, in the play's general investment in great men in power (such as Archbishop Cranmer) being schooled by Catholic factions (as in Act V, scene ii), and in its critical representation of imagery and spectacle, *Henry VIII* uses Catholicism as a satiric and interpretive tool. But it does so from within the context of a play which is clearly (as an older school of criticism has, in my view, rightly noted) marked off as overtly "Protestant" in its underlying sensibilities and beliefs. In this paper, I suggest that Shakespeare follows a strategy that would be appropriated by Protestant authors throughout the seventeenth century, in political prints and topical political drama from the 1610s on. Couching satire in the "conventional" language of Foxeian nationalism, providentialism, apocalypticism, and (often, though not in Shakespeare's case) anti-Catholicism, such political and religious critics conveyed libelous sentiments from within the context of a more overtly traditional frame (and often with the intention of sidestepping censorship or safeguarding against prosecutions for seditious libel or treason). (Examples of these kinds of texts are numerous, and include Samuel Ward's political print of 1621, "To God In Memory of His Double Deliverance," ostensibly on the Spanish Armada and Gunpowder Plot, but "really" a satire of the Spanish Match). This paper shows the continuity between Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and these other documents, arguing for Shakespeare's late play's status as a kind of "bridge text" between Shakespeare's work and these analogous materials (see: Carlson; Alexandra Walsham). Although many of these later works were created by radical Protestants ("Puritans"), who stressed the importance of Foxe's Catholic vs. Protestant divide, the strategy of couching satire in a Protestant national context is one that Shakespeare's appears to have appropriated in *Henry VIII* as well, though for a predominantly pro-Catholic as opposed to anti-Catholic cause. What these texts have in common is their use of a conventional Protestant idiom as a template for criticizing the power structure of religion and politics. Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* follows this model implicitly, so that what looks like "ambiguity" to a modern critic is, in fact, a central part of the satiric approach of the play itself – and also deeply conventional.

**The Real Presence of Banquo? Ceremony in *Macbeth***  
**Greg Foran (Nazareth College, Rochester, NY)**

Though the First Folio has a ghost physically appear when Macbeth raises his wine goblet in memory of Banquo, the theatrical audience can never be sure of the ghost's ontological status. In this way, *Macbeth's* famous banquet scene resembles the early seventeenth-century English church's ambiguous theology of Eucharistic presence. I read the banquet scene in light of contemporary controversies over ceremonial prescriptions in the liturgy. Between 1603 and 1607—probably coinciding with the composition and first performances of *Macbeth*—Puritan ministers sparred with King James and his bishops over questions of ceremony, including requirements for the administration of the Lord's Supper. Many post-revisionist historians understand these disputes to have been rooted in the same political-theological differences that would play so much havoc during the tenure of King Charles I and Archbishop William Laud in the 1630s and 40s. I see Macbeth's failure to manage the quasi-Eucharistic ceremony of the banquet as a dramatization of these divisions in the English church, and thus as a harbinger of civil war and the end of sacramental kingship.

**“From Sylla to Caesar:” Topicality in *Julius Caesar* and *Catiline***  
**Philip Goldfarb**  
**University of Chicago**

In this paper I examine topicality as an orientation within a text towards applicability to its time and place of composition: in the case of historically focused texts, towards a concept of generalizable or exemplary history that contains direct parallels to its own time. I then explore the ways in which Shakespeare's plays avoid and deny this kind of orientation through close engagement with the elements of their settings that were generally thought in his time to be distinctive and particular to those other times and places, especially in a political context. I take *Julius Caesar* and the factious nature of the Roman Civil Wars as my primary example, using Ben Jonson's *Catiline*, which treats a very similar period, as a counter-text. By examining how the political organization of *Julius Caesar* reflects the early modern English understanding of the particular political system of the late Roman republic, while that of *Catiline* is more idealized, I show how Shakespeare pushes back against a topical or exemplary reading of his play while Jonson embraces it for his, even as the specific events of *Catiline* remain closer to their Roman sources. Jonson's very Roman action takes place within a context that opens it up to topical interpretation, while Shakespeare's less closely sourced action resists such interpretation because of its distinctively Roman context.

**Reading for Topicality, Reading for Form:**  
**A Characterological Convergence**  
**David Hershinow**

This essay constitutes my own attempt to make good on Roland Barthes' aphorism that “a little formalism turns one away from history, but a lot brings one back to it.” Drawing from my work on sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century debates

over the value of Cynic character—which index key developments in the articulation of Enlightenment ideals, counter-Enlightenment critiques of those ideals, and, finally, our current post-Enlightenment detente between the impulse to avow and disavow those ideals—I argue that attending to certain *longue durée* intellectual histories enables us to discover legitimate points of contact between certain topical and philosophical readings of Shakespeare’s plays.

**Fashioning Authorship, Editing Futures — Shakespeare’s Poems as Accommodations to Diverse Readers and Assertions of the Poet’s Legacy in Print**  
**Jeffery Moser [jeff.moser.du@gmail.com](mailto:jeff.moser.du@gmail.com)**  
**4<sup>th</sup>-year student, Ph.D. Candidate in English, University of Denver**

Print technology and books increasingly encircled Shakespeare and his culture and print inspired him. His work led to a body of printed poetry that belies a configuration and extension of the literary, artistic, and cultural conventions that both enabled and constrained the poet’s artistic production, yet also satisfied and promoted readership. My studies theorize that his poems (aside from his plays) offer a unique body of topical work that identifies a “rhetorical self-fashioning” overtime of the textual author “Shakespeare.” With his first published narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis* (1593), which was the first text of any kind to be published carrying his own name, Shakespeare, then and thereafter, emerged as the most print-published and read poet in his lifetime and when print was almost entirely replacing manuscript form. In this initial long poem, containing as many lines as the act of a play, and, as with his successive poems and sonnet sequence, Shakespeare seems to have had a wider readership in mind than seeking patronage, writing verse to while away the time when the theaters were closed due to the plague, or accommodating London book traders and the market for print literature. I surmise that Shakespeare seized upon print as a new tool in the late-Elizabethan artist’s tool box, embracing its potential as viable means to reach a wider and more various audience, hardly unlike the way that digital has been developed and applied by writers, scholars and everyday persons to affect and transform communications, lives and literature today.

Thus, this seminar paper is intended to be part(s) of my dissertation which encourages a close re-reading of Shakespeare’s non-dramatic verse and advances understandings about the cultural milieu in which the poet lived and worked. By the 1590s, it can be easily gauged how print technology reoriented a view of form and power relations quite differently than manuscript, including reader access, book dissemination and new ideals about the poet-writer/reader relationship. Themes and terms exist in the narrative poems and sonnets about writing, time, transition, reading, production, and on other topics. The purpose is to offer a different view how Shakespeare engaged locally with his culture in order to prove that his poems were carefully fashioned. Most notably, I am defining and arguing that Shakespeare’s poems were consciously constructed rhetorical texts for appealing to and accommodating a growing print readership in number and diversity during the poet’s lifetime and as printed texts geared to assert the poet’s authorial legacy after his and his readers own time.

**Practical Theatricals: Drama, Investigation, and the Lake-Ros Affair**  
**Hillary Nunn**  
**The University of Akron**

Drama, as Philip Sidney and others before him claim, should "teach and delight," and my paper explores a rarely explored dimension of early modern theater's power to instruct. While Hamlet relies overtly on the notion of learning through drama in his use of *The Mousetrap*, other characters in the play reveal a more subtle reliance on the mechanisms of theater in their knowledge gathering – and their reliance hints at ways that early modern playgoers might invoke their own experiences as audience members to solve extra-theatrical problems. Such use of dramatic tricks beyond the stage suggests that audience members take more than moral instruction from playgoing. In the course of their plots, plays model ways to deal with situations that, though not common, might arise in life beyond the theater. In a variation of what Sarah Olive calls "incidental appropriation" – that is, the casual invocation of Shakespeare as a tool for developing a larger narrative – I propose that plays provide occasion for incidental learning, teaching audience members new methods of solving problems, even when the transfer of this knowledge is not the drama's main focus.

Examining the use of dramatic tropes in records of the Lake-Ros affair, my paper explores how incidental learning gleaned from playgoing allows the scandal's early modern narrators to cast King James as a resourceful and evenhanded judge. Not only do reports of confessions made by those involved in the intricate 1619 scandal invoke theatrical methods; records of James's examination of this testimony situate him as both master playwright and learned audience member. The result, I argue, illustrates the effectiveness of dramatic enactment beyond the playhouse, underscoring theater's pedagogical power beyond the university setting.

**“Scaling his present, bearing with his past”: *Coriolanus* and the challenges of teaching Shakespearean topicality now**  
**Stephen O’Neill**

This paper aims to explore the challenges of teaching topicality in *Coriolanus* vis-à-vis a presentist reading. The paper is informed by two “experiences” of the play. The first is from a pedagogical context – teaching the play as part of an undergraduate module surveying Shakespeare and Renaissance literature. The second addresses the screening of the Donmar Theatre production across cinemas in the UK and Ireland as part of the National Theatre Live initiative.<sup>1</sup> Directed by Josie Rourke, the production featured Tom Hiddleston in the title role. Production paratexts, in the form of promotional material and social media, made much of Hiddleston’s star-power. The dominant image for the production was of a bare chested Hiddleston, thus offering the actor’s body as available for the consuming pleasure of a cinematic audience. The production can be understood as mapping all those images of bodies, bellies and wounds onto the body of the actor who, perhaps like Coriolanus, submits to a certain display, even scopophilia. Inviting our gaze, Hiddleston’s body reflects the production’s location within the crowded attention economy of our contemporary mediascape. I argue that Hiddleston’s body becomes the site of the production’s translation of the play and, in particular, the translation of its topically charged vocabularies. Reading this translation in terms of recent turns – or

pressures – towards a present-centred Shakespeare, I consider to what extent a sense of *Coriolanus* “live” (or mediated for a cinema going audience) gains value over a historically-situated reading of the play, one attentive to its Jacobean contexts. How do we convey a sense of the text’s history and the text in history and, at the same time, address our student’s potential alienation from that history? To what extent does our teaching mirror the strategies of theatre productions to render Shakespeare relevant and contemporary? If we seek to make the plays more relevant to our students, are we ultimately bowing, as Linda Charnes has suggested, to pressures within – and *on* – our profession to justify the humanities?<sup>ii</sup> In pursuing these questions through the localised instance of *Coriolanus*, this paper argues that we have two key responsibilities. Firstly, we have a responsibility to our students: we need to allow them to experience a Shakespeare that is relevant and in their “now”, yet in ways that are less about a casual assumption regarding Shakespeare’s “uncanny modernity” (Garber) than about a dialectical relation of text and context.<sup>iii</sup> Secondly, as scholars, we have an ethical responsibility to the past, one that perhaps risks erasure within presentism’s interpretative emphases. The NT live *Coriolanus* offers an opportunity to critically reflect on a presentist reading, “scaling” it with a topical reading, with the “bearing” of the past. This paper argues for a pedagogy attuned to our students’ present and also the play’s past, one that fosters recognition of its difference, its capacity to return other forms of consuming pleasure. But such an approach may require conscious and active competition for attention – the currency of our contemporary culture of information overflow. In this regard, we and the play become Hiddleston’s / Coriolanus’ body.

<sup>i</sup> See <http://ntlive.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/ntlout5-coriolanus>

<sup>ii</sup> See Linda Charnes, “Anticipating Nostalgia: Finding Temporal Logic in a Textual Anomaly” *Textual Cultures* 4:1 (2009): 72–83.

<sup>iii</sup> Marjorie Garber, “*Coriolanus*”. In *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor, 2005), 776.

## **History as Pretext: The Internal Logic of Topicality in the King John Plays**

**David Read**

**University of Missouri**

My point of departure is the philosopher R. G. Collingwood's notion of historical re-enactment, which he defines as the historian's effort to think the thoughts of the past. Acknowledging the challenges that this notion presents, I tackle the question of why Shakespeare might have composed *The Life and Death of King John* and what would have attracted audiences to this outrider in Shakespeare's historical oeuvre. This discussion leads inevitably to the tangled relationship between *King John* and its “twin,” *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, which has most recently been attributed to George Peele. Rather than once again getting into the weeds over the problems of source and influence raised by these two plays, I make a foray at treating them synchronically, as if they were being performed at roughly the same time in two different London theaters. What then would be the reasons for audiences to be drawn to either play? This leads me in a couple of directions: first, toward King John's persistence as a “traditional” figure in English culture, representing a strain of anti-Catholicism that gained additional resonance following the English Reformation (a strain best viewed in John Bale's *King Johan*, a play that survived in manuscript but is not considered to be an influence on the two later plays); second, toward the idea that the attraction of the plays is less in the historical

circumstances and more in the *energeia* of certain scenes and events and notably of a particular shared character, the Bastard, whose presence serves dramatic and affective rather than historical purposes. My further (albeit tentative) conclusion is that it is quite useful to pay attention to the manner in which plays generate topicality from within, based on exigencies of composition and performance, and not simply by reflecting outward contexts.

## **The Skeptical Imagination: Paradoxes of Secularization in English Literature, 1579-1681**

**Anita Sherman**

This paper argues that despite recent attacks levelled against the so-called secularization thesis, the term secular remains useful for thinking about the intellectual history of early modern England. In our current parlance, secular is a polemical word evoking godlessness and an anti-religious stance. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the term was far more nuanced and less stark in its connotations. It's important to remember its jurisdictional origins and intimate entanglements with religious discourse. The question then becomes how best to use secularization as an analytical category for literary texts, as the recent upsurge in studies of early modern political theology attests.

I am still wrestling with Hans Blumenberg's claims about the functional reoccupation of metaphors and seek help from the seminar members in understanding their implications. On the one hand, Blumenberg seems invested in ideas of rupture and innovation. On the other hand, he subscribes to the notion of "absolute" metaphors that remain constant while simultaneously revealing the spirit of the particular age. Blumenberg sees himself as challenging the theories of Carl Schmitt and Karl Lowith with respect to secularization. Presumably he is also challenging Raymond Williams's tripartite sense of residual, dominant, and emergent discourses. Which model enables the best close reading in any given literary instance?

### **"Re-imagining topicality in *Sir Thomas More*"**

**Alan Stewart (Columbia University)**

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Scene 1 of *Sir Thomas More*, a play in which Shakespeare had a hand, originally depicted the growing insurrection against the foreigners or "strangers" in London on the "Ill May Day" of 1517. The surviving manuscript of the play records censor Edmund Tilney's instruction to "Leaue out *the* insurrection wholly & *the* Cause ther off." The play should begin, Tilney advised, with just "A shortt report" of Thomas More's "good service ... vppon a mutiny Agaynst *the* Lumbardes onlys." Scholars have traditionally seen Tilney's cut, and his recasting of the French as Lombards, as ways of undermining the play's unsubtle topicality at a time of unrest in London against immigrant French artisans. Indeed, they have used this supposed topicality to date the play to the height of xenophobic agitation in 1593 or 1595.

The play itself, however, reveals a far more nuanced approach to topicality in More's harangue to the mob. He asks them to imagine their behavior as the behavior of past

Londoners, whose actions would have prevented the peace they now enjoy. He asks them to imagine the future removal of the foreigners, and ask them what lesson would have been taught and learned by it. And he asks them to imagine themselves in exile, becoming the “strangers” they now attack. Through these forms of empathetic projection, *Sir Thomas More* plays with past, future and an alternate present in complex ways that force us to re-imagine topicality in 1517—and in the year that the play was censored.

### **Re-Imagining Topicality in Elizabethan Fluvial Discourse** **Laura Lehua Yim**

This essay reconsiders the map scene (III.1) of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part 1* in relationship to Harrison’s *Description of Britayne* from Holinshed’s *Chronicles* and Camden’s *Britannia* in order to re-investigate the role that rivers played in later Elizabethan constructions of placed meaningfulness. Critical arguments that river imagery in these Elizabethan works support “nation-building” by offering a new unifying vision of the realm or “Britain” address fresh watercourses as metaphors for unification or as material means of movement and transportation.

Working through III.1 and into the chorographic prose narratives, this paper analyzes fluvial discourse as a method of spatial topicality, specifically how such discourse structures viewers’ and readers’ relationships to local knowledge of the social, economic, political, and cultural value of specific river-lands while constructing a shifting (and contestable) delineation of placed meaningfulness as part of an entire river basin. This water-based method of assessing and assigning value to specific places does not quite add up to “nation” or “the realm.” In reconsidering our own assumptions about models of the macro- at work in sixteenth century England, we may ascertain a more complex topical meaningfulness of these island places and what they add up to in these texts’ methods of gathering them together.

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://ntlive.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/ntlout5-coriolanus>

<sup>ii</sup> See Linda Charnes, “Anticipating Nostalgia: Finding Temporal Logic in a Textual Anomaly” *Textual Cultures* 4:1 (2009): 72–83.

<sup>iii</sup> Marjorie Garber, “*Coriolanus*”. In *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor, 2005), 776.